Celastrol promotes chondrocyte autophagy by regulating mTOR expression

Siming Dai¹, Jiankun Fan², Yue Zhang¹,³, Zhenyong Hao⁴, Huiming Yu¹, Zhiyi Zhang¹

¹Department of Rheumatology and Immunology, The First Affiliated Hospital of Harbin Medical University, Harbin, Heilongjiang 150001, China;
²The Laboratory of Medical Genetics, Harbin Medical University, Harbin, Heilongjiang 150001, China;
³Shenzhen Futian Hospital for Rheumatic Diseases, Shenzhen, Guangdong 518000, China;
⁴Department of Orthopedic Surgery of Harbin Fifth Hospital, Harbin, Heilongjiang 150001, China.

Osteoarthritis (OA) is a debilitating disease with limited treatment options.¹ Autophagy serves as an important protective mechanism against the deterioration of cartilage and is negatively regulated by the mammalian target of rapamycin (mTOR).² In previous studies, celastrol could promote autophagy in various cell types and had the promising therapeutic potential for OA.³ However, the effect and underlying mechanisms of celastrol on autophagy in OA remain unclear.

Our preliminary study using transcriptome sequencing and a network pharmacology analysis identified mTOR as a potential direct target of celastrol for protection against OA.⁴ In this study, we aim to evaluate the effects of celastrol on mTOR activity in primary human osteoarthritic chondrocytes and to determine the mechanism by which it affects autophagy and endoplasmic reticulum (ER) stress.

Celastrol is a triterpenoid quinine methide isolated from the root of Tripterygium wilfordii Hook F. In laboratory studies and clinical practice, celastrol has a demonstrated favorable effect for slowing the progression of different forms of arthritis.⁵ We first determined the optimal dose (200 nmol/L, for 24 hours) of celastrol for chondrocyte cultures by Cell Counting Kit-8 assay [Figure 1A]. Based on the previous bioinformatic analysis, we hypothesized that mTOR (a key regulator of autophagy) was a potential biological target of celastrol. Celastrol treatment reduced mTOR levels in primary OA chondrocytes, as measured by Western blotting [Figure 1B]. The expression of P62 and LC3 was used to assay autophagy. P62 is a marker of autophagy turnover, and its expression is inversely related to autophagic activity. LC3 indicates autophagosome formation, and its conversion from LC-I to LC3-II is generally regarded as marker of autophagy. The chondrocyte cells treated with celastrol had reduced P62 and increased LC3-II [Figure 1B], which indicated that celastrol could promote autophagy and contributed to the chondroprotective effect [Supplementary files, http://links.lww.com/CM9/A594].

Rapamycin is also an mTOR inhibitor. By comparing the pharmacological effects of celastrol and rapamycin on mTOR in OA chondrocytes, we found that celastrol treatment increased levels of phosphorylated pancreatic ER kinase (PERK), a marker of ER stress activation,⁶ and LC3-II but decreased levels of P62, as well as caspase 12 (CASP12) and DNA damage-inducible transcript 3 (DDIT3), which indicated decreased proapoptotic effects [Figure 1C and 1D]. These results demonstrated that celastrol could promote chondrocyte autophagy and inhibit chondrocyte apoptosis, which could result in a therapeutic effect. Moreover, we observed a strong synergistic effect of combined treatment with celastrol and rapamycin, which suppressed mTOR but enhanced autophagy [Figure 1E], compared to treatment with celastrol or rapamycin alone (P < 0.05).

When celastrol was combined with MHY1485, an mTOR agonist, this reduced its inhibitory effect on mTOR signaling and did not result in activation of PERK. The combination of celastrol and MHY1485 also resulted in increased CASP12 and DDIT3, indicating a proapoptotic effect, as well as increased P62 and decreased LC3-II, indicating decreased autophagy [Figure 1G and 1H]. Thus, blocking autophagy with an mTOR agonist muted the pharmacological effects of celastrol on autophagy in
chondrocytes; this indicates that mTOR is an intracellular target of celastrol and that there may be antagonistic effects of celastrol and MHY1485.

Finally, we transfected OA chondrocytes with a small interfering RNA (siRNA) silencing the mTOR gene. Chondrocytes treated with celastrol for 24 h after transfection served as the experimental group. As depicted in Figure 1F and 1I, both celastrol treatment and siRNA silencing of mTOR significantly promoted autophagy. However, there was no appreciable difference in the outcomes of the two treatment groups, which indicates that mTOR is the key target of celastrol in OA chondrocytes.

In conclusion, celastrol can promote autophagy by reducing mTOR levels, thereby protecting primary human OA chondrocytes. Combination treatment with celastrol and rapamycin can produce an even stronger effect. Combining celastrol with the mTOR agonist MHY1485...
reduced its effects on OA chondrocytes, and celastrol also had no effect on chondrocytes treated with siRNA targeting mTOR. In future work, an OA mouse model will be used to further determine the therapeutic target and potential mechanism of celastrol in OA.

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Conflicts of interest

None.

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