Anaplastic lymphoma tyrosine kinase oncogene in human cancer: gene aberrations, methods of detection and therapeutic potential

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Abstract

Anaplastic lymphoma tyrosine kinase (ALK) gene could be an attractive oncotarget in human cancers, since it is involved in several genetic alterations resulting in an aberrant activity of the receptor. To date, ALK-rearrangement represents a molecular target for the treatment of ALK-rearranged Non Small Cell Lung Cancer patients, who are highly sensitive to crizotinib, a specific inhibitor. ALK-rearranged patients treated with crizotinib show relevant clinical implications, however several different resistance mechanisms have been identified. Here we review various critical issues related to ALK-targeting therapy, including ALK gene aberrations, methods of detection, mechanism of acquired resistance and second-generation ALK inhibitors.

Introduction

Anaplastic lymphoma kinase (ALK) gene maps on the short arm of chromosome 2 (2p23) and it encodes for a tyrosine kinase receptor (RTK). ALK is physiologically expressed only in the nervous system during embryogenesis and plays important roles in cellular proliferation and differentiation. In human adults, ALK protein is expressed exclusively in the pericytes of the brain and in rare scattered neuronal and endothelial cells. ALK displays the classical structural features of a RTK, with an extracellular segment, a transmembrane region and an intracellular receptor resulting in an uncontrolled cellular proliferation, differentiation and survival.

ALK gene aberrations in human cancer

ALK gene is involved in different genetic aberration, including rearrangements, activating point mutations and gene amplification. ALK gene aberrations have been identified in several malignancies, including Anaplastic Non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma, breast cancer, colorectal carcinoma, inflammatory myofibroblastic tumor, diffuse large B-Cell lymphoma, renal carcinomas, esophageal squamous cell carcinoma, anaplastic thyroid carcinoma, neuroblastoma, glioblastoma, Ewing’s sarcoma, ovarian cancer, melanoma, and rhabdomyosarcoma (Table 1).4-41

ALK-rearrangement (ALK-R) was described for the first time in ALCCL, subsequently ALK-fusion proteins and different fusion partners are identified in other tumor types. In NSCLC, ALK-R are reported with a frequency of 3-7% and patients harboring this alteration are sensitive to ALK specific inhibitors. Echinoderm microtube-associated protein-like 4 (EML4) gene, mapped in position 2p21, is the most frequent ALK fusion partner. EML4-ALK chimeric gene is generated by the small inversion within the short arm of chromosome 2 and it encodes for a fusion protein with the N-terminus of EML4 and the kinase domain of ALK.42 Other ALK fusion partners have been identified in NSCLC, including TRK-fused gene (TFG), kinesin family member 5B (KIF5B) and kinesin light chain 1 (KLC1).13,15,28 ALK-R is frequently found in a subset of patients with NSCLC, particularly in male, young and never/light smoker patients. Furthermore, ALK-R is generally associated with adenocarcinoma histotype, especially in solid signet-ring cell and mucinous cribiform pattern.42,43 To date, NSCLC patients harboring ALK-R are treated with crizotinib, a specific inhibitor that acts through competitive binding to the ATP-binding pocket of the target kinases. This inhibitor was initially developed as a c-MET inhibitor, then its relevant activity in advanced NSCLC ALK-positive has been demonstrated.45,47 In 2011, crizotinib was approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for the treatment of ALK-rearranged advanced NSCLCs.

In addition to the rearrangement, ALK gene could be involved also in mutations, especially in neuroblastoma more than 35 mutations have been currently described. The majority of ALK mutations occurred within the kinase domain more frequently in three hotspots amino acid residues such as F1174, F1245 and R1275. The frequency of these mutations is different between sporadic and familial cases, especially R1275 mutations are frequently found in both sporadic and familial cases, conversely no germine mutations involving the F1174 or F1245 are described.28,48,49 Furthermore, other ALK point mutations are reported also in undifferentiated anaplastic thyroid cancer (ATC), in particular C3592T and G3602A mutations in exon 23 were found in approxi-
approximately 11.11% of cases, leading to a constitutive activation of RAS/MAPK and PI3K/AKT pathways. ALK gene could be involved also in an increase of the number of copies that could involve in a deregulated expression of ALK protein. ALK amplification (ALK-A) is a common genetic event in several cancers and it is often associated with a more aggressive behavior. ALK-A was described for the first time in neuroblastoma cell lines as a mechanism involved in tumorigenesis. Subsequently, ALK gene extra copies were found in several other cancers, such as NSCLC, ALCL, inflammatory breast cancers, pulmonary sarcomatoid carcinoma, rhabdomyosarcoma, carcinoma of the esophagus, adult renal cell carcinoma and hepatocellular carcinoma. Moreover, Bresler et al. showed that the human NB-derived cell lines with ALK-A are sensitive to both crizotinib and TAE684, another selective ALK inhibitor. These findings suggest that ALK inhibitors could be used in the treatment of ALK-amplified patients. ALK gene copy number gain could be more frequently associated with the chromosome 2 polysomy, thus a correct analysis needs the discrimination of real ALK-A versus chromosome 2 polysomy through the use of a specific centromeric alpha-satellite probe (CEP2). The instability of chromosome 2 with an increased copy numbers of some regions represents a frequent event in cancer, leading to a deregulated expression of the gene located in this amplicon. For example, ALK and MYCN co-amplification has been reported in approximately 7-15% of NB. Moreover, a close connection between ALK and MYCN has been demonstrated in neuronal and NB cell lines, in fact ALK receptor activation could lead to the initiation of MYCN mRNA transcription. Finally, ALK gene extra copies could have a value in the context of ALK-targeting therapy.

Assays for ALK aberrations detections: FISH, IHC and RT-PCR

Several assays are currently used to analyze ALK alterations, including immunohistochemistry (IHC), fluorescent in situ hybridization (FISH) and polymerase chain reaction based techniques (PCR). Below we will briefly review these methods and their relative advantages and disadvantages.

**FISH assay**

FISH is used for the detection ALK-R through a break apart strategy including two probes labeled with different fluorocromes and designed for the telomeric and centromeric sides of the break points. ALK FISH analysis is positive when at least 15% of cells show the classic break-apart pattern with one fusion, one red, and one green signal or alternative pattern with one fusion and one single red signal.

FISH test has some disadvantages, such as a high cost, a lengthy turn-around time. Moreover, FISH interpretations requires expertise and does not allow the identification of specific fusion partner. However FISH represents a precise and reliable method to detect ALK-R. In 2011, FDA validated FISH test as a gold standard for the

### Table 1. ALK gene aberrations in human cancer.

| ALK alterations          | Tumor type and fusion partners                                                                 | ALK-alterations frequency (%) | References |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|------------|
| ALK- rearrangements      | Anaplastic Non-Hodgkin’s Lymphoma (ALCL)                                                       | 60-85                         | (3, 7-9)   |
|                          | Non-Small Cell Lung Cancer                                                                     | 3-7                           | (6, 10-13) |
|                          | EML4, TFG, KLC1, KIKFSB                                                                      | 2.4                           | (14, 15)   |
|                          | Breast Cancer                                                                                 | 2.4                           | (14)       |
|                          | Colorectal Carcinoma                                                                          | 2.4                           | (14)       |
|                          | Inflammatory Myofibroblastic Tumor (IMT)                                                       | ~50%                          | (12, 16-18) |
|                          | CLTC, TPM3, CLTC, CARS, ATIC, RANBP2, SEC31L1                                                 | NA                            | (19,20)    |
|                          | Diffuse large B-Cell Lymphoma                                                                 | NA                            | (21-25)    |
|                          | Renal Carcinomas                                                                              | ~20                           | (26)       |
|                          | EML4, TPM3 and BCL                                                                            | NA                            |            |
|                          | Esophageal Squamous Cell Carcinoma                                                             | ~20                           |            |
|                          | EML4, TFG, ATIC                                                                               | NA                            |            |
|                          | Neuroblastoma                                                                                 | NA                            |            |
|                          | F1174L                                                                                       | 11                            | (27)       |
|                          | F1174I                                                                                       | 11                            | (28)       |
|                          | F1245C                                                                                       | 11                            | (28)       |
|                          | F1245V                                                                                       | 11                            | (28)       |
|                          | R1275Q                                                                                       | 11                            | (28)       |
|                          | R1275Q                                                                                       | 11                            | (28)       |
| ALK- mutations           | Anaplastic Thyroid Carcinoma                                                                  | 11                            | (27)       |
|                          | Neuroblastoma                                                                                 | 4-33                          | (28)       |
|                          | Neuroblastoma                                                                                 | ~50                           | (28, 30, 31)|
|                          | Neuroblastoma                                                                                 | NA                            | (32,33)    |
|                          | Neuroblastoma                                                                                 | NA                            | (34,35)    |
|                          | Neuroblastoma                                                                                 | 2-4                           | (36)       |
|                          | Neuroblastoma                                                                                 | 6.9                           | (37)       |
|                          | Neuroblastoma                                                                                 | 45                            | (38-40)    |
|                          | Extramedullary plasmacytoma                                                                   | ~2.2                          | (41)       |

NA, not available.
ALK target therapy and drug resistance in NSCLC

ALK represents a molecular target in lung cancer treatment, particularly NSCLC patients harboring ALK-R that are treated with crizotinib and which resulted in greater improvement in global quality of life and when compared to chemotherapy.46,47

In August 2011, the impressively high rate of rapid objective responses to crizotinib has led to an accelerated approval of the drug for the treatment of ALK-positive patients with locally advanced or metastatic NSCLC.

Despite the initial sensitivity to crizotinib, ALK-rearranged patients frequently develop the acquired resistance. In literature, ALK-positive crizotinib-treated relapsed patients are reported and the middle time of relapse was approximately 4 to 34 months.58,69

Table 2. Mechanisms of Crizotinib resistance.

| Mechanism of Crizotinib resistance | Major alterations | References |
|-----------------------------------|------------------|------------|
| ALK dominant                      | ALK-point mutations | G1269A EML-ALK (68) |
|                                   |                  | L1196M EML-ALK (68,69,71) |
|                                   |                  | C1150Y EML-ALK (68,69,71) |
|                                   |                  | S1206Y EML-ALK (69,71,72) |
|                                   |                  | L1152R EML-ALK (73) |
|                                   |                  | G1202R EML-ALK (69,72) |
|                                   | ALK copy number gain | I151 Tns: Thr insertion (68) |
| ALK non-dominant                  | EGFR alterations | L585R amplification (88,69,73) |
|                                   | KRAS mutations   | G12C G12V amplification (88) |
|                                   | c-Kit amplification | (89) |

Table 3. Characteristics of second-generation ALK inhibitors.

| Drugs       | Molecular targets other than ALK | Resistance mutations that are sensitive to the drug | Current status | References |
|-------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|----------------|------------|
| Crizotinib  | ROSI, MET, Ron and AXL           | L1198F+C1156Y                                      | FDA and EMA approved (87) |            |
| Ceritinib   | IGF-1R, InsR and ROSI            | L1196M, G1269A, S1206Y, F1245C, I1171T (N), V1180L | FDA and EMA approved (87) |            |
| Alectinib   | RET, GAK, LTK                    | L1196M, G1269A, S1206Y, C1156Y, F1147L, F1245C, L1152R, I151T-ins | FDA approved (87) |            |
| Brigatinib  | EGFR and ROSI                    | G1269S, L1196M                                     | Phase II/III (87) |            |
| Lorlatinib  | ROSI                             | G120R, G1269A                                     | Phase I/II (87) |            |
| TSK01       | NTRK                             | L1196M                                            | Phase I/II      |            |
| ASP3026     | ROSI, ACK                        | L1196M                                            | Phase I/II      |            |
| X396        | MET                              | L1196M and C1156Y                                 | Phase I/II      | (88)       |
| Entrectinib | ROSI and NTRK                    | L1196M and C1156Y                                 | Phase I/II      |            |
| CEP-28122/37440 | CEP-28122: InsR, IGF-R1 and c-MET, CEP-37440: PAK | --                                  | Preclinical development and phase I (89) |            |
The first new generation of ALK inhibitor FDA-approved was Ceritinib (LDK378) that was recommended for the treatment of ALK-positive NSCLC patients who have recurrence or no longer respond to treatment to crizotinib. Clinical trials showed that previously patients treated with crizotinib had an overall response rate to ceritinib of 56%, a median duration of response of 8.3 months and a median PFS of 6.9 months. Then, FDA approved also alecintib (Alecensa) for the treatment of ALK-rearranged NSCLC patients with disease progression.77,78

Moreover, new generation of ALK inhibitors represent a glimmer for the treat- ment of advanced NSCLC especially those with brain metastases.79 In particular, Alectinib showed better central nervous system penetration compared with crizo- tinib, since it is not expelled from the intracranial environment.80,81 Moreover, one of the major advantages of these new drugs is the differential efficacy against the various ALK alterations, for example the gate- keeper mutations V1180L and I1171T that give resistance to alectinib but are sensitive to ceritinib.77,78

In the last years, other next-generation ALK inhibitors are in clinical development including brigatinib and lorlatinib. Recent studies showed the efficacy of lorlatinib (PF-06463922) in patients harboring G1202R ALK mutation that confers resistance to alectinib but are sensitive to ceritinib.77,78

Conclusions

ALK gene could represent an intriguing molecular target in several different human cancers. ALK-targeting therapy showed dramatic benefits, particularly in NSCLC, thus it would be desirable that the plethora of patients sensitive to ALK inhibitors might be expanded. Therefore, further studies are required to analyze other aberrations occurring in ALK gene, beyond the rearrangement. Finally, the management of ALK-rearranged NSCLC with disease progression due to resistance to crizotinib represents currently a critical issue in the clinical practice.

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