Inhibition of DNA-PK activity sensitizes A549 cells to X-ray irradiation by inducing the ATM-dependent DNA damage response

LINA YANG1, XINRUI YANG2, YIWEI TANG1, DEFU ZHANG1, LIJIE ZHU1, SHENGNAN WANG1, BO WANG1 and TAO MA1

1College of Food Science and Technology, Bohai University, Jinzhou, Liaoning 121013; 2Center for Therapeutic Research of Hepatocarcinoma, Beijing 302 Hospital, Beijing 100039, P.R. China

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Abstract. Non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) is radioresistant to X-rays due to powerful cellular DNA damage repair mechanisms. DNA-dependent protein kinase (DNA-PK) is a key enzyme involved in DNA damage repair and the phenomenon and molecular mechanism of NSCLC radiosensitivity were investigated following inhibition of DNA-PK activity. In the present study A549 cells were treated with the DNA-PK inhibitor NU7026 and/or siRNA directed against ataxia telangiectasia mutated (ATM), followed by exposure to 4 Gy X-ray irradiation. Radiosensitivity, DNA damage, apoptosis and protein expression were measured by colony formation assay, γH2AX foci immunofluorescence, Annexin V/PI staining and western blotting, respectively. A Balb/c-nu/nu xenograft mouse model was established by subcutaneous injection of A549 cells and was used to examine the effect of administering NU7026 via intraperitoneal injection prior to 4 Gy X-ray exposure. The xenograft tumors were weighed and observed by hematoxylin and eosin staining after irradiation. NU7026 treatment followed by X-ray irradiation significantly decreased the colony formation ratio of A549 cells, and increased γH2AX foci and cell apoptosis. Furthermore, the combined treatment of NU7026 and X-rays resulted in growth inhibition and cell apoptosis in A549 xenograft tumors. Consequently, apoptosis regulators full-length transactivating (TA) p73 and an N-terminally truncated (DN) p73 were upregulated and downregulated respectively, leading to activation of glucosyltransferases and Rab-like GTPase activators and myotubularins domain-containing 4 (GRAMD4) protein to reduce the Bcl-2/Bax protein ratio. In addition, ATM siRNA efficiently prevented γH2AX foci formation, and enhanced NU7026-induced inhibition of survival and promoted apoptosis. In conclusion, inhibition of DNA-PK activity increased the radiosensitivity of A549 cells to X-ray irradiation. NU7026 treatment activated the ATM-dependent DNA damage response and induced p73 apoptosis pathway. DNA-PK inhibitor may be an effective constituent of radiosensitization products. DNA damage repair pathway could be a potential target for radiosensitization.

Introduction

Lung cancer is a leading cause of cancer mortality, accounting for over 1 million deaths per year worldwide (1,2). Lung cancer has been classified into small-cell lung cancer and non-small cell lung cancer (NSCLC) according to their histological types (1). NSCLC accounts for at least 85% of all lung cancers, with increasing incidence and mortality in developing countries (2). Radiotherapy is a common method used in NSCLC clinical treatment, including X-rays and γ-rays, which provide low-linear energy transfer. However, NSCLC cells demonstrate poor response to radiotherapy due to radioresistance (3). The radiosensitivity of NSCLC cells is therefore one of the most important factors for improving the curative effect of radiotherapy.

Powerful DNA damage repair systems in cancer cells contribute to radioresistance, including the non-homologous end joining (NHEJ) and homologous recombination (HR) pathways (4). The HR repair pathway only occurs in the S and G2 phases of the cell cycle, while the NHEJ pathway can occur in all the cell cycle phases (5). Notably, DNA repair kinetics of the NHEJ pathway are much faster than those of the HR repair pathway (6,7). Therefore, NHEJ is the dominant DNA damage repair pathway in mammalian cells. Previous studies have identified members of the phosphoinositide-3 kinase family that participate in the NHEJ and HR pathways, including DNA-dependent protein kinase (DNA-PK) and ataxia telangiectasia mutated (ATM), respectively (4,8). It has been hypothesized that inhibition of DNA-PK activity can block the NHEJ process to increase radiosensitivity (9,10).
Cell apoptosis is another significant factor in the process of blocking DNA damage repair pathways and is regulated by a complex balance in signaling pathways controlling pro- and anti-apoptotic factors (11). *p73* serves a key role in apoptosis induction, encoding two types of protein isoform: Full-length transactivating (TA) *p73* and an N-terminally truncated (DN) *p73* (12,13). TA*p73* can activate the transcription of cell cycle and apoptosis regulators, thus acting as a pro-apoptotic factor (14), while DN*p73* is able to bind to DNA and form dimers with TA*p73* as a dominant negative anti-apoptotic factor (12,15). Overexpression of DN*p73* and the low expression of TA*p73* have frequently been detected in radiosensitive cancer cells (e.g., cervical cancer, breast cancer and non-Hodgkin lymphoma), leading to activated mitochondrial effector protein glucosyltransferases and Rab-like GTPase activators and myotubularins domain-containing 4 (GRAMD4) to reduce the Bcl-2/Bax ratio in mitochondria (16-18). This suggested that increasing TA*p73* and/or decreasing DN*p73* may enhance the radiosensitivity of NSCLC cells.

**NU7026** (2-(4-Morpholinyl)-4H-naphtho[1,2-b]pyran-4-one) is a novel DNA-PK inhibitor, which has been studied for the treatment of human immunodeficiency virus and leukemia (19). In the present study, NU7026 was used to reduce the DNA damage repair capacity and its effect on the radiosensitivity of A549 lung cancer cells and xenograft tumors was investigated. The present results may be useful in assessing the clinical potential of NU7026 and may also identify the molecular mechanisms involved in the regulation of the DNA damage response and cell apoptosis. The present study may therefore serve as an important supplement to our knowledge regarding the underlying mechanisms of radiosensitivity.

**Materials and methods**

**Cell culture and RNA interference.** A549 lung cancer cells were purchased from ATCC and cultured in Dulbecco's modified Eagle's medium (DMEM; Invitrogen; Thermo Fisher Scientific, Inc., Waltham, MA, USA) supplemented with 10% fetal bovine serum (FBS; Hyclone; GE Healthcare, Chicago, IL, USA). The cells were incubated in 95% humidified atmosphere at 37°C in the presence of 5% CO₂ to maintain exponential cell growth. A549 cells were plated in 60 mm dishes at a concentration of 2.0x10⁵ cells. On the second day, 100 nM SignalSilence® ATM siRNA (Cell Signaling Technology, Inc., Danvers, MA, USA) targeting the ATM (5'-CUAACAAACAGGUGAUAAU-3') was mixed with Lipofectamine® 2000 in serum-free DMEM medium transfected A549 cells. The transfection controls included 100 nM scramble siRNA (5'-UGUUAACUAAC AUGCAUAUG-3'; Takara Biotechnology Co., Ltd., Dalian, China) to exclude the effect of non-specific factors and treatment with Lipofectamine® 2000 alone to exclude the effect of the transfection reagent and untransfected controls (Cell Signaling Technology, Inc.).

**DNA-PK inhibitor and irradiation treatment.** DNA-PK inhibitor NU7026 (Abcam, Cambridge, UK) was dissolved in DMSO. 1-10x10⁶ A549 cells were treated with 10 μM NU7026 for 30 min, prior to being exposed to 4 Gy X-rays for 3.6 min at room temperature. NU7026 was not washed until the sample was collected. All the treatments with NU7026 were performed in the same manner. X-rays were obtained from a Faxitron 43885D X-ray machine at 100 kVp energy. The X-ray dose was 1.1 Gy/min. Non-irradiated A549 cells were handled in parallel with the irradiated cells.

** Colony formation assay.** A549 cells (2x10^⁵ cells) were seeded in a 25-cm² culture flask with 0, 2, 4, 6 and 8 Gy X-ray irradiation. Similarly, A549 cells were treated with 10 μM NU7026 for 30 min followed by 4 Gy X-ray irradiation. The cells were washed with phosphate-buffered saline (PBS), fixed with 70% ethanol and stained with Giemsa for 5 min at room temperature 10 days later. Colonies containing >50 cells were identified as survivors under a stereomicroscope. Survival fraction (SF; 2 Gy) was calculated according to colonies.

**Apopotisis analysis by Annexin V/PI staining.** Apoptosis was measured using the Annexin V-FITC Apoptosis Detection kit (Bestbio, Shanghai, China). Briefly, approximately 1x10⁶ cells per experimental condition (Control, NU7026, 4 Gy, NU7026+4 Gy, ATM siRNA, ATM siRNA+NU7026, ATM siRNA+4 Gy and ATM siRNA+NU7026+4 Gy) were collected after trypsinisation at 24 h post-irradiation, washed with cold PBS twice, and resuspended with 400 μl binding buffer. After adding 5 μl of Annexin V-FITC solution and 10 μl PI (Abcam) solution, the cells were incubated for 15 min at room temperature in the dark. After the incubation, 10,000 cells were analyzed with the FACSCalibur flow cytometer (BD Bioscience, Franklin Lakes, NJ, USA) and FlowJo version 7.6 software (FlowJo LLC, Ashland, OR, USA).

** γH2AX foci immunofluorescence.** The cells were seeded in a 6-well plate at a density of 1x10⁵ cells/well. The cells per experimental condition were treated with 10 μM NU7026 for 30 min, prior to being subjected to 4 Gy X-ray irradiation. At 30 min post-irradiation, the A549 cells were fixed with 4% paraformaldehyde for 15 min, and then treated with 0.1% Triton X-100 for 30 min, prior to being subjected to 4 Gy X-ray irradiation. At 30 min post-irradiation, the A549 cells were fixed with 4% paraformaldehyde for 15 min, and then treated with 0.1% Triton X-100 for 30 min and 5% BSA for 1 h at room temperature. Subsequently, the cells were incubated with primary monoclonal antibody anti-γH2AX (cat. no. 9718; 1:500; Cell Signaling Technology Inc.) at room temperature for 2 h. Subsequently, the cells were incubated at room temperature for 1 h with IgG-fluorescein isothiocyanate (cat. no. A0562; 1:500; Bestbio) in the presence of 1% BSA. Following the addition of 20 μl DAPI (1.5 μg/ml) to counter-stain the nuclei, γH2AX foci were detected with a confocal microscope. When the sizes of γH2AX foci were >0.01 μm², the number of γH2AX foci was counted in three random fields.

**Western blot analysis.** A total of 1-10x10⁶ cells were treated with NU7026 for 30 min at room temperature prior to 4 Gy X-ray irradiation. At 24 h post-irradiation, A549 cells were lysed in 0.5 ml RIPA lysis buffer (Bestbio) supplemented with 1 mM PMSF (Sigma-Aldrich; Merck KGaA, Darmstadt, Germany) for 1 h on ice, and protein concentration was detected by BCA kit (Beyotime Institute of Biotechnology). The protein was separated on sodium dodecyl sulfate polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis (SDS-PAGE) with 10% separating gel and 4% stacking
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significantly inhibited in the NU7026 treatment group with a mean tumor weight of 0.71±0.07 g (longest diameter=14.78±4.65 mm, volume=1,205.75±82.55 mm³; Fig. 3B and C). In contrast, tumor growth was significantly inhibited in the X-ray and NU7026+X-rays treatment groups with mean tumor weights of 0.61±0.18 g (longest diameter=13.27±3.02 mm, volume=930.13±32.86 mm³) and 0.42±0.15 g (longest diameter=9.24±2.10 mm, volume=308.38±12.39 mm³), respectively (P<0.001; Fig. 3B and C). The tumor weight of NU7026+4 Gy was a 31.1% decrease compared with 4 Gy X-ray irradiation alone (P<0.001). NU7026 increased the sensitivity of tumors to X-rays by 1.5 times. The effects of NU7026+X-ray irradiation treatment was also examined by H&E staining. The results indicated that necrosis of tumor tissue gradually increased, especially in the NU7026+X-ray irradiation group with increased cytoplasm (pink; Fig. 3D) and fragmented nuclei (arrows; Fig. 3E).

ATM gene silencing promotes NU7026/X-ray-induced inhibition of survival and apoptosis. In ATM siRNA-transfected cells, NU7026 and/or X-ray treatment decreased survival fraction (Fig. 4). The survival fraction of A549 cells after ATM siRNA+NU7026+X-ray treatment decreased by 94.1% compared with ATM siRNA treatment (P<0.001), and decreased by 35.2% compared with ATM siRNA+X-ray treatment (P<0.001; Fig. 4A). Late apoptosis in ATM siRNA-transfected cells was significantly increased by NU7026 treatment and/or X-ray treatment. The late apoptosis rate of the ATM siRNA treatment group was 4.84±0.5% compared with 6.3±0.4% in the ATM siRNA+NU7026 group, 10.8±1.6% in the ATM siRNA+X-rays group and 84.2±1.9% in the ATM siRNA+NU7026+X-rays group (Fig. 4B). These results demonstrated that ATM gene silencing enhanced the inhibition of survival and promoted apoptosis induced by NU7026/X-ray treatment.
ATM gene silencing reduces the NU7026+X-ray-induced DNA damage response. The number of γH2AX foci was increased by ATM siRNA+4 Gy treatment compared with the ATM siRNA and ATM siRNA+NU7026 groups. In contrast, the number of γH2AX foci was decreased after ATM siRNA+NU7026+4 Gy treatment (Fig. 4C). These results...
paralleled γH2AX protein expression in the same groups (Fig. 4D). However, the expression of DNA-PK was almost unchanged in ATM siRNA, ATM siRNA+NU7026 and ATM siRNA+NU7026+4 Gy groups. These results indicated that γH2AX foci disappeared after NU7026+4 Gy treatment in ATM siRNA-transfected A549 cells compared with normal cells. Therefore, ATM but not DNA-PK, was involved in the NU7026+X-ray-induced DNA damage response. When the ATM-mediated repair pathway was inhibited, cells initiated programmed cell death. The desired effects of ATM-siRNA transfection have been achieved, that is, the expression of ATM protein has been reduced by western blotting (Fig. 4E).

Discussion

NSCLC has a strong capacity to repair DNA damage, which is the main reason for cancer radioresistance. DNA-PK serves an important role in radioresistance of cancer cells as a key kinase in NHEJ DNA damage repair (4,8). NU7026 (DNA-PK inhibitor) has been demonstrated to enhance the antitumor effect of X-rays against lung adenocarcinoma (10). The results of the current study revealed that NU7026 significantly increased the radiosensitivity of NSCLC cells exposed to X-ray irradiation by inhibiting the growth of A549 cells and xenograft tumors. The inhibitor NU7026 may therefore be useful as a radiosensitizing drug for radiotherapy.

The sampling times of γH2AX protein for confocal microscopy and other proteins for western blotting were 30 min and 24 h post-irradiation, respectively. Usually DNA damage occurs within 30 min post-irradiation. Subsequently, cells activate the DNA damage response pathway >30 min (5,6). DNA damage agents can also activate the DNA damage response pathway, which either results in DNA repair or apoptosis of cancer cells (22-25). In the present study, the radiosensitizing effects of NU7026 on NSCLC cells were further investigated. The results demonstrated that inhibition of DNA-PK increased DNA damage and initiated the ATM-dependent DNA damage response after X-ray irradiation. It was also illustrated that NU7026 pre-treatment activated apoptosis of NSCLC cells, indicating that inhibition of DNA-PK could result in persistent DNA damage. ATM is involved in activation of the downstream p73 apoptotic pathway when DNA damage repair fails (14). Overexpression of the TAp73 isoform directly activated pro-apoptotic factor GRAMD4 expression to induce changes in Bcl-2 and Bax protein levels in mitochondria. Decreased Bcl-2/Bax ratio contributes to apoptosis (11). In addition, our previous study demonstrated that ATM knockdown effectively inhibited cell growth and increased DNA damage and apoptosis in NSCLC cells after co-treatment with NU7026 and X-ray irradiation (10). Therefore, combining
the ATM specific inhibitor CGK733 and DNA-PK inhibitor NU7026 may more effectively block DNA damage repair and enhance radiosensitivity of NSCLC cells.

Previous studies have demonstrated that DNA-PK inhibitors can enhance the radiosensitivity of cancer cells (liver cancer HepG2, gastric cancer N87 and leukaemia MOLT-4) by increasing DNA damage leading to G2/M phase arrest and induction of apoptosis (22-28). Similarly, the present results demonstrated that a DNA-PK inhibitor exerted radiosensitization effects on xenograft tumors in vivo and on A549 cells in vitro. John et al (13) demonstrated that p73 was able to trigger apoptosis via the mitochondrial pathway by the newly discovered pro-apoptotic mediator GRAMD4 (death-inducing protein), which induced changes in Bcl-2 and Bax protein expression.

A recent study has revealed that ATM-dependent DNA repair response of cervical cancer cells were activated by 7-hydroxy-5,4'-dimethoxy-2-arylbenzofuran via causing DNA damage as an anti-cancer agent (29). Moreover, several cancer cell lines that lack ATM function have enhanced sensitivity to radiotherapy and chemotherapy (10,30,31). The function of DNA-PK and ATM is complementary since it has been demonstrated that combined knockout of both kinases is synthetically lethal (32). Therefore, it could be proposed that inhibition of DNA-PK activates the ATM-dependent DNA damage response and that ATM knockdown increases the radiosensitivity of NSCLC cells following X-ray irradiation.

DNA damage is a universal characteristic following cancer cell radiotherapy. Therefore, the use of DNA repair inhibitors alone or in combination may have great radiosensitizing potential (10,33-37). The key factors in the DNA damage repair pathway include PARP, ATM, ATR, DNA-PK, Chk1 and Chk2, among others (33-39). PARP inhibitors have been demonstrated to interfere with single strand break (SSB) repair in HR-defective cancer cells at a safe dose level in combination with chemotherapy and radiotherapy in clinical trials (33). ATM and ATR inhibitors (caffeine and KU-55933, respectively) induce phosphorylation of p53 to promote radiosensitization, but low serum levels and high systemic toxicity have been limiting factors in clinical trials (34). DNA-PK inhibitors wortmannin and LY294002 are neither specific nor suitable for clinical use due to severe toxicity (35,36). The pharmacokinetitcs of NU7026 and NU7441 (another DNA-PK inhibitor) are still undergoing clinical analysis (37). Chk1 inhibitors (UCN-01) have demonstrated a long half-life and decreased bioavailability, whereas the Chk1 and Chk2 inhibitor PF-00477736 resulted in greater inhibition of tumor growth (38,39). Notably, the clinical development of inhibitors for PARP, ATM, ATR, Chk1, Chk2 and DNA-PK is being actively pursued (9). In summary, inhibition of DNA-PK activity enhanced the radiosensitivity of NSCLC cells to X-ray radiation by inducing the ATM-dependent DNA damage response and p73 apoptosis pathway, thus elucidating mechanisms underlying the myriad effects of DNA-PK, ATM, p73 and radiotherapy.

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Availability of data and materials

The analyzed data sets generated during the study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Author's contributions

LY was a major contributor in study design, cell tests, data analysis and writing of the manuscript. XY performed mice experiments. DZ and LZ analyzed and interpreted the data. YT, SW and BW performed cell tests. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Ethics approval and consent to participate

The study protocol was approved by the ethics committee of the Bohai University.

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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