8-5-1991

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Recommended Citation
Ala-Kokko, Leena; Hyland, James; Smith, Carol; Kivirikko, Kari I.; Jimenez, Sergio A.; and Prockop, Darwin J., "Expression of a human cartilage procollagen gene (COL2A1) in mouse 3T3 cells." (1991). Department of Medicine Faculty Papers. Paper 184.

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Expression of a Human Cartilage Procollagen Gene (COL2A1) in Mouse 3T3 Cells*

(Received for publication, February 13, 1991, and in revised form, May 16, 1991)

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Expression in a recombinant system has been difficult to obtain for any of the major fibrillar collagens that require processing by eight or more post-translational enzymes. Here, two DNA constructs were designed so that the promoter region of the gene for the pro-α1(I) chain of human type I procollagen drove expression of the human type II procollagen gene in mouse NIH 3T3 cells, a culture line that normally synthesizes type I procollagen but not any cartilage-specific protein such as type II procollagen. Both constructs were expressed as both mRNA and protein. In clones expressing the construct at high levels, the steady-state levels of mRNA and the production of type II procollagen were comparable to the mRNA levels and production of type I procollagen from the endogenous mouse genes. Comparison of clones containing the two constructs demonstrated that sequences extending 80 base pairs beyond the major polyadenylation signal of the gene are not in themselves sufficient for correct termination and 3’ processing of RNA transcripts. The results strongly suggest that specific sequences present in a downstream 3.5-kilobase SpHl/SpHl fragment determine the termination of the transcription. Of special importance is that the system will make it possible to examine the consequences of mutations in the human type II procollagen gene on the processing of RNA transcripts and on the functional properties of the protein simply by using the genomic DNA from leukocytes or other non-cartilaginous sources.

Expression of many exogenous genes is readily obtained in a variety of recombinant host-vector systems. Expression of an exogenous gene, however, is difficult to obtain if the protein normally requires extensive post-translational processing. Apparently for this reason, expression in a recombinant system has not been reported for any of the major fibrillar collagens that require processing by eight or more post-translational enzymes. Rescue experiments in cells that synthesized only one of the two chains for type I procollagen were successful in two different systems (2, 3), but synthesis of a procollagen molecule in which all three chains are derived from an exogenous gene has not been obtained. Failure to obtain expression of genes for fibrillar collagens in a fully recombinant system has hampered attempts to study the normal structure-function relationships of the proteins and to study the effects of mutations. In particular, mutations in the gene for type II procollagen have recently been implicated as the cause of several human diseases (4-13), but because adequate numbers of human cartilage cells are difficult to obtain and because human chondrocytes readily lose their phenotype in culture (14, 15), the causal relationship between a mutation in the gene and the biological function of the protein has proven elusive. Here we describe a system in which it is possible to express the human type II procollagen gene in stable transfectants of mouse NIH 3T3 cells. The results also indicate that correct termination and 3’ processing of RNA transcripts of the gene require sequences over 80 bp downstream of the major polyadenylation signal (16).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Gene Constructs—Two versions of a cosmid construct were prepared. Both contained a 5’ fragment from the human COL1A1 gene that included the promoter, the first exon, and most of the first intron (Fig. 1). The 5’ fragment extended from -500 to +1445 bp of the gene (17-19). Both constructs also contained two SpHl/SpHl fragments of 14 and 12 kb of the human COL2A1 gene (20-27). The 5’ end of the 14-kb fragment corresponded to the 3’ end of intron 1B (28), and the 3’-end of the 12-kb fragment extended 80 bp beyond the major polyadenylation signal of the gene. One construct differed from the other in that it contained an additional 3.5-kb SpHl/SpHl fragment from the 3’ end of the gene.

The first construct was assembled from three fragments: (a) a 2-kb SpHl/HindIII fragment from the 5’ end of human COL1A1 gene in which the SpHl site was converted to a Sall site and the HindIII site was converted to an SpHl site; (b) a 14-kb SpHl/SpHl fragment from the middle of the human COL2A1 gene; and (c) a 12-kb SpHl/SpHl fragment that extended 80 bp beyond the major polyadenylation signal of the human COL2A1 gene and in which the 3’-SpHl site was converted to a Sall site. The three fragments were assembled by four-way ligation into the Sall site of the cosmid vector pJD8 that was previously modified by insertion of a 7-kb EcoRI/EcoRI stuffer fragment (27).

The second construct was assembled in two steps. The first step involved (a) the 5’-fragment from the COL1A1 gene with Sall/SpHl terminal sites used for the first construct and (b) a 3.5-kb SpHl/SpHl fragment that extended beyond the 3’-end of the COL2A1 gene. The 3’-SpHl site in the 3.5-kb SpHl/SpHl fragment was converted to a Sall site. In the first step, the 2-kb Sall/SpHl and 3.5-kb SpHl/Sall fragments were assembled into the modified cosmid vector by three-way ligation. In the second step the two SpHl/Sall fragments of 14 and 12 kb from the COL2A1 gene were inserted by three-way ligation into the SpHl site of the construct obtained in the first step.

Cell Transfections—For the cell transfection experiments, a cosmid clone containing a chimeric COL1A1/COL2A1 gene was cleaved with Sall. A plasmid containing a neomycin-resistant gene (29) was linearized by cleavage with BamHI. The two samples were mixed in a
ratio of 10:1 of chimeric gene construct to neomycin-resistant gene, and the mixture was then used for co-transfection of NIH 3T3 cells by calcium phosphate precipitation (30). The DNA in the calcium phosphate solution was layered onto cultured cells with about 10 μg of chimeric gene construct per 90-mm plate of preconfluent cells. The cells were incubated in Dulbecco’s modified Eagle’s medium containing 10% newborn calf serum for 10 h. The samples were subjected to glycerol shock by adding a 15% glycerol solution for 3 min. The cells were transferred to Dulbecco’s modified Eagle’s medium containing 10% newborn calf serum for 24 h and then to the same medium containing 450 μg/ml G418. Incubation in the medium containing G418 was continued for about 4 weeks with a change of medium every third day. The G418-resistant cells were either pooled or used to obtain clones by isolating foci with a plastic cylinder and subculturing.

Northern Blot and Western Blot Analysis—Total RNA was extracted from stably transfected NIH 3T3 cells with guanidine isothiocyanate and the RNA purified by centrifugation in cesium chloride (30). The RNA samples were separated by agarose gel electrophoresis and blotted onto nitrocellulose filters for hybridization with human cDNAs for COL2A1 (31) and COL1A1 (32).

For Western blot analysis, the culture medium from each of several clones was removed and separately precipitated by the addition of solid ammonium sulfate (30% saturation). The precipitates were collected by centrifugation at 14,000 × g for about 10 min and the mixture was then used for co-transfection of NIH 3T3 cells with about 10 μg of plasmid DNA. Incubation in the medium containing G418 was continued for about 4 weeks with a change of medium every third day. The G418-resistant cells were either pooled or used to obtain clones by isolating foci with a plastic cylinder and subculturing.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The two gene constructs employed here (Fig. 1) were designed to test the hypothesis that the promoter of the human COL1A1 gene would drive expression of human COL2A1 gene in mouse NIH 3T3 cells that normally express type I procollagen but do not synthesize any cartilage-specific proteins. The constructs were used to generate stably transfected cells, and the cells were assayed for synthesis of mRNA for human type II procollagen (Fig. 2). Cells transfected with either construct synthesized human type II procollagen mRNA. The mRNA from cells containing the construct that included the 3.5-kb SphI/SalI fragment extending beyond the 3'-end of the gene appeared as a discrete band of the expected size of about 5 kb (Fig. 2A). In contrast, the mRNA from cells containing the shorter construct (Fig. 2C) appeared as a broad smear ranging in size from RNAs larger than the expected message for type II procollagen to much smaller sizes. The results, therefore, demonstrated that sequences extending 80 bp beyond the unusual ATTAAA major polyadenylation signal (16) of the gene are not in themselves sufficient for correct termination and the 3'-processing of RNA transcripts that is required to generate stable mRNA. The 80-bp region contains a GT-rich sequence (16) required for correct polyadenylation of transcripts of most eukaryotic genes (33). To date, specific sequences that determine the termination of transcription in eukaryotic cells have not been defined (33). The results here strongly suggest that such specific sequences are present in the 3.5-kb SphI/SalI fragment of the human COL2A1 gene.

The transfected cells were then assayed for expression of the type II procollagen gene as protein by Western blot
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analysis. For this purpose, a polyclonal antibody was prepared in rabbits with a 23-residue synthetic peptide that had an amino acid sequence found in the COOH-terminal telopeptide of human type II collagen (22). Western blots demonstrated the presence of human pro-α(I1) chains in the media from several stably transfected lines of 3T3 cells (Fig. 3). To verify that the transfected cell lines were synthesizing human type II procollagen, two-dimensional cyanogen bromide peptide mapping was carried out (Fig. 4). The peptides were identified by Western blotting with polyclonal antibodies that reacted with multiple epitopes in the triple helix of type II collagen. The protein generated the expected pattern of cyanogen bromide fragments for type II collagen.

The level of expression of the human COL2A1 gene as mRNA and protein varied in different lines and clones of the neomycin-resistant cells. In the highest expressing clones, the steady-state levels of mRNA for type II procollagen as assayed with a cDNA for the human protein were comparable with the endogenous levels of mRNA for mouse type I procollagen as assayed with a cDNA for the human pro-α(I1) chain. In the same clones, the production of human type II procollagen was comparable with the production of endogenous mouse type I procollagen as assayed by semi-quantitative Western blotting or by chromatographic purification of the proteins from culture media (not shown). In general, there was a good correlation between the steady-state levels of mRNA and the production of type II procollagen. Surprisingly, there were no consistent differences in levels of type II procollagen production among clones transfected with the shorter construct and cells transfected with the longer construct containing the 3.5-kb SphI/SphI fragment. The longer and apparently less stable transcripts from the shorter gene constructs were, therefore, efficiently translated. Clones producing high levels of type II procollagen were stable and continued to synthesize the protein even after repeated passage in culture and storage as frozen cells over a 2-year period (not shown).

The results here demonstrate that the promoter region together with the first exon and 1,218 bp of the first intron of the human COL1A1 gene are sufficient to drive expression of a cartilage-specific collagen gene in cells that do not normally express any cartilage gene. The results, therefore, are consistent with previous reports suggesting that the promoter with or without elements in the first intron is sufficient for tissue-specific expression of the COL1A1 gene (34–38).

Of special importance is that the system developed here provides a unique method for obtaining human cartilage collagen from stably transfected murine cells. Extensive efforts were made in the past to establish human chondrocytes that continue to synthesize type II procollagen, but it is difficult to expand the cultures without a loss of phenotype (14, 15). Also, it is usually difficult to obtain sufficient amounts of human articular cartilage. These technical limitations have presented serious obstacles in developing definitive data to confirm observations suggesting that mutations in the type I1 procollagen gene can cause several human diseases, including chondrodysplasias (5–7), arthro-ophthalmopathy (Stickler syndrome) (8–10), and primary generalized osteoarthritis (11–13). The system developed here makes it possible to generate both mRNA and protein simply by using genomic DNA from leukocytes or other non-cartilaginous sources. Therefore, it makes it possible to examine directly the effects of mutations in the human COL2A1 gene on the processing of RNA transcripts and on the functional properties of type II procollagen.

Acknowledgments—We thank Anthony Savarese and Ronald Yanikowski for expert technical assistance. We also thank Dr. Anthony Reginato for the RNA from human fetal chondrocytes.

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Fig. 1. Western blot analysis of proteins synthesized by individual clones expressing the human type II procollagen gene. Proteins from culture media were reduced and separated by polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis in SDS and were electroblotted onto nitrocellulose filters. The filters were reacted with the polyclonal rabbit antibodies to a 23-residue synthetic peptide (described in the text) that were specific for human type II procollagen and collagen. The secondary antibody was an anti-rabbit IgG linked to alkaline phosphatase. Lane 1, control 3T3 cells that were not transfected; lanes 2–5, clones of 3T3 cells transfected with the shorter construct shown in Fig. 1.

Fig. 2. Expression of the human COL2A1 gene in 3T3 cells. The level of expression of the human COL2A1 gene as mRNA and protein varied in different lines and clones of the neomycin-resistant cells. In the highest expressing clones, the steady-state levels of mRNA for type II procollagen as assayed with a cDNA for the human protein were comparable with the production of endogenous mouse type I procollagen as assayed with a cDNA for the human pro-α(I1) chain. In the same clones, the production of human type II procollagen was comparable with the production of endogenous mouse type I procollagen as assayed by semi-quantitative Western blotting or by chromatographic purification of the proteins from culture media (not shown). In general, there was a good correlation between the steady-state levels of mRNA and the production of type II procollagen. Surprisingly, there were no consistent differences in levels of type II procollagen production among clones transfected with the shorter construct and cells transfected with the longer construct containing the 3.5-kb SphI/SphI fragment. The longer and apparently less stable transcripts from the shorter gene constructs were, therefore, efficiently translated. Clones producing high levels of type II procollagen were stable and continued to synthesize the protein even after repeated passage in culture and storage as frozen cells over a 2-year period (not shown).

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