Expression of COX-2, iNOS, p53 and Ki-67 in gastric mucosa-associated lymphoid tissue lymphoma

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AIM: To assess the expression of cyclooxygenase-2 (COX-2), nitric oxide synthase (iNOS), p53 and Ki-67 in gastric mucosa-associated lymphoid tissue (MALT) lymphoma and clarify the relationship between COX-2 expression and iNOS or p53 expression in these patients.

METHODS: The expressions of COX-2, iNOS, p53 and Ki-67 were detected in 32 gastric MALT lymphoma specimens and 10 adjacent mucosal specimens by immunohistochemical Envision method.

RESULTS: COX-2 and iNOS expressions were significantly higher in gastric MALT lymphoma tissues than those in adjacent normal tissues. The expression of COX-2 was observed in 22 of 32 cases of MALT lymphoma tissues (68.8%). A positive cytoplasmic immunoreactivity for iNOS was detected in 17 of 31 cases (53.1%). COX-2 expression in gastric MALT lymphoma tissues was positively correlated with iNOS expression (r=0.448, P=0.010) and cell proliferative activity analyzed by Ki-67 labeling index (r=0.410, P=0.020). The expression of COX-2 protein did not correlate with age, sex, stage of disease, lymph node metastasis or differentiation. The accumulation of p53 nuclear phosphoprotein was detected in 19(59.4%) of tumors. p53 protein was expressed in 11 of 23 assessed LG tumors and in 8 of 9 assessed HG tumors. The difference of p53 positivity was found statistically significant between LG and HG cases (P=0.0302). The p53 accumulation correlated with advanced clinical stage (stage III+IV vs stage I+II, P=0.017). There was a significant positive correlation between COX-2 expression and p53 accumulation status (r=0.403, P=0.022). The mean PI of Ki-67 in each grade group were 36.0±7.73% in HG and 27.4±9.21% in LG. High-proliferation rate correlated with HG tumors (r=0.419, P=0.017). The correlation coefficient showed a significant positive correlation between PI and COX-2 expression in MALT lymphoma patients (r=0.410, P=0.020).

CONCLUSION: COX-2 expresses in the majority of gastric MALT lymphoma tissues and correlates with cellular proliferation and iNOS expression. COX-2 overexpression is closely associated with p53 accumulation status. iNOS and COX-2 may play a synergistic role in the pathogenesis of gastric MALT lymphoma.
were fixed in 40 g/L buffered formaldehyde, and embedded in paraffin wax.

**Immunohistochemical assay for expression of COX-2, iNOS, p53 and Ki-67**

The expression of COX-2, iNOS, p53 and Ki-67 was studied by immunohistochemical Envision method according to the manufacturer’s instructions. H-62 (COX-2) is a rabbit polyclonal antibody raised against a recombinant protein corresponding to amino acids 50-111 mapping near the amino terminus of COX-2 of human origin (sc-7951, Santa Cruz Biotechnology, dilution 1:50). M-19 (iNOS) was provided as a rabbit affinity-purified polyclonal antibody raised against a peptide mapping at the carboxyl terminus of iNOS of mouse origin (sc-650, Santa Cruz Biotechnology, dilution 1:50). The Ki-67 antibody recognizes the Ki-67 antigen of paraffin-embedded tissues. To detect the p53 protein, a mouse monoclonal antibody (sc-126, Santa Cruz Biotechnology, dilution 1:50) was used which recognizes an epitope in the N-terminus of the human p53 protein. Staining for Ki-67 was performed by using an anti-Ki-67 monoclonal mouse antibody (ZM-0166, Zhongshan Biotechnology, dilution 1:50) was used which recognizes an epitope in the N-terminus of the human p53 protein. Staining for Ki-67 was performed by using an anti-Ki-67 monoclonal mouse antibody (ZM-0166, Zhongshan Biotechnology, dilution 1:50). Briefly, 5-µm sections cut from formalin-fixed, paraffin-embedded specimens were deparaffinized in xylene and rehydrated in graded alcohol. For antigen retrieval, the deparaffinized slides were microwaved in 0.01 mol/L sodium citrate buffer (pH 6.0) for 10 min. Endogenous peroxidase activity was then blocked by incubating the sections with 30 mL/L H$_2$O$_2$ in 0.05 mol/L phosphate buffer (pH 7.4), containing 0.45 mol/L NaCl for 15 min. Non-specific antibody binding was blocked by pretreatment with PBS containing 5 g/L bovine serum albumin. The sections were then incubated with the primary antibodies diluted as described above. After incubation, these sections were washed with 0.02 mol/L sodium phosphate buffer. The slides were then incubated with a secondary antibody for 30 min. Diaminobenzidine was used as chromogen and the sections were counterstained with hematoxylin. Negative controls were established by replacing the primary antibody with PBS.

**Assessment of immunohistochemical results**

The slides were evaluated independently by two observers who were unknown to the histological status. At the cellular level, COX-2 and iNOS staining was cytoplasmic in most cases, however, p53 and Ki-67 staining was nuclear. COX-2 is cytoplasmic enzyme detectable in tumor cells, epithelial cells, endothelial cells, smooth muscle cells and inflammatory cells. For final analysis, the expression of COX-2 was scored in the tumor cells. Staining for COX-2 and iNOS was considered positive only when more than 10% of the tumor cells in the entire tumor area were judged to be positive. The level of p53 was calculated by expressing the number of p53-positive cancer cells as a percentage of the total number of cancer cells in a high-power field. For analysis, tumors were classified as p53-negative (less than 10% positive nuclei) or p53-positive (more than 10% positive nuclei). The Ki-67 labeling index (proliferation index, PI) was determined by counting the percentage of positive cells among 1 000 tumor cells in 10 random regions in 400-fold fields.

**Statistical analysis**

Statistical comparisons for significance were made with the Student’s $t$ test and Chi-square test. Spearman correlation test was used for the correlation between positive rates. A $P$ value $<0.05$ was considered statistically significant.

**RESULTS**

**Expression of COX-2 and iNOS in gastric MALT lymphoma**

The expression of COX-2 was observed in 22 of 32 cases of MALT lymphoma tissues (68.8%). Immunohistochemically, COX-2 was stained diffusely in cytoplasm of the tumor cells (Figure 1A). In contrast, no or very faint signal was found in neighboring normal tissues. A positive expression correlated well with the histopathological diagnosis of MALT lymphoma. The expression of iNOS was observed in 17 of 31 cases (53.1%, Figure 1B). A positive expression was not observed in the neighboring normal tissues.

**Figure 1** Results of immunohistochemical staining (Original magnification: $\times$400). A: Expression of COX-2 in gastric MALT lymphoma; B: Expression of iNOS in gastric MALT lymphoma; C: Expression of p53 in gastric MALT lymphoma; D: Expression of Ki-67 in gastric MALT lymphoma.
Correlation between COX-2 expression and clinicopathological factors

The correlation between COX-2 expression and the clinicopathologic findings was analyzed by Spearman correlation test. All the parameters analyzed in COX-2 positive cases, including age, gender, stage of disease, lymph node metastasis and differentiation degree of the tumor, did not reach statistical significance (P>0.05, Table 1).

Expression of p53 in gastric MALT lymphoma

The accumulation of p53 nuclear phosphoprotein was detected in 19(59.4%) of tumors (Table 1, Figure 1C), whereas the p53 accumulation was undetectable in normal gastric tissues. A relationship between p53 status and several clinicopathological characteristics was investigated. p53 protein was expressed in 11 of 23 assessed LG tumors and in 8 of 9 assessed HG tumors. The difference of p53 positivity was found statistically significant between LG and HG cases (P=0.033). The p53 accumulation correlated with advanced clinical stage (stage III+IV vs stage I+II, P=0.017). The other parameters, such as age, gender and lymph node metastasis did not show any significant relation to the expression of p53.

There was a significant positive correlation between COX-2 expression and p53 accumulation status (r=0.403, P=0.022). Tumors that overexpressed p53 had higher expression levels of COX-2 than those without p53 overexpression (P=0.022, Table 1).

Expression of Ki-67 in gastric MALT lymphoma

Ki-67 staining was nuclear (Figure 1D). Very few cells were positive for Ki-67 in non-neoplastic gastric tissues. The mean PI of Ki-67 in the tumors was 29.81±9.54% (mean±SD). Mean values in each grade group were 36.0±7.73% in HG and 27.4±9.21% in LG. A significant correlation was observed between the high-proliferation rate and HG cases (r=0.419, P=0.017).

The PI in COX-2 positive group was significantly higher than that in COX-2 negative group (P=0.031). The correlation coefficient showed a significant positive correlation between PI and COX-2 expression in MALT lymphoma patients (r=0.410, P=0.020). However, no significant correlation between PI and iNOS expression was found (r=-0.037, P=0.839).

Table 1 Correlation between expression of COX-2 and iNOS/p53 and clinicopathological factors in gastric MALT lymphoma (n, %)

| Variable          | Total   | COX-2 positive | COX-2 negative | P value |
|-------------------|---------|----------------|----------------|---------|
| Gender Male       | 22      | 15(68.2)       | 7(31.8)        | 0.918   |
| Gender Female     | 10      | 7(70.0)        | 3(30.0)        |         |
| Age (yr) ≤50      | 9       | 6(66.7)        | 3(33.3)        | 0.874   |
| Age (yr) >50      | 23      | 16(69.6)       | 7(30.4)        |         |
| Lymph node +      | 10      | 8(80.0)        | 2(20.0)        | 0.355   |
| Lymph node -      | 22      | 14(63.6)       | 8(36.4)        |         |
| Histological Low  | 23      | 14(60.7)       | 9(39.1)        | 0.124   |
| Histological High | 9       | 8(88.9)        | 1(11.1)        |         |
| Stage III+IV      | 10      | 6(60.0)        | 4(40.0)        |         |
| Stage III         | 17      | 15(88.2)       | 2(11.8)        | 0.011   |
| Stage IV          | 15      | 7(46.7)        | 8(53.3)        |         |
| p53               | 19      | 16(84.2)       | 3(15.8)        | 0.022   |
| p53               | 13      | 16(84.2)       | 3(15.8)        |         |

DISCUSSION

Gastric MALT lymphoma is a unique disease. Normal human gastric mucosa is devoid of MALT. MALT accumulates within gastric mucosa as a result of long-standing H pylori infection in a subset of infected patients, and from this acquired MALT, low-grade B cell MALT lymphoma may eventually develop[13]. H pylori can be demonstrated in the gastric mucosa of the majority of cases of gastric MALT lymphoma[14,15]. Additionally, eradication of H pylori was reported to result in the complete regression of the majority of these tumors[16,17]. However, the exact mechanism responsible for the development of MALT lymphoma still remains obscure.

The contribution of COX-2 to carcinogenesis and the malignant phenotype of tumor cells has been thought to be related to its abilities: (1) increase production of prostaglandins[18]; (2) convert procarcinogens to carcinogens[19]; (3) inhibit apoptosis[20]; (4) promote angiogenesis[21]; (5) modulate inflammation and immune function[22,23]; (6) increase tumor cell invasiveness[24,25]. Like COX-2, iNOS is also involved in the process of carcinogenesis. Sustained induction of iNOS in chronic inflammation may be mutagenic through NO-mediated DNA damage or hindrance to DNA repair, and thus potentially carcinogenic. In addition, NO can favour tumor growth and development by stimulating angiogenesis[26,27] and causing immunosuppression[28].

In the current study, we demonstrated that a high positive immunostaining rate for COX-2 and iNOS was observed in gastric MALT lymphoma. Our results agree with the findings of previous investigations[18,26,27]. The present results indicated that the increased expression of COX-2 and iNOS might be important molecular events that contribute to gastric MALT lymphoma carcinogenesis. We speculate that H pylori infection might induce gastric carcinogenesis via overexpression of COX-2. These processes may be completed by the expression of COX-2 as an inflammation enzyme to release excessive amounts of prostaglandins, leading to further proliferation, reduction in apoptosis, angiogenesis and tumor growth.

It has been reported that COX-2 overexpression in tumors significantly correlates with iNOS overexpression[8,5]. In the current study, we also discovered that COX-2 expression was positively correlated with iNOS expression, suggesting a link between the COX-2 and iNOS pathways. In addition, iNOS and COX-2 may play a synergistic role in the pathogenesis of gastric MALT lymphoma. Because the product of iNOS catalysis, NO, is an important regulator of COX-2 activity and expression[28,31], and the products of COX-2 (diverse prostaglandins) may also influence iNOS expression[32]. Furthermore, prostaglandins and NO have been proposed to be involved in angiogenesis in vivo[33]. The inhibition of NO production by COX-2 inhibitors suggests NO-COX cross-talk between COX-2 and iNOS pathways[34].

Our results demonstrated that COX-2 expression in MALT lymphoma tissues was positively correlated with cell proliferative activity analyzed by Ki-67 labeling index. Ki-67 is expressed in cells that undergo active proliferation and have left the G0 phase of the cell cycle[35]. These results suggest that COX-2 expression may be actively associated with the modulation of cellular proliferation and transformation during the evolution of H pylori-associated gastritis to MALT lymphoma.

So far, there have been some ambiguous points with regard to relationships between COX-2 overexpression and clinicopathological characteristics of tumors. Several reports have demonstrated that COX-2 expression in various tumors influences tumor cell differentiation, invasiveness, size, and survival[36]. However, we found no significant relation between COX-2 expression and clinicopathological characteristics in our study, which was compatible with previous reports on other organs[37].
Low-grade MALT lymphoma can transform into high-grade lymphoma and is associated with other genetic events such as p53 inactivation\textsuperscript{[18,19,20]}. In the current study, p53 positivity increased significantly as the histological grade advanced. The results of our study support the concept that the expression of COX-2 in gastric lymphomas may be associated with transformation from low-grade to high-grade disease. In addition, there have been many workers reporting that high-proliferation rate is associated with the presence of a large cell component of MALT lymphomas\textsuperscript{[18,19]}. The results of our experiments showed that high proliferation rate expressed by Ki-67 was correlated with HG tumors. These suggested that high proliferation index in MALT lymphoma may help in identifying a population of patients with an increased risk of developing MALT lymphoma.

Consistent with the findings of others\textsuperscript{[10,11]}, we found that COX-2 overexpression was closely associated with p53 accumulation status. With regard to the negative regulation of COX-2, it has recently been shown that wild-type p53 suppresses promoter activities of COX-2 and the expression of COX-2 protein. Wild-type p53 was shown to suppress COX-2 promoter activity by competing with TATA-binding proteins\textsuperscript{[10,11]}. Han et al.\textsuperscript{[21]} identified that COX-2 expression was inducible by wild-type p53 and DNA damage. They also found that p53-mediated activation of the Ras/Raf/MAPK cascade, as demonstrated by suppression of COX-2 induction in response to p53 by dominant-negative Ras or Raf1 mutants. Furthermore, heparin-binding epidermal growth factor-like growth factor (HB-EGF), a p53 downstream target gene, induced COX-2 expression, implying that COX-2 is an ultimate effector in the p53 → HB-EGF → Ras/Raf/MAPK → COX-2 pathway.

In conclusion, COX-2 is expressed in the majority of gastric MALT lymphoma tissues and correlates with cellular proliferation and iNOS expression. iNOS and COX-2 may play a synergistic role in the pathogenesis of gastric MALT lymphoma. COX-2 overexpression is closely associated with p53 accumulation status. The molecular basis for the expression of COX-2 and iNOS and their roles in the evolution of Helicobacter-associated gastritis to gastric MALT lymphoma requires to be carefully investigated in follow-up studies.

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Edited by Kumar M Proofread by Chen WW and Xu FM