Expression of miR-195 and its target gene Bcl-2 in human intervertebral disc degeneration and their effects on nucleus pulposus cell apoptosis

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Research article

Keywords: miR-195, Bcl-2, intervertebral disc degeneration, nucleus pulposus cells, Apoptosis

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-69943/v1

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Abstract

Objective: To investigate the expression of miR-195 and its target gene Bcl-2 in intervertebral disc degeneration (IVDD) and its effect on nucleus pulposus (NP) cell apoptosis.

Methods: The expressions of miR-195 and Bcl-2 in NP tissues of IVDD patients were quantified by qRT-PCR and Western blotting respectively. NP cells were divided into Blank group, TNF-α group, TNF-α + miR-NC group, TNF-α + siBcl-2 group, and TNF-α + miR-195 inhibitors + siBcl-2 group. Cell proliferation was detected by MTT assay, cell apoptosis evaluated by flow cytometry, mitochondrial membrane potential (MMP) tested by JC-1 staining, and the expression of apoptosis-related proteins quantified by Western blotting.

Results: Compared with controls, IVDD patients had significantly increased miR-195 expression and decreased Bcl-2 protein in NP tissues. The expression of miR-195 was negatively correlated with the expression of Bcl-2 in NP tissues of IVDD patients ($r = -0.89$, $P < 0.001$). Dual-luciferase reporter gene assay indicated that Bcl-2 was a target gene of miR-195. In comparison with Blank group, TNF-α group showed decreased cell proliferation and MMP, increased cell apoptosis, up-regulated expression of miR-195, Bax and cleaved caspase 3, and down-regulated Bcl-2 protein, these changes were attenuated by miR-195 inhibitors. Additionally, siBcl-2 can reverse the protective effect of miR-195 inhibitors on TNF-α-induced NP cells.

Conclusion: IVDD patients had increased miR-195 expression in NP tissues, and inhibiting miR-195 can specifically up-regulate Bcl-2 expression to curb apoptosis of TNF-α-induced NP cells.

Introduction

Intervertebral disc degeneration (IVDD) is one of the major causes of low back pain, seriously endangering the public health and bringing huge economic burdens to the global (1, 2). However, the molecular mechanism of IVDD has not been clearly elucidated and multiple factors in vivo and in vitro may cause IVDD, such as genetic factors, intervertebral disc dystrophy, immunological factors, matrix metalloproteinases, inflammatory mediators, extracellular matrix (ECM) factors, apoptosis, and mechanical overload (3–5). According to a previous study, the inner layer of intervertebral disc is nucleus pulposus (NP) composed of ECM which contains NP cells, proteoglycan and type II collagen (6). The IVDD occurrence has been generally considered to be associated with excessive apoptosis of NP cells (7). Thus, inhibiting NP cell apoptosis may promote the synthesis of NP ECM to slow down the IVDD progression, which is of great significance to improve the quality of life of IVDD patients (8).

MicroRNAs (miRNA) are a class of small single-strand non-coding RNA molecules about 18–25 nt, and play a critical regulatory role in cell differentiation, proliferation and survival (9). In recent years, miRNA has been shown to be involved in the development and progression of IVDD primarily via affecting cell apoptosis, inflammatory signal response and ECM components (10, 11). Of note, miR-195, located at chromosome 17p13.1, belongs to the miR-15/16/195/424/497 family, and it has differential roles in
different diseases (12). For example, Xiaoming Cao et al. fund the increased miR-195 in osteoarthritis, which could affect the collagen synthesis in osteoarthritis progression via targeting PTHrP (13). Also, miR-195 can target IKKa to enhance the proliferation and inhibit the apoptosis of human umbilical vein endothelial cells (HUVECs) treated with oxygen-glucose deprivation (OGD), as suggested by Xiao-Li Yang et al. (14). Nevertheless, relevant studies on the role of miR-195 in IVDD are still unclear. Using the target gene prediction website, Bcl-2 was turned out to be a target gene of miR-195. Indeed, the over-expressed Bcl-2 in NP cells can significantly reduce the apoptosis of serum starvation-induced NP cells in the study of Hideki Sudo et al. (15). Kangcheng Zhao et al. also found silencing miRNA-143 can specifically up-regulate Bcl-2 expression to inhibit NP cell apoptosis (8). Hence, we hypothesized that miR-195 may play its regulatory role in NP cell apoptosis of IVDD through the regulation of Bcl-2.

To this end, this study attempted to investigate the expression of miR-195 and its target gene Bcl-2 in IVDD, and its possible influence in NP cell apoptosis, aiming to provide some new theoretical basis for the targeted therapy of IVDD.

**Materials And Methods**

**Ethics statement**

This study was approved by Ethics Committee of The Second Hospital of Liaocheng Affiliated to Shandong First Medical University. All participants and their guardians were well informed and signed the informed consent form prior to the study.

**Study subjects**

From January 2018 to December 2019, 12 IVDD patients treated in our hospital were recruited as study subjects (Pfirrmann grade: IV-V, mean age: 41.6 ± 8.3 years). During the same period, 10 patients who received decompression, bone grafting and internal fixation in Orthopedic Surgery of our hospital due to spinal burst fractures were recruited as control subjects (Pfirrmann grade: I-II, mean age: 39.2 ± 7.5 years). All patients had no history of tumor, tuberculosis, diabetes, chronic infection and autoimmune diseases. NP tissues from IVDD patients and control patients were quickly collected and stored in liquid nitrogen for later experiments, and all tissues were preserved in cell center of our hospital.

**Isolation and culturing of NP cells**

Human NP tissues were carefully isolated, washed three times with PBS, and cut to 1 mm³ pieces with ophthalmic scissors and placed in 15 ml centrifuge tube. At the temperature of 37 °C, NP tissues were digested for 40 min in PBS solution with 0.25% trypsin (Gibco-BRL, Grand Island, NY). The digestive solution was removed, and the left tissues were washed with PBS again. Next, NP tissues were digested for 4 h in PBS solution with 0.025% type II collagen (Invitrogen), followed by filtering, centrifugation and discarding the upper supernatant. NP cells were inoculated to culture dish or plate and incubated for 3 weeks in a 37 °C, 5% CO₂ incubator. The culture medium was DMEM/F12 supplemented by 15% fetal
bovine serum (FBS) (Gibco-BRL), 1% penicillin/streptomycin (Invitrogen). The culture medium was replaced twice every week. The 2nd passage cells were used for subsequent experiments.

**Dual-luciferase reporter gene assay**

Bioinformatics software was used to predict the target site of Bcl-2 3'UTR to bind to miR-195. Wild-type Bcl-2-Wt 3'UTR and mutant-type Bcl-2-Mut 3'UTR recombinant plasmids were constructed. One day before transfection, cells were digested by trypsin, counted (2 × 10^5 cells/mL) and inoculated to 24-well plates. Cells were co-transfected with wild-type or mutant-type luciferase reporter gene plasmid, Renilla (pRL-TK) plasmid, and miR-195 mimic or miR-NC in accordance with the instructions of Lipofectamine 2000 kit (Invitrogen, USA). At 6 h after transfection, the culture medium was replaced by serum-containing medium. At 24 h after transfection, cells were collected to detect the luciferase activity using dual-luciferase reports gene assay kit (Promega, USA). The ratio of pGL3 firefly luciferase activity to pRL-TK Renilla luciferase activity was regarded as the relative luciferase activity. The experiment was performed three times independently to obtain the mean value.

**Grouping and transfection of cells**

NP cells were divided into 5 groups: Blank group (NP cells without any treatment), TNF-α group (NP cells treated with 20 ng/ml TNF-α for 12 h (16)), TNF-α + miR-NC group (NP cells transfected with miRNA NC prior to TNF-α treatment), TNF-α + miR-195 inhibitors group (NP cells transfected with miR-195 inhibitors prior to TNF-α treatment), TNF-α + siBcl-2 group (NP cells transfected with Bcl-2 siRNA prior to TNF-α treatment) and TNF-α + miR-195 inhibitors + siBcl-2 group (NP cells co-transfected with miR-195 inhibitors and Bcl-2 siRNA prior to TNF-α treatment). miRNA negative control (NC), miR-195 inhibitors and Bcl-2 siRNA were all purchased from Shanghai Genechem Co., LTD. The liposome method was used for cell transfection procedures according to the instructions of Lipofectamine™ 2000 (Sigma, USA).

**qRT-PCR**

Total RNA in tissues or cells were extracted using TRIZOL agent, quantified for RNA concentration using an ultraviolet spectrophotometer, and reversely transcribed into cDNA using PrimeScript RT kit (RR014A, Takara Biomedical Technology (Beijing) Co., Ltd., China). Appropriate amount of cDNA was used as template for PCR. Primers were designed using software Primer 5.0 (Table 1), and synthesized by GenScript (Nanjing) Co., Ltd). qRT-PCR was performed according to instructions of PCR kit (KR011A1, TIANGEN Biotech (Beijing) Co. Ltd., Beijing, China) and reaction conditions included pre-denaturation at 95 °C for 1 min and 40 cycles of denaturation at 95 °C for 10 s, annealing at 60 °C, extending for 40 s. With U6 as internal reference, 2^−ΔΔCt method was used to calculate the expression of target genes, with ΔCt = Ct_{target gene} - Ct_{internal reference gene}, ΔΔCt= ΔCt_{experimetn group} - ΔCt_{control group}, and relative expression of miRNA = 2^-ΔΔCt. The experiment was performed three times independently to obtain the mean value.
Table 1
Primers for qRT-PCR

| Gene | Primers (5’-3’) |
|------|----------------|
| miR-195 | F: CGTAGCAGCACAGAAATATTGGC  
R: CCAGTCTCAGGGTCCGAGGTATTC |
| U6 | F: CTCGCTTCGGCAGCACATATA  
R: ACGCTTCACGAATTTGCGTGTC |

Western blotting

Total proteins in NP cells were extracted and quantified for protein concentration with a BCA kit. The protein samples were adjusted to the same level regarding protein content and loading volume. Polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis was performed to separate proteins, which were transferred to Polyvinylidene fluoride (PVDF) membranes using semi-dry transfer system (Bio-Rad, USA). The membrane was blocked in skimmed milk at room temperature and washed with PBST buffer, before the addition of primary antibodies for 1 h reaction at room temperature, including rabbit-anti-human Bax, Bcl-2 and cleaved caspase 3, and GAPDH monoclonal antibody (all purchased from Abcam, UK). Next, the membrane was washed with PBST for 5 times × 3 min, incubated for 1 h with horseradish peroxidase (HRP) labeled goat-anti-rabbit IgG (Beijing Zhongshan Gold Bridge Biotechnology Co., Ltd.), and rinsed with PBST for 5 times × 3 min. ECL luminescent reagent was used for visualization of target proteins. With GAPDH protein as internal reference, the software Image-pro Plus 6.0 was used to determine the gray value of target protein bands. The relative expression of target protein was set as the gray value ratio of target protein to GAPDH. The experiment was performed three times independently to obtain the mean value.

Cell viability detected by MTT assay

NP cells in each group were inoculated to 96-well plates by density of $1 \times 10^4$ cells/well. When cell confluence reached 70%, 5 mg/mL MTT (3-[4,5-dimethylthiazol-2-yl]-2,5 diphenyl tetrazolium bromide) solution (ST316, Beyotime Biotechnology) was added to each well by 10 µL/well and cells were cultured at 37 °C for 4 h. After removing the upper clear supernatant, the plate was washed with PBS, followed by addition of dimethylsulfoxide (DMSO) (D5879, Sigma) by 100 µL/well and 10 min of oscillation. At 48 h after inoculation, the absorbance (OD value) was determined at wavelength of 492 nm with a Microplate Reader (MK3, Thermo, Pittsburgh, PA, USA). The experiment was performed three times independently to obtain the mean value.

Cell apoptosis detected by flow cytometry

NP cells were digested by 0.25% trypsin (without EDTA) (PYG0107, Wuhan Boster Biological Technology., LTD, China) in a 15 ml centrifuge tube, centrifuged for 5 min at the speed of 1000 r/min, and washed three times with cold PBS. The clear supernatant was discarded. Next, 400 µl 1 × binding buffer was
added to suspend cells, followed by addition of 5 µl Annexin V-FITC for 15 min staining at 4 °C in an avoidance of light, with the addition of 10 µl propidium iodide (PI) staining for 5 min at 4 °C without light. A flow cytometer was used to detect the cell apoptosis, with the excitation wavelength of 488 nm. Passband filter with the wavelength of 515 nm was used to detect FITC fluorescence, and the filter with wavelength of 560 nm was used to detect PI fluorescence. The experiment was performed three times independently to obtain the mean value.

**Detection of mitochondrial membrane potential (MMP)**

In accordance with instructions of the JC-1 MMP detection kit (TIANGEN Biotech (Beijing) Co., Ltd., China), JC-1 staining solution was added to cells for 20 min of incubation at 37 °C. Next, JC-1 staining buffer was used to wash cells twice. 300 µL PBS was used to suspend cells before detection with the flow cytometer. The excitation and emission wavelength was 490 nm and 580 nm for red fluorescence respectively, and 490 nm and 520 nm for green fluorescence respectively. The experiment was performed three times independently to obtain the mean value.

**Statistical methods**

All statistical data were analyzed using SPSS 21.0 (SPSS, Inc, Chicago, IL, USA). Measurement data were presented by mean ± standard deviation. Comparison between two groups was analyzed using Student’s *t*-test, while difference among multiple groups was compared using One-Way ANOVA. *P* < 0.05 was regarded as statistical significance.

**Results**

**Expression of miR-195 and Bcl-2 in NP tissues of IVDD patients**

The expression of miR-195 in NP tissues of IVDD patients and control patients was detected by qRT-PCR (Fig. 1A). As a result, miR-195 expression in NP tissues was significantly higher from IVDD patients than those from control participants (*P* < 0.05). Western Blotting was performed to detect Bcl-2 expression in NP tissues of IVDD patients (Fig. 1B-C). Obviously, IVDD patients had lower Bcl-2 protein level than control participants (*P* < 0.05). As shown in Fig. 1D, miR-195 expression was negatively correlated with the Bcl-2 expression in NP tissues from IVDD patients (*r* = -0.89, *P* < 0.001).

**Targeting relationship between miRNA-195 and Bcl-2**

Biological prediction website (targetscan.org) showed a targeted binding site between miRNA-195 and *Bcl-2* (Fig. 2A). The result of dual-luciferase reporter gene assay was displayed in Fig. 2B. As compared with miR-NC group, co-transfection with miR-195 mimic and *Bcl-2*-Wt 3′UTR can significantly reduce the luciferase activity (all *P* < 0.05), while the co-transfection of miR-195 mimic and *Bcl-2*-Mut 3′UTR showed no significant changes in the luciferase activity (all *P*> 0.05). These results indicated that *Bcl-2* was a target gene of miR-195.
Comparison of proliferation and apoptosis of NP cells in each group

As shown in Fig. 3, NP cells in the TNF-α group and TNF-α + miR-NC group had decreased proliferation activity and increased apoptosis rate compared to the Blank group (all \( P < 0.05 \)). In comparison with TNF-α group, cells in the TNF-α + miR-195 inhibitors group had significantly increased proliferation activity but apparently decreased apoptosis rate, while those in the TNF-α + siBcl-2 group had declined proliferation and elevated apoptosis (all \( P < 0.05 \)). Besides, compared with TNF-α + miR-195 inhibitors group, TNF-α + miR-195 inhibitors + siBcl-2 group was also strikingly reduced in cell proliferation activity and markedly elevated in cell apoptosis (all \( P < 0.05 \)).

Comparison of the MMP of NP cells

Seen from Fig. 4, compared with Blank group, TNF-α group and TNF-α + miR-NC group declined dramatically in MMP (both \( P < 0.05 \)), but TNF-α group and TNF-α + miR-NC group had no obvious difference in MMP (\( P > 0.05 \)). Compared with TNF-α group, TNF-α + miR-195 inhibitors group was increased appreciably in MMP while TNF-α + siBcl-2 group was decreased in MMP (all \( P < 0.05 \)). In addition, in comparison with TNF-α + miR-195 inhibitors group, TNF-α + miR-195 inhibitors + siBcl-2 group also declined substantially in MMP (\( P < 0.05 \)).

Expression of miR-195 and Bcl-2 in NP cells

As demonstrated by Fig. 5, compared with Blank group, TNF-α group and TNF-α + miR-NC group had the increased expression of miR-195 and Bax and cleaved caspase 3 proteins, but declined Bcl-2 protein expression (all \( P < 0.05 \)). Compared with TNF-α group, TNF-α + miR-195 inhibitors group was significantly down-regulated in miR-195, Bax and cleaved caspase 3 proteins, with the up-regulated Bcl-2 protein (all \( P < 0.05 \)), while TNF-α + siBcl-2 group showed no significant difference regarding miR-195 expression level (\( P > 0.05 \)), but decreased in Bcl-2 protein and increased remarkably in Bax and cleaved caspase 3 proteins (all \( P < 0.05 \)). With TNF-α + miR-195 inhibitors as baseline for comparison, TNF-α + miR-195 inhibitors + siBcl-2 group presented no observable difference in miR-195 expression in cells (\( P > 0.05 \)), but showed a significant reduction in Bcl-2 protein and apparent enhancements in Bax and cleaved caspase 3 proteins (both \( P < 0.05 \)).

Discussion

In the first place, we observed significant miR-195 up-regulation and Bcl-2 down-regulation in NP tissues of IVDD patients. The elevated miR-195-5p was also observed in age-related macular degeneration (AMD) by using miRNA microarray chip detection, which was regarded as a potential biomarker for AMD diagnosis, as indicated by Chengda Ren \textit{et al.} (17). On the other aspect, Bcl-2 expression was found to be dramatically down-regulated, whereas Bax expression was remarkably up-regulated in the rabbit IVDD model (18). Notably, Ping Cai \textit{et al.} identified the increased expression of miR-15a, which belonged to the
same family as miR-195, in NP tissues of IVDD, and in particular, over-expressed miR-15a can inhibit the Bcl-2 expression to promote the apoptosis of NP cells (19). Although miR-195 demonstrated different targets and functions in different tissues or diseases, according to the published data, many studies pointed out a pathogenic role of miR-195 in inhibiting cell proliferation and promoting cell apoptosis (20–22). More importantly, miR-195 expression was found negatively correlated with the Bcl-2 expression in our research, and the dual-luciferase reporter gene assay confirmed Bcl-2 to be a target gene of miR-195. At the same time, miR-195 can play its regulatory role by targeting Bcl-2 in many cells, such as tumor cells (23) and cardiomyocytes (24). All these findings suggested that miR-195 can regulate the expression of its target gene Bcl-2 to promote the progression of IVDD.

The presence of a significant number of senescent cells were shown in degenerative nucleus pulposus, which can induce the expression of multiple inflammatory cytokines and matrix degrading enzymes to aggravate the living environment of NP cells, thereby affecting the growth and function of NP cells and further triggering the apoptosis of more cells (25). In fact, TNF-α is a multifunctional pro-inflammatory cytokine and considered to be a key factor in IVDD (26). As such, we constructed TNF-α-induced NP cell apoptosis model by referring to a previous study (27), aiming to observe the mechanism of miR-195 in inducing NP cell apoptosis in vitro. Firstly, we found that the proliferation of TNF-α-induced NP cells was dramatically decreased, while the cell apoptosis was apparently increased, which was in consistency with the previous findings (28, 29). Besides, inhibiting miR-195 effectively enhanced the proliferation and limited the apoptosis of TNF-α-induced NP cells, whereas inhibiting Bcl-2 promoted NP cell apoptosis. Similarly, miR-199 was exhibited by Wei Wang et al. to mitigate TNF-α-induced NP cell apoptosis by targeted down-regulation of MAP3K5, and thereby playing its protective role for NP cells (30). Also, HOTAIR can inhibit miR-34a expression to up-regulate the expression of its target gene Bcl-2 to further attenuate TNF-α-induced NP cell apoptosis (31). Here in this study, Bcl-2 siRNA can reverse the protective effect of miR-195 inhibitor on NP cells. Not surprisingly, Huaqing Zhu et al. noted that miR-195 may reduce Sirt1 and Bcl-2 expression to enhance the reactive oxygen species production and promote the apoptosis of palmitate-induced cardiomyocytes (32). Taken together, inhibiting miR-195 can inhibit TNF-α-induced NP cell apoptosis by targeted regulation of its target gene Bcl-2.

As for cell apoptosis in IVDD, it can occur through death receptor pathway, mitochondrial pathway and endoplasmic reticulum signaling pathway (33), while its apoptosis induced by endogenous pathway was initially found in mitochondria, namely mitochondrial pathway, which mainly exert functions via Bcl-2 protein family (34). As a major anti-apoptotic member, Bcl-2 can maintain the outer mitochondrial membrane integrity (35). On the contrary, Bax, a pro-apoptotic member of the Bcl-2 family of proteins, mainly plays its regulatory role by destroying the integrity of mitochondrial membrane (36). Bcl-2 protein family can change the permeability of mitochondrial membrane and induce the opening of mitochondrial pore, thus allowing the apoptosis inducing factor, cytochrome C, and pro-apoptotic protein into the cytoplasm, and finally inducing cell apoptosis by activating caspase (37, 38). In agreement, we also found down-regulated miR-195 can improve MMP of TNF-α-induced NP cells, elevate Bcl-2 protein, and reduce Bax and cleaved caspase 3 proteins, which however can be reversed by silencing Bcl-2. Besides, inhibition of miR-494 can effectively reduce Caspase-3 and Bax, and elevate Bcl-2, thus promoting the
proliferation and hindering the apoptosis of NP cells (39). As reported by Ping Liu et al., miRNA-125a can up-regulate anti-apoptotic protein Bcl-2 and inhibit Caspase-3 and Bax proteins by down-regulating BAK1, thus inhibiting the apoptosis of NP cells (40). Moreover, Chang-Kui Gao et al. demonstrated that down-expressed miR-195 can elevate Bcl-2 but reduce Bax, Cyt-c and caspase-3 to increase the MMP of cardiomyocytes and mitigate hypoxia re-oxygenation-induced cardiomyocyte apoptosis (41). Given the above, inhibiting miR-195 can specifically up-regulate Bcl-2 to mediate mitochondrial apoptosis pathway, thus playing a protective role to reduce TNF-α-induced NP cell apoptosis.

To sum up, we observed the increased miR-195 in NP tissues of IVDD patients, and inhibiting miR-195 can attenuate TNF-α-induced NP cell apoptosis by up-regulating Bcl-2 expression. This study provides a new pathway and scientific basis for the clinical gene-based diagnosis, prevention and treatment of IVDD.

**Abbreviations**

IVDD, intervertebral disc degeneration

NP, nucleus pulposus

MMP, mitochondrial membrane potential

miRNA, MicroRNAs

FBS, fetal bovine serum

NC, negative control

PVDF, Polyvinylidene fluoride

HRP, horseradish peroxidase

DMSO, dimethylsulfoxide

**Declarations**

**Ethics approval and consent to participate:**

This study was approved by Ethics Committee of The Second Hospital of Liaocheng Affiliated to Shandong First Medical University. All participants and their guardians were well informed and signed the informed consent form prior to the study.

**Consent for publication:** Not applicable.

**Availability of data and materials:** The datasets used and/or analysed during the current study available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.
Competing interests: The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Funding: There was no funding in this study.

Authors' contributions:

Xue-Lin Lin designed the study; Zhao-Yun Zheng and Qing-Shan Zhang carried out experiments; Zhen Zhang analyzed the data; You-Zhi An made the figures; Xue-Lin Lin and Zhao-Yun Zheng drafted and revised the paper; all authors approved the final version of the manuscript.

Acknowledgements: The authors appreciate the reviewers for their useful comments in this paper.

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