The Rat c-kit Ligand, Stem Cell Factor, Induces the Development of Connective Tissue-type and Mucosal Mast Cells In Vivo. Analysis by Anatomical Distribution, Histochemistry, and Protease Phenotype

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Summary

Mast cell development is a complex process that results in the appearance of phenotypically distinct populations of mast cells in different anatomical sites. Mice homozygous for mutations at the W or Sl locus exhibit several phenotypic abnormalities, including a virtual absence of mast cells in all organs and tissues. Recent work indicates that W encodes the c-kit tyrosine kinase receptor, whereas Sl encodes a c-kit ligand that we have designated stem cell factor (SCF). Recombinant or purified natural forms of the c-kit ligand induce proliferation of certain mast cell populations in vitro, and injection of recombinant SCF permits mast cells to develop in mast cell-deficient WCB6F1-Sl/Sl mice. However, the effects of SCF on mast cell proliferation, maturation, and phenotype in normal mice in vivo were not investigated. We now report that local administration of SCF in vivo promotes the development of connective tissue-type mast cells (CTMC) in the skin of mice and that systemic administration of SCF induces the development of both CTMC and mucosal mast cells (MMC) in rats. Rats treated with SCF also develop significantly increased tissue levels of specific rat mast cell proteases (RMCP) characteristic of either CTMC (RMCP I) or MMC (RMCP II). These findings demonstrate that SCF can induce the expansion of both CTMC and MMC populations in vivo and show that SCF can regulate at least one cellular lineage that expresses c-kit, the mast cell, through complex effects on proliferation and maturation.

Studies in mice and rats indicate that mast cells are derived from hematopoietic precursors that arise in the bone marrow and circulate in the blood, but complete their program of differentiation and maturation within interstitial tissues, epithelia, or serosal cavities (reviewed in references 1–6). In murine rodents, this process results in the generation of at least two distinct mast cell populations that vary in many aspects of phenotype, the connective tissue-type mast cells (CTMC), which occur in such sites as the skin and peritoneal cavity, and the mucosal mast cells (MMC), which occur in the mucosa of the gastrointestinal tract (reviewed in references 1–4). Evidence derived from both in vitro and in vivo studies indicates that IL-3 represents one major growth factor for MMC, whereas the regulation of CTMC proliferation requires additional and/or alternative factors (reviewed in references 1–6). For example, in vitro work indicates that one representative CTMC, peritoneal mast cells (PMC), do not proliferate in response to IL-3 alone but divide when IL-3 is provided with a second stimulus such as IL-4 (7) or PMA (8).

Several important insights into mast cell development have been derived from analyses of mice that virtually lack mast cells as a result of a double dose of mutant genes at either the W locus on chromosome 5 or the Sl locus on chromosome 10 (reviewed in references 1, 2, and 5). For example, W or Sl mutant mice lack both CTMC and MMC, indicating that the W or Sl gene products are important in the development of both of these mast cell populations in vivo (reviewed in references 1, 2, 5, and 6). Moreover, both in vitro and in vivo studies suggested that the mast cell deficiencies of these mutant mice reflected, in the case of W mutants, defects in the responsiveness of cells in the mast cell population to IL-3.

Abbreviations used in this paper: BrdU, 5-bromo-2'-deoxyuridine; CTMC, connective tissue-type mast cell; Hct, hematocrit; MMC, mucosal mast cell; PMC, peritoneal mast cell; RMCP, rat mast cell protease; rSCF164, recombinant rat stem cell factor164.
lineage to a stromal cell–derived growth factor and, in the case of Sl mutants, inadequate production of this growth factor by stromal cells (reviewed in references 1, 2, and 5).

The products encoded at W and Sl recently have been defined. W encodes the c-kit tyrosine kinase growth factor receptor (9, 10), whereas Sl encodes a newly recognized multifunctional growth factor that represents a ligand for c-kit (11–18). Several lines of evidence in addition to the lack of mast cells in W or Sl mutant mice indicate that one of the important biological activities of the c-kit ligand is to regulate mast cell development. The recombinant c-kit ligand can promote the proliferation of certain populations of immature, IL-3-dependent mast cells in vitro (11, 14, 15, 17, 18), and the c-kit ligand purified from the supernatants of BALB/3T3 fibroblasts (19), or the recombinant ligand (20), can induce proliferation of IL-3-independent mouse PMCs in vitro. In addition, we demonstrated that daily subcutaneous injection of a recombinant c-kit ligand, recombinant rat stem cell factor (rrSCF164), for 3 wk permitted mast cells to develop in the skin of genetically mast cell–deficient WCB6F1-Sl/SF mice (16). However, the mast cells that developed in WCB6F1-Sl/SF mice injected with rrSCF164 were not characterized according to phenotype. Nor was it determined whether rrSCF164 could influence mast cell development or phenotype in normal mice. In the present study, we therefore examined the effects of rrSCF164 on mast cell populations in normal mice and rats in vivo, using approaches that permitted the anatomical and phenotypic characterization of the responding cells as CTMC or MMC. Some of these results have been reported in abstract form (20).

Materials and Methods

Studies in Mice. Groups of five to seven female 8–12-wk-old WCB6F1-+/+, WCB6F1-Sl/SF, WBB6F1-+/+, and WBB6F1-W/Sl mice (The Jackson Laboratory, Bar Harbor, ME) received for 3 wk a daily subcutaneous injection of rrSCF164 purified from Escherichia coli and modified by the covalent attachment of polyethylene glycol (16) or vehicle alone (0, 30, or 100 μg rrSCF164/kg in 150–200 μl of sterile saline containing 0.1% BSA) (fraction V, fatty acid free; ICN Immunobiologicals, Lisle, IL). Injections were performed with the mice under light ether anesthesia and were delivered to approximately the same site on the dorsal back skin. Blood for determination of hematocrit (Hct) was obtained from the mice by retroorbital puncture under light ether anesthesia on the day before initiation of treatment and on the day of death. For labeling of tissue mast cells proliferating in vivo (21), 5-bromo-2′-deoxyuridine (BrdU) (Sigma Chemical Co., St. Louis, MO) was injected intraperitoneally (100 mg/kg in sterile saline) 1 h before death. After death by cervical dislocation, the cutaneous injection site was excised and fixed in Carnoy’s fixative, and embedded in paraffin. 4-μm sections were cut, placed onto polysylene-coated slides, and processed as in reference 21 for staining of mast cells with 1.0% alcian blue, pH 1.0, and for immunohistochemical staining of BrdU-labeled nuclei, using an anti-BrdU mAb (Becton Dickinson & Co., Mountain View, CA). The slides were examined at 400× to quantify mast cells/mm² of dermis (22) and to determine the percent of mast cells positive for BrdU incorporation (21). Other slides of the Carnoy’s-fixed specimens were stained with the heparin-binding fluorescent dye berberine sulfate (23) or with alcian blue/safranin, and were examined in an epifluorescent or light microscope, respectively, as previously described (1, 22).

Results and Discussion

Local Administration of SCF Induces the c-kit-dependent Development of CTMC in the Skin of Mice. Recombinant rat SCF164 administered in daily subcutaneous injections for 3 wk induced a striking expansion of dermal mast cell populations in normal WBB6F1-+/+ or WCB6F1-+/+ mice, and in genetically mast cell–deficient WCB6F1-Sl/SF mice (Table 1). In WBB6F1-+/+ mice, mast cell numbers at sites injected with 100 or 30 μg of rrSCF164/kg were 165 or 157 times that in control sites injected with vehicle alone. In striking contrast to its effects on populations of dermal mast cells, rrSCF164 had little or no effect on the Hct of normal mice of either genotype tested (Table 1).

The majority of the mast cells at rrSCF164 injection sites, like dermal CTMC in the skin of untreated normal mice (1, 22), exhibited cytoplasmic reactivity with the heparin-binding fluorescent dye berberine sulfate, and many of them stained with safranin (Fig. 1, A, B, D, and E). Thus, injection of rrSCF164 as the sole exogenous cytokine resulted in the development of dermal mast cells with characteristics of CTMC. Colocalization of immunohistochemical staining for BrdU incorporated into nuclear DNA and mast cell cytoplasmic granule staining with alcian blue (21) indicated that morphologically identifiable mast cells were proliferating at sites of rrSCF164 injection (Table 1 and Fig. 1 F). This finding indicated that the increased numbers of mast cells at sites of rrSCF164 injection reflected at least in part the proliferation of differentiated dermal mast cells, not merely the proliferation and/or maturation of mast cell precursors.

However, the skin of Sl/SF mice ordinarily contains virtually no dermal mast cells (Table 1 and reference 25). Thus, even though many differentiated mast cells were proliferating...
Table 1. C-kit-dependent Stimulation of Proliferation of Mouse Dermal Mast Cells in vivo by rrSCF<sup>164</sup>

| Mouse genotype | rrSCF<sup>164</sup>  | Before treatment | After treatment | Mast cells | BrdU* (percent of mast cells) |
|----------------|-----------------------|------------------|----------------|------------|-----------------------------|
|                | µg/kg/d               | µg/kg/d          | %              | no./mm<sup>2</sup> of dermis |
| WBB6F<sup>1</sup>-++/+ |                       | 100              | 48 ± 1.3       | 50 ± 0.7   | 4,710 ± 1,190*               | 16 ± 2.2*          |
|                 |                       | 30               | 50 ± 0.8       | 51 ± 0.3   | 454 ± 155*                  | 13 ± 2.7*          |
|                 |                       | 0                | 51 ± 0.6       | 51 ± 0.5   | 31 ± 2                      | 3.3 ± 1.2           |
| WBB6F<sup>1</sup>-W/W<sup>+</sup> |                      | 100              | 39 ± 0.8       | 36 ± 3.4   | 0                           |                  |
|                 |                       | 30               | 40 ± 0.7       | 40 ± 2.5   | 0                           |                  |
|                 |                       | 0                | 40 ± 0.6       | 39 ± 0.2   | 0                           |                  |
| WCB6F<sup>1</sup>-++/+ |                      | 30               | 46 ± 0.8       | 44 ± 2.7   | 122 ± 17*                   | 36 ± 3.5*          |
|                 |                       | 0                | 47 ± 0.3       | 44 ± 0.4   | 29 ± 5                      | 4.9 ± 0.7           |
| WCB6F<sup>1</sup>-Sl/Sl | 30               | 30 ± 1.1         | 38 ± 1.7*      | 61 ± 24*   | 29 ± 5.7                    |                  |
|                 | 0                    | 30 ± 0.3         | 33 ± 0.6       | 0          |                            |                  |

Mice were killed 24 h after the last of 21 daily subcutaneous injections of rrSCF<sup>164</sup> or vehicle for assessment of the number of mast cells/mm<sup>2</sup> of dermis at the injection site and for quantification of the percent of these mast cells that were proliferating, based on nuclear incorporation of BrdU (See Materials and Methods). All results are expressed as mean ± SEM (n = 5–7). *p < 0.001 vs. value for mice treated with 0 µg/kg/d by Student’s t test (two tailed).

In contrast to the effects of rrSCF<sup>164</sup> in Sl/Sl<sup>+</sup> mice, injection of rrSCF<sup>164</sup> into genetically mast cell-deficient WBB6F<sup>1</sup>-W/W<sup>+</sup> mice influenced neither the profound mast cell deficiency, nor the anemia, of these animals (Table 1). This result, together with work indicating that the W and W<sup>+</sup> alleles encode c-kit products that express no (W) or markedly diminished (W<sup>+</sup>) tyrosine kinase activity (27), indicates that the ability of rrSCF<sup>164</sup> to induce IL-3-dependent bone marrow–derived cultured mast cells to mature and acquire phenotypic characteristics of CTMC in vitro (20, 26).

At rrSCF<sup>164</sup> injection sites in Sl/Sl<sup>+</sup> mice 3 wk after initiation of treatment (Table 1), some of the effect of rrSCF<sup>164</sup> in these mice must have reflected the recruitment, proliferation, and/or induction of maturation of the mast cell precursors present in these animals (25). An effect of rrSCF<sup>164</sup> on mast cell maturation is also supported by the finding that many of the mast cells at rrSCF<sup>164</sup> injection sites in Sl/Sl<sup>+</sup> mice stained with berberine sulfate (Fig. 1 C) or safranin (data not shown), and by data indicating that rrSCF<sup>164</sup> can induce IL-3-dependent bone marrow–derived cultured mast cells to mature and acquire phenotypic characteristics of CTMC in vitro (20, 26).

In contrast to the effects of rrSCF<sup>164</sup> in Sl/Sl<sup>+</sup> mice, injection of rrSCF<sup>164</sup> into genetically mast cell–deficient WBB6F<sup>1</sup>-W/W<sup>+</sup> mice influenced neither the profound mast cell deficiency, nor the anemia, of these animals (Table 1). This result, together with work indicating that the W and W<sup>+</sup> alleles encode c-kit products that express no (W) or markedly diminished (W<sup>+</sup>) tyrosine kinase activity (27), indicates that the ability of rrSCF<sup>164</sup> to induce the development of dermal CTMC in vivo requires that the rrSCF<sup>164</sup> interacts with a functionally active c-kit receptor. The complete failure of even very high doses of rrSCF<sup>164</sup> to induce cutaneous mast cell development in W/W<sup>+</sup> mice is also noteworthy in light of reports that this mutant can develop mature dermal mast cells in association with a chronic idiopathic dermatitis (22), in response to repeated epicutaneous applications of PMA (28), or as a result of treatment with IL-3 (29). The results reported here indicate that the appearance of mast cells in the skin of W/W<sup>+</sup> mice in these settings probably does not reflect increased local production of endogenous c-kit ligand, but instead may be due to other
effects such as the activation of either alternative signaling mechanisms or processes distal to the interaction between c-kit and its ligand.

**Systemic Administration of SCF Expands Populations of CTMC and MMC in the Rat.** Even though subcutaneous administration of rrsSCF\(^{164}\) increased the Hct of Sl/Sld mice (Table 1), the effects of rrsSCF\(^{164}\) on mast cell populations were most striking in the vicinity of the subcutaneous injection sites. For example, no mast cells appeared in the skin contralateral to rrsSCF\(^{164}\) injection sites in Sl/Sld mice or in the gastric tissues of these animals (data not shown). To assess the systemic effects of rrsSCF\(^{164}\) on mast cell development and phenotype, we turned to the rat. Daily intravenous injections are more readily performed in rats than in mice. More importantly, Huntley et al. (24) have reported highly sensitive and specific ELISA methods for quantifying tissue content of mast cell–specific proteases associated with CTMC and MMC (RMCP I and RMCP II, respectively) in this species.

We found that daily intravenous administration of rrsSCF\(^{164}\) to rats at a dose of 25 \(\mu g/kg/d\) for 14 d increased mast cell levels systemically and also produced striking increases in levels of both types of rat mast cell–associated proteases (Tables 2 and 3). In the skin, lung, and liver (Table 2), rrsSCF\(^{164}\) treatment resulted in marked increases in numbers of mast cells and in tissue content of the CTMC–associated protease, RMCP I, but no significant changes in levels of the MMC–associated protease, RMCP II. In the spleen, bone marrow, and peritoneal cavity (Tables 2 and 3), rrsSCF\(^{164}\) treatment resulted in striking expansion of mast cell populations, as well as marked increases in levels of both RMCP I and RMCP II. Note, however, that the total amounts of RMCP II in these sites in the rrsSCF\(^{164}\)-treated animals were much less than the corresponding amounts of RMCP

### Table 2. Systemic Effects of rrsSCF\(^{164}\) on Mast Cell Populations and Tissue Mast Cell Protease Content in the Rat

| Tissue                  | rrsSCF\(^{164}\) | Mast cells | RMCP I | RMCP II |
|-------------------------|-----------------|-----------|--------|---------|
|                         | \(\mu g/kg/d\)  | no./mm\(^2\) of tissue | \(\mu g/gm\) of tissue | \(\mu g/gm\) of tissue |
| Skin                    | 25              | 87 ± 7*   | 69 ± 7* | ND      |
|                         | 0               | 26 ± 3    | 27 ± 3 | ND      |
| Lung                    | 25              | 48 ± 6*   | 13 ± 1.2* | 10 ± 1.6 |
|                         | 0               | 7 ± 0.4   | 3.8 ± 0.8 | 11 ± 1.2 |
| Liver                   | 25              | 62 ± 10*  | 35 ± 8* | 1.2 ± 0.3 |
|                         | 0               | 3.6 ± 0.4 | 0.4 ± 0.06 | 0.8 ± 0.1 |
| Spleen                  | 25              | 204 ± 40* | 92 ± 24* | 14.2 ± 5.0* |
|                         | 0               | 0.07 ± 0.02 | 0.7 ± 0.08 | 0.10 ± 0.004 |
| Glandular stomach:      |                 |           |        |         |
| Mucosa                  | 25              | 50 ± 9†   | 5.9 ± 1.2 | 19 ± 1.3† |
| Submucosa               | 25              | 144 ± 36† | 32 ± 5† |         |
| Muscularis propria      | 25              | 12 ± 3    |         |         |
| Mucosa                  | 0               | 45 ± 8    | 3.3 ± 0.4 | 13 ± 1.7 |
| Submucosa               | 0               | 12 ± 2    |         |         |
| Muscularis propria      | 0               | 80 ± 14†  | 1.4 ± 0.5† | 508 ± 83† |
| Ileum:                  |                 |           |        |         |
| Mucosa                  | 25              | 146 ± 51† | ND     |         |
| Submucosa               | 0               | 38 ± 12†  | 0.2 ± 0.1 | 272 ± 5 |
| Muscularis propria      | 0               | 19 ± 4†   |         |         |

Rats were killed \(\sim 24\) h after the last of 14 daily intravenous injections of rrsSCF\(^{164}\) or vehicle for assessment of mast cell numbers and content of RMCP I and RMCP II in various tissues (See Materials and Methods). All results are expressed as mean ± SEM (n = 5–8). *f, t, or $ = p < 0.001, 0.01, or 0.05, respectively, vs. value for rats treated with 0 \(\mu g/kg/d\) by Student's t test (two tailed).
I. rrSCF treatment significantly expanded populations of mast cells in the mucosa, submucosa, and muscularis propria of the glandular stomach, and in the mucosa and submucosa of the ileum (Table 2). MMC predominate in the mucosa of these organs, whereas CTMC predominate in the submucosa and muscularis propria (3, 4, 24). rrSCF treatment increased the content of both RMCP II (p = 0.018 by the two-tailed Student's t test) and RMCP I (p = 0.045 by the one-tailed Student's t test) in the glandular stomach, and also significantly increased the content of both proteases in the ileum (Table 2). Thus, according to anatomical distribution and mast cell protease phenotype (reviewed in references 3–5 and 24), intravenous administration of rrSCF to rats markedly expanded populations of CTMC and also increased levels of gastrointestinal MMC.

By immunohistochemistry (24), mast cells in rrSCF-treated rats exhibited a pattern of staining for RMCP I and II that was similar to that of mast cells in control rats (24). For example, dermal mast cells were exclusively RMCP I+ and RMCP II−, whereas mast cells in the mucosa of the ileum were predominantly RMCP II+ and RMCP I−. However, the effect of rrSCF treatment on the numbers of mast cells in various sites generally was more marked than the corresponding effect on RMCP content. For example, in the spleen, femoral bone marrow, and glandular stomach, mast cell numbers were ~3,000, 13, and 3 times those in control rats, whereas the corresponding ratios for total content of RMCP I and II in rrSCF-treated vs. control rats were ~130, 5, and 1.5. This finding may reflect any of a number of factors, including the recent expansion of mast cell populations in the rrSCF-treated animals. It is well established that the cytoplasmic granule–associated mediator content of rat mast cells increases progressively with the age of the cells (reviewed in references 30 and 31).

These data show that the local injection of SCF promoted the expansion of dermal CTMC populations in mice in vivo, and indicate that this effect required a functionally active c-kit receptor. In rats, intravenous administration of rrSCF resulted in striking expansions of mast cell populations in all of the anatomical sites examined. These included sites that usually contain large populations of CTMC, such as the skin and peritoneal cavity, and sites that ordinarily contain substantial numbers of MMC, such as the mucosa of the glandular stomach and ileum. These findings, taken together with the observation that W/Wv and Sl/Sld mice virtually lack both CTMC and MMC (1, 2, 6), indicate that interactions between c-kit and its ligand importantly regulate the normal development of both CTMC and MMC. However, administration of exogenous SCF not only produced significant expansions of populations of CTMC and MMC in sites ordinarily containing large numbers of mast cells, such as the skin and stomach, but also resulted in the appearance of many mast cells at sites that typically contain very few mast cells, such as the liver, spleen, and bone marrow. These findings raise the possibility that the mast cell proliferation associated with certain immunological or pathological responses may reflect, in part, excessive local or even systemic production of c-kit ligand.

We thank Ms. Lisa Fox and Ms. Linda Kradin for technical assistance, and Dr. Thomas Ulich for helpful discussions.

This work was supported in part by United States Public Health Service grants AI-22674, Al-23990, CA-28834, and GM-45311, and by AMGEN, Inc., (Thousand Oaks, CA).

Table 3. Systemic Effects of rrSCF on Peritoneal and Bone Marrow Mast Cells and Mast Cell Protease Content in the Rat

| Site                  | rrSCF164 | Cells/peritoneal cavity or femur | Protease content of total peritoneal cells or femoral bone marrow cells |
|-----------------------|----------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                       | μg/kg/d  | Total cells (10^6) Mast cells (10^6) | RMCP I (μg) RMCP II (μg)                                               |
| Peritoneal cavity     | 25       | 2.3 ± 0.1 7.6 ± 0.5*               | 134 ± 7* 17 ± 5*                                                      |
|                       | 0        | 2.1 ± 0.2 1.7 ± 0.3                | 49 ± 3 0.2 ± 0.2                                                     |
| Femoral bone marrow  | 25       | 9.0 ± 0.3 3.9 ± 0.4*               | 34 ± 4* 42 ± 6*                                                     |
|                       | 0        | 8.7 ± 0.6 0.3 ± 0.1                | 7 ± 1 8 ± 3                                                        |

These data (mean ± SEM) are from the same rats shown in Table 2 (see Materials and Methods).

*p < 0.001 vs. value for rats treated with 0 μg/kg/d by Student's t test (two tailed).
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