### Title
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Adipose-derived regenerative cell therapy inhibits the progression of monocrotaline-induced pulmonary hypertension in rats

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A B S T R A C T

Aims: Functional and structural changes in pulmonary vasculature characterize pulmonary arterial hypertension (PAH) and the prognosis of advanced PAH remains poor despite progress in pharmacotherapy. Adipose-derived regenerative cells (ADRCs) promote cell regeneration at pathological sites and comprise a novel therapy for ailments of various organs. We investigated the effects of ADRC therapy in rat models of monocrotaline (MCT)-induced pulmonary hypertension (PH) and the underlying mechanisms.

Main methods: Rats were assigned to Control and MCT groups without and with (M/A) intravenous transfusion of seven million ADRCs on day 7. We echocardiographically evaluated pulmonary hypertension as pulmonary artery flow acceleration time (PAAT) and deceleration (PADc). Right ventricular (RV) systolic pressure was measured by catheterization on day 28 and then pathological changes in pulmonary vessels were assessed. We analyzed PAH-associated gene expression on day 14 using real-time RT-PCR.

Key findings: Echocardiography and RV catheterization showed that ADRC therapy inhibited PH development (assessed as PAAT, PADc, and RV systolic pressure) at day 28 (MCT vs. M/A, P < 0.05). Pulmonary vascular remodeling was also inhibited (vessel wall thickness: MCT vs. M/A, P < 0.01). Messenger RNA levels of endothelin (ET) A and B receptors, ET-1 and transforming growth factor (TGF)-β increased in the lungs by MCT were suppressed by ADRCs (MCT vs. M/A, P < 0.05).

Significance: The development of PH was inhibited by ADRCs through suppressing changes in the expression of genes associated with ET and TGF-β systems. We believe that ADRC therapy could serve as a novel strategy for treating PH.

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Introduction

Pulmonary arterial hypertension (PAH) is a debilitating chronic disorder of the lungs that is characterized by perpetually elevated blood pressure in the pulmonary vasculature (Galie et al., 2009). The cause of PAH is often idiopathic, but it can also arise secondarily due to medical conditions such as collagen disease, heart malformations or viral infections. Genetic and epigenetic risk factors have also been linked to PAH pathogenesis (Loscalzo, 2001), but, all known causes of PAH are associated with endothelial dysfunction, vasoconstriction and pulmonary vessel remodeling.

Endothelial dysfunction is an early component of the pulmonary hypertensive process, during which an imbalance is created between vaso-dilators such as nitric oxide (NO) and prostacyclin, and vasoconstrictors such as endothelin, thromboxane A2 and serotonin (Morrell et al., 2009). This imbalance leads to a cascade of events that results in the hyper-proliferation of pulmonary smooth muscle cells, the activation of lung fibroblasts, the induction of thrombotic mediators and inflammatory cytokine release, all of which increase vascular resistance and pressure. One factor that is associated with endothelial dysfunction and vascular impairment is the endothelin system. Endothelin-1 (ET-1), a peptide produced mainly by endothelial cells, was discovered in 1988 and it is a potent vasoconstrictor and smooth muscle cell mitogen (Yanagisawa et al., 1988). The ET-1 system is activated in both the plasma and lung tissues of patients with PAH and in animal models of pulmonary hypertension (PH).

Pulmonary arterial hypertension is refractory to most conventional pharmacological therapies. Stem cell therapy might constitute a novel treatment modality for patients with PH. Mesenchymal stem cells (MSC) are unique in that they are pluripotent and can secrete paracrine factors that improve damaged tissue (Passier and Mummery, 2003). One such novel potential therapy for PH lies within the regenerative properties of easily accessible and abundant adipose tissue-derived stem and regenerative cells (ADRCs) that can be used in real-time, autologous applications. Here, we investigated the effects of ADRC therapy on PH and explored the underlying mechanisms in a rat model of monocrotaline (MCT)-induced PH.

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Materials and methods

Isolation of ADRCs

We isolated ADRCs from 13- to 14-week-old male Wistar rats (200–250 g) as described with minor modifications (Angelini et al., 2011; Feng et al., 2010). Briefly, inguinal subcutaneous adipose tissue was removed, minced and digested with 0.1% collagenase (Sigma-Aldrich, St. Louis, MO, USA) for 40 ± 5 min at 37 °C. The ADRC fraction was separated by centrifugation at 600 × g for 5 min and sequentially passed through 100- and 40-μm Falcon™ cell strainers (BD Biosciences, San Jose, CA, USA). The ADRCs were washed in phosphate-buffered saline (PBS) and resuspended (7.0 × 10^6/mL) in PBS. Some ADRCs were labeled with the cross-linkable membrane dye CM-DiI (Invitrogen, San Diego, CA, USA) for Flow cytometric analysis of ADRCs

Adipose-derived regenerative cells resuspended in staining buffer were incubated for 10 min at 4 °C with antibodies to block non-specific binding and then for 30 min at 4 °C with CD45FITC (554878), CD31PE (555027) and CD90PE (551401) (all from BD Pharmingen, San Diego, CA, USA) for flow cytometry. The cells were washed twice with cold Dulbecco’s PBS, fixed using FACS Lysing Solution (BD Biosciences) and then analyzed on a FACSaria using FACSdiva software (BD Biosciences).

Colony forming unit-fibroblast (CFU-F) assay

CFU-F assay was performed as described by Hayashi et al. (2008). Briefly, ADRCs were seeded at a density of 1 × 10^3 nucleated cells/cm² in 6-well plates and incubated in Dulbecco’s Modified Eagle Medium (DMEM) (Sigma-Aldrich) with 1% fetal bovine serum (FBS) (Sigma-Aldrich), Medium was changed every 3–4 days. Six days after plating, colonies were stained with Crystal Violet (Wako, Osaka, Japan) and counted. Only cell aggregates containing more than 50 cells were scored as a colony. The CFU is defined as colony number per 100 nucleated cells seeded.

Animal models

Monocrotaline (Sigma-Aldrich) was dissolved in 1 N HCl. The pH was neutralized with 1 N NaOH, and the volume was adjusted with PBS to achieve a concentration of 15 mg/mL. Eight-week-old Wistar rats weighing 225–250 g (Japan SLC Inc., Shizuoka, Japan) were subcutaneously injected with a bolus of MCT (50 mg/kg) or an equal volume of PBS (Control group). All rats were weighed twice weekly during the study and analyses proceeded until 28 days after MCT or sham injection. The Experimental Animal Committee at the Biomedical Research Center Division of Comparative Medicine Center for Frontier Life Sciences at Nagasaki University approved the experimental protocols and animal care methods applied in the study.

Experimental groups

All experiments proceeded in a blinded manner to evaluate the effects of ADRC therapy. One week after MCT injection, the rats were randomly assigned to one group that received 1 mL of PBS (M/C group) or 7.0 × 10^6 ADRC (M/A group) via the caudal vein. Control rats received neither MCT nor ADRC (Control). Various types of cells in the range of 4.0 × 10^6 to 2.0 × 10^7 have been injected into the caudal vein as stem cell therapy for PH in previous studies (Angelini et al., 2011; Kim et al., 2012). Therefore, the amount of ADRCs injected herein was within this range.

Echocardiography

The rats were examined by transthoracic echocardiography using a ProSound Alpha 7 ultrasound device (Hitachi-ALOKA Medical, Tokyo, Japan) with a 13.0 MHz linear transducer. Pulmonary artery flow was measured using pulsed wave Doppler sonography with a sample gate of 1.0 mm at the level of the pulmonary valve but signals for pulmonary artery flow acceleration time (PAAT) and deceleration (PADc) were determined at the right ventricular outflow tract and opening and closing clicks of the pulmonary valve were avoided. We defined PAAT as the interval from onset to the maximal velocity of forward pulmonary artery flow and PADc as the first linear deceleration period after maximal velocity (Koskenvuo et al., 2010).

Measurement of right ventricular systolic pressure and hypertrophy

Twenty-eight days after MCT injection, the rats were anesthetized with isoflurane and a 3-Fr tube was inserted via the right jugular vein into the right ventricle (RV) to measure RV pressure using a PowerLab 2/26 with BP Amp (ADInstruments, Colorado Springs, CO, USA) under a closed chest. The position of the catheter in RV was confirmed by the waveform. Data were analyzed using the Chart program supplied with the Power Lab system. Right ventricular hypertrophy was assessed by weighing the RV separately from the left ventricle (LV) with the septal wall (S).

Histological studies

After measuring the RV systolic pressure, the rats were sacrificed with an overdose of pentobarbital sodium and several tissues including the lungs, heart and liver were fixed with 4% paraformaldehyde for morphological analysis. Paraffin-embedded sections were processed for hematoxylin–eosin (HE) and Elastica van Gieson stain (EVC) for optical microscopic studies. The remodeling of pulmonary arterioles was analyzed using the Sahara method (Sahara et al., 2007) in which the external diameter and medial wall thickness were measured in 30 muscular arterioles (~100 μm external diameter) per lung section using a computer-based image analysis system comprising a BZ-9000 fluorescence and optical microscope (KEYENCE, Tokyo, Japan). The ratio of medial thickness was calculated as: medial wall thickness × 2 / external diameter.

Terminal deoxynucleotidyl transferase dUTP nick end labeling (TUNEL) assays proceeded using MK500 in-situ apoptosis detection kits (Takara Bio Inc., Otsu, Shiga, Japan) according to the manufacturer’s protocol. The number of TUNEL-positive cells was counted and averaged in 10 fields under a light microscope at × 200 magnification, and representative fields were photographed.

Some of the tissues were fixed with 4% formaldehyde that was increased to 30% over 4 days and then immersed in OCT compound (Sigma-Aldrich). The tissues were frozen in liquid nitrogen and stored at −80 °C. Each section was cut into 7- to 10-μm slices. The survival of ADRCs in the lung tissue was confirmed by the presence of Dil-labeled cells. Immunofluorescence staining proceeded using a 1:200 dilution of FITC-conjugated mouse monoclonal anti-rat alpha smooth muscle actin (SMA) antibody (Sigma-Aldrich) or a 1:50 dilution of mouse monoclonal anti-rat PECAM-1 (CD31) antibody (Millipore, Darmstadt, Germany) with a 1:1000 dilution of FITC-conjugated goat anti-mouse IgG antibody (Millipore). Nuclei were stained with DAPI (Vector Laboratories Inc., Burlingame, CA, USA).

Real-time reverse transcribed-polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR)

The rats were sacrificed with an overdose of pentobarbital and the upper lung lobe was removed and immersed in RNA later for 24 h and frozen at −80 °C for PCR. The lung tissue was used for RT-PCR to analyze gene expressions.
Total RNA was isolated using RNeasy Micro kits (QIAGEN, Hilden, Germany) and cDNA was reverse transcribed using PrimeScript™ RT reagent kits (Takara Bio Inc.) as described (Vernal et al., 2008). The mRNA levels of ET-1, endothelin A (ETA) receptor, endothelin B (ETB) receptor, interleukin (IL)-6, IL-10, vascular endothelial growth factor (VEGF), hepatocyte growth factor (HGF), connective tissue growth factor (CTGF), transforming growth factor beta (TGF-β), and glyceraldehyde-3-phosphate dehydrogenase (GAPDH) were determined using real-time quantitative PCR. Forward and reverse primers were designed (Supplemental Table 1) using Primer3 (http://bioinfo.ut.ee/primer3-0.4.0/primer3). Reference gene candidates were amplified by real-time quantitative PCR using 10 μL of SYBR Premix Ex Taq (Takara Bio Inc.), 2 μL of diluted reverse transcription product, 0.4 μL of forward and reverse primer and 7.2 μL of DNase/RNase-free water in a total volume of 20 μL. Amplification proceeded in a LightCycler 480 (Roche Applied Science, Basel, Switzerland) with initial polymerase activation at 95 °C for 10 min, followed by 40 cycles of 95 °C for 15 s and 60 °C for 60 s. Thereafter, the specificity of amplicons was verified by melting curve analysis (60 °C to 95 °C). Fluorescent signals were normalized to an internal reference (the Ct value). Relative gene expression = 2−ΔΔCt.

ADRCs improved pulmonary artery remodeling induced by MCT

In line with the hemodynamic data, HE and EVG staining confirmed that ADRC transplantation attenuated the obliterative remodeling of the small arteries that started in the lungs after MCT injection. The small arteries in the MCT group featured medial hypertrophy and a hyperplastic response in the pulmonary arterioles (Fig. 2A). The ratio of medial wall thickness to the external diameter of the pulmonary artery was significantly increased in the MCT, compared with the Control group on day 28 (0.44 ± 0.04 vs. 0.17 ± 0.04, P < 0.01). The ratio of wall thickness of the pulmonary artery was significantly decreased in the M/A group compared with the MCT group on day 28 (0.31 ± 0.05 vs. 0.44 ± 0.04, P < 0.01; Fig. 2B). We counted the apoptotic cells in lung tissues (Supplemental Fig. 2A) and found significantly more apoptotic cells in the MCT, than in the Control group (2.3 ± 1.2 vs. 0.4 ± 0.2, P < 0.05). However, the number of apoptotic cells did not significantly differ between the MCT and M/A groups (Supplemental Fig. 2B).

Identification of transplanted ADRC

DiI-positive cells in the lungs that emitting red fluorescence at seven days after ADRC transplantation (Fig. 2C and F) were often located near αSMA- (Fig. 2D) and CD31- (Fig. 2G) positive cells that emitted green fluorescence. We counted 4.52 ± 2.56 ADRCs in one ×200 power magnification field. However, the cells emitting red and green fluorescence were not colocalized (Fig. 2E and H), suggesting that most intravenously implanted ADRCs did not differentiate into vascular endothelial or smooth muscle cells in vivo. Red fluorescence was also emitted by the liver but not the heart of ADRC treated rats.

Gene expression analysis in the lung

On day 14 after MCT injection, mRNA levels of ET system components (ET-1, ETA receptor and ETB receptor) and TGF-β in the lungs were significantly higher in the MCT, than the Control group (P < 0.05; Fig. 3A–D). These increases were inhibited by ADRCs (MCT vs. M/A, P < 0.05; Fig. 3A–D). Levels of IL-6 mRNA were increased in the MCT, compared with the Control group, but they were not inhibited by ADRCs (Fig. 3E). On the other hand, MCT did not significantly change mRNA levels of IL-10, CTGF, HGF and VEGF, whereas the level of IL-10 mRNA was increased in the M/A, compared with the Control group (Fig. 3F–I).
We investigated the effects of ADRC therapy in a rat model of PH induced by MCT. We found that ADRC therapy significantly inhibited the progression of hemodynamic parameters assessed by right heart catheterization and echocardiography, vascular remodeling and the gene expression of ET-1, ETA receptor, ETB receptor and TGF-β in the lungs.

Regenerative and gene therapy has recently become a global research focus, but stem cell research remains in its infancy, and treatment for PH has not yet been standardized. Therefore, further experimental investigations into a safe and practical strategy for treating PH are urgently required. Several studies have assessed the ability of stem cell therapy using MSC and endothelial progenitor cells to protect against PH. For example, Zhao et al. (2005) found that rat endothelial progenitor cells exerted a protective effect in a rat model of PH induced by MCT and that this effect was enhanced when the cells were transfected with the eNOS gene. Luan et al. (2012) also found a protective effect of MSC though a paracrine mechanism in a PH model induced by high flow. We also found that ADRC therapy protects against PH, but we did not directly compare ADRC therapy with other types of stem cell therapy such as endothelial progenitor cells or MSC, and thus whether or not ADRC therapy is more effective than these therapies remains a topic for future study. However, large quantities of ADRC, that do not require expansion ex vivo, can be isolated by minimally invasive liposuction thus rendering them an appealing and practical source for immediate cell-based therapies (Fraser et al., 2004; Strem and Hedrick, 2005). The development of PH was inhibited by ADRCs at least in part, through inhibiting the expression of genes associated with the ET system. Plasma levels of ET-1 are elevated in patients with PH (Stewart et al., 1991), and ET-1 levels correlate with pulmonary arterial pressure, pulmonary artery oxygen saturation and pulmonary vascular resistance (Cacoub et al., 1997; Giaid et al., 1993). Levels of ET-1 are also increased in the lungs of animal models of PH (Kim et al., 2012). Levels of ET-1 can be modulated by TGF-β in human pulmonary microvascular endothelial cells in vitro and the enhanced stimulatory effects of TGF-β might lead to the vascular abnormalities associated with PH (Newman et al., 2008). Lambers et al. (2013) reported that ET-1 also activates pulmonary artery smooth muscle cells, and that the synergistic effects of ET-1 and TGF-β mediate vascular remodeling though ERK1/2 MAPK kinesis. Since we detected ADRCs in the lung at day 14 and hemodynamic differences between days 14 and 21, we considered that ADRCs exerted therapeutic effects during the early phase of MCT-induced PH. Therefore, we assessed mRNA concentrations of the cytokines and growth factors that are involved in the process of PH development on day 14 using the RT-PCR. We then examined histology of the lung and heart tissues at day 28. The present study found that ADRC therapy might attenuate vascular remodeling by reducing the expression of genes associated with both the TGF-β and ET systems.

The ADRC population comprised various types of cells. About 41.6% and 3.4% of fresh ADRCs express mesenchymal and endothelial cell markers, respectively (Feng et al., 2010) and 18.5% and 1.7% of our ADRC population expressed surface markers of stromal cells and mesenchymal cells.
endothelial cell markers, respectively. Moreover, 7% of ADRCs were reported to be stem cells (Hayashi et al., 2008) and 5% of our ADRCs were considered as stem cells from CFU-F assay. Thus, we consider that our population of ADRCs was similar to previous reports.

Several investigators have described a paracrine mechanism of ADRC therapy in various experimental models (Harada et al., 2013; Suganuma et al., 2013). The expression of several growth factors such as VEGF, HGF and insulin-like growth factor (IGF)-1 by ADRCs after acute myocardial infarction in rats indicated that these cells promote angiogenesis and exert anti-apoptotic/necrotic effects via a paracrine mechanism (Schenke-Layland et al., 2009). Furthermore, ADRCs down-regulate the expression of inflammation-related genes such as IL-6 and chemokine (C-X-C motif) ligand 2 (CXCL2), and significantly reduce inflammation after acute kidney injury in rats (Feng et al., 2010).

Angelini et al. (2011) reported that stem cell therapy using adipose tissue stromal vascular fraction (SVF) induced positive pulmonary vascular remodeling, and improved neurohormonal profiles as well as hemodynamic effects in rat models of PH. That study also found that treatment with SVF prevents increases in levels of inflammatory serum cytokines. These results agree with our study. In addition, we also examined the gene expressions associated with TGF-β and ET systems in the lung tissue. Then we found that ADRC therapy attenuated vascular remodeling though reducing the expression of genes associated with the TGF-β and ET systems without changing angiogenesis. The levels of IL-6 were significantly increased in the MCT group and those of IL-10 were increased in the M/A group compared with the Control group, suggesting the anti-inflammatory effect of ADRCs. However, precisely how ADRC suppresses the expression of genes associated with the TGF-β and ET systems remains unknown.

The significance of apoptosis in the pathogenesis or treatment of PH is controversial. Li et al. (2014) reported that apoptosis of endothelial cells in the lung tissue increased in MCT-induced PH, which triggered smooth muscle cell growth, suggesting that apoptosis of endothelial cells plays a role in the development of PH. Akagi et al. (2013) reported that high-dose prostaglandin (PG) I2 induces apoptosis in pulmonary artery smooth muscle cells from the patients with IPAH in association with beneficial effects of PGI2. Although apoptotic cells were increased in the MCT group, we could not detect the anti-apoptotic effect of ADRCs in this study. Thus, the anti-PH effect of ARDCs may not be mediated through the anti-apoptotic effect.

This study has several limitations. The dose of injected MCT (50 mg/kg) was relatively low to minimize animal mortality. Several studies that have used 60 mg/kg of MCT induced a higher RV pressure and a higher RV/LV + S ratio than we did (Baber et al., 2007; Frasch et al., 1999; Lee et al., 2013). Thus, the amount of pressure overload in our model might not be sufficient to cause RV remodeling. Therefore, the increase in the RV/LV + S ratio in the MCT group was small and we could not show the effects of ADRCs on RV remodeling.

We delivered ADRCs relatively soon after injecting MCT to show that ADRC therapy could inhibit the progression of PH. Considering the
clinical situation, however, the therapeutic effects of ADRCs delivered at various times after PH established should also be confirmed.

The major limitation of this study is that the rat model of MCT-induced PH partly differs from human PAH. Other rodent models of PAH (Abe et al., 2010) and larger animals should be tested to open a translational investigation of ADRC therapy on human pulmonary arterial hypertension.

Lastly, we showed that transplanted ADRCs persisted in the lungs for at least up to seven days after transplantation. Most of them were located in the stroma and a few were incorporated into the pulmonary vessels. How long the transplanted ADRCs can survive in the lung and maintain a paracrine effect remains unknown. We believe that transfusion with ADRCs derived from GFP-positive rats instead of DiI staining will help to address this issue in a future study.

Conclusion

The intravenous administration of ADRCs into rats with MCT-induced PH inhibited PH development by suppressing changes in the expression of genes associated with the TGF-β and ET systems. These results indicate that uncultured autologous ADRCs could serve as a novel strategy for treating PH.

Conflict of interest statement

None declared.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.lfs.2014.05.008.

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