Methyl-CpG binding domain protein 3: a new diagnostic marker and potential therapeutic target of melanoma

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SUMMARY Methyl-CpG binding domain protein 3 (MBD3) belongs to the methyl-CpG binding protein family. MBD3 facilitates the initiation of neural stem cell reprogramming. Melanoma originates in melanocytes derived from neural crest stem cells; therefore, we investigated the role of MBD3 in melanoma. MBD3 was overexpressed in melanoma compared with pigmented nevi. MBD3 knockdown had no effect on the proliferation of melanoma cells (A375 and A2058 cells). Contrarily, it significantly reduced the migration and invasion of A375 cells, but had no significant effect on A2058 cells. Furthermore, MBD3 knockdown reduced N-cadherin protein levels and matrix metalloproteinase-2 (MMP-2) activity in A375 cells, but had no significant effect on A2058 cells. Based on these results, the MBD3 expression level may be a useful biomarker for the diagnosis of melanoma. Thus, MBD3 has potential as a novel therapeutic target for some melanoma patients.

Keywords MBD3, melanoma, N-cadherin, MMP-2

1. Introduction

Although immune checkpoint inhibitors (ICIs) improve the prognosis of patients with advanced melanoma, the response rate to ICIs is approximately 30-40% (1). In addition, only approximately 30% of Japanese melanoma patients have a BRAF mutation, which is required for treatment with BRAF inhibitors (1). As such, the currently available therapies are not suitable for all melanoma patients. Therefore, novel therapeutic molecular targets for advanced melanoma need to be identified. Furthermore, it is not always possible to make a differential diagnosis between a nevus and a melanoma. This is due to the fact that the representative melanoma markers, including melanoma antigen recognized by T cells 1 (MART-1) and gp100, are also present in pigmented nevi. Therefore, they are not useful for differential diagnoses.

Methyl-CpG binding domain protein 3 (MBD3) is approximately 35 kDa and belongs to the methyl-CpG-binding protein family. MBD3 acts as a transcriptional repressor through its interaction with nucleosome remodeling deacetylase (NuRD) (2). MBD3 is essential for the formation and stability of the NuRD complex (3). It is contained within this complex, where it binds to hydroxymethylated DNA (4). DNA hydroxymethylation is an epigenetic mechanism that modifies the C-5 position of cytosine by adding a hydroxymethyl group, resulting in the regulation of gene expression levels (5,6). MBD3 binds to hydroxymethylated DNA and suppresses gene expression (4). MBD3 protein has been previously detected in neural stem cells using two-dimensional fluorescence differential gel electrophoresis targeting nuclear phosphorylated proteins after stimulation with fibroblast growth factor 2 (7). MBD3 is involved in the regulation of neural stem cell reprogramming and differentiation (8). Moreover, melanoma originates from melanocytes derived from neural crest cells (9).

Although the expression levels of MBD3 are high in several cancers, there is a divergence in terms of its function according to the type of cancer. MBD3 suppresses tumor growth in lung cancer (10) and pancreatic cancer (11) but promotes tumor growth in breast cancer (12). However, the role of MBD3 in melanoma has not yet been clarified. Therefore, we investigated the role of MBD3 in melanoma and whether the inhibition of MBD3 has an antitumor effect.

2. Material and Methods

2.1. Clinical assessment and patient samples
In accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, institutional review board approval and written informed consent was obtained from patients before their enrollment in this study. Skin samples were collected from 20 patients with melanoma and 19 patients with pigmented nevi.

2.2. Cell culture

Human melanoma cell lines were obtained from the Cell Resource Center for Biomedical Research Institute of Development, Aging and Cancer, Tohoku University (Sendai, Miyagi, Japan) or the American Type Culture Collection (Manassas, VA, USA). Normal human epidermal melanocytes (NHEM) were purchased from Lonza (Basel, Switzerland). Human melanoma cell lines were maintained in Dulbecco's modified Eagle medium, supplemented with 20% fetal bovine serum (FBS) under 5% CO₂ and 95% air. NHEM in CSF-4HM-500D culture medium, supplemented with human melanocyte growth supplements, were maintained under 5% CO₂ and 95% air.

2.3. Immunofluorescent staining

Immunofluorescent staining of MBD3 and Melan-A proteins in patient tissues and cultured cell lines was performed using an anti-MBD3 antibody at a dilution of 1:100 (ab157464; Abcam, Cambridge, UK) or an anti-Melan-A antibody at 1:100 (mouse monoclonal) (ab731; Abcam), respectively. Slides were counterstained with Fluoroshield mounting medium with 4′,6-diamidino-2-phenylindole (DAPI) (ab104139; Abcam) and images were captured using fluorescence microscopy (BZ-X 710; Keyence, Osaka, Japan). The intensity of staining was classified as follows: (‒), same or weaker than the adjacent epidermis; (+), stronger than the adjacent epidermis; (++), much stronger than the adjacent epidermis.

2.4. Western blotting

Equal amounts of proteins (10 μg) were separated using SDS polyacrylamide gels and were electrotransferred to polyvinylidene fluoride (PVDF) membranes (Bio-Rad Laboratories, Hercules, CA, USA). The membranes were immunoblotted overnight at 4°C with primary antibodies, followed by their respective secondary antibodies, anti-MBD3 (1:1,000; Abcam), anti-N-cadherin (1:1,000; Abcam), and anti-β-actin (1:2,000; Cell Signaling Technology, Beverly, MA, USA).

2.5. Gene silencing using small interfering RNA

An MBD3-specific small interfering RNA (siRNA) and a scrambled control siRNA were purchased from Dharmacon (Lafayette, CO, USA). The target sequences of the MBD3-specific siRNA are the following four sequences: CCUGAAGCGCUUCGACAUU, UGAGCA AGAUGAACAAGAG, UCAAGCAGCGGUGACCA A, CCAACCAGGAAGGGCAG. Human melanoma cell lines were transfected using Lipofectamine RNAiMAX transfection reagent (Invitrogen Corporation, Carlsbad, CA, USA) for 6 h following manufacturer's instructions. The final concentration of MBD3-specific siRNA and scrambled control siRNA were 100 nM.

2.6. Cell proliferation assay

A375 (low metastatic melanoma cell line) and A2058 (high metastatic melanoma cell line) (13) cells were seeded at 5.0 × 10⁴ cells/well in 6-well plates and transfected with either an MBD3-specific siRNA or a scrambled control siRNA using Lipofectamine RNAiMAX. After incubating for 48 hours, the transfected cells were stained with Trypan blue and counted under a light microscope. Each experiment was performed in triplicate.

2.7. Migration and invasion assays

Migration and invasion assays were performed to evaluate the migrative and invasive ability of A375 and A2058 cells transfected with either an MBD3-specific siRNA or a scrambled control siRNA using Lipofectamine RNAiMAX. For migration assay, a 24-well plate containing Permeable Support with 8.0 µm Transparent PET Membrane (Corning Inc., Corning, NY, USA), was prepared and for invasion assay, a 24-well plate containing 8 μm pore size transwell inserts pre-coated with Matrigel (Corning Inc.) was prepared. After serum starved incubation with serum-free Dulbecco's Modified Eagle Medium (DMEM) in 5% CO₂ atmosphere at 37°C for 24 h, the cells were seeded into the upper chamber of the insert at 5 × 10⁴/well in 500 μL serum-free DMEM. The lower chamber was filled with 750 μL DMEM supplemented with 20% fetal bovine serum as a chemoattractant. After incubating the cells at 37°C for 48 h, the cells on the upper chamber of the insert were removed with a cotton swab. Subsequently, the cells on the bottom of the insert were fixed with paraformaldehyde for 15 min. Using an inverted microscope, the migrated and invaded cells were counted in five different fields at 200× magnification.

2.8. MMP-2 activity assay

Supernatants were collected from melanoma cells (A375 and A2058 cells) and cultured in 6-well plates for 48 hours. MMP-2 activity was measured using a commercially available assay (QuickZyme Biosciences, Leiden, Netherlands), according to the manufacturer’s protocol.
2.9. Statistical analysis

Data are presented as bar graphs with the mean ± standard deviation (SD) of at least three independent experiments. Statistical analyses were performed using the Mann-Whitney U-test to compare medians. The immunofluorescent staining results were analyzed using the Chi-squared test. A p-value < 0.05 was considered to be statistically significant.

3. Results

3.1. MBD3 was overexpressed in melanoma

Western blotting was performed to examine the MBD3 expression levels in melanoma in vitro. The MBD3 levels were higher in melanoma cell lines than in NHEM (Figure 1a). Immunofluorescent staining showed results similar to western blotting (Figure 1b). In addition, we measured the expression levels of MBD3 in melanoma tissues by immunofluorescence. A representative MBD3 immunofluorescence experiment is shown in Figure 2a. The tissue samples were classified as negative, slightly positive, or strongly positive based on MBD3 immunoreactivity (Figure 2b). MBD3 staining was significantly more intense in melanoma samples than in pigmented nevi (Table 1). Moreover, when the patients were evaluated by the staining results of MBD3, neither lymph node metastasis nor organ metastasis was observed in all three cases of melanoma negative for MBD3 (Table 2).

3.2. An MBD3-specific small interfering RNA inhibited the migration and invasion of A375 cells

We investigated the effect of an MBD3-specific siRNA in melanoma cell lines (A375 and A2058 cells) to determine the role of MBD3 in the pathogenesis of melanoma. The expression level of MBD3 was down-regulated by the MBD3-specific siRNA, as shown in Figure 3a. MBD3 knockdown did not affect the proliferation of neither A375 nor A2058 cells (Figure 3b).

Table 1. Results of the immunofluorescent analysis of MBD3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>–</th>
<th>+</th>
<th>++</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pigmented nevus</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melanoma</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The tissue samples were classified as negative (–), slightly positive (+), or strongly positive (+++) based on MBD3 immunoreactivity. MBD3 staining was significantly more intense in melanoma samples than in pigmented nevi.

Table 2. Correlation between MBD3 immunofluorescent staining and clinical features of melanoma patients

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Negative (n = 3)</th>
<th>Positive (n = 17)</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex (Male:Female)</td>
<td>2:1</td>
<td>8:9</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (years), mean ± SD</td>
<td>74.9 ± 11.7</td>
<td>63.3 ± 21.7</td>
<td>0.175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lymph node metastasis (No:Yes)</td>
<td>3:0</td>
<td>9:8</td>
<td>0.242</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organ metastasis (No:Yes)</td>
<td>3:0</td>
<td>15:2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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3b). We also evaluated the effect of the MBD3-specific siRNA on the migration and invasion of melanoma cells. Migration/invasion assays showed that MBD3 silencing significantly inhibited the migration and invasion of A375 cells, but had no statistically significant effect on the migration or invasion of A2058 cells (Figures 3c and 3d).

3.3. MBD3 knockdown suppressed N-cadherin expression and MMP-2 activity in A375 cells

N-cadherin promotes the migration of melanocytes and is involved in the migratory ability of melanoma (14). MMP-2 has the ability to degrade type IV collagen and is associated with the migration and invasion of cancer (15). To clarify the mechanism of migration and invasion related to MBD3, we examined whether MBD3 knockdown affected N-cadherin expression levels and MMP-2 activity in melanoma cell lines. As shown in Figure 4a-b, MBD3 knockdown significantly suppressed N-cadherin expression and MMP-2 activity.
in A375 cells, but had no effect on these parameters in A2058 cells.

4. Discussion

In this study, we revealed two major findings. Firstly, MBD3 was found to be strongly expressed in the cultured melanoma cells and tissues of melanoma patients. In addition, as shown in Figure 2b and Table 1, the MBD3 levels were significantly higher in melanoma compared with pigmented nevi. These results demonstrated that MBD3 may be useful for the differential diagnosis of melanoma and pigmented nevus.

Secondly, the role of MBD3 in the progression of melanoma was found to vary depending on the cell line. MBD3 knockdown did not affect the proliferative ability of A375 or A2058 cells. However, MBD3 knockdown significantly reduced the migration and invasion of A375 cells, but had no significant effect on A2058 cells. Furthermore, the knockdown of MBD3 reduced the N-cadherin protein levels and MMP-2 activity in A375 cells, but had no significant effect on A2058 cells. These findings suggested that MBD3 may promote migration and invasion by regulating N-cadherin and MMP-2 in A375 cells. The reason of the finding that the migration and invasion of A2058 cells were not affected by an MBD3-specific siRNA, was suggested to depend on the presence of PTEN. A2058 cells have been established from metastatic lymph node and reported to be PTEN-deficient, while A375 cells have wild-type PTEN (16,17). PTEN is a negative regulator of PI3K. The PI3K/PTEN pathway transcriptionally regulates this cadherin regulation (19). It has been reported that PTEN was repressed through the epigenetic repressor NuRD complex (20). MBD3 is essential for the formation and stability of the NuRD complex. The knockdown of MBD3 may only suppress EMT in tumor cells with PTEN. Therefore, we suggest that the migration and invasion of PTEN-deficient A2058 cells were not affected by an MBD3-specific siRNA. However, this should be confirmed using a greater number of different cell lines in future studies.

In conclusion, although the differential diagnosis of pigmented nevus and melanoma is sometimes difficult, the assessment of MBD3 protein expression levels may solve this problem. Although heterogeneity was observed depending on the type of cell line, MBD3 has potential for use as a therapeutic target for the treatment of advanced melanoma.

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