Original Article

Effects of Dectin-1 on the mast cells in allergic conjunctivitis and its underlying mechanism

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Abstract: Our previous investigations have shown that Dectin-1 plays a crucial role in allergic conjunctivitis (AC) and the mast cells mediate this allergic reaction. Here, we tried to investigate the possible effects and underlying signal pathway of Dectin-1 on the mast cells in allergic conjunctivitis mice. 30 Balb/c mice were randomly divided into control and AC groups. The mice were immunized with phosphate buffer solution (PBS) or ovalbumin (OVA) to establish control or allergic conjunctivitis model. Prostaglandin D2 (PGD2), histamine (HIS), interleukin 4 (IL-4), and tumor necrosis factor-alpha (TNF-α) in the serum of the mice were detected using enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA). Additionally, conjunctival tissues in mice were separated and RNA was extracted, the expression of Dectin-1 was detected using real-time PCR. Moreover, the peritoneal mast cells were separated and then stimulated using allergen OVA or control allergen BSA and mRNA levels of PGD2, histamine, IL-4 and TNF-α were detected. Furthermore, western blot was used to examine the expressions of Dectin-1, and two downstream signal molecules Syk and Bcl-10 to elucidate the possible effects and underlying mechanism of Dectin-1 on allergic conjunctivitis. The expression of Dectin-1 was significantly up-regulated in the conjunctiva tissues in AC group. Importantly, the expression of Dectin-1 in the OVA treated mast cells was dramatically elevated compared to BSA groups. Moreover, Syk and Bcl-10 were up-regulated after OVA stimulation. These data indicates that Dectin-1 via Syk-Bcl signal pathway triggers immune responses, which promotes the development of allergic conjunctivitis.

Keywords: Allergic conjunctivitis, allergic response, Bcl-10, Dectin-1, Syk

Introduction

Allergic conjunctivitis (AC) is a class of conjunctival reactive inflammation and very common in department of ophthalmology. AC is a type I hypersensitivity disease mediated by the mast cells and IgE [1, 2]. To note, the pathogenesis of AC is complicated. The allergens are extensively broad in different individuals. The most common allergens are pollens, dusts, microbial proteins and polysaccharide components, etc. Innate immune responses depend on a series of pattern recognition receptors (PRRs) on the surface of the cell membrane. PRRs can identify the conserved structure-pathogenic-associated molecular pattern (PAMPs), of the microorganisms. PAMPs are highly conserved microbial structures that serve as ligands for pattern recognition receptors (PRRs). When the PRRs recognizes PAMPs, the body will produce the corresponding innate immune responses, and ultimately form the specific adaptive immune response [3]. The cell walls of fungi are mainly composed of carbohydrates, including β-dextran and chitosan, etc. These polysaccharides can act as PAMPs, which can be identified by the corresponding PRRs and then activate the immune signaling pathway. β-dextran receptors dendritic cell associated C-type Leetin-1 (Dectin-I) is an important PRR [4, 5]. Previous investigations have shown that Dectin-I is required to absorb, killing and early inflammatory reaction in fungi. The expression of Dectin-I are found in epithelial cells and mast cells, which can trigger the immune signaling pathways and tyrosine kinase Syk plays an impor-
Mechanism of Dectin-1 in allergic conjunctivitis

Dectin-1 plays an important role to mediate the signal transduction [6, 7]. Briefly, investigations about Dectin-1 will provide important theoretical bases to elucidate the possible mechanisms of allergic conjunctivitis [8, 9].

In the current work, we investigate the expressions of Dectin-1 in allergic conjunctivitis effects in preclinical animal model. Furthermore, we explore the underlying mechanisms of Dectin-1 at mRNA and protein level using separated mast cells in AC mice.

Materials and methods

6-8 weeks old female Balb/c mice were maintained in in a climate-controlled room on a 12 hr light/dark cycle, and food and water were available ad libitum. The room temperature was maintained at 18-25°C. 30 mice were used in the current study and 5 mice were in each cage. Mice were purchased from Shanghai SLRC Laboratory Animal Co., Ltd. All experiments were performed in accordance with the policies and recommendations of the International Association for the Study of Pain and the National Institutes of Health guidelines for the handling and use of laboratory animals and received approval from the Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee of the Zhengzhou University. All efforts were made to minimize animal suffering and reduce the number of animals used.

Main materials and reagents

Ovalbumin (OVA, A5503) and aluminum hydroxide (V900163) were purchased from Sigma-Aldrich (Buenos Aires, Argentina). PGD2, Histamine (HIS), IL-4 and TNF-α ELISA kits were obtained from USCN Business Co., Ltd. (Wuhan, China). The catalog numbers were as followings: SEB640Mu, CEA927Ge, SEA077Mu and SEA133Mu, respectively. Total RNA extraction kit was from Tiangen Biotech (DP430, Beijing, China) Co., Ltd. Reverse transcription Kit was purchased from Applied Biosystems (No. 4366597, New York, USA). Real-time PCR fluorescence quantitative reagent kit was from Biorad (No. 172-5264, California, USA). Percoll cell liquid separation was from Pharmacia Company (New York, USA) and ReadyPrep protein extraction kit was purchased from Bio-Rad (California, USA). BCA protein quantitative kit was obtained from Vazyme Biotech (Nanjing, China). Dectin-1, Syk, Bcl-10 monoclonal antibodies were from Santa Cruz Biotech (Texas, USA) and the catalog numbers were sc-73897, 573 and 5611, respectively. Horseradish peroxidase (HRP) labeled second antibody was from ZSGB-Bio (Beijing, China). ECL chemiluminescent substrate reagent kit was purchased from Life Technologies (WP20005, New York, USA).

CO2 cell culture box was purchased from Thermo Scientific (New York, USA). Nucleic acid quantitative analyzer was from Qubit Fluorometer (Massachusetts, USA). Fluorescence quantitative PCR detection system was from Bio-rad-CFX96 Touch (California, USA).

Establishment of allergic conjunctivitis model, isolation and culture of mast cells

30 Balb/c mice were randomly divided into 2 groups: Ctrl group and AC group. 15 mice were in each group. After fed for 7 days, the mice were carried out to establish the AC model. AC model was established by two steps: sensitization and inspiration. Sensitization was carried out by intraperitoneal injection of 100 mg ovalbumin (OVA) and the adjuvant 5 mg Al (OH)3 dissolved in 200 ml every week and continued for three weeks. The mice were treated with 400 mg OVA dissolved in 100 ml physiological saline into the right eyes once every day for 7 days. After that, 400 mg OVA dissolved in 100 ml PBS (pH 7.7) was used to allergen attack the eyes and induce AC symptoms.

After establishing the AC model, the blood was taken from the tail vein. The mice were killed by cervical dislocation. The abdomen was disinfected by 75% alcohol and 5 ml sterile Tyrode’s solution without calcium was injected intraperitoneally. Next, the abdomen was gently massaged and opened on the super clean bench. The peritoneal fluid was drawn and centrifuged for 10 min (1500 rpm) at 4°C. Then, the supernatant was discarded. 1 ml Tyrode’s solution without calcium was added and the cells were suspended. After that, 80% Percoll separation medium was added and centrifuged about 15 min (2500 rpm) at 4°C. The cells at the division were collected and put in RPMI 1640 culture liquid containing 10% calf serum (5% CO2) at 37°C.
Detection of related inflammatory factors using ELISA

The blood was collected from the tail vein and put it in the room temperature for 2 hours, and the serum was centrifuged. The quantitative analysis of TNF-α, HIS, IL-4 and PGD$_2$ in serums was detected using ELISA assay kits. Briefly, the standard wells, the sample wells, and the blank wells were set up. 7 standard wells were established and the different concentrations of the standards were added. Then, the tested samples were added and incubated for 2 h at 37°C. The solution in the wells was discarded and washed with 350 μl washing buffer for 1-2 min three times. 100 μl HRP labeled secondary antibodies were added followed by incubation for 30 min at 37°C. Next, 90 μl TMB substrate was added to visualize the results for 15-25 min at 37°C and the light should be avoided. When the first 3 standard wells appeared an obvious blue gradient, the enzymatic reaction was terminated and 50 μl 2M H$_2$SO$_4$ was added. Immediately, the optical density (OD) values were measured using micro-plate reader at the absorbance 450 nm wavelengths.

According to the standard curve, the target protein concentration was calculated, and the data were expressed as mean ± SD. T-test was used to compare the differences between two groups. *P<0.05, **P<0.01.

**Real-time PCR**

The collected cells were washed using RNase free PBS and the total RNA was extracted with a RNA Extraction Kit. The concentration and purity of RNA were tested using Qubit Fluorometer (Massachusetts, USA). In brief, total RNA was reversed according to the reverse transcription kit to cDNA and the expression of the relevant genes was detected using real-time PCR. The mRNA sequences of Dectin-1, IL-4 and TNF-α gene were searched in the National Center for Biotechnology Information (NCBI) database and the real time PCR primers were designed. All the primers were synthesized by Shanghai Generay Biotech Co., Ltd. The specific sequences were shown in **Table 1**.

The relative expression levels of target genes were calculated using double ΔCt value. The Ct values were obtained from the average values in three parallel experiments. ΔCt = CT (Target Gene) - CT (internal reference), ΔΔCt = ΔCt (sample) - ΔCt (control). Therefore, the relative expression levels of target genes was $2^{-\Delta\Delta C_t}$ and $2^{\Delta C_t} = 1$ [10] in the control group. The synthetic system of inverse transcription and the synthetic system of PCR were shown in **Tables 2 and 3**.

**Table 1.** The primers used in Real-time PCR

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gene</th>
<th>GenBank Accession</th>
<th>Primer (5’-3’)</th>
<th>Length (bp)</th>
<th>Tm (°C)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dectin-1</td>
<td>NM_020008.3</td>
<td>For: GACTTCAGCCTCAAGACATCC</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>60.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Rev: TTGTGTCGCCAAATGCTAGG</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>61.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interleukin-4</td>
<td>NM_021283.2</td>
<td>For: GTGCTCAACCCCAAGCTAGT</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>62.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Rev: GCCGATGATCTCTCAAGGTAG</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>61.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TNF-a</td>
<td>NM_013693</td>
<td>For: CAGGGGTGCTCATTGCTC</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>62.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Rev: CGATCACCCCAGAATTGTCAG</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>62.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GAPDH</td>
<td>NM_008084.3</td>
<td>For: AGGTCGGTGTAAACGATTTG</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>60.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Rev: GGGGTGTTGATGGAACAA</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>61.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For, forward; Rev, reverse.

**Table 2.** The synthetic system of inverse transcription

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Components</th>
<th>Volume per Reaction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5× iScript reaction mix</td>
<td>4 μl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iScript reverse transcriptase</td>
<td>1 μl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RNA template (1 μg RNA)</td>
<td>1 μg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nuclease-free water</td>
<td>Up to 20 μl</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

iScript reaction mix was from Bio-Rad (California, USA); Nuclease-free water was from Invitrogen (New York, USA).

**Table 3.** The synthetic system of PCR

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Components</th>
<th>Volume per Reaction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SsoAdvanced SYBR Green Super mix</td>
<td>5 μl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forward primer (10 μM)</td>
<td>0.3-0.4 μl (300-400 nM)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reverse primer (10 μM)</td>
<td>0.3-0.4 μl (300-400 nM)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cDNA template</td>
<td>100 ng</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nuclease-free water</td>
<td>Up to 10 μl</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SsoAdvanced SYBR Green Super mix was from Bio-Rad (California, USA).
Mechanism of Dectin-1 in allergic conjunctivitis

Western blot

The collected cells were washed twice using PBS. Total protein was extracted using ReadyPrep protein extraction kit. Briefly, the cells were placed on ice for 30 min and the ultrasound was performed to lyse cells. The lysis was centrifuged for 20 min at 4°C and the speed was 13,000 r/min. Protein concentration was determined with BCA method.

20 g total protein samples was electrophoresed using SDS-PAGE. Then, the gel was transferred into transfer buffer for 10 min. After that, proteins were transferred onto PVDF for 10-15 min at 100 mA. The membrane was blocked in 5% (w/v) non-fat milk TBS/T for 1 h at the room temperature and then treated with the primary antibody (diluted with 1% (w/v) non-fat milk in TBS-T), for 2 h at the room temperature. Next, the membrane was washed using TBS-T for 5-10 min each time and three washes. After exposure, photographs were preserved. The experiments were repeated for three times. The bands were observed and analyzed with a gel analysis system Quantity one v4.62. The relative protein expression of target protein was calculated as followings: relative expression of target protein = OD target protein/OD GAPDH, and GAPDH served as an internal reference.

Statistical analysis

All the data was expressed as mean±SD. Paired t-test was used to compare the differences between treatment group and control group. $P<0.05$ was considered to be statistically significant. The data were analyzed using SPSS 11.5 statistical software.

Results

Establishment of allergic conjunctivitis mice model

30 Balb/c mice were randomly divided into two groups, namely Ctrl group and AC group, 15 in each group. In the process of modeling, two mice in the AC group were died because of infection, and finally 13 mice in AC group. After the second allergen attack into the eyes using 400 μg OVA solved in 100 μl pH 7.7 PBS, blood samples were collected from tail vein and the serum was separated. The concentrations of PGD$_2$, HIS, IL-4 and TNF-α in the serum of AC group and Ctrl group were detected by ELISA. The results showed that Table 4. The concentrations of PGD$_2$, HIS, IL-4 and PGD$_2$ in AC group were significantly higher than that in the control group ($P<0.05$). Real-time PCR suggested that Dectin-1 in the conjunctivitis tissues was higher than that in the control groups, as shown in Figure 1.

Expression of IL-4, TNF-α and Dectin-1 in the peritoneal mast cells of allergic conjunctivitis

The peritoneal mast cells in mice were isolated in AC group and followed by OVA or BSA stimulation. 5 mice in AC group were sacrificed. The peritoneal mast cells was extracted and then cultured. The livability of the cultured peritoneal mast cells was 87.21%, and the purity was 72.33%. 4 hours after OVA or BSA stimulation, the cells were collected and total RNA was extracted. Real-time PCR indicated that the

Table 4. The levels of PGD$_2$, HIS, IL-4 and TNF-α in the serum using ELISA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>PGD$_2$</th>
<th>HIS</th>
<th>IL-4</th>
<th>TNF-α</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ctrl</td>
<td>276.34±41.07</td>
<td>12.79±1.06</td>
<td>22.78±0.98</td>
<td>107.01±12.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AC</td>
<td>403.66±52.2</td>
<td>19.06±1.88*</td>
<td>46.16±0.93*</td>
<td>235.48±16.87**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. Vs. Ctrl $P<0.05$; b. Mean ± SD, ng/l.

Figure 1. Expressions of Dectin-1 in the allergic conjunctivitis tissues. The relative mRNA expressions of Dectin-1 was dramatically higher in AC that in the control group ($**P<0.01$).
Mechanism of Dectin-1 in allergic conjunctivitis

expressions of IL-4, TNF-α and Dectin-1 in OVA group (n = 7) were 2.66±0.34, 4.21±1.22, and 2.26±0.38, respectively, and higher than that in BSA group (the relative expression is 1; n = 6), as shown in Figure 2.

Expression of Dectin-1 and its downstream molecules Syk and Bcl-10 in allergic conjunctivitis mice

Western blot was used to detect the expressions of Dectin-1 and its downstream molecules Syk and Bcl-10 in AC mice. We found that the expression of Dectin-1 in OVA group was higher than that in BSA group (P<0.05). The expression of Syk and Bcl-10 in Dectin-1 signaling pathway was significantly up-regulated after OVA stimulation (P<0.01), as shown in Figure 3. The data from Western blot was consistent with that from real-time PCR.

Discussion

Allergic conjunctivitis (AC) is well-known as allergic reaction conjunctivitis, which is a hypersensitivity reaction of the conjunctiva induced by the external allergen. AC is a type I hypersen-
Mechanism of Dectin-1 in allergic conjunctivitis

sitivity disease mediated by the mast cells and Ig E [1, 2]. The pathogenesis of AC is not clear yet. The allergens are extensively broad in different individuals. The most common allergens are pollens, dusts, microbial proteins and polysaccharide components, etc. They are pathogen-associated molecular patterns (PAMPs) and can trigger allergic responses in the body.

Except for toll-like receptor (TLR) family, Dectin-1 is discovered in recent years that can induce the own intracellular signal pattern recognition receptors. Dectin-1 can trigger phosphorylation of tyrosine kinase under Src family kinases (SFKs) and activate the downstream signal pathway after the receptors bind to the ligands [8]. Dectin-1 was expressed in epithelial cells and mast cells. The main component of fungi cell walls is β-dextran, which is PAMPs of Dectin-1. Previous investigations have shown that except for β-dextran, Dectin-1 can recognize other polysaccharides and trigger the immune responses [11-13]. In the current work, we investigate the expressions of Dectin-1 in allergic conjunctivitis effects in preclinical animal model. Furthermore, we explore the underlying mechanisms of Dectin-1 using AC mast cells at mRNA and protein levels.

To note, allergic conjunctivitis animal model is established via the secondary sensitization of PAMPs, such as cunninghamia lanceolata pollen with aluminium hydroxide adjuvant immunized Hartley guinea pigs, ovalbumin (OVA) with aluminium hydroxide adjuvant immunized Balb/c mice. In the current investigation, we used ovalbumin (OVA) with aluminum hydroxide adjuvant immunized Balb/c mice to establish AC model and elucidate our hypothesis. Degranulation of mast cells is considered as crucial responses in type I hypersensitivity reactions. Currently, treatments on allergic conjunctivitis are mast cell stabilizer and can inhibit its degranulation, which can effectively relieve the symptoms of AC patients. Degranulation of mast cells can induce the secretion of chemokine, pro-inflammatory factor and some substances which can induce spasm. The common mediators in this process are prostaglandin D2 (PGD2), histamine (HIS), interleukin 4 (IL-4) and tumor necrosis factor (tumor necrosis factor-alpha, TNF-α) [15, 16]. In the current investigation, we tested the above-mentioned factors and found that concentrations of PGD2, HIS, IL-4 and TNF-α in the serum in the OVA stimulated AC model were much higher than that in the control group, which is consistent with the previous reports and indicates that AC model is stable and the data is creditable in the current investigation. The immune signal pathways were activated and further secreted a variety of inflammatory cytokines in AC model. Up-regulation of PGD2 suggests that substances secreted by mast cell degranulation produce pathological manifestations such as smooth muscle spasm and other pathological manifestations. Moreover, we separated the conjunctiva and extracted RNA and found that Dectin-1 level in the conjunctiva of AC mice was dramatically increased compared with that of control group. The data indicates that Dectin-1 plays a crucial role in the early stage of AC.

To further explore the effects of Dectin-1 on a mast cell in the AC model, we separated the mast cells according to literatures [17, 18]. We administrated the allergen OVA or the control BSA to stimulate the separated mast cells and analyzed the mRNA expression of IL-4 and TNF-α. Importantly, average livability of mast cells was 87.21% and the purity was 72.33%, which validates the method and experimental procedures in the current investigation. After 4 hours stimulation with OVA or BSA, we found that the expressions of IL-4, TNF-α and Dectin-1 were significantly increased in AC group, compared with that in the control group. The data indicates that Dectin-1 plays an important role on the mast cells mediated allergic conjunctivitis. Moreover, western blot data demonstrates that the expressions of Dectin-1 and its downstream signal molecules, such as Syk, Bcl-10, dramatically up-regulated after OVA stimulation and didn’t have a significant change after in BSA stimulation, which is consistent with the data at the mRNA level and further confirm our hypothesis. Syk and Bcl-10 are the middle molecules in the signal pathway, which receive the signals from upstream PRRs and then trigger the downstream NF-kappa-B signal pathway, and further express and secret a variety of inflammatory molecules and induce the development of allergic conjunctivitis [19, 20].

In summary, we have demonstrated that Dectin-1 via Syk-Bcl signal pathway triggers immune responses, which promotes the development of allergic conjunctivitis. The current investigation provides further evidences to elu-
Mechanism of Dectin-1 in allergic conjunctivitis

candidate the underlying mechanisms of allergic conjunctivitis. The underlying action sites and mechanisms involved into allergic conjunctivitis and possible mechanisms will increase understanding of allergic conjunctivitis mechanism and may offer translational opportunities for the discovery of novel therapeutic strategies for allergic conjunctivitis. Dectin-1 would be a valuable target to affectively treat allergic conjunctivitis in patients.

Disclosure of conflict of interest

None.

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