Downregulation of serum miR-26a predicts poor clinical outcome of papillary thyroid carcinoma

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Received July 24, 2016; Accepted August 31, 2016; Epub August 1, 2017; Published August 15, 2017

Abstract: Deregulation of miRNAs has been demonstrated to play an important role in the initiation and development of many types of cancers including papillary thyroid carcinoma (PTC). Currently the role of miR-26a and its potential clinical significance for PTC remains unknown. Eighty-four PTC patients and forty healthy controls were enrolled in this study. Quantitative real-time PCR (qRT-PCR) was performed to determine the expression level of serum miR-26a in all the participants. The association between serum miR-26a expression level and clinical outcome of PTC was investigated. Serum miR-26a expression level was reduced in PTC patients compared with the healthy controls (P<0.01) and significantly increased after receiving treatments (P<0.01). Serum miR-26a expression level was associated with lymph node metastasis (P=0.0173) and TNM stage (P=0.0022). In addition, PTC with lower serum miR-26a expression had poorer overall (P=0.029) and disease free survival rates (P=0.0004). Moreover, serum miR-26a expression was an independent risk factor for PTC (P<0.05). Collectively, down-regulation of serum miR-26a is associated with poor prognosis in PTC and it might be a promising biomarker for this malignancy.

Keywords: Papillary thyroid carcinoma, prognosis, serum miR-26a

Introduction

Thyroid cancers, the most common type of endocrine malignancy, have rapidly increased global prevalence [1]. Papillary thyroid carcinoma (PTC) accounts for 80-90% of thyroid carcinomas. Despite PTC is relatively indolent and highly curable in most cases, more than 10% of patients suffered from disease recurrence and PTC-related deaths [2]. Identifying the biomarkers that can predict the prognosis of PTC might not only allow a personalized and differentiated treatment, but also help monitor the therapy responses in real time.

MicroRNAs (miRNAs) are small (19-25 nucleotides) noncoding, single-stranded RNAs that regulate gene expression at the post-transcriptional level [3]. miRNAs play important roles in many biological processes including cell growth, differentiation, survival and apoptosis [4]. The aberrant expression of miRNAs has been implicated in many diseases such as cancer, cardiovascular diseases and autoimmune disorders [5]. Circulating miRNAs are very stable in serum and plasma samples, which enables them to become promising biomarkers for early detection as well as predicting the clinical outcome of diseases. The expression levels of miR-9 and miR-21 were significantly downregulated in PTC patients with recurrence compared to those without recurrence. In addition, PTC with lower serum miR-26a expression had poorer overall (P=0.029) and disease free survival rates (P=0.0004). Moreover, serum miR-26a expression was an independent risk factor for PTC (P<0.05). Collectively, down-regulation of serum miR-26a is associated with poor prognosis in PTC and it might be a promising biomarker for this malignancy.
ectopic expression of miR-204-5p could suppress PTC cell proliferation and induce cell cycle arrest and apoptosis, indicating miR-204-5p functions as a tumor suppressor during the progression of PTC [8].

miR-26a has been demonstrated to play important roles in the initiation and development of various types of cancers including PTC [9-11]. However, whether the expression level of serum miR-26a is downregulated in PTC patients and its potential clinical significance is poorly known. Therefore the purpose of this study was to reveal the clinical value of serum miR-26a for predicting the prognosis of PTC.

Materials and methods

Patients

The study was approved by the Ethic Committee of the Ninth People’s Hospital of Shen-
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Serum miR-26a expression level was associated with various clinicopathological parameters including lymph node metastasis ($P=0.0173$) and TNM stage ($P=0.0022$). However, it was not correlated with gender, age, bilaterality, multifocality, tumor size and extrathyroidal extension ($P>0.05$) (Table 1).

Low serum miR-26a expression was correlated with poorer survival rates

The mean value of serum miR-26a was used to divide all the PTC patients into two groups (high serum miR-26a expression group and low serum miR-26a expression group). The PTC patients in high serum miR-26a expression group had a better overall survival (OS) rate ($P=0.029$) and disease free survival (DFS) ($P=0.0004$) than people in the low serum miR-26a expression group (Figures 3 and 4).

Serum miR-26a was an independent prognosis factor for PTC

The multivariate analysis showed that TNM stage (OS: HR=4.358, 95% CI=1.747-7.532, $P=0.008$; DFS: HR=4.587, 95% CI=1.823-7.930, $P=0.005$) and serum miR-26a expression (OS: HR=2.528, 95% CI=1.128-4.068, $P=0.026$; DFS: HR=2.810, 95% CI=1.275-4.328, $P=0.021$) were independent risk factors for PTC (Table 2).

Discussion

In this study, our result showed that the expression level of serum miR-26a was significantly downregulated in PTC patients and it was very sensitive to monitor therapeutic responses. In addition, reduced serum miR-26a expression was associated worse clinicopathological parameters and shorter overall/disease free survival. Moreover, serum miR-26a was demonstrated to be an independent prognosis factor for PTC. miR-26a might function as a tumor suppressor in PTC and loss of miR-26a promotes the development of this malignancy. Consistent with our findings, Lv et al reported that the expression level of miR-26a was significantly decreased in the tissue samples derived from PTC patients compared with the controls. In addition, ectopic
expression of miR-26a could induce G2 phase-arrest in PTC cell lines and opposite results were observed following miR-26a inhibition. Moreover, CKS2 was identified as a downstream target of miR-26a [9]. Similarly, Visone et al showed that a significant decrease in tissue miR-26a expression was found in anaplastic thyroid carcinoma which was an aggressive form of cancer of the thyroid gland. Overexpression of miR-26a could significantly suppress cell proliferation, suggesting miR-26a played a tumor suppressive role in PTC [12]. However, the molecular mechanisms responsible for the reduced miR-26a expression in PTC are poorly known. In addition, due to the relative small sample size in this study, large scale cohort studies are needed to perform to further corroborate the clinical significance of tissue/serum miR-26a in predicting the prognosis of PTC.

Downregulation of miR-26a has also been reported in many types of cancers. Liu et al showed that the expression level of tissue miR-26a was downregulated in triple-negative breast cancer (TNBC), and its expression levels were correlated with lymph node metastasis and overall survival. In addition, upregulation of miR-26a inhibited proliferation and metastasis of breast cancer cell lines both in vitro and in vivo by downregulating MTDH [13]. miR-26a expression was reduced in prostate cancer and cell lines. Overexpression of miR-26a inhibited cell proliferation, metastasis, and epithelial mesenchymal transition and induced G1 phase arrest in prostate cancer. Moreover, Wnt5a was demonstrated to be a target of miR-26a [14].

Some miRNAs may function as oncogenes or tumor suppressors in different types of cancer or even in the same type of cancer [15-17]. The role of miR-26a in carcinogenesis appears to be very complicated, in the sense that it has also been suggested to play an oncogenic role in cancers. Huse et al showed that miR-26a DNA is frequently amplified in human glioma. In addition, overexpression of miR-26a could enhance de novo tumor formation in vivo by targeting PTEN, which was a validated tumor suppressor [18]. Chen et al reported that the expression level of miR-26a was increased in colorectal cancer (CRC) cells, especially in CRC cells with high metastasis capacity. Moreover, miR-26a played an important role in regulating glucose metabolism by direct suppressing PDHX in CRC cells, which inhibited the conversion of pyruvate to acetyl CoA in tricarboxylic acid cycle [19]. Therefore, the controversial properties of miR-26a in various cancers indicate that the concrete functions of miR-26a are cell type dependent and closely correlated with the tumor environment. It is also possible that miR-26a has distinct functions in different stages of cancer pathogenesis and progression, while the underlying mechanisms need further validation.

Taken together, our results provide the convincing evidence that miR-26a might involve in the
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Table 2. Multivariate analysis of 5-year overall and disease-free survival in patients with PTC

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<tr>
<th>Parameters</th>
<th>Overall survival</th>
<th>Disease-free survival</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>HR (95% CI)</td>
<td>P</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TNM stage (III-IV vs. I-II)</td>
<td>4.358 (1.747-7.532)</td>
<td>0.008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serum miR-26a (Low vs. High)</td>
<td>2.528 (1.128-4.068)</td>
<td>0.026</td>
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progression and recurrence of PTC. More importantly, the serum level of miR-26a may be a noninvasive and novel prognostic biomarker for the patients with PTC.

Acknowledgements

This work was partly supported by the fund from the science and technology project of Urumqi, P. R. China (Y09231001).

Disclosure of conflict of interest

None.

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