Wheatgrass extract inhibits hypoxia-inducible factor-1-mediated epithelial-mesenchymal transition in A549 cells

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BACKGROUND/OBJECTIVES: Epithelial-mesenchymal transition (EMT) is involved in not only cancer development and metastasis but also non-cancerous conditions. Hypoxia is one of the proposed critical factors contributing to formation of chronic rhinosinusitis or nasal polyposis. Wheatgrass (Triticum aestivum) has antioxidant, anti-aging, and anti-inflammatory effects. In this study, we analyzed whether wheatgrass has an inhibitory effect on the EMT process in airway epithelial cells.

MATERIALS/METHODS: A549 human lung adenocarcinoma cells were incubated in hypoxic conditions (CO₂ 5%/O₂ 1%) for 24 h in the presence of different concentrations of wheatgrass extract (50, 75, 100, and 150 μg/mL) and changes in expression of epithelial or mesenchymal markers were evaluated by immunoblotting and immunofluorescence. Accordingly, associated EMT-related transcriptional factors, Snail and Smad, were also evaluated.

RESULTS: Hypoxia increased expression of N-cadherin and reduced expression of E-cadherin. Mechanistically, E-cadherin levels were recovered during hypoxia by silencing hypoxia inducible factor (HIF)-1α or administering wheatgrass extract. Wheatgrass inhibited the hypoxia-mediated EMT by reducing the expression of phosphorylated Smad3 (pSmad3) and Snail. It suppressed the hypoxia-mediated EMT processes of airway epithelial cells via HIF-1α and the pSmad3 signaling pathway.

CONCLUSION: These results suggest that wheatgrass has potential as a therapeutic or supplementary agent for HIF-1-related diseases.

Keywords: Triticum, epithelial-mesenchymal transition, sinusitis, hypoxia inducible factor 1, cadherins

INTRODUCTION

Hypoxia inducible factor (HIF) regulates the expression of proteins that increase oxygen delivery, which enables cells to survive in oxygen-deficient conditions. HIF-1 inhibitors could be useful as therapeutic agents for various diseases associated with the over-activation of HIF-1. Epithelial-mesenchymal transition (EMT) is involved in many crucial cell functions, including tissue reorganization, tumorigenesis, cancer recurrence, and metastasis [3]. Thus, many studies have examined the EMT process to understand the disease mechanism from a cancer-related perspective. Interestingly, EMT has been studied from many different perspectives revealing that it is not restricted to cancer, but is also implicated in upper airway sinonasal diseases such as chronic rhinosinusitis (CRS) and nasal polyposis. Wheatgrass (Triticum aestivum) has antioxidant, anti-aging, and anti-inflammatory effects. In this study, we investigated whether wheatgrass has an inhibitory effect on the EMT process in airway epithelial cells.

Hypoxia increased expression of N-cadherin and reduced expression of E-cadherin. Mechanistically, E-cadherin levels were recovered during hypoxia by silencing hypoxia inducible factor (HIF)-1α or administering wheatgrass extract. Wheatgrass inhibited the hypoxia-mediated EMT by reducing the expression of phosphorylated Smad3 (pSmad3) and Snail. It suppressed the hypoxia-mediated EMT processes of airway epithelial cells via HIF-1α and the pSmad3 signaling pathway.

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This study was supported by Research Fund from Chosun University 2016 (K206560003).
is an important alternative strategy. In this study, we evaluated the EMT-inhibiting effect of wheatgrass extract under hypoxic conditions in airway epithelial cells.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

**Materials**

3-(4,5-Dimethylthiazol-2-yl)-2,5-diphenyltetrazolium bromide (MTT) was obtained from Sigma-Aldrich (St. Louis, Missouri, USA). The other chemicals used were of the purest grade available from Sigma.

**Preparation of wheat sprout sample**

The wheatgrass sprout was harvested in 2015 from a commercial planting location in Gwangju, Korea.

**Extract preparation**

After grinding dried wheat sprouts in a mixer, they were extracted at 25°C with 80% ethanol for three days in shaking incubators (200 rpm). They were concentrated in a rotary evaporator. The ethanol extracts were fractionated with ethyl acetate or water. The ethyl acetate layer was further separated with n-butanol and water. Then, the butanol fraction was separated with hexane and water. The n-ethanol fraction was utilized in all experiment.

**Cell cultures and transfection**

A549 cells were maintained in RPMI 1640 (Gibco BRL, Grand Island, NY, USA) media supplemented with 1% penicillin/streptomycin (Gibco/Invitrogen, Carlsbad, CA, USA) and 10% fetal calf serum. The cells were grown to 60% confluence in 100-mm plates according to the manufacturer's protocol. The membranes were developed using the enhanced chemiluminescent analysis system. Results were obtained from three independent experiments.

**Nuclear protein extract**

The nuclear protein was extracted using NE-PER® Nuclear and Cytoplasmic Extraction Reagents (Pierce, Rockford, IL, USA) according to the manufacturer’s instructions. After 24 h incubation in hypoxic conditions, the medium was removed and cells were washed with phosphate-buffered saline, pelleted by centrifugation at 13,000×g for 2 min, and resuspended in CER I buffer. Cells were allowed to swell on ice for 10 min and then ice-cold CER II was added to the cell pellet for 1 min on ice. Cells were vortexed to disrupt cell membranes and centrifuged at 13,000×g at 4°C for 5 min. The supernatant was stored at -70°C until used as the cytoplasmic extract. The pelleted nuclei were resuspended in the nuclear extraction buffer, placed on ice, and vortexed for 15 sec every 10 min for 40 min. The nuclear extract was collected by centrifugation at 13,000×g for 10 min at 4°C. Protein concentration of the nuclear extract was estimated using Bradford’s reagent (BioRad, Hercules, CA, USA).

**Immunoblot analysis**

After 24 h incubation in hypoxic conditions, the medium was removed and cells were washed with phosphate-buffered saline and lysed with lysis buffer (50 mM Tris pH 7.7, 150 mM NaCl, 1% NP-40, 5 mM EGTA, 50 mM glycerophosphate, 20 mM NaF, 1 mM Na3VO4, 2 mM phenylmethylsulfonyl fluoride, 10 mg/mL leupeptin, and 10 mg/mL aprotinin). After centrifugation at 13,000×g for 10 min at 4°C, the supernatant containing the total cell lysate was collected. Equal amounts of protein were separated by electrophoresis on 10-12% Tris-HCl gels and were transferred to a PVDF membrane. After blocking with TBS-T (20 mM Tris, 500 mM NaCl, and 0.1% Tween-20) containing 5% (w/v) skim milk, the membrane was incubated with a specific primary antibody for E-cadherin (Santa Cruz Biotechnology, Dallas, TX, USA), N-cadherin, Snail, Phospho-Smad3, Smad3 , Lamin (Cell Signaling Technology, Danvers, MA, USA), HIF-1α (Novus, Littleton, CO, USA), or GAPDH (Santa Cruz Biotechnology) followed by peroxidase-conjugated anti-mouse immunoglobulin G (IgG) or anti-rabbit IgG (Jackson Immuno Research, West Grove, PA, USA). The membranes were developed using the enhanced chemiluminescent analysis system. Results were obtained from three independent experiments.

**Immunofluorescence**

Cells were incubated in hypoxic conditions for 24 h or transfected with si-HIF-1α mRNA and control si-mRNA, treated with different concentrations of wheatgrass (50-150 μg/mL), and then incubated in hypoxic conditions for 24 h on a cover slide in 12-well plates. Cells were rinsed three times with PBS, fixed with 4% paraformaldehyde for 10 min at room temperature, and rinsed again. Cells were then blocked with 1% bovine serum albumin, followed by the addition of the primary antibodies: anti-E-cadherin, anti-N-cadherin, anti-Snail, or anti-HIF-1α. After extensive washing with PBS, fluorescein isothiocyanate-conjugated IgG was added. DAPI was used to counterstain the nuclei. Following incubation, the slides were rinsed, mounted, and viewed at 488 nm on a confocal microscope (FV1000, Olympus, Tokyo, Japan).

**Statistical analysis**

The results were analyzed statistically using SPSS 19.0 software (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA). Student’s t-tests were used for pairs of data. A P value < 0.05 was considered to be statistically significant.
Fig. 1. Wheatgrass inhibits the hypoxia-mediated EMT process in airway epithelial cells. (A) A549 cells were treated with wheatgrass at the indicated concentrations for 24 h and total cell lysates were analyzed by immunoblotting with anti-E-cadherin or N-cadherin antibodies. (B and C) E-cadherin levels were visualized by immunofluorescence analysis. Green fluorescence indicates E-cadherin expression, blue denotes DAPI staining of the nucleus, and the right panel is a merged image of the two panels. Scale bar represents 20 μm. (D and E) N-cadherin expression levels were visualized by immunofluorescence analysis. Red fluorescence indicates E-cadherin expression (* P< 0.01). WG, wheatgrass; EMT, epithelial mesenchymal transition; HPF, high power field.
RESULTS

Wheatgrass inhibits the hypoxia-mediated EMT in airway epithelial cells

Wheatgrass extract per se did not affect the viability of airway epithelial cells (data not shown). In an effort to identify new EMT inhibitors, we screened natural extracts from wheatgrass for their ability to alter the fibroblastic morphological changes induced by hypoxia in airway epithelial cells. Incubation in hypoxic conditions (O₂ 1%) induced the expected morphological changes in epithelial cells at 24 h (data not shown). Consistent with the observed morphological changes in hypoxia-exposed airway epithelial cells, reduced expression of the epithelial marker E-cadherin was observed, whereas the expression of the

Fig. 2. Wheatgrass inhibits the hypoxia-mediated EMT process by inhibiting the activation of HIF-1α in airway epithelial cells. (A) A549 cells were treated with wheatgrass at the indicated concentrations for 24 h, and nuclear protein fractions were analyzed by immunoblotting with an anti-HIF-1α antibody. (B and C) Cells were transfected with either si-HIF-1α, si-negative control (NC), wheatgrass (150 μg/mL), or hypoxia only as indicated. E-cadherin expression levels (green) were analyzed by immunofluorescence analysis; (D and E) HIF-1α expression levels (red) were visualized by immunofluorescence analysis (* P<0.01). WG, wheatgrass; EMT, epithelial mesenchymal transition; HIF, hypoxia inducible factor; HPF, high power field.
mesenchymal marker N-cadherin increased. When the cells were pre-treated with wheatgrass for 30 min and then incubated for 24 h in hypoxic conditions, E-cadherin expression was restored (Fig. 1A, B, and C, \(P < 0.01\)), whereas that of N-cadherin gradually decreased as wheatgrass concentration increased (Fig. 1D and E, \(P < 0.01\)). These data suggest that wheatgrass inhibits the EMT in airway epithelial cells.

**Wheatgrass negatively regulates HIF-1α expression in airway epithelial cells**

Various signaling pathways contribute to inducing an EMT. We investigated the relationship between HIF-1α and EMT, and the effect of wheatgrass on HIF-1α expression. We found that wheatgrass down-regulated HIF-1α expression (Fig. 2A). To further evaluate the role of HIF-1α, we transiently knocked down HIF-1α expression using si-HIF-1α mRNA. Loss of the E-cadherin marker due to hypoxia was recovered following si-HIF-1α mRNA transfection and in cells treated with wheatgrass (Fig. 2B and C, \(P < 0.01\)). Hypoxia-induced HIF-1α expression was decreased by wheatgrass treatment or si-HIF-1α mRNA transfection to a similar extent (Fig. 2D and E, \(P < 0.01\)). Together, these results suggest that wheatgrass suppresses the EMT by inhibiting the activation of HIF-1α.

**Wheatgrass suppresses EMT by reducing Smad signaling**

The Smad signaling pathway facilitates the induction of
Wheatgrass ameliorates the EMT in airway epithelial cells

We found that wheatgrass affected the phosphorylation of Smad3. The phosphorylated Smad3 signal intensity was maintained for 6 h after hypoxia exposure. However, it decreased in an extract dose-dependent manner (Fig. 3A and B). Immunofluorescence analyses showed that Smad3 localized to the cell nucleus following hypoxia exposure, whereas it localized in the cytosol in the normoxic state. Hypoxia-induced nuclear localization of Smad3 expression was reduced by the wheatgrass treatment (Fig. 3C and D, P < 0.01). These data suggest that wheatgrass suppresses the EMT by inhibiting the activation of Smad.

Wheatgrass negatively regulates Snail expression in airway epithelial cells

Snail, Slug, and ZEB 1/2 are well known EMT-related transcriptional factors that suppress epithelial marker expression and enhance mesenchymal marker expression. Pre-treatment with increasing concentrations of wheatgrass down-regulated Snail expression in parallel with increased E-cadherin expression (Fig. 4A). Immunofluorescence analyses demonstrated that the hypoxia-mediated nuclear localization of Snail was reduced by wheatgrass treatment (Fig. 4B and D, P < 0.01). Collectively, these results suggest that wheatgrass negatively regulates the EMT by inhibiting the expression of Snail that is responsible for repressing E-cadherin expression, and that this process is governed by hypoxia-mediated Smad activation.

DISCUSSION

We sought to identify whether wheatgrass extract has an EMT inhibiting capability. A previous study demonstrated that hypoxia contributes to nasal polypogenesis in chronic rhinosinusitis by inducing EMT not only in primary nasal polyp epithelial cells but also in A549 airway epithelial cell lines [5]. Using human A549 airway epithelial cells, we directly evaluated the effect of wheatgrass extract on several hypoxia-mediated EMT parameters, including expression levels of epithelial and mesenchymal markers. We found that wheatgrass inhibits the hypoxia-mediated EMT in airway epithelial cells and rescues the hypoxia-mediated downregulation of E-cadherin.

It has increasingly been recognized that hypoxia can result in the failure of transepithelial oxygenation, non-vascularized exudates, or the tendency of inflammatory hyperplasia to exceed neovascularization [12]. Moreover, in CRS, oxygen levels have been found to be lower in inflamed sinus cavities, supported by the up-regulated HIF-1α and osteopontin levels in the sinonasal tissue of patients with CRS [2,13,14]. HIF is a transcription factor that activates genes required for adaptation...
to hypoxia. HIF-1α and 2α are expressed in nasal polyps and nasal epithelium and they induce EMT by altering the expression of EMT markers [1,2,5]. Thus, inhibition of HIF activity or the EMT might be a new target for innovative mechanism-based drug discovery for sinonasal disease.

Wheatgrass is a medicinal plant used in traditional medicine to cure various diseases. Because it contains chlorophyll, minerals, phenolic compounds, antioxidants, and flavonoids such as apigenin, quercetin, and luteolin, wheatgrass is primarily studied as a potent anti-carcinogenic agent. In one study, methanol extracts of wheatgrass inhibited human laryngeal cancer cell proliferation via cell cycle G1 arrest and p53 induction [15]. Another study demonstrated that chlorophyllin has the capability to reduce the risk of breast cancer by inducing cell cycle arrest and apoptosis in human breast cancer MCF-7 cells through ERK deactivation and cyclin D1 depletion [16]. In a study with a chronic myeloid leukemia cell line, aqueous and ethanol wheatgrass extracts inhibited the growth of cells in a time-dependent manner, induced apoptosis, increased malondialdehyde (oxidant) levels, and increased catalase and superoxide dismutase (antioxidant) activities [17]. Wheatgrass has beneficial effects on disease states such as beta-thalassemia, ulcerative colitis, wound healing, and diabetes mellitus [10,18-20]. However, few scientific or clinical studies exist for the use of wheatgrass in sinonasal disease.

In our study, immunofluorescence staining revealed that HIF-1α expression is closely related to the EMT process and both HIF-1α levels and the EMT are downregulated by wheatgrass treatment. In addition, the transfection of si-HIF-1α mRNA reduced the expression level of Snail and rescued E-cadherin expression in airway epithelial cells. Finally, wheatgrass inhibited the EMT by reducing HIF-1α activation. Wheatgrass appears to inhibit the hypoxia-mediated EMT by reducing the expression level of the EMT-related transcription factor, Snail, via the HIF-1α -Smad3 pathway. This suggests that wheatgrass may help to treat sinonasal disease, and could therefore have potential therapeutic relevance.

In conclusion, to the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to demonstrate that wheatgrass effectively inhibits the EMT processes in a concentration-dependent manner in airway epithelial cells. Although further studies are needed to examine the effects of wheatgrass, wheatgrass might have the potential to be developed into an anti-HIF-1α-related disease agent.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interests.

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