Activation of the E-cadherin/catenin complex in human MCF-7 breast cancer cells by all-trans-retinoic acid

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Summary All-trans-retinoic acid (RA), like insulin-like growth factor I (IGF-I) and tamoxifen, inhibit invasion of human MCF-7/6 mammary cancer cells in vitro. For tamoxifen and for IGF-I, activation of the invasion-suppressor function of the E-cadherin/catenin complex by certain molecules is the most probable mechanism of the anti-invasive action. We did a series of experiments to determine whether the anti-invasive effect of RA also implicated the invasion-suppressor E-cadherin/catenin complex. Human MCF-7/6 mammary and HCT-8/R1 colon cancer cells, both with a dysfunctional E-cadherin/catenin complex, were treated with RA and the function of the complex was evaluated through Ca\(^{2+}\)-dependent fast aggregation. Fast aggregation of both MCF-7/6 and HCT-8/R1 cells was inhibited by 1 \(\mu\)g/ml RA. This effect was abolished by antibodies against E-cadherin. RA-induced fast aggregation was not sensitive to cycloheximide, tyrosine kinase inhibitors or antibodies against IGF-I or against the IGF-I receptor. RA did not stimulate IGF-I receptor phosphorylation or alter the E-cadherin/catenin complex, as evidenced by immunoprecipitation. RA up-regulates the function of the invasion-suppressor complex E-cadherin/catenin. Its action mechanism is different from that of IGF-I. RA may act as an anti-invasive agent with unique mechanisms of action.

Keywords: All-trans-retinoic acid; E-cadherin/catenin complex; fast aggregation; invasion

The epithelial Ca\(^{2+}\)-dependent cell-cell adhesion molecule E-cadherin has an invasion-suppressor function when linked to the actin cytoskeleton via α-catenin plus β-, or γ-catenin (Takeichi, 1993; Mareel et al., 1994). The adhesive function of the E-cadherin/catenin complex can be down-regulated at the transcriptional, translational and post-translational level in experimental (Shimoyama et al., 1992; Behrens et al., 1993) and in human (Bringuiet et al., 1993) cancer. Recently, the APC protein has been implicated in the regulation of the E-cadherin/catenin complex through association with α- and β-catenin in the cytoplasm (Su et al., 1993). Furthermore, new models have been described for the homophilic interactions between the extracellular domains of cadherins (Overduin et al., 1995; Shaprio et al., 1995). Experiments both in vivo (Mareel et al., 1991) and in vitro (Van Roy et al., 1992; Bracke et al., 1993) have suggested that the invasion-suppressor function of the E-cadherin/catenin complex is modulated by external factors. In human MCF-7/6 breast cancer cells IGF-I (Bracke et al., 1993) and the anti-oestrogen tamoxifen (Bracke et al., 1994a) up-regulated the adhesive function of the E-cadherin/catenin complex and inhibited invasion in vitro. Inhibition of invasion of MCF-7/6 cells was also obtained with RA (Bracke et al., 1991). We therefore wanted to examine whether RA could up-regulate the adhesive function of the E-cadherin/catenin complex. We have also examined the effect of RA on the components of the E-cadherin/catenin complex, using immunoprecipitation of metabolically labelled cells. Finally, since the literature mentions that RA modulates IGF-I as well as IGF-binding proteins (IGFBPs) (Fontana et al., 1991; Figueroa and Yee, 1992), we have tested possible relationships between IGF-I-mediated regulation of E-cadherin/catenin functions and effects of RA. The general purpose of our work is to find agents that activate invasion-suppressor molecules and are therefore candidates for chronic anti-invasive treatment of cancer.

Materials and methods

Cells

The MCF-7/6 cell line (obtained from Dr H Rochefort, Unité d’Endocrinologie Cellulaire et Moléculaire, Montpelier, France) is a variant of the human MCF-7 breast cancer cell family. MCF-7/6 cells were treated with 1 \(\mu\)g/ml mycoplasma removal agent (ICN Biomedicals, Costa Mesa, CA, USA) for seven passages. For the present experiments the cells were harvested from mycoplasma-free stock cultures maintained as described previously (Bracke et al., 1991). The HCT-8/R1 cell line is a subclone from the human HCT-8 colon cancer cell line (CCL244, ATCC, Rockville, MD, USA) that was selected for its round morphology. HCT-8/R1 cells were maintained in RPMI-1640, supplemented with 1 mm sodium pyruvate and 100 \(\mu\)g/ml streptomycin. MCF-7/6 cells (Bracke et al., 1991, 1993) and HCT-8/R1 cells (Vermeulen et al., 1994) are invasive and have a dysfunctional E-cadherin/catenin complex, i.e. unable to mediate fast Ca\(^{2+}\)-dependent homotypic aggregation. MDA-MB-231 (ATCC; HTB26) cells were maintained in Leibovitz-15 medium, supplemented with 0.05% glutamine. These cells do not express E-cadherin (Frixen et al., 1991). All culture media (Gibco, Gent, Belgium) were supplemented with 10% fetal bovine serum (FBS) and 250 \(\mu\)l/l pencillin.

Drugs

All-trans-retinoic acid (RA; Sigma, St Louis, MO, USA) was dissolved in ethanol at 1 mm and used at concentrations between 0.1 nm and 1 \(\mu\)m. Control cultures were treated with corresponding ethanol concentrations. To study the role of de novo protein synthesis cells were treated with cycloheximide (Sigma) at 10 \(\mu\)g/ml and Recombinant human IGF-I was from Boehringer Mannheim (Brussels, Belgium). As tyrosine kinase inhibitors (all from Gibco) we used Genistein (25 \(\mu\)m), Me-2,5-dihydroxyphenylacetamide (50 \(\mu\)m), RCAM-lysosyme (1 \(\mu\)m) and 2-OH-5-(2,5-dioH-benzyl)aminobenzoic acid (10 \(\mu\)m). Treatment schedules are mentioned in the Results section.

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Received 9 March 1995; revised 29 June 1995; accepted 25 July 1995
Antibodies
MB2 (Bracke et al., 1993) and HECD-1 (Takara Shuzo, Kyoto, Japan) are monoclonal antibodies against human E-cadherin with neutralising effects on E-cadherin functions (Bracke et al., 1993). zlR3 and 82-9A (Oncogene Science, Uniondale, NY, USA), are monoclonal antibodies functionally blocking respectively the human IGF-I receptor (Cullen et al., 1990; Bracke et al., 1993) and human IGF-I (Kerr et al., 1990). PY20 (ICN Biomedicals) is a monoclonal antibody recognising phosphotyrosine. 5D10 (obtained from Dr L. Plessers, Limburgs Universitair Centrum, Diepenbeek, Belgium), is a monoclonal antibody against MCF-7 cell surface components (Plessers et al., 1986). Anti CEA (Dakopatts, Glostrup, Denmark), a purified immunoglobulin fraction of rabbit anti-serum, reacts with CEA and CEA-like molecules. We prepared rabbit anti-β-catenin antiserum using as an immunogen a synthetic peptide C-PGDSNLAWFLDTDL (provided by J. Vandekerckhove, Laboratory of Physiological Chemistry, University of Gent, Gent, Belgium) corresponding to the C-terminal part of mouse β-catenin (Butz et al., 1992). The peptide was coupled to keyhole limpet haemocyanin via the additional N-terminal cysteine and used for four cycles of intradural and intramuscular immunisation of rabbits. Immune serum was affinity purified by fast protein liquid chromatography (FPLC) (Pharmacia, Uppsala, Sweden) with the peptide bound to a p-hydroxymercuribenzoate matrix (Sigma). Immune serum 1522 recognised a 95 kDa band on Western blots and immunoprecipitated from metabolically labelled cell lysates the 95, 102 and 120 kDa bands that are specific for the E-cadherin/ catenin complex.

Assay for fast aggregation
Cell-cell adhesion was numerically evaluated in an aggregation assay as described (Bracke et al., 1993). Briefly, cells were detached in E-cadherin-saving conditions and allowed to aggregate on a Gyrotory shaker (New Brunswick Scientific, New Brunswick, NJ, USA) in a buffer containing 1.25 mM Ca\(^{2+}\) and 0.1% bovine serum albumin. The aggregate index was expressed as 1 - N/N0, where N0 indicates the initial number of particles and N the number of particles after 30 min present in a constant volume of 500 μL. The number of particles was measured by a Coulter counter ZM (Coulter, Miami, FL, USA) with the following settings: full scale, 10 mA; current, 3.34 mA; lower threshold, 5.00 μA; attenuation, 32; preset gain, 2; aperture size, 140 μm. Aggregate size distribution in function of volume % (total volume of all aggregates equals 100%) was analysed on 20 000 particles by a Coulter MultisizerIIe with the following settings: current, 3.2 mA; lower threshold, 8.0 μμ; preset gain, 1; aperture size, 400 μμ.

Flow cytometric analysis of E-cadherin
MCF-7/6 cells, detached as in the assay for fast aggregation, were incubated with the antibody against E-cadherin (HECD-1) followed by rabbit anti-mouse antiserum conjugated with fluorescein isothiocyanate (RAM-FITC, Dakopatts) as a second antibody (Bracke et al., 1993). Fluorescence intensity was measured with a FACSscan III (Becton Dickinson, Mountain View, CA, USA).

Molecular characterisation of the E-cadherin/catenin complex
The E-cadherin/catenin complex was characterised by co-immunoprecipitation from metabolically labelled cells as described (Vleminkx et al., 1994) with the following modifications. Cells on plastic tissue culture substrate were washed three times in methionine-free Eagle’s minimum essential medium (EMEM, Gibco) with 2% dialysed FBS (Gibco) followed by incubation for 30 min in the same medium and addition of 100 μCi ml\(^{-1}\)TranS\(^{35}\)S (ICN Biomedicals) for 3 h. Cells were detached as in the assay for fast aggregation and lysed after 10 min using the lysis buffer described previously with the following protease inhibitors (all from Sigma): phenylmethylsulphonyl fluoride (1.72 mM), leupeptin (21 μM), aprotinin (10 μg ml\(^{-1}\)). Equal amounts of trichloroacetic acid-precipitable material were preclarified for 30 min at 4°C with 25 μl protein G sepharose 4 fast flow (Pharmacia). HECD-1 (1 μg per precipitation) or immune serum 1522 (20 μl per precipitation) followed by protein G sepharose 4 fast flow were used for co-immunoprecipitation. The immune complexes were washed three times with 750 μl of lysis buffer. Proteins were eluted by sodium dodecyl sulphate under reducing conditions and analysed by sodium dodecyl sulphate polyacrylamide (6%) gel electrophoresis followed by fluorography.

Molecular characterisation of IGF-I receptor and binding proteins
The IGF-I receptor phosphorylation was evaluated by sequential immunoprecipitation as described by Izumi et al. (1987) with the following modifications. Cells were washed three times in phosphate-free EMEM with 2% dialysed FBS (Gibco) followed by labelling with 0.5 μCi ml\(^{-1}\) carrier-free [\(^{32}\)P]orthophosphate (Amersham, Gent, Belgium) for 2 h. Cells were lysed in the presence of the following phosphatase inhibitors (all from Sigma): sodium pyrophosphate (10 mM); sodium fluoride (10 mM); sodium vanadate (1 mM). Phosphotyrosine molecules were immunoprecipitated with PY20 (5 μg per precipitation), immune complexes were washed three times with 750 μl of lysis buffer and molecules were eluted three times for 15 min with 250 μl elution buffer containing phospho-I-tyrosine (10 mM) and phenylphosphate (10 mM) in lysis buffer. Eluted molecules were immuno- precipitated with zlR3 (1 μg per precipitation) and proteins were analysed as described with the E-cadherin/catenin complex. IGFBPs were evaluated by ligand blotting (Fontana et al., 1991). Briefly, cells were washed 5 times with serum-free medium followed by incubation for 4 h in the same medium. The conditioned medium was dialysed against 1.5 mM Tris and concentrated 100 times by lyophilisation. Lyophilised proteins were denatured with sodium dodecyl sulphate under non-reducing conditions, separated on 12% polyacrylamide gels and electrobotted. IGFBPs were visualised by [\(^{125}\)I]IGF-I (Hossenlopp et al., 1986). We quantitated IGFBPs with an XRS 12cx Omnimedia scanner using Bio Image Whole Band Analyser software (Millipore, Ettenu-Leur, The Netherlands) on a Sun Sparc Classic computer.
Results

MCF-7/6 cells showed a poor tendency to aggregate in accordance with previous results (Bracke et al., 1993). Pretreatment of cells with RA at 1 μM induced Ca\(^{2+}\)-dependent and E-cadherin-specific fast aggregation of MCF-7/6 cells (Figure 1). Analysis of aggregate size distribution showed formation of larger aggregates in RA-treated than in untreated samples (Figure 2). The effect of RA was counteracted by an antibody against E-cadherin (Figure 2). The minimum duration of treatment needed for maximum effect was 4 h. Partial response was obtained within 2 h of treatment at a concentration of 1 μM RA or within 24 h treatment at 0.1 μM (Figure 3). RA also induced E-cadherin-specific fast aggregation in HCT-8/R1 cells lacking α-catenin, although to a lesser extent than in MCF-7/6 cells (Figure 1). The E-cadherin-negative MDA-MB-231 cells showed Ca\(^{2+}\)-independent fast aggregation that was hardly altered by RA or by an antibody against E-cadherin (Figure 1). RA-induced fast aggregation of MCF-7/6 cells was not inhibited by cycloheximide at concentrations that reduced Tran\(^{35}\)S incorporation to less than 15% of untreated controls (Figure 4). It was lowered by antibodies functionally blocking E-cadherin but not by antibodies against other surface molecules, (Figure 5) shown to be expressed on MCF-7/6 cells by Western blots (CEA, 5D10; data not shown). Neither did RA-induced fast aggregation respond to antibodies against IGF-I or IGF-I receptor (Figure 5) in matched experiments in which IGF-I-induced aggregation was clearly inhibited (data not shown). RA changed neither the level of E-cadherin expressed at the cell surface as revealed by flow cytometry (Figure 6) nor the composition of the E-cadherin/catenin complex in MCF-7/6 cells (Figure 7). IGF-I receptor phosphorylation was not increased by RA in contrast to the effect of IGF-I (Figure 8). Neither was RA-induced fast aggregation inhibited by the

![Figure 2](image)

Figure 2: Aggregate size distribution of RA-induced fast aggregation of MCF-7/6 cells. Approximately 20,000 particles were analysed before (D) and after 30 min (Φ) of aggregation. Cells were treated (b and c) or not (a) with 1 μM RA for 24.5 h, including the time of aggregation. Cells were pretreated (e) for 1 h at 4°C with the E-cadherin-specific antibody MB2 (diluted 1:20) and the antibodies remained present during aggregation. Ordinate, percentage of total volume of aggregates; abscissa, size of aggregates in μm.

![Figure 3](image)

Figure 3: RA-induced fast aggregation (1 - Nt/N0) of MCF-7/6 cells as a function of RA concentration (a) and time of RA treatment (b). (a) Treatment with RA (concentration in μM) for 24.5 h including the time of aggregation. (b) Treatment with 1 μM RA (time in h). Bars represent mean values ± s.d. of six measurements.
tyrosine kinase inhibitors Genistein (25 μM), Me-2,5-dihydroxycinnamate (50 μM), RCAM-lysozyme (1 μM) or 2-OH-5-(2,5-diOH-benzyl)aminobenzoic acid (10 μM) (Table I), although such concentrations inhibited IGF-1-induced fast aggregation (Bracke et al., 1994b). The total amount of IGFBPs in medium conditioned for 44 h from MCF-7/6 cells treated with RA at 0.1 μM was 1.1 and 1.5 times (two independent experiments) higher than in medium from untreated cultures.

Figure 4 Fast aggregation (1 - N_0/N_0) of MCF-7/6 cells in the presence of antibodies against E-cadherin (HECD-1, 1:20), CEA (anti-CEA, 1:100), an unidentified MCF-7 cell surface epitope (5D10, 1:10), the IGF-1 receptor (αIR3; 15 μg ml⁻¹) or IGF-1 (82-9A, 15 μg ml⁻¹). Treatment with RA (1 μM) was for 4.5 h including the time of aggregation. Cells were pretreated with antibodies for 5 h (82-9A or αIR3) at 37°C or for 30 min (all other antibodies) at 4°C and antibodies remained present during aggregation. Bars represent mean values ± s.d. of six measurements.

Figure 5 RA-induced fast aggregation (1 - N_0/N_0) of MCF-7/6 cells pretreated (+) or not (−) with 10 μg ml⁻¹ cycloheximide for 5 h and with 1 μM RA (+) or with solvent (−) during the last 4 h; when cycloheximide and RA were added, they were also present during the aggregation assay. Bars represent mean values ± s.d. of six measurements.

Discussion

We report that RA, at anti-invasive concentrations, induces fast aggregation of cells which have a dysfunctional E-cadherin/catenin complex. This induction was prevented by monoclonal antibodies that functionally blocked E-cadherin but not by other antibodies also binding to the cell surface. For MCF-7/6 breast cancer cells, induction of E-cadherin-dependent fast aggregation was achieved also with IGF-1 (Bracke et al., 1993), with tamoxifen (Bracke et al., 1994a) and with the citrus flavonoid tangeretin (Bracke et al., 1994b). All these agents inhibited invasion of MCF-7/6 cells in organ culture confirming the invasion-suppressor function of the E-cadherin/catenin complex (Marel et al., 1994). E-cadherin is known to act as an organiser of junctional complexes. It might be that the rapid and reversible cell type- and concentration-related up- or down-modulation of gap-junctional communication by RA (Mehta et al., 1989) occurs via modulation of the E-cadherin/catenin complex. Induction of the epithelioid morphotype and of E-cadherin expression at the cell–cell contact sites was reported with human SK-BR-3 mammary cancer cells treated with RA (Anzano et al., 1994).

RA-induced fast aggregation also occurred in the absence of de novo protein synthesis, as demonstrated by our experiments with cycloheximide. This suggests that RA, in association with its receptors or not, interacts directly with the E-cadherin/catenin complex or its effectors. It does not, however, exclude the possibility that RA acts via binding to hormone-sensitive elements, leading to arrest of transcription of an inhibitory protein. The fact that cycloheximide by itself has no effect on fast aggregation argues against the latter possibility.

The relatively high concentrations (1–0.1 μM) of RA needed to induce fast aggregation are similar to those de-
scribed for the decrease in B16 melanoma cell aggregation (Edward et al., 1992) and for down-regulation of β4 integrins in LL4 cells (Gaetano et al., 1994). This need may be ascribed to the presence of serum in the culture medium and of albumin in the salt solution used for the aggregation assay (see Materials and methods). Albumin is known to bind RA as it serves as its carrier protein in the blood (Allen and Bloxham, 1989).

Our co-immunoprecipitation data failed to demonstrate an effect of RA on the composition of the E-cadherin/catenin complex. This observation suggests that the cause of dysfunction of E-cadherin in MCF-7/6 cells is situated downstream of the E-cadherin/catenin complex. The fact that RA also induced E-cadherin-dependent fast aggregation, although less effectively, in α-catenin-deficient HCT-8/R1 cells supports the idea of a downstream defect in MCF-7/6 cells.

RA does not seem to interact directly with IGFBPs, IGF-I or the IGF-I receptor, all of which are implicated in IGF-I-mediated aggregation of MCF-7/6 cells (Bracke et al., 1993). An action via an autocrine IGF-I loop is unlikely because antibodies functionally blocking IGF-I did not hamper RA-induced aggregation. Neither could it be inhibited with antibodies against the IGF-I receptor nor did phosphorylation of the IGF-I receptor occur upon RA treatment in contrast to addition of IGF-I. Moreover, the tyrosine kinase inhibitors that blocked IGF-I-induced fast aggregation had no effect on RA-induced aggregation. It is unlikely that the slight increase in IGFBPs found in our and in others' experiments (Fontana et al., 1991; Yee et al., 1994) was involved in RA-induced aggregation, since such an increase would have had an opposite effect. Indeed, IGFBPs are known to neutralise IGF-I and a variant of IGF-I lacking the IGFBP-binding domain was much more potent than genuine IGF-I at inducing fast aggregation (Bracke et al., 1994b).

Our present results indicate that activation of the E-cadherin/catenin complex may contribute to the anti-invasive

**Figure 7** Autoradiographs of sodium dodecyl sulphate polyacrylamide gel electropherograms from total lysates of MCF-7/6 cells metabolically labelled with Tran35S and immunoprecipitated with the E-cadherin-specific antibody HECD-1 (top), with the rabbit anti-β-catenin antiserum 1522 (middle) or without antibody (bottom). MCF-7/6 cells were treated for 2 h with 1 μM RA (lane 1), with solvent (lane 2) or untreated (lane 3). E-CAD, E-cadherin; α-CTN, α-catenin; β-CTN, β-catenin; γ-CTN, γ-catenin. Horizontal bars (right) indicate molecular weight markers.

**Figure 8** Autoradiograph of sodium dodecyl sulphate polyacrylamide gel electrophrogram from total lysates of MCF-7/6 cells metabolically labelled with 35P and sequentially immunoprecipitated with respectively, a phosphotyrosine specific antibody (PY20) and an IGF-I receptor specific antibody (αIR3). MCF-7/6 cells were treated for 4 h with 1 μM RA (lane 1), with 250 μM acetic acid (solvent of IGF-I, lane 2) or 0.5 μg ml−1 IGF-I (lane 3). β, β-Subunit of the IGF-I receptor. Horizontal bars (right) indicate molecular weight markers.

**Table 1** Fast aggregation of MCF-7/6 cells

| Treatment | RA′ | IGF-F | I - N_M/N_S |
|-----------|-----|-------|-------------|
| None      | 0.469 ± 0.004 | 0.274 ± 0.005 |
| 10 μM 2-OH-5-[2,5-diOH-benzyl] aminobenzoic acid | 0.487 ± 0.014 | 0.015 ± 0.003 |
| 1 μM RCAM-lysosome | 0.456 ± 0.019 | 0.038 ± 0.008 |
| 50 μM Me-2,5-diOH-cinnamate | 0.613 ± 0.020 | 0.041 ± 0.013 |
| 25 μM Genistein | 0.633 ± 0.007 | 0.033 ± 0.006 |

(*) Cells were treated with tyrosine kinase inhibitors 1 h preceding and during RA or IGF-I treatment. (†) Aggregation index, numerical values indicate mean ± s.d. of six measurements. Cells were treated with (*) 1 μM RA for 4.5 h or (†) 0.5 μg ml−1 IGF-I for 30 min. In the absence of either tyrosine kinase inhibitor, RA or IGF-I, MCF-7/6 aggregation was: 0.080 ± 0.008 (mean ± s.d. of six measurements).
activity of RA on MCF-7/6 cells as described previously (Bracke et al., 1991). It is, however, unlikely that this is the only mechanism of the anti-invasive action of RA. Such action was described also for melanoma (Helige et al., 1993) and rhabdomyosarcoma (Gerharz et al., 1993) cells which are not expected to express E-cadherin. RA did not inhibit, however, the invasion of the E-cadherin-negative MDA-MB-231 cells into chick heart (our unpublished results). This shows the existence of alternative mechanisms of anti-invasiveness such as inhibition of proteolytic enzymes (Gudas et al., 1994; Yamamoto et al., 1995).

Taken together, our results indicate that RA-induced aggregation of MCF-7/6 cells via the E-cadherin/catenin complex depends upon a mechanism other than IGF-I-induced aggregation. This novel function, namely the activation of a dysfunctional E-cadherin/catenin complex via a protein synthesis-independent mechanism, might identify RA as a potential anti-invasive agent for combinatiorial cancer treatment.

Acknowledgements

Rathank M Goethals for help in preparation of antibody, L Baekke, R Colman, K Vennekins and A Verspecht for technical assistance, J Roels for preparation of the illustrations and W Dewispelaere (N.V. Analis, Gent, Belgium) for the measurements on the Coulter Multisizer II. This work was supported by the State of Florida Department of Citrus, the Nationala Fonds voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek, the Vereniging voor Kankerbestrijding VZW, the Sportvereniging tegen Kanker, the Effel Schenking, the ASLK/VIVA-verzekeringen, the GOA van de Vlaamse Gemeenschap, Brussels, Belgium.

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