A Highly Selective CC Chemokine Receptor (CCR)8 Antagonist Encoded by the Poxvirus Molluscum Contagiosum

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Abstract

The MC148 CC chemokine from the human poxvirus molluscum contagiosum (MCV) was probed in parallel with viral macrophage inflammatory protein (vMIP)-II encoded by human herpesvirus 8 (HHV8) in 16 classified human chemokine receptors. In competition binding using radiolabeled endogenous chemokines as well as radiolabeled MC148, MC148 bound with high affinity only to CCR8. In calcium mobilization assays, MC148 had no effect on its own on any of the chemokine receptors, but in a dose-dependent manner blocked the stimulatory effect of the endogenous I-309 chemokine on CCR8 without affecting chemokine-induced signaling of any other receptor. In contrast, vMIP-II acted as an antagonist on 10 of the 16 chemokine receptors, covering all four classes: XCR, CCR, CXCR, and CX3CR.

In chemotaxis assays, MC148 specifically blocked the I-309–induced response but, for example, not stromal cell–derived factor 1α, monocyte chemotactic protein 1, or interleukin 8–induced chemotaxis. We thus concluded that the two viruses choose two different ways to block the chemokine system: HHV8 encodes the broad-spectrum chemokine antagonist vMIP-II, whereas MCV encodes a highly selective CCR8 antagonist, MC148, conceivably to interfere with monocyte invasion and dendritic cell function. Because of its pharmacological selectivity, the MC148 protein could be a useful tool in the delineation of the role played by CCR8 and its endogenous ligand, I-309.

Key words: monocytes • Kaposi sarcoma–associated herpesvirus • dendritic cells • chemokines • chemokine receptors

Introduction

The poxvirus molluscum contagiosum (MCV)1 causes small benign tumors in the skin of immunocompetent children and opportunistic infections in immunocompromised patients. MCV lesions are characterized by a surprising absence of surrounding inflammatory cell infiltrates (1–3). The genome of MCV contains several genes corresponding to human genes suggested to take part in immune evasion, such as a homologue of the MHC, a protein with identity to the human peroxidase, and finally an open reading frame (ORF), MCV148R, which codes for a chemokine-like protein that, based on its sequence, was originally suggested to be a chemokine antagonist (4).

Chemokines are 70–80-amino acid proteins with well characterized three-dimensional structures usually stabilized by two disulfide bridges. They are involved in attracting and activating distinct leukocyte subsets, for example to inflammatory foci and specific tissues and microenvironments within tissues, as in a lymph node (5–7). The precise number of human chemokines is still unclear but is likely to be ~45–55. They are divided into four families on the basis of the pattern of the conserved cysteine residues located near their NH2 terminus and forming disulfide bridges with cysteines located further COOH-terminally in the molecule.
In the CC family, the two NH$_2$-terminal cysteines are adjacent; in the CXC family, the two residues are separated by a single amino acid; and in the CX$_3$C family, the separation is by three amino acids. The XC family, which as yet has only one member, has just one cysteine near the NH$_2$-terminus. Chemokines exert their function through seven-transmembrane (7TM), G protein–coupled receptors, of which today nine are CC chemokine receptors, five are CXC chemokine receptors, one is a C$\times$C chemokine receptor, and one is an XC chemokine receptor. On the basis of their function, chemokine receptors can be classified in an “inflammatory group,” which is activated under pathological conditions, and a “housekeeping group,” taking care of re-circulation and maturation of lymphocytes in the unchallenged host (5).

In the last couple of years, it has become clear that several herpes- and poxviruses code for chemokine proteins and/or chemokine-like 7TM receptors (8–12). Viral 7TM receptors are encoded by CMV (13, 14), human herpesvirus (HHV)6 (15, 16), HHV7 (17), and HHV8 (18). In addition to this, EBV as well as HHV6 and HHV7 have been shown to upregulate certain endogenous chemokine receptors in their target cells. Thus, EBV actively upregulates the expression of endogenous CCR7, previously called EBV-US28 receptor from CMV, which appears to be involved in the cellular transfer of virus (23).

As for the receptors, only some of the virally encoded chemokine proteins have been characterized pharmacologically. Thus, CMV encodes an uncharacterized CXC chemokine as well as a newly characterized CXC receptor 2 agonist (24, 25), whereas HHV6 encodes an uncharacterized CC chemokine (15, 26). Regarding HHV8, functions for two of the three chemokines encoded by the virus have been suggested. The first is viral macrophage inflammatory protein (vMIP)-II, which has been shown to be a surprising broad-spectrum antagonist for both CXC and CC chemokine receptors in vitro (27). In accordance with this finding, vMIP-II was shown to function as an efficient immunosuppressive agent in vivo, i.e., in a rat model for glomerulonephritis (28). Very recently, it was demonstrated that vMIP-I, also from HHV8, could act not as a blocker but as a selective agonist for CCR8 (29, 30). Interestingly, it has also been shown that vMIP-II, which otherwise is a broad-spectrum chemokine antagonist, in fact can act selectively as a chemotransactant for eosinophils (31).
Production of Recombinant Protein. COS-7 cells were transiently transfected by a calcium phosphate precipitate method with addition of chloroquine. Serum-free medium was collected 24, 48, and 72 h after transfection. The medium was centrifuged at 1,500 g for 20 min, and the supernatant was adjusted to pH 4.5 and filtered through 0.22-μm filters (Nalgene). The medium was diluted with water 1:1 to decrease ionic strength and loaded on cation exchange SP-Sepharose columns (Pharmacia Biotech). The columns were washed with 50 mM sodium acetate buffer, pH 4.5, and the protein was eluted with 2 M NaCl in the same buffer. The eluate was made 0.2% in TFA, filtered, and loaded on C8 columns (Vydac) for reverse-phase HPLC, from which the buffer was removed. The elution position of the recombinant MC148 protein as well as the purity was identified with mass spectroscopy and N-terminal sequence analysis on an ABI 494 protein sequencer (Perkin-Elmer Corp.). The identity of each subsequent batch was identified with mass spectroscopy. The yield was ~4–6 μg/175 cm² flask per harvest.

Cell Binding. Whole cell binding (0.8–2.5 × 10⁶ cells per well) was performed at 4°C for 3 h in 0.5 ml of 25 mM Hepes buffer containing 1 mM CaCl₂ and 5 mM MgCl₂, at pH 7.2, supplemented with 0.5% BSA on transiently transfected COS-7 cells. The incubation was stopped by washing four times with 0.5 ml of ice cold binding buffer made 0.5 mM in NaCl. Cell-associated radioactivity was determined after extraction of the cells with 8 M urea in 3 M acetic acid supplemented with 1% NP-40. Nonspecific binding, determined in the presence of the relevant chemokine peptide (0.1 μM), was subtracted. The following radioactively labeled peptides were from Amersham: 125I-MIP-1α (IM 285), 125I-MCP-1 (IM 280), 125I-RANTES (IM 288), 125I-I-309 (IM 313), and 125I-IL-8 (IM 249). 125I-metSDF-1α, 125I-fractalkine, and 125I-MC148R were prepared in our facilities, the first two by oxidative iodination and the latter by Bolton-Hunter iodination before HPLC purification.

Calcium Fluorimetry. Cells stably transfected with various chemokine receptors were loaded with Fura-2AM (Molecular Probes, Inc.) in a Krebs ringer buffer, pH 7.4 (CH₃O and H EK 293 stable transfectants) or RPMI with 1% FCS (L12 and 300.19 stable transfectants) or RPMI with 1% FCS (L12 and 300.19 stable transfectants) or RPMI (depending on cell type) with 10 mM EGTA. Fluorescence was measured on a Jobin Yvon FlouroMax-2 fluorimeter (Jobin Yvon Spex) as the ratio of emission at 490 nm when excited at 340 and 380 nm, respectively.

In Vitro Chemotaxis. Chemotaxis was measured using 24 transwells polycarbonate membranes (3 μm; Corning Costar Corp.). Chemokines were diluted in 0.6 ml chemotaxis buffer (RPMI containing 0.5% BSA) and added to the lower chemotaxis chamber. 10⁶ PMNs, PBLs, or L1.2/C CR 8 cells or 0.75 × 10⁶ THP-1 cells were resuspended in 0.1 ml chemotaxis buffer and added to the top chamber insert. Chemotaxis plates were then incubated for 30 min (PMNs) or 4 h (PBL, THP-1, or L1.2/C CR 8) at 37°C in a 5% CO₂-humidified incubator. After the incubation, the cells from the bottom well were collected and counted by FACScan® (Becton Dickinson).

Results

Cloning and Expression of the MC148R Gene. The MC148R gene was cloned from a skin lesion of a patient, and sequence analysis showed that it was identical to the gene from the MCV subtype 1 (deposited in EMBL/GenBank/DDBJ under accession no. U60315). COS-7 cells were used for production of the MC148 chemokine protein, which was collected in conditioned, serum-free medium, subjected to cation exchange chromatography followed by HPLC purification. Production of the viral chemokine in the eukaryotic cells should secure that the protein product corresponds to the chemokine normally secreted from cells infected by the virus. The conditioned medium contained a major protein peak eluting at 35% acetonitrile that corresponded to the processed, secreted MC148 protein (Fig. 1). Mass spectroscopy and N-terminal sequence analysis revealed a single protein with a molecular mass of 8,984 daltons and a cleavage site for the secretory signal peptide between residues 24 and 25 of the precursor protein (Fig. 2). The HPLC-purified MC148 protein was used for receptor activation studies, in chemotaxis assays, and, after being radioactively labeled with 125I, and HPLC purified, in receptor binding studies.

Receptor Binding Studies. To characterize the binding profile of MC148, we probed a panel of human chemokine receptors in both heterologous and homologous binding experiments. MC148 was not able to compete for binding against the radioactively labeled human chemokines used as radioligands for CCR1, CCR2, CCR5, CXCR1, CXCR2, CXCR4, and CCR5; and CXCR1 (Fig. 3). However, MC148 did displace 125I-I-309 from CCR8 transiently expressed in COS-7 cells with subnanomolar affinity (IC₅₀ = 0.47 nM; 95% CI; 0.33–0.67 nM). The affinity of the MC148 protein corresponds to that of the endogenous CCR8 ligand I-309 (IC₅₀ = 0.52 nM), but interestingly, ~20% of the bound 125I-I-309 could apparently not be displaced by the viral protein (Fig. 4).
3). vMIP-II from HHV8 also bound to CCR8, albeit with a somewhat lower affinity (IC$_{50}$ = 27.8 nM; Fig. 3).

Heterologous competition binding experiments can sometimes be misleading, as a high-affinity ligand may not always be able to compete for binding against another high-affinity ligand (34). Direct binding experiments using $^{125}$I–MC148 confirmed the high-affinity binding of the viral protein to human CCR8 (IC$_{50}$ = 0.27 nM; 95% CI; 0.24–0.30 nM) and demonstrated the suitability of the radiolabeled peptide as a radioligand in receptor binding experiments. Nevertheless, $^{125}$I–MC148 was unable to bind specifically to any other human chemokine receptor tested (CCR1, CCR2, CCR5, CXCR1, CXCR2, CXCR4, and CX3CR1; Fig. 3). In all these cases, binding experiments were performed in parallel with the appropriate radioactive, endogenous chemokine to confirm suitable receptor expression (Fig. 3). Thus, both heterologous and homologous binding experiments indicate that the MC148 chemokine from MCV is a selective CCR8 ligand.

**Calcium Mobilization Studies.** Calcium mobilization was studied in 16 cell lines individually expressing 16 different human chemokine receptors. As shown in Fig. 4, in each

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**Figure 2.** Alignment of known CCR8 ligands to MC148. vMIP-II, vMIP-I, MC148, and I-309 were aligned using CLUSTALW 1.7. Identical amino acids are shown white on black, whereas similar amino acids are shown white on gray. The line above the alignment shows the secondary structure of vMIP-II as determined by NMR (51). *Cysteine residues.*

**Figure 3.** Heterologous and homologous competition binding experiments with recombinant MC148 with various chemokine receptors. Heterologous competition binding curves for MC148 are shown to the left; human chemokine corresponding to the radioactively labeled human chemokine used ( ), MC148 ( ), and vMIP-II ( ). Homologous binding curves for MC148 are shown to the right; MC148 ( ), I-309 ( ), and vMIP-II ( ). For every homologous binding experiment with $^{125}$I–MC148, a homologous control curve was made with the human chemokine known to bind the receptor to make sure that the receptor was expressed on the surface of the cell.
Figure 4. Effect of recombinant MC148 and vMIP-II on calcium mobilization on a panel of cell lines stably transfected with human chemokine receptors. 10^{-7} M MC148, vMIP-II, or vehicle was added to the cells at 50 s, followed by a submaximal dose of an appropriate endogenous human chemokine at 150 s. The height of the response with the endogenous ligand was measured, and the heights in the experiments with MC148 and vMIP-II were expressed as percent of the height in the experiment with the vehicle. A representative example of each experiment is shown to the left, whereas the box diagram to the right shows the average inhibition with SEM as indicated. Asterisks (*) indicate statistically significant inhibition (P < 0.05). The chemokine concentrations used were: CCR1, 10^{-10} M RANTES; CCR2, 10^{-8} M MCP-1; CCR3, 10^{-9} M MCP-3; CCR4, 10^{-9} M macrophage-derived chemokine; CCR5, 10^{-9} M RANTES; CCR6, 10^{-8} M liver-activated and -regulated chemokine; CCR7, 10^{-9} M secondary lymphoid tissue chemokine; CCR8, 10^{-8} M I-309; CCR9, 10^{-7} M thymus-expressed chemokine; CXCR1, 10^{-9} M IL-8; CXCR2, 10^{-9} M IL-8; CXCR3, 10^{-10} M I-TAC; CXCR4, 10^{-10} M SDF-1α; CXCR5, 10^{-10} M B cell-attracting chemokine 1; CXCR1, 10^{-7} M murine lymphotactin; and CX3CR1, 10^{-9} M fractalkine.
cell line the appropriate, endogenous human chemokine was able to rapidly increase intracellular calcium concentrations. In contrast, MC148 given at $10^{-7}$ M concentration had no effect on calcium mobilization in any of the cell lines (Fig. 4). More importantly, pretreatment with $10^{-7}$ M MC148 did not diminish the response to the appropriate endogenous chemokine elicited through any of the tested human chemokine receptors, except for CCR8 (Fig. 4). In the HEK293 cells expressing CCR8, pretreatment with MC148 in a dose-dependent manner and with an IC$_{50}$ of 7.1 nM blocked the calcium response to I-309 (Fig. 5). Despite the observation that MC148 in binding experiments was unable to compete for binding against 20% of the bound $^{125}$I-I-309, the viral chemokine totally blocked the calcium response elicited by I-309 through CCR8.

In contrast to MC148, vMIP-II acted as a broad-spectrum antagonist, as it inhibited the receptor-mediated calcium mobilization in 10 out of 16 human chemokine receptors tested. As previously reported, vMIP-II fully blocked the ligand-induced calcium mobilization through CCR1, CCR2, CCR5, and CCR4 and partially blocked the CCR3-mediated response, whereas the CCR1-mediated calcium flux was unaffected (27). Interestingly, the antagonistic repertoire of vMIP-II was here extended to also cover the two minor families of chemokines, fractalkine and lymphotactin, as it totally blocked the calcium responses induced by these chemokines through CX3CR1 and XCR1, respectively (Fig. 4). Finally, it was found that vMIP-II could partially block CCR4, CCR8, and CCR3. In contrast, vMIP-II had no effect on the calcium responses elicited by the appropriate endogenous chemokine through CCR6, CCR7, CCR9, CXCR2, and CXCR5.

Thus, as studied in cells individually expressing the various cloned receptors and in respect of signal transduction through calcium mobilization, vMIP-II from HHV8 truly is a broad-spectrum chemokine antagonist covering receptors for all four families of chemokines, whereas MC148 from MCV acts as a highly selective CCR8 antagonist.

**Effect on Chemotaxis.** The potential chemotactic activity of MC148 was tested on freshly isolated and purified neutrophils, PBLs, and THP-1 cells, as well as on L1.2 cells transfected with CCR8. When administered alone, MC148 was not able to chemoattract any of these cell types. MC148 was also unable to inhibit SDF-1$^{1}$-induced chemotactic response of PBLs (Fig. 6), conceivably mediated through CCR8, which is in agreement with the lack of effect of MC148 on the SDF-1$^{1}$-induced calcium mobilization. MC148 did not affect the IL-8$^{1}$-induced chemotactic response of neutrophils or the MCP-1$^{1}$-induced response of THP-1 cells, which is in agreement with the lack of effect of MC148 on cloned CCR2 and CCR7, respectively. However, as expected based on the effect on signal transduction, MC148 did block the I-309$^{1}$-induced chemotactic response on L1.2 cells transfected with CCR8 (Fig. 6). It is noteworthy that MC148 inhibited CCR8$^{1}$-mediated chemotaxis in a concentration similar to the concentration of I-309 used to chemoattract the cells. Furthermore, we tested the chemotactic activity of vMIP-II on CCR8$^{1}$-transfected L12 cells. vMIP-II was unable to chemoattract any of the cell types tested; it did block the I-309$^{1}$-mediated chemo...
taxis, but at concentrations ~100-fold higher than the effective concentration of I-309.

**Discussion**

Through a systematic analysis using 16 cloned and categorized human chemokine receptors, we find here that the MC148 chemokine from MCV is a highly specific ligand for CCR8 and that it specifically blocks the binding and action of the endogenous ligand I-309 on this receptor. In contrast, another virally encoded chemokine, vMIP-II from HHV8, is found to be an even more broad-spectrum chemokine antagonist than originally described (27), as it bound and blocked 10 out of 16 chemokine receptors tested, covering all four classes of chemokine receptors. Thus, the two viruses, MCV and HHV8, have apparently exploited two different avenues to interfere with the chemokine branch of the immune system of their host. The fact that MCV specifically addresses CCR8 is interesting and points to this receptor as playing a key role in our immune system. This also suggests that CCR8 could be a useful drug target as well.

MC148 Is a Surprisingly Selective Chemokine Antagonist. MC148 was discovered only recently as an ORF during the sequencing of the genome of MCV and, based on its deduced amino acid sequence, it was then suggested that it might function as a chemokine antagonist (4). This notion was supported by the short NH2-terminal extension of the virally encoded chemokine and the observation that several endogenous CC chemokines become antagonists by modification or shortening of their NH2 termini (35–38). It is interesting that the two extra cysteine residues of MC148, which very likely could form a third intramolecular disulfide bridge, are found in the COOH-terminal end of the molecule. However, the possible structural and functional consequences of these two cysteine residues are still unclear and remain to be determined experimentally. When the MC148 protein was subsequently expressed and tested, it was found to act, as expected, as a chemokine antagonist (32, 39). However, in contrast to the findings in our study, MC148 was in the first reports described as a broad-spectrum chemokine antagonist based on its apparent ability to block the chemotactic response of several types of chemokines (32). Nevertheless, very little data was presented in these preliminary reports on the effect of MC148 on individual, cloned chemokine receptors except for CCR8. We cannot explain why it was originally found that the MC148 protein could inhibit the chemotaxis induced by various chemokines, as the protein product apparently was identical, although the protein in our study was produced by expression in COS-7 cells from an artificial eukaryotic expression plasmid and in the previous study was produced in HeLa/BS-C-1 cells after infection with recombinant vaccinia virus (32). Nevertheless, it should be noted that in both studies it was found that MC148 acts potently as an antagonist on CCR8. We would like to emphasize that the selective action of MC148 on CCR8 in our report is supported by the parallel characterization of vMIP-II as a truly broad-spectrum antagonist. Moreover, the double HPLC-purified, radioactively labeled MC148 protein also bound with high affinity only to CCR8.

Why Does MCV Specifically Block CCR8? Unfortunately, this important question cannot be answered well in this report due to the limited information available concerning both CCR8 as such and its specific ligand, I-309. CCR8 has been found on the surfaces of monocytes (40), and I-309 has been shown to be a chemoattractant for monocytes (41), whereas Th2 cells have been shown to upregulate CCR8 transcripts as well as respond with an intracellular I-309-mediated calcium flux upon activation (42, 43). Furthermore, I-309 has been shown to be produced by activated T cells (44) and IL-1-stimulated monocytes (45), as well as by an activated human mast cell line. MCV lesions are characterized by an absence of inflammatory cell infiltrate (1, 2) as well as the absence of Langerhans cells, the APCs of the epidermis (2, 3). Monocytes have been shown to be precursors of Langerhans cells (47) as well as antigen-presenting dendritic cells (48). Thus, it could be speculated that MCV has optimized MC148 to block CCR8-mediated recruitment of monocytes, resulting in a lack of APCs that creates a stalemate between the virus and the host in which the host cannot eliminate the virus and the virus cannot disseminate. It should also be noted that MCV does code for proteins other than MC148, which also could be involved in interfering with the host immune response (4).

The question posed above can in fact be turned around. The fact that the virus has taken the effort to carefully optimize the MC148 chemokine to be such a selective, high-affinity antagonist for CCR8 indicates that this as yet poorly characterized receptor probably plays an important role in our immune system. Importantly, with MC148, the virus at the same time has provided a highly useful pharmacological tool for delineating the function of CCR8 and its endogenous ligand, I-309.

vMIP-II Is an Even More Broad-Spectrum Chemokine Antagonist than Expected. Originally, we found that vMIP-II could block CCR1, CCR2, CCR5, and the CMV-encoded US28, as well as the CXC chemokine receptor CXCR4 (27). Subsequently, vMIP-II has also been reported to block CX3CR1 and CCR8, as well as the HHV8-encoded chemokine receptor ORF-74 (22, 28, 30, 49). Here we find that vMIP-II also can antagonize CCR4, CXCR3, and CXCR1. Thus, vMIP-II is able to bind and block receptors for all known classes of chemokines: XCR, CXCR, CCR, and CXCR. Endogenous chemokines, in contrast to many other chemical messengers, are often able to bind to more than one receptor type. However, even the most “promiscuous” endogenous chemokines do not cross-react with receptors outside of their own class. For example, RANTES binds to CCR1, CCR3, and CCR5, and IL-8 binds to CXCR1 and CXCR2. In contrast, HHV8 has during its efficient evolution and in vivo selection been able to optimize vMIP-II to exploit not only one but all four classes of chemokine receptors. The receptors not targeted by vMIP-II appear to be the neutrophil-activating ones, that is CXCR1 and CXCR2, and those with housekeeping functions, CCR7, CCR9, CXCR5, and CCR6.
However, the function of vMIP-II may be dependent on the cellular setting, as it has been reported under certain circumstances to be able to act as a chemoattractant for certain cells, i.e., eosinophils—conceivably acting through CCR3—and even for CCR8-transfected Jurkat cells (31, 49, 50). It should be noted that in both cases these are receptors for which vMIP-II does not appear to be a particularly high-affinity ligand (Fig. 4). Nevertheless, the function of vMIP-II as a general chemokine antagonist has been supported by an in vivo study, where vMIP-II was used in a rat kidney inflammatory disease model. Here, vMIP-II given intravenously was able to act as a potent and efficient immunosuppressive agent (28). It will be interesting to see if vMIP-II and especially the poxvirus-encoded, selective CCR8 antagonist MC148 can function as immunosuppressive agents in other disease models.

We thank Ulrik Gether for use of the spectrofluorometer.

This study was supported by grants from the Danish Medical Research council. H.R. Lütthau was supported by the Danish AIDS Foundation, the Foundation of Else and Mogens Wedel-Wedellsborg, a Maks and Anna Friedmanns grant for prevention of AIDS Foundation, the Foundation of President E. Danielsen and Wife, the Foundation of Madsen and Wife Olga Madsen, the Research Foundation of Ehrenfried Owesen and Wife, the Foundation of President Jacob Løvens Chemical Factory, the Foundation of Dagmar Marshall, the Foundation of Konsul Wedellsborg, a Max and Anna Friedmanns grant for prevention of AIDS Foundation, the Foundation of Else and Mogens Wedell-Weaver, and the Foundation of Bjørn Aastrup.

Submitted: 24 August 1999
Revised: 12 December 1999
Accepted: 19 December 1999

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