Short communication

hnRNP-R REGULATES THE PMA-INDUCED c-fos EXPRESSION IN RETINAL CELLS

JIA HUANG¹, SHU-JING LI¹, XIAN-HUA CHEN²*, YU HAN and PING XU²*
¹Laboratory of Genomic Physiology and ²State Key Laboratory of Medical Neurobiology, Fudan University, 138 Yixueyuan Road, Shanghai, 200032, P. R. China

Abstract: This study focused on the function of hnRNP-R in the regulation of c-fos expression. We demonstrated that hnRNP-R accelerated the rise and decline phases of c-fos mRNAs and Fos proteins, allowing PMA to induce an augmented pulse response of c-fos expression. Then, we examined the role of the c-fos-derived AU-rich element (ARE) in hnRNP-R-regulated mRNA degradation. Studies with the ARE-GFP reporter gene showed that hnRNP-R significantly reduced the expression of GFP with an inserted ARE. Moreover, immunoprecipitation-RT-PCR analysis demonstrated that in R28 cells and rat retinal tissues, the c-fos mRNA was co-immunoprecipitated with hnRNP-R. These findings indicate that hnRNP-R regulates the c-fos expression in retinal cells, and that the ARE of c-fos mRNAs contributes to this regulation.

Key words: hnRNP-R, Retina, c-fos, mRNA turnover, ARE

INTRODUCTION

The immediate-early gene (IEG) c-fos encodes the protein Fos, which mediates light-elicited cellular activities in the retina by controlling the expression of its downstream genes encoding neurotransmitters or neuromodulators [1, 2]. The mechanisms regulating c-fos expression in the retina are not completely

* Authors for correspondence; e-mail: matibuck@yahoo.com or xhchen@fudan.edu.cn, tel: 086-21-54237094, fax: 086-21-54237094

Abbreviations used: ARE – AU-rich element; DMSO – dimethyl sulfoxide; GFP – green fluorescence protein; PMA – phorbol 12-myristate 13-acetate; SMA – spinal muscular atrophy; UTR – 3’-untranslated region
understood. One mechanism is attributed to the regulation of its mRNA degradation [3, 4] by cis-elements [2, 5, 6] including an AU-rich element (ARE) located in the 3'-untranslated region (UTR) of the c-fos mRNA [5, 7]. Heteronuclear RNA-binding proteins (hnRNPs) are predominantly nuclear RNA-binding proteins involved in many cellular activities, including transcription and pre-mRNA processing [8]. Two of the hnRNPs, hnRNP-Q and hnRNP-D, were recently shown to enhance the stability of ARE-contained mRNAs, indicating the importance of hnRNPs in regulating the c-fos mRNA degradation [6].

hnRNP-R is another member of the hnRNP family, and it is important in normal neural function and neural disease SMA [9-11]. The biochemical similarities between hnRNP-R and hnRNP-Q [9, 12] and the known function of hnRNP-Q in regulating the c-fos mRNA turnover process [6] suggest that hnRNP-R may act as a new protein component in the regulation of c-fos expression. The results of our studies support this possibility.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Cell culture
Immortalized R28 retinal precursor cells (a gift from Dr. Seigel) were cultured and transfected as described previously [13]. PMA (100 μg/ml in DMSO) with a final concentration of 100 ng/ml was added to induce c-fos expression in the cells. Cells were harvested at different time points (15, 30, 45, 60, 120, 240 min) after PMA addition for time-course analysis, or at 60 min for other analyses. Actinomycin (ActD, 5 μg/ml) was used to inhibit transcription. In PMA-induced R28 cells, ActD was added 45 min after the addition of PMA.

Preparation of DNA constructs
The DNA construct for hnRNP-R expression (pcDNA-R) was prepared as described previously [13]. To prepare the ARE-green fluorescence protein (GFP) reporter gene, a cDNA fragment containing the ARE located at the 3'-UTR of c-fos mRNA (1844~2026 bp, GenBank No. X06769) was generated using reverse transcription (RT)-PCR with the primers: ARE-GFP forward, 5'-ATT CTC GAG AGC GTC CAT GTT CAT TGT-3'; and ARE-GFP reverse, 5'-TCG GGA TCC CGA AAG ACC TCA GGA TAG-3'. The ARE cDNA was then inserted into pEGFP-C2 vectors (Clontech) after XhoI/BamHI digestion.

Reverse transcription-polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR) analysis
RT-PCR analysis of c-fos mRNAs was performed as described previously [13]. The following primers were used: for c-fos mRNA (GenBank No. X06769), 5'-AGC GTC CAT GTT CAT TGT CAT TGT-3' (forward), 5'-CGA AAG ACC TCA GGA TAG AAA -3' (reverse); and for GAPDH (as a control, GenBank No. M17701), 5'-TGA TTA CAT CAA GAA GGT GGT GAA G-3' (forward), 5'-TCC TTG GAG GCC ATG TGG GCC AT-3' (reverse). The reactions were performed with 30 cycles for c-fos and 20 cycles for GAPDH.
Western blot analysis
Cell lysates were separated by 9% SDS-PAGE for further Western blot analysis as described previously [13]. Rabbit anti-hnRNP-R (1:1000, [13]), monoclonal mouse anti-Fos (1:5000) or anti-GAPDH (as a control, 1:5000) antibodies were used as primary antibodies and AP-labeled goat anti-rabbit or horse anti-mouse IgG (1:1000) as secondary antibodies.

Immunoprecipitation-RT-PCR analysis
The immunoprecipitation of hnRNP-R antibodies with R28 cell pellets or rat retinal tissues was performed following Esnaults’ protocol [14]. Preimmune rabbit serum was used as a negative control. Precipitated samples were then split, with 40% dissolved in TriReagent (Watson, China) for the purification of RNA according to the manufacturer’s recommendations, and 60% dissolved in SDS-PAGE loading buffer for Western blot analysis. The RT-PCR analysis for c-fos, tra2β and β-actin were performed as described above or previously [13, 15].

Statistical analysis
The experiments were performed in triplicate, and repeated at least three times independently. The data is presented as mean ± SE. The difference was determined as significant by Student’s t-test at P < 0.01 (**) or P < 0.05 (*).

RESULTS
hnRNP-R regulates the c-fos expression in retinal R28 cells
To study whether hnRNP-R regulates c-fos expression, we examined the effect of hnRNP-R overexpression on the level of c-fos expression induced by PMA in retinal R28 cells [16]. By comparison to the time-course of the c-fos expression induced by PMA in cells transfected with pcDNA plasmids (control), we demonstrated that hnRNP-R overexpression not only accelerated the rise, but also the decline of the levels of c-fos mRNAs and Fos proteins, as shown in Figs 1A and B, indicating a “dual effect” of hnRNP-R on PMA-induced c-fos expression [3, 4]. Figs 1A and B also showed a delayed increase in Fos compared with the increase in c-fos mRNA after the transfection, which is consistent with the known delay effect between c-fos mRNA and Fos protein expression [3, 4]. The transfection efficiency (~30%) was monitored by co-expression of EGFP. The overexpression of hnRNP-R was determined by immunoblotting with hnRNP-R antibodies (data not shown). This dual effect resulted in an increased peak expression level or pulse expression of c-fos in response to PMA induction. To observe the effect of hnRNP-R on c-fos mRNA degradation, we used the transcription inhibitor ActD after PMA induction. As shown in Fig. 1C, in the presence of ActD, hnRNP-R increased the c-fos mRNA degradation rate, suggesting that hnRNP-R accelerated the c-fos mRNA degradation.
hnRNP-R reduces the expression of the ARE-GFP reporter gene
To examine the role of the ARE in hnRNP-R-accelerated c-fos mRNA degradation without the interference of hnRNP-R-increased c-fos transcription, we prepared a reporter gene (ARE-GFP) by inserting a c-fos-derived ARE at the 3'-UTR of the full-length GFP cDNA. The results demonstrated that the GFP mRNA and protein levels were significantly reduced in the cells transfected with ARE-GFP plasmids, compared to the control (GFP) (Fig. 2A). Then, we used this reporter gene to test whether the ARE mediates the effect of hnRNP-R on mRNA degradation. As shown in Fig. 2B, hnRNP-R overexpression significantly reduced the ARE-GFP mRNA levels, but not the GFP levels (Fig. 2C), indicating that the function of hnRNP-R requires the presence of the ARE. The result supports the idea that the c-fos-derived ARE may contribute to the accelerated c-fos mRNA degradation by hnRNP-R.
Fig. 2. The effect of c-fos-derived ARE on GFP expression (A) and hnRNP-R on ARE-mediated GFP expression (B and C). A – GFP mRNA (left) and protein (right) expression in R28 cells transfected with ARE-GFP or GFP plasmids (same dosages). B – Time courses of ARE-GFP expression in R28 cells without (pcDNA) or with (pcDNA-R) hnRNP-R overexpression after ActD treatment (0 h, 3 h). C – GFP expression in R28 cells without or with hnRNP-R overexpression after ActD treatment (0 h, 3 h).

The exogenous c-fos-derived ARE reduces the decline rate of endogenous c-fos mRNA in the presence of the overexpressed hnRNP-R

To further examine whether the ARE contributes to the accelerated c-fos mRNA degradation by hnRNP-R, the ARE-GFP was used as an exogenous c-fos-derived ARE, with the GFP as a control, to study its effect on PMA-induced c-fos mRNA expression in R28 cells. We assumed that if the ARE is involved in hnRNP-R-regulated c-fos mRNA degradation in vivo, then the ARE-GFP competes with the endogenous ARE and thereby attenuates the hnRNP-R-accelerated c-fos mRNA degradation, resulting in an augmentation of hnRNP-R-promoted c-fos expression. All the experiments were performed in the presence of ActD to inhibit the c-fos transcription. Fig. 3A showed that in R28 cells transfected with ARE-GFP plasmids, the decline rate of the c-fos mRNA level was significantly decreased, compared to that in the control (Fig. 3B), suggesting that the ARE contributes to the c-fos mRNA degradation regulated by either endogenous or overexpressed hnRNP-R.
Fig. 3. The effect of ARE-GFP or GFP on the *c-fos* mRNA decline rate in R28 cells with (A) or without (B) hnRNP-R overexpression. ActD was added 45 min after the addition of PMA to the R28 cells. The *c-fos* mRNA level at 0 min ($L_0$) and 30 min ($L_{30}$) after ActD treatment was measured and normalized according to the GAPDH mRNA level. The decline rate of *c-fos* mRNA was calculated by the equation: $(L_0-L_{30})/L_0$.

The *c-fos* mRNA is co-immunoprecipitated with hnRNP-R proteins

We determined whether the hnRNP-R is associated with *c-fos* mRNAs *in vivo* using RT-PCR analysis of *c-fos* mRNAs in the hnRNP-R immunoprecipitates in R28 cells and rat retinal tissues using a pair of primers specific to *c-fos*-ARE. Fig. 4 showed that the *c-fos*-ARE was present in the hnRNP-R immunoprecipitate, but not in the control (preimmune). In the experiments, the β-actin mRNAs known to bind with hnRNP-R proteins [11] were detected as a positive control. In addition, the immunoprecipitation with an antibody specific to another RNA binding protein, Tra2-β, was performed as an unrelated control. The results demonstrated that hnRNP-R was associated with the *c-fos* mRNA, indicating the involvement of hnRNP-R in regulating the *c-fos* mRNA degradation *in vivo*.

Fig. 4. The *c-fos* mRNA was co-immunoprecipitated with hnRNP-R in cells induced with PMA to express *c-fos* R28 cells (A) and rat retinal tissues (B).
DISCUSSION

The c-fos plays a critical role in mediating the biological rapid responses to various stimuli, such as diurnal responses in the retina [17]. The rapid response is tightly controlled by multiple mechanisms, especially highly regulated mRNA degradation [6, 18]. Two cis-elements, mCRD (the major protein-coding-region determinant of instability) and ARE (the AU-rich element), are known to act as key elements in regulating c-fos mRNA degradation. In addition, the mRNA degradation process requires multiple factors acting cooperatively. Therefore, identifying additional candidate factors regulating c-fos mRNA degradation is an important issue for understanding the mechanisms of mRNA degradation. hnRNP-Q has been shown to stabilize ARE-containing mRNA and regulate c-fos expression [6]. In this study, we examined the function of hnRNP-R, a newly identified member of the hnRNP family that binds to mRNAs, in regulating the c-fos expression in retinal R28 cells. Because c-fos is an inducible gene with an extremely low basal expression, we used the PMA-induced c-fos expression in R28 cells as a model [2, 16]. We showed that hnRNP-R significantly accelerates the rise and decline phases of c-fos expression, suggesting that hnRNP-R promotes c-fos transcription and mRNA degradation [19]. This is consistent with the results of previous studies showing that c-fos expression is tightly controlled by transcription and mRNA degradation mechanisms [2, 6, 18]. This “dual effect” results in a transient or pulse increase in c-fos expression, which is crucial for c-fos to function as an IEG in acute responses to stimuli [2].

In view of the known function of hnRNP-Q to enhance the stability of ARE-contained mRNAs [6], in this study, we focused on the possibility that hnRNP-R, which is highly homologous to hnRNP-Q, may accelerate the c-fos mRNA degradation via an ARE-mediated mechanism. To eliminate the potential interference of the cis-element mCRD, an ARE-GFP reporter gene was used. We demonstrated that regulation of GFP expression by hnRNP-R requires the attachment of c-fos-derived ARE to the GFP, suggesting the requirement of the ARE for hnRNP-R to regulate the mRNA degradation. We further examined the role of the ARE and hnRNP-R in regulating the c-fos mRNA degradation in vivo, and showed that the exogenous ARE decreases the c-fos mRNA decline rate and that the c-fos-derived ARE is co-immunoprecipitated with hnRNP-R. Together, the results suggest that hnRNP-R regulates c-fos expression via an ARE-mediated mechanism.

In contrast to the function of hnRNP-Q as a stabilizer for ARE-contained mRNAs [6], our results indicate that hnRNP-R may function as de-stabilizer in regulating the c-fos mRNA degradation via an ARE-mediated mechanism. Our results do not exclude the possibility that hnRNP-R may regulate the c-fos mRNA degradation by cooperating with other members of hnRNPs, such as hnRNP-Q [6]. In addition, the importance of mCRD in hnRNP-R-regulated c-fos expression is unknown. In order to fully understand how hnRNP-R regulates the c-fos mRNA degradation, these issues will be studied in the future.
Acknowledgements. We would like to thank Dr. Seigel for providing the R28 cells. This study was supported by the National Foundation of Natural Sciences of China (grants No. 30070242, No. 30470383, No. 30470535), the Shanghai Leading Academic Discipline Project (No. B111) and the Shanghai Key project (No. 07DJ14005).

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