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*J Immunol* 2010; 184:21-25; Prepublished online 30 November 2009;
doi: 10.4049/jimmunol.0902369

http://www.jimmunol.org/content/184/1/21

Supplementary Material

http://www.jimmunol.org/content/suppl/2009/12/08/jimmunol.0902369.DC1

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Cutting Edge: TNF-Induced MicroRNAs Regulate TNF-Induced Expression of E-Selectin and Intercellular Adhesion Molecule-1 on Human Endothelial Cells: Feedback Control of Inflammation

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MicroRNAs (miRNAs) pair with target sequences in the 3’ untranslated region of mRNAs to posttranscriptionally repress gene expression. In this study, we report that TNF-mediated induction of endothelial adhesion molecules can be regulated by miRNAs that are induced by TNF. Specifically, E-selectin and ICAM-1 are targets of TNF-induced miRNAs miR-31 and miR-17-3p, respectively. Specific antagonism of these TNF-induced miRNAs increased neutrophil adhesion to cultured endothelial cells. Conversely, transfections with mimics of these miRNAs decreased neutrophil adhesion to endothelial cells. These data suggest that miRNAs provide negative feedback control of inflammation.


The online version of this article contains supplemental material.

Abbreviations used in this paper: CI, control inhibitor sequence; CM, control mimic sequence; EC, endothelial cell; HDF, human dermal fibroblast; miRNA, microRNA; QRT-PCR, quantitative real-time PCR; SELE, E-selectin; UTR, untranslated region; VE-cadherin, vascular endothelial cadherin; VEGF, vascular endothelial growth factor.

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www.jimmunol.org/cgi/doi/10.4049/jimmunol.0902369
using a Dual-Glo Luciferase Assay System (Promega) and reported as the percentage of control cells cotransfected with the same concentration of CM.

HUVEC transfection

HUVECs were transfected with 40 nM miRDIAN miRNA mimics or with 60 nM miRDIAN miRNA inhibitors (Dharmacon) using Oligofectamine (Invitrogen) (8, 18). Control samples were transfected with an equal concentration of CM or negative control inhibitor sequence (CI), as described previously (8). The effects of transfections with miR-mimics/inhibitors was assessed by quantitative real-time PCR (QRT-PCR). miR-31 and -17-3p levels were efficiently increased after 18 h and persisted 36 h following transfection, and transfection with miR-31 did not affect the endogenous levels of miR-17-3p and vice versa (not shown). Transfection with miRNA inhibitors for miR-31 or -17-3p efficiently reduced the TNF-stimulated levels of miR-31 and -17-3p below levels in untreated cells, indicating an efficient inhibition of indicated miRNAs (not shown).

Western blots

Western blots were performed (8, 18) using mouse mAbs reactive with human ICAM-1 and SELE (R&D Systems, Minneapolis, MN) under nonreducing conditions or with Tie2 and vascular endothelial cadherin (VE-cadherin) polyclonal Abs (Santa Cruz Biotechnology, Santa Cruz, CA) or Hsp-90 mAb (BD Biosciences, San Jose, CA) under reducing conditions. Binding of fluorophore-conjugated secondary Abs (Rockland, Gilbertsville, PA) were visualized using an Odyssey Infrared Imaging System (LI-COR, Lincoln, NE).

Cell surface immunostaining

HUVECs were transfected and/or treated with TNF as indicated, stained with directly fluor-conjugated mAbs as described (18), and analyzed on a FACS-calibur (BD Biosciences) using CellQuest analysis software, collecting 5000 gated cells per sample. Specific Abs used in these analyses were FITC or PE directly conjugated and reactive with human SELE (R&D Systems) or ICAM-1 (BD Pharmingen, San Diego, CA), respectively.

Neutrophil adhesion assays

Adhesion of neutrophils to the confluent EC monolayer was measured as described previously (19) with slight modifications. Neutrophils were labeled with directly fluor-conjugated and reactive with human SELE (R&D Systems) or ICAM-1 (BD Pharmingen, San Diego, CA), respectively.

Statistical analyses

Statistical differences between groups were assessed by the two-tailed paired Student t test. Data from QRT-PCR and reporter assays were expressed relative to the control of each experiment, and 95% confidence intervals were calculated; differences were judged significant when the confidence interval did not include the "1" or "100" value.

Results and Discussion

We characterized miRNA expression in HUVECs stimulated for 2 or 24 h with 10 ng/ml TNF using microarrays. Several miRNAs were induced after 2 h; some of these had increased after 24 h, whereas others had decreased (Fig. 1, Supplemental Table I). Levels of selected miRNA species identified in the arrays (Fig. 1, highlighted in black) were confirmed by Northern blotting (Supplemental Fig. 1A) and/or by QRT-PCR (Supplemental Fig. 1B). Levels of miR-155, -31, -17-5p, -191, and -125b were increased by TNF, but levels of miR-222, -20a, and -126 were not (Supplemental Fig. 1A, 1B).

Several TNF-induced HUVEC miRNAs were not induced in HDFs, suggesting at least partial specificity of the EC response. miR-155 is highly induced by TNF in HUVECs and HDFs (Supplemental Fig. 1C). TNF also induces miR-155 in immune cells (12), in synovial fibroblasts (21), and in lymphomas (9, 22). miR-155 is also upregulated in ECs by VEGF (8).

FIGURE 1. TNF regulation of miRNA levels in human ECs. RNA was isolated from ECs that were treated or not for 2 or 24 h with TNF (10 ng/ml). Data are presented as the log2 ratio of miRNA expression of average treated (2 or 24 h) versus average untreated (0 h). miR-155, 31, 17-5p, -191, -126, -222, -20a are indicated in black diamonds.

Other miRNAs induced by TNF also overlap with those induced by VEGF (Supplemental Fig. 2). VEGF induces several components of the c-myc/E2F–regulated oncogenic cluster miR-17/92 (including miR-17-5p, -18a, and -20a) (8), but only miR-17-5p is upregulated by TNF (Fig. 1, Supplemental Fig. 1A). Although a single primary RNA transcript encodes the entire cluster, differences in the efficiency of posttranscriptional processing (23, 24) or selective blockade of pri-miRNA processing (25) may result in differential expression of mature miRNAs. miR-17-5p is upregulated in psoriasis, atopic eczema, and systemic lupus erythematosus (26, 27). In human pulmonary aortic ECs, the miR-17/92 cluster is modulated by IL-6 via STAT3 (28). Secretion of IL-6 is induced in ECs by TNF (29), raising the possibility of an indirect autocrine/paracrine effect. In HUVECs, guide and passenger strands of miR-17 (5p and 3p, respectively) are induced by TNF (Supplemental Fig. 1A).

We used miRNA target prediction algorithms (5) to identify a putative binding site in the 3′UTR of SELE for miR-31 (Supplemental Fig. 3A), a highly TNF-induced miRNA (Fig. 1), and an additional site for miR-221 and -222 (Supplemental Fig. 3A). Two highly homologous miRNAs, derived from the same pri-miRNA transcript that contains identical seed sequences and that are not regulated by TNF (Fig. 1). The miR-31 predicted site is a canonical 7mer-m8 site sup-
miR-31 inhibitor (I-miR-31) prior to TNF stimulation (Fig. 6 h, respectively, when cells were transfected with an antisense 

Furthermore, SELE levels increased by 25% and 20% at 3 and 

for 12 h; after a 24-h recovery period, they were stimulated with 

HUVECs were transfected with miR-31 mimic (M-miR-31) 

which is predicted to bind to the SELE 3'9 

produced miR-17-3p, -17-5p, -155, or -125b (Fig. 2 3 B 

FIGURE 2. miR-31 regulates TNF-induced SELE expression by targeting 

the SELE 3'UTR. COS-7 cells were cotransfected with the indicated 

constructs and with 40 nM of M-miR-31 or CM (A) or with SELE 3'UTR construct and 40 nM of the indicated miRNA mimics or CM (B). Data are expressed as relative luciferase activity to control samples cotransfected with CM and with control 3'UTR and with the indicated miRNAs, p ≤ 0.05. C and D, Western blot analysis of SELE protein levels in ECs transfected for 12 h with M-miR-31 or CM (C) or with I-miR-31 or CI (D); in both cases, the cells were treated or not with TNF 24 h posttransfection. Hsp-90 was used as loading control. VE-cadherin served as a control protein that is not targeted by miR-31. Graphs on the right show the relative total SELE protein levels compared with nontreated CM- or CI-transfected controls (mean ± SEM of four experiments). Significantly different from TNF-treated control, p ≤ 0.05.

3'UTR was not significantly reduced by miR-221 and -222 (Fig. 2B). Positioning in the center of a long 3'UTR and lesser efficacy of 6mer sites (5) may explain this lack of effect. SELE 3'UTR luciferase activity also was not affected by TNF-induced miR-17-3p, -17-5p, -155, or -125b (Fig. 2B), none of which is predicted to bind to the SELE 3'UTR.

To analyze the effect of miR-31 on SELE protein expression, HUVECs were transfected with miR-31 mimic (M-miR-31) for 12 h; after a 24-h recovery period, they were stimulated with TNF for 3 or 6 h, the peaks of SELE mRNA and protein expression, respectively (1, 17). By immunoblotting, M-miR-31 reduced TNF-induced SELE levels by ≥35% at 3 h (Fig. 2C). Furthermore, SELE levels increased by 25% and 20% at 3 and 6 h, respectively, when cells were transfected with an antisense miR-31 inhibitor (I-miR-31) prior to TNF stimulation (Fig. 2D). Two other EC proteins, VE-cadherin and Tie2, were not changed by these treatments (although a putative binding site for miR-31 was predicted in Tie2). By FACS, TNF-induced SELE cell surface expression increased when miR-31 was inhibited (Supplemental Fig. 5A).

Two canonical 7mer-m8 and one 7mer-A1 putative binding sites (5) in the human 3'UTR of ICAM-1 were predicted for the 

TNF-induced miR-17-3p and for non-TNF-induced miR-221/222, respectively (Supplemental Fig. 3B). None of these sites is conserved across species but were independently predicted by three different target-prediction algorithms (TargetScan, miRBase, and RegRNA), and a large fraction of nonconserved sites can be functional (30). In reporter gene assays, miR-17-3p efficiently repressed ICAM-1 3'UTR luciferase activity by ≥40% (Fig. 3A). Luciferase activity was unaffected by cotransfection of CM, and miR-17-3p did not affect reporter vectors lacking ICAM-1 3'UTR, with reverse-oriented 3'UTR (control 3'UTR) or with a mutation in the sequence complementary to the miR-17-3p seed sequence (miICAM-1 3'UTR). Luciferase activity of ICAM-1 3'UTR was significantly reduced at 40 nM (Supplemental Fig. 4B). ICAM-1 3'UTR luciferase activity was unaffected by miR-221 or -222 (Fig. 3B), suggesting the predicted site is nonfunctional (5). It was recently reported that miR-222 can regulate the expression of ICAM-1 in tumor cells by direct interaction with its 3'UTR (31). A key difference from our experiments is that Ueda et al. (31) tested the isolated target sequence rather than testing the sequence in the context of the entire 3'UTR. Contextual features of the 3'UTR, such as secondary structures or local AU-rich regions, among others, can govern

FIGURE 3. miR-17-3p regulates TNF-induced ICAM-1 expression by targeting the ICAM-1 3'UTR. COS-7 cells were cotransfected with the indicated constructs and with 40 nM of M-miR-17-3p or CM (A) or with ICAM-1 3'UTR construct and 40 nM of the indicated miRNA mimics or CM (B). Data are expressed as relative luciferase activity to control samples cotransfected of CM, and with indicated constructs and with 40 nM of M-miR-17-3p or CM (C) or with I-miR-17-3p or CI (D); in both cases, the cells were treated or not with TNF 24 h posttransfection. Hsp-90 was used as loading control. Tie2 served as a control protein that is not targeted by miR-17-3p. Graphs on the right show the relative total ICAM-1 protein levels compared with nontreated CM- or CI-transfected controls (mean ± SEM of three experiments). *Significantly different from control, p ≤ 0.05.
miRNA–mRNA interactions (5). ICAM-1 3′UTR luciferase activity was not affected by other TNF-induced miRNAs (miR-31, -17-3p, -155, and -125b) (Fig. 3A) not predicted to bind to the ICAM1 3′UTR. In general, the miRNA strand that has the lowest thermodynamic stability at its 5′-terminus acts as the mature miRNA (guide strand), and the other (passenger) strand (miRNA*) is degraded. However, in some cases, both miRNA strands may accumulate in tissues at significant levels (32), and there are validated examples of trans-regulatory RNAs with demonstrable activities (33). Although basal miR-17-3p levels are very low compared with miR-17-5p levels, miR-17-3p is clearly stimulated upon TNF treatment (Supplemental Fig. 6).

To analyze the effect of miR-17-3p on ICAM-1 protein expression, HUVECs were transfected with miR-17-3p mimic (M-miR-17-3p) for 12 h and, after a 24-h recovery period, they were stimulated with TNF for 12 h. M-miR-17-3p reduced TNF-induced ICAM-1 expression by 30% (Fig. 3C). ICAM-1 levels increased up to 35% when cells were transfected with an antisense miR-17-3p inhibitor (I-miR-17-3p) prior to TNF stimulation (Fig. 3D). Tie2 levels were not affected by miR-17-3p (Fig. 3C, 3D). Although the total protein levels were consistently induced by miR-17-3p antagonism, increases in TNF-induced ICAM-1 cell surface expression observed by FACS did not reach statistical significance (Supplemental Fig. 5B). The increase was significant in some HUVEC donors, consistent with a polymorphic response.

We did not find predicted sites for regulation of VCAM-1 by TNF-induced miRNAs. miR-126 is an EC-specific miRNA that was shown to regulate the expression of VCAM-1 and limit the adhesion of leukocytes to EC (16); miR-126 is not regulated by TNF (Fig. 1) (16). miRGen Target interface does not predict any sites for miR-126 in the 3′UTRs of SELE or ICAM-1.

Finally, we tested whether the miRNA effects on TNF-induced adhesion molecule expression are functional. As expected, TNF increased neutrophil adhesion to ECs. Exogenous overexpression of M-miR-31, M-miR-17-3p, or the combination of the two significantly reduced neutrophil binding (Fig. 4A, Supplemental Fig. 7A), whereas the inhibition of miRNAs miR-31 and/or miR-17-3p increased neutrophil adherence to TNF-stimulated ECs (Fig. 4B, Supplemental Fig. 7B). It is likely that TNF-induced miRNAs (miR-31 and -17-3p) regulate neutrophil adhesion through the regulation of TNF-induced expression of SELE and ICAM-1, respectively, although other actions of these miRNAs could affect neutrophil binding. To test this possibility, we performed experiments combining blocking Abs with miRNA mimic or inhibitor transfections. As expected, the incubation with blocking Abs alone profoundly reduced neutrophil binding (Supplemental Fig. 7C, 7D). Transfection of mimics did not cause any evidence of further reduction in TNF-induced neutrophil binding (Supplemental Fig. 7C). Transfection of inhibitors produced a small increase in neutrophil binding in the presence of blocking Abs that did not reach statistical significance (Supplemental Fig. 7D). These experiments do not rule out the possibility that these TNF-induced miRNAs affect neutrophil adhesion by actions on targets other than SELE or ICAM-1, but if such effects exist, they are too small to detect when interactions with SELE or ICAM-1 are blocked.

In summary, we illustrated two examples of miRNA-mediated feedback control of the expression of adhesion molecules (SELE and ICAM-1). This kind of regulation, in which miRNA-directed target repression acts to oppose the overall outcome of a biological response and the regulatory miRNAs are induced by the same signals that cause the response, is likely to be important for fine-tuning of the process (34). Antisense oligos (antismiRs) that target specific miRNAs were recently shown to be very efficient in vivo (35). In the system we describe, miRNA delivery designed to simulate, rather than antagonize, the function of endogenous mature miRNAs could be useful as an anti-inflammatory therapy.

Acknowledgments
We thank Dr. Anjelica Gonzalez for helpful comments regarding neutrophil adhesion assays; Louise Benson, Gwen Davis-Arrington, Lisa Gras, and Todd Jensen for help with cell isolation and culture; Penn Microarray Facility at University of Pennsylvania and the Keck Facility at Yale University for miRNA array analyses; Dr. William C. Sessa for providing COS-7 cells and access to LI-COR; and Dr. Carlos Fernández-Hernando for critical discussions during the preparation of this manuscript.

Disclosures
The authors have no financial conflicts of interest.

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