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Simvastatin Augments Lipopolysaccharide-Induced Proinflammatory Responses in Macrophages by Differential Regulation of the c-Fos and c-Jun Transcription Factors

Makoto Matsumoto, Derek Einhaus, Elizabeth S. Gold, and Alan Aderem

The 3-hydroxyl-3-methylglutaryl-coenzyme A (HMG-CoA) reductase is the rate-limiting enzyme in cholesterol biosynthesis (1). The drugs that competitively inhibit HMG-CoA reductase and that reduce cholesterol biosynthesis are collectively known as statins. Statins have been widely prescribed to lower cholesterol in hyperlipidemic patients at risk for cardiovascular disease.

Large-scale clinical trials have demonstrated significant reductions in cardiovascular events following statin therapy. However, the observed benefit of statin therapy is greater in these trials than would be expected from lowering lipid levels alone (2, 3). Statins are now believed to exert pleiotropic effects that include improvement of endothelial function, stabilization of atherosclerotic plaques, thrombosis control, and anti-inflammatory effects (4).

Accumulating evidence supports the assumption that statins have anti-inflammatory properties and thus may regulate important molecules in both immune and vascular biology. Pravastatin lowered the level of C-reactive protein and eliminated the higher risk of cardiovascular events associated with this inflammatory marker (5). Pravastatin or simvastatin therapy reduced the incidence of rejection and improved survival after heart transplantation (6).

Several recent observations suggest a mechanism for the anti-inflammatory effects of statins. Statins suppressed IFN-γ-inducible expression of MHC class II on monocyte-derived macrophages and endothelial cells, but not constitutive expression of MHC-II in peripheral blood-derived dendritic cells (7). Statin pretreatment of monocyte-derived macrophages and endothelial cells repressed subsequent activation of allogenic T cells; this effect was due to inhibition of the inducible promoter IV of the MHC class II transactivator (7). Statins have also been shown to bind directly to the β2 integrin LFA-1, thereby blocking LFA-1-mediated adhesion and costimulation of lymphocytes (8). In addition, atorvastatin prevented and reversed chronic and relapsing paralysis in experimental autoimmune encephalomyelitis (EAE), a murine model of multiple sclerosis (9). In these studies, atorvastatin induced the secretion of Th2 cytokines, but inhibited secretion of Th1 cytokines, thereby suppressing Ag-specific T cell activation (9). This effect was thought to be due to enhanced STAT6 phosphorylation, and decreased STAT4 phosphorylation. By contrast, Aktas et al. (10) suggested that atorvastatin-induced down-regulation of cyclin-dependent kinase 4 and up-regulation of p27kip1 caused the decrease of T cell proliferation.

Contrary to these anti-inflammatory effects, lipophilic statins, including simvastatin, atorvastatin, lovastatin, and fluvastatin, have been shown to have proinflammatory effects on PBMC, endothelial cells, monocytes, or bone marrow-derived dendritic cells. Montero et al. (11) reported that fluvastatin activated caspase-1, and enhanced secretion of IL-1β, IL-18, and IFN-γ from PBMC stimulated with Mycobacterium tuberculosis. Unexpectedly, simvastatin potentiated TNF-α or IL-1β-induced expression of E-selectin, ICAM-1, and VCAM-1 in HUVECs (12). The authors also demonstrated that pertussis toxin mimicked this simvastatin effect, suggesting the participation of a Gαi protein. Recently, Sun and Fernandes (13) reported that lovastatin enhanced IL-6, IL-12,
and TNF-α production in bone marrow-derived dendritic cells, and Monick et al. (14) reported that lovastatin increased TNF-α production by inhibition of Rho family GTPases in a murine macrophage cell line.

Thus, statins have both anti-inflammatory and proinflammatory effects; however, the molecular mechanisms underlying these properties are poorly understood. In this study, we define the molecular mechanism underlying the proinflammatory response to statins. We demonstrate that simvastatin pretreatment enhances LPS-induced IL-12p40 production through activation of the IL-12p40 promoter, and that C/EBP and AP-1 binding sites are essential for this effect. Furthermore, we have shown that c-Fos repression and c-Jun N-terminal kinase activation underlie this mechanism. Simvastatin also augments TNF-α expression, which is also controlled by the C/EBP and AP-1 transcription factors.

Materials and Methods

Reagents

Simvastatin, c-Jun N-terminal kinase (JNK) inhibitor I, and negative control peptide were purchased from Calbiochem (La Jolla, CA). Simvastatin was converted to open acid form before use, as previously described (15). Briefly, 20 mg of simvastatin was suspended in 0.4 mL of ethanol, and 2.8 mL of 0.1 M NaOH was added. The solution was heated to 50°C for 2 h. To this heated solution, 3.6 mL of an aqueous solution containing 81 mM Na2HPO4 and 15 mM NaH2PO4 was added. The solution was heated to 40°C for 30 min, and the pH was adjusted to 7.3 with concentrated HCl.

The carrier was used as vehicle control in the same dilution as simvastatin. Mevalonate, farnesylpyrophosphate, geranylglycerophosphate, and squalene were purchased from Sigma-Aldrich (St. Louis, MO). We used 0.7 mg/mL methanol and 3 mM NH4 OH that dissolved farnesylpyrophosphate and geranylglycerophosphate as mock in Fig. 5. LPS O55:B5 was purchased from List Biological Laboratories (Campbell, CA). N-palmitoyl-3-dipalmitoylglycerol (Pam3; Cys-Ser-(Lys)4 (CSK4) was purchased from List Biological Laboratories (Campbell, CA). Pam3-CSK4 was converted to open acid form before use, as previously described (15).

Reagents and Materials and Methods

Plasmid constructs

The murine IL-12p40 promoter region was amplified by PCR from the genomic DNA of C57BL/6 mouse. Appropriate 5′ primers and a common 3′ primer were used to amplify varying lengths of the promoter region. The following primers were used to generate the 5′ −352, the 194, and the 127 constructs: 5′ primer, −352; 5′-GGCAATGGTCCCTCTTCTTCTTCGCA GTGCCCTTCCCTGTATCT-3′; 5′-CCC CCAGAGAATTTGGAC-3′, 3′ primer, +55; 5′-CCCGTCTTGTGCAGA GCTGGC-3′. Amplified products were inserted into pcCR2.1 TOPO vector (Invitrogen, Carlsbad, CA), digested with SacII/Xhol, and subcloned into pcG3 basic vector (Promega, Madison, WI). The −81 construct was generated by self ligation after excising −352 to −81 region with SacII digestion. Mutants with 2-bp mutations in NF-κB, C/EBP, or AP-1 binding sites were generated by RT-PCR from murine leukemia virus reverse transcriptase and oligo(dT) primers (Promega). Quantitative real-time PCR was performed on an ABI 7700 (Applied Biosystems, Foster City, CA) using TaqMan Universal PCR Master Mix (Applied Biosystems). All data were normalized to elongation factor-1α (EF-1α) expression in the same cDNA set. Each experiment was performed independently at least three times, and the results of one representative experiment are shown. Sequences of TaqMan primers and forward and reverse primers for TNF-α and EF-1α were described previously (24). Sequences for IL-12p40 and IP-10 are as follows: IL-12p40 probe, CTGAGGACACACATG CCACCTG; forward primer, GTCTCGATGCATCTACATTC; reverse primer, TTCTTCAATTGTTCTCCTTCTTCTT. IP-10 probe, TACACGCGGGGACTCAGTATGGA; forward primer, GACGGCT CGTCGAACG; reverse primer, GCTTCTATGCGCCTCAT.

EMSA

The nuclear extracts were prepared, as described previously (25). The protein concentration was determined by bicinchoninic acid method (Pierce, Rockford, IL) in parallel. The luciferase values were normalized to protein concentration. All assays were done in triplicate, and each experiment was repeated at least three times. The luciferase activity was calculated for each individual assay. Fold activation was calculated by dividing the luciferase values for the test conditions by the relative luciferase value for the control condition. In all cases, values are the mean ± SD of triplicate wells and are representative of at least three separate experiments.

ELISA

The concentration of IL-12p40 and TNF-α was measured with DuoKit ELISA system (R&D Systems, Minneapolis, MN). The production of IFN-γ-inducible protein-10 (IP-10) was determined with IP-10 ELISA system (Cedarlane Laboratories, Hornby, Ontario, Canada).

Real-time PCR analysis

After stimulation, total RNA was isolated with an RNaseasy minikit (Qiagen, Valencia, CA). Approximately 2 μg of total RNA was treated with DNase I (Fisher Scientific, Pittsburgh, PA) and reverse transcribed using Moloney murine leukemia virus reverse transcriptase and oligo(dT) primers (Promega). Real-time quantitative PCR was performed on an ABI 7700 (Applied Biosystems, Foster City, CA) using TaqMan Universal PCR Master Mix (Applied Biosystems). All data were normalized to elongation factor-1α (EF-1α) expression in the same cDNA set. Each experiment was performed independently at least three times, and the results of one representative experiment are shown. Sequences of TaqMan primers and forward and reverse primers for TNF-α and EF-1α were described previously (24). Sequences for IL-12p40 and IP-10 are as follows: IL-12p40 probe, CTGAGGACACACATGCCACCTG; forward primer, GTCTCGATGCATCTACATTC; reverse primer, TTCTTCAATTGTTCTCCTTCTTCTT. IP-10 probe, TACACGCGGGGACTCAGTATGGA; forward primer, GACGGCTCGTCGAACG; reverse primer, GCTTCTATGCGCCTCAT.
Probes were made by annealing single-stranded oligonucleotides and labeled by filling in with $[^{32}P]dCTP$ using Klenow fragment (Promega). Five micrograms of nuclear extracts were mixed with $5 \times 10^5$ cpm probe in $20 \mu$m HEPES (pH 7.9), $50\text{ mM KCl, } 1\text{ mM EDTA, } 0.2\text{ mM EGTA, } 5\text{% glycerol, } 1\text{ mM DTT, } \text{and } 1\times \text{ protease inhibitor mixture (Roche Diagnostics) at room temperature for 30 min. Bound and free DNAs were then resolved by electrophoresis through a } 5\% \text{ polyacrylamide gel (0.5 } \times \text{ Tris-glycine-EDTA buffer) at 25 mA for 90 min. For supershift analysis, Abs were incubated with the nuclear extracts for 1 h on ice, followed by an additional incubation for 30 min with labeled probes. Binding activities were measured using PhosphorImager (Molecular Dynamics, Sunnyvale, CA).}

**Immunoblot analysis**

Forty micrograms of nuclear extracts or $100 \mu$g of whole cell lysates were denatured in SDS, electrophoresed on a $12\% \text{-SDS-polyacrylamide gel, and transferred to polyvinylidene difluoride membrane (Immobilon-P; Millipore, Billerica, MA). Ponceau S staining was performed to ensure equivalent gel loading. Membranes were then incubated with the indicated rabbit polyclonal Abs, followed by HRP-conjugated goat anti-rabbit IgG (Zymed Laboratories, South San Francisco, CA), which were detected using West-Pico chemiluminescence reagent (Pierce).

**In vitro kinase assay**

RAW264.7 cells ($2 \times 10^6$ cells in a 35-mm dish) were washed twice with ice-cold PBS and lysed in lysis buffer ($1 \times \text{ PBS, } 0.2\% \text{ IGEPAL CA630, } 0.1\% \text{ SDS, } 0.25\% \text{ sodium deoxycholate, } 2 \text{ mM Na$_3$VO$_4$, } 1\times \text{ complete protease inhibitor). Lysates were passed through a 26-gauge needle five times, clarified by centrifugation, and assayed for protein content (Pierce). Five hundred micrograms of whole cell lysates were suspended in JNK lysis buffer (25 mM HEPES, pH 7.5, 0.2\% IGEPAL CA630, 250 mM NaCl, 3 mM EDTA, 3 mM EGTA, 1 mM DTT, 2 mM Na$_3$VO$_4$, 20 mM $\beta$-glycerophosphate, 10 mM $p$-nitrophenyl phosphate, and $1\times \text{ complete protease inhibitor}) and incubated with $20 \mu$M of GST-c-Jun1–89 beads (Cell Signaling Technology) on a rotator for 1 h. The beads were washed and transferred to JNK assay buffer containing $10 \mu$Ci of $[^{32}P]ATP$, and JNK activity was determined (26).

**Results**

**Simvastatin augments LPS-induced IL-12p40 production by macrophages**

To study the effect of simvastatin on IL-12 production by macrophages, we pretreated murine resident peritoneal macrophages with simvastatin for 20 h and stimulated them with LPS for 8 h. As shown in Fig. 1A, simvastatin primed the cells for enhanced LPS-induced IL-12p40 production, and this occurred in a dose-dependent manner. Simvastatin also augmented IL-12p40 production in response to other Toll-like receptor agonists, such as R848 and Pam3-CSK$_4$ (Fig. 1A). The effect was not general, because LPS-induced IP-10 secretion was decreased in simvastatin-treated cells (Fig. 1A). The primary cell data were recapitulated in the cell line RAW264.7. RAW264.7 cells ($5 \times 10^5$/ml) were treated with the indicated concentration of simvastatin for 20 h and stimulated either with $10 \text{ ng/ml LPS, } 100 \text{ ng/ml R848, or } 100 \text{ ng/ml Pam3-CSK}_4$ for 8 h. Concentrations of IL-12p40 (A) and IP-10 (B) were measured by ELISA. Results are the mean $\pm$ SD of triplicate wells and are representative of three separate experiments. IP-10 production by R848 or Pam3-CSK$_4$ was not detected (N.D.). C and D, RAW264.7 cells ($5 \times 10^5$/ml) were treated with the indicated concentrations of simvastatin for 16 h and stimulated with $10 \text{ ng/ml LPS for } 24 \text{ h. Concentrations of IL-12p40 (C) and IP-10 (D) were measured by ELISA. Results are the mean $\pm$ SD of triplicate wells and are representative of three separate experiments. E and F, RAW264.7 cells ($5 \times 10^5$/ml) were treated by vehicle (Vehicle) or $4 \mu$g simvastatin (Statin) for 16 h and stimulated with $10 \text{ ng/ml LPS for the indicated time periods. Induction of IL-12p40 mRNA (E, IP-10 mRNA (F), and the housekeeping gene EF-1$\alpha$ was measured with quantitative real-time PCR. Data shown are relative mRNA amounts normalized to EF-1$\alpha$. Similar results were obtained in three independent experiments.

**Simvastatin activates IL-12p40 promoter-luciferase constructs**

To investigate whether simvastatin enhances IL-12p40 production at the transcriptional level, we compared the effect of simvastatin on RAW264.7 cells that stably express the IL-12p40 promoter linked to the firefly luciferase gene with cells that stably express the ELAM promoter-firefly luciferase gene. As shown in Fig. 2A, simvastatin activated the IL-12p40 promoter, and substantially augmented the LPS response. By contrast, simvastatin did not activate the ELAM promoter and did not augment LPS stimulation of the ELAM promoter. This clearly demonstrates that simvastatin regulates the IL-12p40 promoter. The promoter of the gene encoding IL-12p40 has been studied in great detail. The murine IL-12p40 promoter has an Ets, an NF-$\kappa$B, a CREB, and an AP-1 binding site at $\sim 218$ to $\sim 213$, $\sim 131$ to $\sim 122$, $\sim 96$ to $\sim 88$, and $\sim 79$ to $\sim 74$ relative to the transcription start site, respectively (Fig. 2A). These transcription factors have been shown to functionally cooperate with each other for efficient transcription of IL-12p40 in response to LPS (27–30). To delineate the statin-responsive elements, we made a series of luciferase reporter constructs in which we serially deleted the...
SIMVASTATIN SENSITIZES MACROPHAGES TO LPS

We next used dominant-negative inhibitors to address the involvement of C/EBP and AP-1 transcription factors in the simvastatin response. We used a strategy in which we introduced artificial homologues that form heterodimers with C/EBP and AP-1, thereby preventing them from activating target genes; C/EBP was inhibited with A-C/EBP (16), and AP-1 was inhibited by A-Fos (17). Either A-C/EBP or A-Fos substantially inhibited the simvastatin effects on the IL-12p40 promoter.

We explored the temporal effect of simvastatin on IL-12p40 promoter activity in stably transfected RAW264.7 cells. At early time points (up to 4 h), simvastatin had no effect on the IL-12p40 promoter activity (Fig. 2F). After 8 h, there was a gradual increase in IL-12p40 promoter activity (Fig. 2F). Importantly, there was no temporal difference in AP-1 binding to the IL-12p40 promoter (Fig. 2G). Taken together, these data clearly demonstrate that there is no initial spike in AP-1 activity.

A-Fos are dominant-negative forms of C/EBP and AP-1 transcription factors, respectively. The luciferase titers are shown as relative luciferase units (R.L.U.) compared with mock-transfected cells with vehicle treatment. F. The effect of simvastatin on IL-12p40 promoter activity. The pooled stable transfectant of RAW264.7 cells expressing the IL-12p40 promoter-driven firefly luciferase was treated with vehicle or 8 μM simvastatin for the indicated periods. Nuclear extracts (5 μg/lane) were mixed with radiolabeled probe −58 to −56 in the presence of 0.5 μg of poly(dI-dC). The probe −88−56 encompasses the AP-1 binding site on the IL-12p40 promoter. AP-1-binding activity was measured by PhosphorImager.
Simvastatin reduces c-Fos binding to the IL-12p40 promoter

We examined the effect of simvastatin on the binding activities of the C/EBP and AP-1 transcription factors to the IL-12p40 promoter. Radiolabeled double-stranded oligonucleotide probes spanning the sequence from position −103 to −76, and −88 to −56, were prepared and used to detect the C/EBP and AP-1 complexes, respectively. LPS stimulation enhanced the binding activities of both C/EBP and AP-1, as previously reported (data not shown) (29, 30). Simvastatin pretreatment did not show any effects on either constitutive or LPS-induced C/EBP-binding activities (data not shown). C/EBP refers to a family of transcription factors; and the formal possibility existed that a different C/EBP family member might be induced to bind to the IL-12p40 promoter when the cells were treated with simvastatin. Supershift assays were performed using polyclonal Abs against C/EBPα, β, -δ, or -ε, and nuclear extracts from LPS-stimulated RAW264.7 cells with or without simvastatin pretreatment. The majority of the C/EBP complex consisted of C/EBPβ and C/EBPδ, and this was not changed by the presence of simvastatin (Fig. 3A). Simvastatin pretreatment slightly inhibited the augmentation of AP-1-binding activities by LPS (data not shown). Supershift assays demonstrated that the AP-1 complex formed in response to LPS contained c-Jun, JunB, c-Fos, FosB, and Fra-2 (Fig. 3B). Importantly, simvastatin pretreatment decreased c-Fos dramatically from the AP-1 complex (Fig. 3B). This decrease in c-Fos is due to a simvastatin-mediated inhibition of LPS-induced c-Fos synthesis (Fig. 3C).

Ectopic expression of c-Fos negatively regulates the IL-12p40 promoter, whereas expression of c-Jun positively regulates the promoter

The simvastatin-mediated inhibition of c-Fos binding appeared to be paradoxical. On the one hand, simvastatin clearly triggered IL-12p40 production through the AP-1 binding site (Fig. 2, D and E). In contrast, simvastatin drastically reduced LPS-mediated c-Fos induction and binding to the promoter (Fig. 3, B and C). This suggested that the reduction of c-Fos contributed to the activation of the IL-12p40 promoter. Ectopic expression of c-Fos reduced p40–127 promoter activity by 70% in the simvastatin-treated cells, while c-Jun expression enhanced it (Fig. 3D). Thus, these findings suggest a resolution to the paradox: c-Fos negatively regulates the IL-12p40 promoter activity, whereas c-Jun augments it. Ectopic expression of JunB, FosB, and Fra-2 had no effect on IL-12p40 promoter activity (Fig. 3D).

Simvastatin induces c-Jun phosphorylation

c-Jun is activated when c-Jun N-terminal kinase (JNK) phosphorylates Ser^{63} and Ser^{73}. An in vitro kinase assay showed that simvastatin pretreatment provoked JNK activation at 12 h in RAW264.7 cells (Fig. 4A). Moreover, simvastatin pretreatment significantly induced Ser^{63} phosphorylation of the endogenous c-Jun protein (Fig. 4B, lane 6) and substantially augmented LPS-induced phosphorylation at the same site (Fig. 4B, lanes 7-10). Thus, JNK activation appeared responsible for the simvastatin-mediated IL-12p40 promoter activation. This was tested directly using a cell-permeable peptide inhibitor of JNK (31). Indeed, the JNK inhibitor diminished the simvastatin-mediated JNK activation in a dose-dependent manner (Fig. 4C), and this was accompanied by the partial inhibition of transcriptional activation of the IL-12p40 promoter (Fig. 4D). Taken together, simvastatin diminished the negative regulator, c-Fos, by inhibiting its induction, and augmented the positive regulator, c-Jun, through phosphorylation.

The intermediates of the cholesterol biosynthetic pathway restore the normal response to LPS in simvastatin-pretreated cells

To show that the simvastatin effect was due to its inhibition of the HMG-CoA reductase, we demonstrated that mevalonate, farnesylpyrophosphate, and geranylgerany1pyrophosphate, intermediates in the cholesterol biosynthetic pathway, reversed the effect...
Simvastatin also augments TNF-α production by transcriptional activation

The promoter analysis indicates that both C/EBP and AP-1 binding sites are critical for the simvastatin-induced augmentation of IL-12p40 promoter. Other promoters containing both C/EBP and AP-1 binding sites might also be expected to be activated by simvastatin treatment. To confirm this hypothesis, we examined another inflammatory cytokine whose promoter has a similar structure to the IL-12p40 promoter. The unique feature of IL-12p40 promoter is that the C/EBP and AP-1 binding sites are located close to each other. The human TNF-α promoter has C/EBP and AP-1 binding sites similarly apposed (32–34), and, based on sequence homology, so does the murine TNF-α promoter. As expected, simvastatin induced TNF-α promoter-luciferase construct by 7-fold (Fig. 6A), and this was mirrored by increased TNF-α mRNA and secreted protein (Fig. 6, B and C).

Discussion

We have shown that simvastatin augments IL-12p40 production by macrophages in response to LPS stimulation. Our promoter analysis indicates, for the first time, that C/EBP and AP-1 binding sites

**FIGURE 5.** The intermediates of the cholesterol biosynthetic pathway reverse the simvastatin effect on IL-12p40 production. Resident peritoneal macrophages (1 × 10⁶/ml) were treated with vehicle or 8 μM simvastatin for 16 h, Mock (see Materials and Methods), 10 μM Mevalonate (Mev), 10 μM farnesylylphosphosphate (FP), 10 μM geranylgeranylpolyphosphate (GGP), or 10 μM squalene (SQA) was added simultaneously with vehicle or simvastatin. Cells were subsequently stimulated with 10 ng/ml LPS for 8 h. The concentration of IL-12p40 was measured by ELISA. Results are the mean ± SD of triplicate wells and are representative of three separate experiments.

**FIGURE 6.** Simvastatin enhances TNF-α production by activating its promoter. A, RAW264.7 cells were transfected with either pGL3 empty vector (180 ng/well) or TNF-α promoter construct (180 ng/well), together with phRG-TK (20 ng/well) and subsequently treated with vehicle (Vehicle) or 8 μM simvastatin (Statin) for 24 h. Twenty micromolars of negative control peptide (Control) or JNK inhibitor I (JNKi) were added twice to the culture medium at 0 and 16 h following simvastatin addition. Data are shown as R.L.U. compared with cells treated with vehicle and control peptide. The data represent the mean ± SD of five independent experiments run in triplicate. Value of p was calculated by Student’s t test.

FIGURE 4. JNK activation plays an important role in the simvastatin-mediated IL-12p40 promoter augmentation. A, RAW264.7 cells were treated with 4 μM simvastatin for indicated times and harvested for the preparation of whole cell lysates. Five hundred micrograms of whole cell lysates were subjected to in vitro kinase assay by using GST-c-Jun (1–89) as a substrate. Bottom panel, Expression of JNK1 and 2 as a loading control. B, RAW264.7 cells were pretreated with vehicle or 4 μM simvastatin for 16 h and stimulated with 10 ng/ml LPS for the indicated time periods. Nuclear extracts (40 μg/lane) were subjected to SDS-PAGE, and Ser 63- phosphorylated c-Jun protein (upper panel) and total c-Jun protein (bottom panel) were detected by immunoblot analysis. C, RAW264.7 cells were treated with 4 μM simvastatin with or without the indicated concentration of JNK inhibitor I (JNKi) for 16 h, and JNK activation was determined by in vitro kinase assay, as described above. Bottom panel, Expression of JNK1 and 2 as a loading control. D, RAW264.7 cells were transfected with the IL-12p40–127 promoter construct (180 ng/well) and phRG-TK (20 ng/well) and subsequently treated with vehicle (Vehicle) or 8 μM simvastatin (Statin) for 24 h. Twenty micromolars of negative control peptide (Control) or JNK inhibitor I (JNKi) were added twice to the culture medium at 0 and 16 h following simvastatin addition. Data are shown as R.L.U. compared with cells treated with vehicle and control peptide. The data represent the mean ± SD of five independent experiments run in triplicate. Value of p was calculated by Student’s t test.
are essential for simvastatin-mediated IL-12p40 enhancement. Previous studies reported that statins increase the production of proinflammatory cytokines by myeloid cells (13, 35), but the mechanism by which this occurs has not been addressed. Our data strongly suggest that statin-mediated c-Fos repression is responsible for increased proinflammatory cytokine production. Simvastatin inhibited the association of c-Fos with the AP-1 binding site of the IL-12p40 promoter, suggesting that c-Fos negatively regulates proinflammatory cytokine production. This was confirmed by the observation that ectopically expressed c-Fos inhibited IL-12p40 promoter activation. c-Fos is known to form stable heterodimers with Jun proteins, thereby enhancing their DNA-binding activities (36). Although c-Fos cannot homodimerize and bind DNA, c-Jun can. Although a number of studies have demonstrated that heterodimers of c-Fos and c-Jun can activate the transcription of proinflammatory genes, recent evidence demonstrates that this heterodimer also has the capacity to inhibit transcription (37). Further, we show in this study that c-Jun and c-Fos have opposing effects on IL-12p40 promoter activity, suggesting that c-Fos/c-Jun heterodimers are inhibitory, whereas c-Jun/c-Jun homodimers are stimulatory. The JNK is known to phosphorylate c-Jun, resulting in the activation of this transcription factor. Consistent with this, we found that simvastatin stimulated JNK-dependent phosphorylation of c-Jun.

Although the AP-1 binding site was critical for simvastatin-mediated activation of the IL-12p40 promoter, so was the C/EBP binding site, and this was confirmed by the demonstration that dominant-negative C/EBP completely abolished the simvastatin effect. It is not clear how these sites functionally interact to mediate the simvastatin effect; one possible explanation is that AP-1 requires the assistance of C/EBP to enhance IL-12p40 transcription.

Two recent reports present compelling evidence that statins have potent anti-inflammatory effects in an EAE model. Atorvastatin induced STAT6 phosphorylation and secretion of Th2 cytokines such as IL-4, IL-5, IL-10, and TGF-β. In contrast, STAT4 phosphorylation was inhibited, resulting in suppression of Th1 cytokine secretion (IL-2, IL-12, IFN-γ, and TNF-α) (9, 10). Although these observations appear to be at variance with our results, they are consistent with this, we found that simvastatin stimulated JNK-dependent phosphorylation of c-Jun.

In conclusion, simvastatin potentiates proinflammatory responses induced by bacterial products, and this occurs by a mechanism involving the AP-1 and C/EBP transcription factors. Given the prevalence of statin use, it may be important to monitor inflammatory responses when treated individuals experience bacterial infection.

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