Direct binding of autoimmune disease related T cell epitopes to purified Lewis rat MHC class II molecules

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Key words: adjuvant arthritis, autoimmunity, class II affinity, competitor peptide, experimental autoimmune encephalitis, experimental autoimmune myasthenia gravis, experimental autoimmune uveoretinitis, rat MHC, peptide binding

Abstract

New strategies applied in the treatment of experimental autoimmune disease models involve blocking or modulation of MHC – peptide – TCR interactions either at the level of peptide – MHC interaction or, alternatively, at the level of T cell recognition. In order to identify useful competitor peptides one must be able to assess peptide – MHC interactions. Several well described autoimmune disease models exist in the Lewis rat and thus this particular rat strain provides a good model system to study the effect of competitor peptides. So far no information has been available on the peptide binding characteristics of the Lewis rat MHC class II RT1.B¹ molecule. We have now developed a biochemical binding assay which enables competition studies in which the relative MHC binding affinity of a set of non-labelled peptides can be assessed while employing detection of biotinylated marker peptides by chemiluminescence. The assay is sensitive and specific. We have used this assay to determine the binding characteristics of several disease associated T cell determinants and their sequence analogues in the Lewis rat. Notably, most of the autoimmune disease associated peptide sequences tested were found to be intermediate to poor binders. Single amino acid substitutions at defined positions were sufficient to turn certain peptides into good binders. These results are relevant to the design of competitor peptides in the treatment of experimental autoimmune diseases.

Introduction

A novel approach in the treatment of CD4⁺ T cell mediated experimental autoimmune diseases involves the inhibition or modulation of T cell responses by interfering with the formation of the trimolecular complex formed by MHC class II molecules, processed antigen (peptide) and TCR, by employing so-called competitor peptides. The formation of this trimolecular complex is an essential part of the final antigen-specific event in CD4⁺ T cell activation (1 – 3) which can be manipulated in several ways. Competition at the level of peptide – MHC interaction has been demonstrated both in vitro and in vivo using MHC binding peptides as competitors (4 – 8). This type of competition interferes with all T cell responses restricted to the particular MHC molecule. In vitro competition at the level of the TCR has recently been suggested using peptides, which do not only bind to the relevant MHC molecule, but also bear close structural relationship with the stimulating peptide (9). This type of interference is expected
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to have a far more limited, albeit more specific, effect. In any event, to work a competitor peptide needs to engage the MHC molecule in question.

The role of autoaggressive CD4+ T cells in several experimental autoimmune disease models is evident, since T cell clones both in mice and in rats have been isolated which can transfer the disease into naïve recipient animals (10, 11, 12). In the peptide induced experimental autoimmune encephalomyelitis (EAE) model in rodents, the use of competitor peptides already has proven successful in prevention of the disease (13–16). The Lewis rat is an inbred rat strain particularly prone to autoimmune diseases such as adjuvant arthritis (AA) (17), EAE (18), experimental autoimmune uveoretinitis (EAU) (19) and experimental autoimmune myasthenia gravis (EAMG) (20). Most disease associated CD4+ T cell responses have so far been found to be restricted to a single MHC class II molecule, RT1.B‘ (20–25). The Lewis rat is therefore a good model system to study the effect of competitor peptides. However, no biochemical assay exists to determine the interaction between peptide and RT1.B‘ or any other rat MHC class II molecule. It has therefore not been possible to ascertain the affinity of RT1.B‘ for any autoimmune disease related peptides or for any other peptide.

Consequently, we have developed a non-radioactive MHC class II—peptide binding assay which will allow us to rapidly screen peptides for their capacity to bind to the RT1.B‘ molecule. To establish the assay we made use of an already well defined MHC—peptide combination [the binding of peptides hen egg lysozyme (HEL) 107–116 and dynorphin (DYN) 1–13 to purified E2 molecules (26)], and we then used the new assay to describe a new MHC specificity, i.e. RT1.B‘. To our knowledge the direct binding of immunogenic peptides to RT1.B‘ is the first reported in the rat. It enabled us to define the relative RT1.B‘ binding capacity of autoimmune disease related T cell epitopes and their analogues. These results are of relevance to the design of MHC class II binding competitor peptides.

Methods

Peptides

Peptides used in the study were:

For the Lewis rat RT1.B‘:

MBP 72 – 85
(QKSRQSQDENV)

MBP 72 – 85S79 – A
MBP 72 – 85D81 – A

MBP 72 – 85E82 – A
MBP 72 – 85V85 – A
MBP 72 – 85S79 – T

MBP 53 – 67
(RGSGKSDKHAARTTH)

MBP 77 – 99 (VHFFKINVTPRT)

D locus binder

hsp65 180 – 188 (TFGLQLELT)

hsp65 178 – 186 (SNTFGLOLE)

hsp65 180 – 188L183 – A

hsp65 180 – 188L185 – A

hsp65 178 – 186L183 – A

IRBP 579 – 591
(GECWLGGGVVPDA)

IRBP 1181 – 1191
(SWEGVGVPDV)

ACHR 101 – 116
(AIVHMTKLLLYTGK)

OVA 323 – 339
(ISQAVHAAHAEINEAGR)

For the mouse I-Ed:

IBV 67 – 83
(QHGYWRRQARFKPGG)

HEL 107 – 116 (AWAWRNCK)

DYN 1 – 13 (YGGFLRRPKLL)

E2 bound

Peptides hsp65 180 – 188, hsp65 180 – 188L183 – A, MBP 72 – 85, MBP 72 – 85D81 – A, IBV 67 – 83 and OVA 323 – 339Y were synthesized by standard solid phase Fmoc chemistry (30). Peptide IRBP 1181 – 1191 was synthesized using t-BOC
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chemistry on an Applied Biosystems (Forster City, CA) Model 430A peptide synthesizer. The remaining peptides were synthesized by automated simultaneous multiple peptide synthesis (31). The peptides were purified by HPLC and subsequently checked by fast atom bombardment mass spectrometry.

**T cell lines and clones**

T cell clone 1/C11 P7 with specificity for OVA 323–339 belongs to a series of RT1.B restricted OVA-specific T cell clones (B. Stier et al., unpublished data). Briefly, Lewis rats were immunized with a total of 40 μg of OVA emulsified in physiologic saline and complete Freund’s adjuvant, injecting 100 μl of emulsion per hind footpad. Ten days later cells from the draining lymph nodes were passed through nylon wool and were cultured at 2 × 10⁶ cells/ml in Iscove’s modified Dulbecco’s medium supplemented with 2 mM L-glutamine, 5 × 10⁻⁵ M 2-mercaptoethanol, 100 IU penicillin, 100 μg/ml streptomycin and 5% FCS (complete medium) in the presence of 100 μg/ml OVA. Starting day 3 cells were subcultured in complete medium containing 2.5% 24 h culture supernatant Lewis rat spleen cells (5 × 10⁶/ml) supplemented with concanavalin A (10 μg/ml; Sigma, St Louis, USA) (Con A SN). Cells were cloned by limiting dilution in the presence of 5 × 10⁵ per well irradiated thymocytes (200 rad), 50 μg/ml OVA and 2.5% Con A SN. Serial re-stimulations were performed every 30 days using 2 × 10⁸ T cells per well and 3 × 10⁸ irradiated thymocytes per well in the presence of 50 μg/ml OVA, alternating with subculture in the presence of 2.5% Con A SN.

The isolation, maintenance and properties of the encephalitogenic T cell line Z1a, reactive with the 72–85 sequence of MBP, has been previously described (32). The isolation, maintenance and properties of the A2b helper T cell clone, reactive with the 180–188 amino acid sequence of mycobacterial hsp65, has been previously described (10). Briefly, the rat T cell lines were cyclically re-stimulated in vitro for 3–4 days with irradiated (3000 rad) thymocytes as antigen presenting cells (APC) and 10 μg/ml MBP for line 21a or 10 μg/ml heat-killed M. tuberculosis clone A2b and propagated for 6 or 7 days in Iscove’s modified Dulbecco’s medium (Gibco Laboratories, Grand Island, NY), supplemented with 10% FCS, 10% EL-4 supernatant (as IL-2 source), 2 mM L-glutamine, 2-mercaptoethanol, antibiotics and 1% non-essential amino acids. The generation, maintenance and characteristics of the IBV specific mouse T cell hybridoma MJB 100 is described elsewhere (33). They were used in Iscove’s modified Dulbecco’s medium (Gibco), supplemented with 10% FCS, 2 mM L-glutamine, 2-mercaptoethanol and antibiotics.

**Cell culture for the production of MHC**

For bulk culture, the rat T cell line Z1a was re-stimulated with 2.5 μg/ml Con A in the above described culture medium supplemented with 5% FCS for 3–4 days and propagated in culture medium supplemented with 5% FCS and 10% EL4 supernatant for 6–7 days. The H-2b mouse B cell lymphoma cells, A20, were cultured in RPMI 1640 medium (Gibco) supplemented with 2 mM L-glutamine and 10% heat inactivated FCS.

**Affinity purification of MHC molecules**

Rat RT1.B was purified from cell lysates of Z1a T cell line. This line expresses MHC class II products: de novo synthesis has been established by metabolic cell labelling and subsequent immunoprecipitation (M. H. M. Wauben, unpublished data). Mouse I-Eα was purified from cell lysates of A20 B cell lymphoma cells. Cells were lysed at 10⁶ cells/ml in PBS containing 1% NP-40, 25 mM iodoacetamide, 5 mM sodium orthovanadate and 0.5 mM phenylmethylsulfonyl fluoride. The lysates were cleared by centrifugation at 10,000 g for 20 min and subsequent passage over a 45 μm filter (Millipore, Bedford, USA). RT-1 B and I-Eα molecules were purified using the mAb OKX6 and 14-4-4S respectively, coupled to CNBr-activated Sepharose-4B (Pharmacia-LKB, Uppsala, Sweden). The cell lysates were passed over the columns, which were washed with 20 column volumes of PBS containing 0.1% SDS, 0.5% NP-40, three column volumes PBS containing 0.05% NP-40 and finally three column volumes PBS containing 1% n-octyl glucoside (OG). The MHC molecules were eluted with 0.05 M diethylamine in 0.15 M NaCl containing 10% OG (pH 11). The eluate was immediately neutralized with 50 μl/ml 2 M Tris–HCl, pH 6.3, and concentrated by vacuum dialysis. MHC preparations were kept in PBS, 1% OG and 0.1% azide.

**Biotinylation of marker peptides**

Peptides MBP 72–85 and IBV 67–83 were biotinylated with NHS-LC-Biotin (Pierce, Rockford, USA). Biotin was dissolved in double distilled water (1 mg/100 μl) and added in 2-fold molar excess to peptide dissolved in 0.5 M NaHCO₃, pH 9.0. After 2 h on ice, 2 M Tris–HCl buffer, pH 6.3, was added at 10% of the total volume to prevent unwanted reactivity of the remaining biotin. The protocol resulted in ~70% biotinylation of the peptide as estimated by ninhydrin reaction.

Peptides were biotinylated at higher ratio’s in DMF. Thus we achieved higher labelling efficiency (up to 95%), but this did not result in improved signals upon testing in the binding assay.

**MHC class II – peptide binding assay**

Purified class II molecules (2–3 μM) were incubated with 5–500 nM of biotinylated peptides at pH 5 in a total volume of 15 μl for 48 h at room temperature in the presence of a protease inhibitor cocktail (final concentration 1 mM phenylmethylsulfonyl fluoride, 135 μM N-acetyl-l-lysine chloromethyl ketone, 142 μM N-p-tosyl-l-lysine chloromethyl ketone, 1 mM N-ethyl maleimide, 8 mM EDTA, 1.3 mM 1,10-phenanthroline and 73 μM pepstatin A) and a final detergent concentration of 0.05% NP-40. The amount of MHC used appears appropriate since it is in the expected range known from mouse and human MHC studies using the radio labelled peptide based assays (34,35). Since we have not actually defined the Kd values of the different rat MHC – peptide combinations, nor the active part of the purified MHC, this conclusion remains a tentative one. However, we have tested a dose range of MHC (1–4 μM) and found that in the competition assay optimal results were achieved with 3 μM of MHC. All binding studies were routinely performed at pH 5. For a largely qualitative assay such as ours, this pH was considered more appropriate (34 – 36). For competition studies concentrations of up to 100 nM of biotinylated peptide were used in combination with 0–100 μM of non-labelled competitor peptide.

The MHC – peptide mixtures were analyzed by SDS-PAGE under non-reducing conditions with the Laemmli buffer modified to a final SDS concentration of 0.1%, a slightly modified version
Results

Detecting peptide–MHC class II interaction by chemiluminescence

As ligands for each of the two MHC molecules used to establish the assay, RT1.B$^d$ and I-E$^d$, we selected previously defined autoimmune disease or viral disease related T-cell epitopes, i.e., MBP 72–85 and IBV 67–83 respectively. These peptides were biotinylated with a 2-fold molar excess of water-soluble biotin. Binding of biotinylated MBP 72–85 to RT1.B$^d$ and biotinylated IBV 67–83 to I-E$^d$ was demonstrated as shown in Fig. 1. The detection method was highly sensitive since concentrations of only 3 μM MHC incubated with as little as 5 nM (IBV 67–83) or 50 nM (MBP 72–85) of biotinylated peptide yielded a signal. The binding was allele specific since incubation of 500 nM (10–100 times excess) of either of the two peptides with the irrelevant MHC molecule did not result in binding (lanes 7). Omitting the biotinylated peptide or the MHC did not yield any

Fig. 1. Direct binding of a dose range (nM) biotinylated IBV 67–83 to 3 μM E$^d$ (left) and biotinylated MBP 72–85 to 3 μM RT1.B$^d$ (right). Allele-specific binding was demonstrated in lanes 7: incubation of 500 nM of either of the two peptides with the reverse MHC type did not result in binding. The controls (c) are MHC without the addition of peptide and peptide without the addition of MHC.
background signal (lanes c). The allele specificity of peptide binding could potentially be changed by the biotinylation. To exclude this possibility for each of the two peptide–MHC combinations in questions, we used a dose range of non-labelled MBP 72–85 or IBV 67–83 to inhibit the binding of either biotinylated IBV 67–83 to I-E^d or biotinylated MBP 72–85 to RT1.B^1 respectively. In both cases the signal was not inhibited, thus confirming that the non-biotinylated peptides did not bind to the non-relevant MHC type either (data not shown).

The possible effect of biotinylation on the binding affinity of peptides for MHC is still of concern. Once a biotinylated peptide has been shown to bind to the MHC class II molecule in question in an allele specific manner then the assay can be converted into a competition assay. Such a competition assay measuring the ability of non-labelled peptides to block the binding of the biotinylated peptide to the MHC class II molecule will be independent of the effect of biotinylation. The low concentration of marker peptides required to obtain a clear chemiluminescence signal enabled us to assess the binding capacity of non-labelled peptides by competition. We performed competition studies with the known strong I-E^d binders DYN 1–13 and HEL 107–116 as non-biotinylated competitor peptides. DYN 1–13 is known to bind with higher affinity to I-E^d than HEL 107–116 (26). In agreement herewith we here show that the non-labelled DYN 1–13 inhibited the binding of biotinylated IBV 67–83 binding to I-E^d at a lower concentration than non-labelled HEL 107–116 did (see Fig. 2). To further quantify the results a digitized picture of the autoradiographs was made. A resolution was achieved of 512 x 512 pixels and a maximum grey value number of 256. This extends beyond the resolution of the human vision. For each of the competitor peptides, a dose–response curve was made and from this the concentration at which 50% inhibition was reached was extrapolated. For DYN 1–13 this dose was 2 mM, whereas for HEL 107–116 the dose was −5 mM (Fig. 3). The inhibition curves were reproducible from gel to gel.

Comparison of the biochemical competition assay with a functional competition assay

The biochemical assay was further confirmed by comparing it with a functional inhibition study in which fixed A20 cells were incubated with IBV 67–83 and competitor peptide at pH 5 in the presence of a protease inhibitor cocktail. The responses of the IBV 67–83 specific, I-E^d restricted T hybridoma cells were used to measure the inhibitory activity of the two competitor peptides DYN 1–13 and HEL 107–116 (Fig. 4). DYN 1–13 blocked the response by 50% at −70 mM, whereas HEL 107–116 blocked the response by 50% at −175 mM, thus showing that the biochemical binding assay yields similar results as the T cell functional competition assay.

Peptide binding to the rat RT1.B^1

We now assessed the relative MHC class II binding affinity of peptides relevant for the four autoimmune disease models in the Lewis rat, their analogues and a single non-disease related peptide (OVA 323–339). T cell responses have been identified as being RT1.B^1 restricted for all the peptides tested (20–25), with the exception of the response to the MBP 87–99 which is D-locus restricted (22). A dose range of non-labelled peptides was incubated together with 100 nM of biotinylated MBP 72–85 and 3 mM of affinity purified RT1.B^1 at pH 5, and the resulting binding determined as described above. The degree of inhibition was further quantified by image processing. From the dose–response curves obtained for each of the peptides the concentration at which 50% inhibition was achieved was extrapolated. The peptides could be ranked into five broadly defined categories. Good binders (+++, with IC_{50} values of 1–10 mM) were the OVA 323–339 peptide, and single alanine substitution analogues of the MBP 72–85, hsp 178–186 and hsp 180–188 peptides; intermediate binders (++, with IC_{50} values of 10–100 mM) were the natural MBP 72–85 immuno-
Inhibition of the binding of 100 nM biotinylated IBV 67–83 to 3 μM purified T cell epitope quantitated by image processing. For both peptides the 50% inhibitory dose is indicated. Results exemplify at least two tests per peptide.

Table 1. Competition for binding to purified RT1.B measured in a direct binding assay

| Peptide       | Relative binding affinity<sup>a</sup> |
|---------------|-------------------------------------|
| OVA 323–339   | + +                                 |
| MBP 72–85S<sub>52</sub>–A         | + +                                 |
| hsp65 178–186L<sub>183</sub>–A   | + +                                 |
| MBP 72–85D<sub>51</sub>–A        | + +                                 |
| hsp65 180–186L<sub>183</sub>–A   | + +                                 |
| MBP 72–85     | + +                                 |
| hsp65 72–85T(trial)              | +                                   |
| hsp65 178–186 | + +                                 |
| hsp65 180–188 | +                                   |
| IRBP 579–591  | +                                   |
| hsp65 180–186L<sub>183</sub>–A   | +                                   |
| MBP 53–67     | +                                   |
| MBP 72–85E<sub>79</sub>–A        | +/-                                 |
| IRBP 1181–1191| +/-                                 |
| AChR 101–116  | +/-                                 |

MBP 87–99 (D-locus binder)

<sup>a</sup>Inhibition of the binding of 100 nM biotinylated MBP 72–85 to 3 μM of affinity purified RT1.B<sup>B</sup>. Different dose ranges of 0–300 μM of competitor peptide were used. The IC<sub>50</sub> values were extrapolated from the inhibition curves each comprising six to eight data points. Quantitation was by image processing of the autoradiographs. The results represent two to four experiments for each peptide. Reproducibility was high. IC<sub>50</sub> values from 0 to 10 μM are indicated by +; IC<sub>50</sub> values from 10 to 100 μM are indicated by + +; IC<sub>50</sub> values from 100 to 300 μM are indicated by + + +; IC<sub>50</sub> values clearly >300 μM are indicated by -.

The original autoimmune disease related sequences are underlined.

The response of encephalitogenic T cells against this epitope is D-locus restricted.

A selected subset of the peptides was tested in functional competition assays to confirm the immunological relevancy of the direct binding data and to compare this assay to the functional competition assay. The functional assay was performed with either fixed or non-fixed APC, the former at pH 5 and in the presence of a protease inhibitor cocktail. For both peptides the 50% inhibitory dose is indicated. Results exemplify at least two tests per peptide.

Table 2. The concentration of competitor peptide needed to obtain 50% inhibition (IC<sub>50</sub>) was compared with the IC<sub>50</sub> of an arbitrarily chosen standard competitor peptide. This relative inhibitory concentration can be used to make comparisons between different T cell read-outs. The non-analogous OVA-specific, RT1.B<sup>B</sup> restricted T cell read-out was used to assess the in vitro competitor function of the two strongest binders MBP 72–85D<sub>51</sub>–A and hsp65 180–188L<sub>183</sub>–A. Using either of the two functional competition assays (fixed or non-fixed APC) the results confirmed the earlier biochemical findings that MBP 72–85D<sub>51</sub>–A is a better RT1.B<sup>B</sup> binder than hsp65 180–188L<sub>183</sub>–A. Similar relative IC<sub>50</sub> for the MBP 72–85D<sub>51</sub>–A and hsp65 180–188L<sub>183</sub>–A binding to RT1.B<sup>B</sup> binding were obtained using the MBP 72–85 specific, RT1.B<sup>B</sup> restricted Z1<sub>A</sub> T cells for the functional read-out. In contrast, using the hsp 180–188 specific, RT1.B<sup>B</sup> restricted T cell clone, A2b, it was shown that within the given experimental design the IC<sub>50</sub> value
Table 2. Inhibition of T cell proliferation by competition for antigen presentation

| T cells | APCs     | Stimulatory peptide | Competitor peptide | IC_{50}^a (μM) | Relative IC_{50}^b |
|---------|----------|---------------------|--------------------|----------------|-------------------|
| 1/C11.P7 | fixed    | OVA 323-339Y (2.8 μM) | MBP 72 - 85D_{91} - A | 166.5 | 1 |
|         |          |                     | hsp65 180 - 188L_{183} - A | 236.5 | 1.4 |
|         |          |                     | MBP 72 - 85D_{91} - A | 17.8 | 1 |
|         |          |                     | hsp65 180 - 188L_{183} - A | 20.9 | 1.2 |
|         | non-fixed | OVA 323-339Y (28 nM) | MBP 72 - 85D_{91} - A | 253.1 | 1 |
|         |          |                     | hsp65 180 - 188L_{183} - A | 440.0 | 1.7 |
|         |          |                     | MBP 72 - 85D_{912} - A | 39.4 | 1 |
|         |          |                     | hsp65 180 - 188L_{183} - A | 60.1 | 1.5 |
|         |          |                     | hsp65 180 - 188 | >200 | >5.1 |
|         |          |                     | IRBP 1181 - 1191 | >200 | >5.1 |
| Z1a     | fixed    | MBP 72 - 85 (17.5 μM) | MBP 72 - 85D_{91} - A | 51.1 | 1 |
|         |          |                     | hsp65 180 - 188L_{183} - A | 14.8 | 0.3 |
|         |          |                     | MBP 72 - 85 | >200 | >3.9 |
|         |          |                     | IRBP 1181 - 1191 | >200 | >3.9 |
| Z1a     | non-fixed | MBP 72 - 85 (7 μM) | MBP 72 - 85D_{91} - A | 20.9 | 1 |
|         |          |                     | hsp65 180 - 188L_{183} - A | 60.1 | 1.5 |
|         |          |                     | hsp65 180 - 188 | >200 | >5.1 |
|         |          |                     | IRBP 1181 - 1191 | >200 | >5.1 |
| A2b     | non-fixed | hsp65 180 - 188 (0.5 μM) | MBP 72 - 85D_{91} - A | 166.5 | 1 |
|         |          |                     | hsp65 180 - 188L_{183} - A | 236.5 | 1.4 |
|         |          |                     | MBP 72 - 85 | >200 | >5.1 |
|         |          |                     | IRBP 1181 - 1191 | >200 | >5.1 |

The data are from a representative experiment.

^aIC_{50} is the concentration of competitor peptide (μM) resulting in 50% inhibition of the proliferative response under the given experimental conditions.

^bRelative IC_{50} is the IC_{50} of a given competitor peptide divided by the IC_{50} of peptide MBP 72 - 85D_{91} - A.

of the competitor analogue hsp65 180 - 188L_{183} - A was much lower than that of the MBP 72 - 85D_{91} - A peptide, indicating a more efficient inhibition by hsp65 180 - 188L_{183} - A. Since both the direct binding assay and the functional assay in the non-analogous systems indicate that MBP 72 - 85D_{91} - A is the better MHC binder, the observed strong functional hsp65 180 - 188L_{183} - A inhibition of the A2b response appears to represent more than merely MHC blockade. The functional inhibition assays also demonstrated that MBP 72 - 85, hsp65 180 - 188 and IRBP 1181 - 1191 at the given concentrations are poor competitors. Thus, in the non-analogous read-outs the same ranking of the peptides is obtained with the functional competition assays as with the biochemical competition assay.

Discussion

The modulation of autoimmune disease by interfering with the CD4+ T help response through MHC blockade is a novel approach. It has recently been observed that in vivo T cell activation can be prevented by co-immunization with stimulator peptide and MHC binding competitor peptides (8). Successful attempts to interfere with the onset or occurrence of autoimmune diseases by immunization with non-pathogenic competitor peptides have been achieved in the rodent EAE model (13-16). The Lewis rat presents an ideal model species for studying autoimmune T cell responses in the Lewis rat to the same MHC class II specificity, RT1.B1'. The same competitor peptide specific for RT1.B1' can therefore be used in several different autoimmune diseases models in the same experimental animal strain. However, to identify such RT1.B1' binding competitor peptides and to understand the possible mechanism of action it becomes essential to measure directly the binding of competitor peptides to MHC class II molecules as well as the binding of peptides involved in activating autoreactive T cell responses.

Our currently used method employs the detection of biotinylated peptides by chemiluminescence, whereby we have achieved stable and non-reactive labelling of peptides, yet maintained the required sensitivity. The assay has been established for both the mouse I-E^d and the rat RT1.B1'. The results obtained show sensitive and allele-specific binding. The method enables competition studies in which the relative binding affinities of a set of non-labelled peptides can be easily assessed. The assay is thus especially useful for the screening of sets of peptides, looking for good binders, in its present form it is less well suited for kinetic studies. A particular asset of the analysis is that it solves the problem of high non-specific backgrounds observed for some peptides in the gel filtration analysis, due to aggregation of peptide molecules. When starting with a not yet tested MHC specificity this can severely hamper the search for good binders. The high separation power of the SDS - PAGE analysis circumvents this problem. Furthermore, the sensitivity of our test system is high allowing the use of very low concentrations of labelled marker peptide, comparable to what is used in peptide binding assays based on radiolabelled peptides (34,35). This is in contrast to the high concentrations of labelled peptide necessary to detect binding of biotin labelled peptide to whole cells and detected by FACS analysis (38,39 and M. H. M. Wauben et al., unpublished results). The very high concentration of labelled peptides needed to perform the direct binding assay based on FACS analysis makes it difficult to convert the assay into the versatile competition assay, something which can reliably be achieved with the present assay. Recently, potenlially very useful biotin based assays have been developed (40 - 42).

It should be noted, however, that the successful outcome of these latter assays is in part dependent on the particular combination of MHC specificity and anti-class II mAb. To be more specific, the conformational binding properties of the mAb and MHC molecules can interfere in the measurements of MHC - peptide complex formation. In a species like the rat where a very limited number of mAb is available, this could seriously hinder the development of a binding assay. In our present study this is of no concern.
The results obtained with the biochemical competition assay were confirmed by functional competition assay for both the mouse and the rat systems. It is obvious that the ability to inhibit MHC binding and subsequently inhibit specific T cell stimulation varies greatly from peptide to peptide. The direct binding assay will yield information which is important in the generation of a MHC blocking strategy.

With respect to the relative binding affinity of the autoimmune associated determinants it is of interest to note that, firstly, none of the natural sequences from autoimmune disease associated proteins were among the highest binders (1–10 μM range). Secondly, from the peptides with direct disease inducing potential, the guinea pig MBP 72–85 peptide and the IRBP 1181–1191 peptide, the MBP peptide was found to be a high ‘intermediate’ binder, as opposed to the IRBP peptide, which was a very poor binder. Also the immunodominant AChR epitope and the secondary IRBP and MBE epitopes were found to be poor binders. Notwithstanding their apparent poor binding affinity, these peptides have the potential to play crucial roles in the development of the disease (20,22,24). It was argued by Lamont et al. (43) and Wall et al. (44) that in the mouse EAE model MHC binding affinity is correlated with encephalitogenicity and that a high MHC binding affinity may be a necessary characteristic of an encephalitogenic determinant. In our study it appears that in the Lewis rat the major encephalitogenic determinants are intermediary binders, i.e. ~10-fold less effective than the highest binder, the non-autoimmune disease related OVA peptide. Furthermore, a substitution analogue of MBP 72–85 with about tenfold increased MHC binding affinity (MBP72–85S12→ A) and capable of inducing disease did not show an increased encephalitogenic potential as compared to the natural sequence (M. H. M. Wauben et al., submitted for publication), suggesting that at least in this model high MHC binding affinity is not directly correlated with disease inducing potential. The finding that the natural peptide sequences relevant for the AA, EAU and EAMG models were low-intermediates to poor binders, is more in line with the work of Gammon and Sercarz (45), in which it is hypothesized that pathogenic determinants on self antigens resemble so-called minor determinants and are poorly presented, resulting in the evasion of tolerance induction by T cells with specificity for these determinants. In view of the results from the mouse EAE model (43,44), it is of importance to establish to what degree this concept is dependent on the particular disease and/or self antigen involved. Consequently, we are currently in the process of extending our panel of autoimmunity disease related and non-related peptides, to be tested in the direct MHC binding assay.

By generating single amino acid substitution analogues of disease associated T cell determinants we were able to define peptides with improved MHC binding affinity, to be used for blocking purposes. The now apparent relative intermediate to poor binding affinity of the disease associated peptides has supported and facilitated this approach. An alternative strategy using analogues involves engagement without stimulation of the TCR (9). An example of this may be the strong inhibitory in vitro (tested in an analogous system) and in vivo capacity of hsp65 180–188L183→A (16), which cannot be based on MHC blockade alone since in the direct binding assay as well as in the non-analogous functional assay, MBP72–85D38→ A was shown to have a higher affinity for MHC. In conclusion, this rat MHC – peptide binding assay may prove very valuable in the search for competitors of the formation of the trimolecular T cell stimulatory complex.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank P. van Kootan for excellent technical advice. Dr R. van der Zee, A. Noordzij and Dr G. van der Warken are acknowledged for peptide synthesis and analysis. Professor I. Cohen is acknowledged for the use of clones A2b and Z1a. Dr. A. Kozich is acknowledged for the gift of the IRBP peptide. We also thank Dr A. Boots for critically reading the manuscript. The research of I.J. has been made possible by a fellowship of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences. Supported by grants from the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO) and the European Concerted Action on immunopathogenesis and immunotherapy of chronic arthritis. Also, supported by grants from the Danish MRC, the Carlsberg and Novo Foundations, and the Centre for Signal peptide research.

Abbreviations

AA . adjuvant arthritis
AChR acetyl choline receptor
Con A concanavalin A
DYN dynorphin
EAE experimental autoimmune encephalomyelitis
EAU experimental autoimmune uveoretinitis
EAMG experimental autoimmune myasthenia gravis
HEL hen egg lysozyme
hsp65 65 kDa heat shock protein of Mycobacterium
bolus
IBV infectious bronchitis virus
IRBP bovine interphotoreceptor retinoid binding protein
MBP myelin basic protein
OG n-octyl-glucoside
OVA chicken egg ovalbumin
SN supernatant

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