Diphenyl Difluoroketone: A Curcumin Derivative with Potent In vivo Anticancer Activity

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Abstract

Diphenyl difluoroketone (EF24), a molecule having structural similarity to curcumin, was reported to inhibit proliferation of a variety of cancer cells in vitro. However, the efficacy and in vivo mechanism of action of EF24 in gastrointestinal cancer cells have not been investigated. Here, we assessed the in vivo therapeutic effects of EF24 on colon cancer cells. Using hexasomaminase assay, we determined that EF24 inhibits proliferation of HCT-116 and HT-29 colon and AGS gastric adenocarcinoma cells but not of mouse embryo fibroblasts. Furthermore, the cancer cells showed increased levels of activated caspase-3 and increased Bax to Bcl-2 and Bax to Bcl-xL ratios, suggesting that the cells were undergoing apoptosis. At the same time, cell cycle analysis showed that there was an increased number of cells in the G2-M phase. To determine the effects of EF24 in vivo, HCT-116 colon cancer xenografts were established in nude mice and EF24 was given i.p. EF24 significantly suppressed the growth of colon cancer tumor xenografts. Immunostaining for CD31 showed that there was a lower number of microvessels in the EF24-treated animals coupled with decreased cyclooxygenase-2, interleukin-8, and vascular endothelial growth factor mRNA and protein expression. Western blot analyses also showed decreased AKT and extracellular signal-regulated kinase activation in the tumors. Taken together, these data suggest that the novel curcumin-related compound EF24 is a potent antitumor agent that induces caspase-mediated apoptosis during mitosis and has significant therapeutic potential for gastrointestinal cancers. [Cancer Res 2008;68(6):1962–9]

Introduction

Colorectal carcinoma is the second leading cause of cancer mortality in the United States with ~55,000 deaths in 2006 (1–3). Because conventional therapies, including surgical resection, chemotherapy, and radiation, are often inadequate at treating the disease, the need for new treatment options has grown more critical. Epidemiologic studies suggest that diet plays a major role in the prevention of many cancers, and curcumin (a common flavoring agent in the spice turmeric) may be a dietary component responsible for lower rates of colorectal cancer in certain part of India (4). Curcumin has also been used in Indian folk medicine to treat several ailments, and recent preclinical and clinical studies show that curcumin has several anticancer and antiangiogenic properties (5, 6). Its antitumor properties include cancer growth inhibition and apoptosis induction in a variety of cultured cancer cell lines in vitro. Additionally, curcumin has shown the ability to inhibit tumorigenesis in vivo (7–13). The use of curcumin in antiangiogenesis includes the inhibition of vascular endothelial cell proliferation in vitro and capillary tube formation and growth in vivo (14, 15). The published report and our previous studies showed that curcumin inhibits epidermal growth factor (EGF)-mediated signaling and growth of intestinal adenomas in APCmin/+ mice (16). However, due to the low cancer-killing potency and poor intestinal absorption characteristics of curcumin (17, 18), bioavailability of the compound has limited its use. Consequently, analogues of curcumin with similar safety profiles but increased anticancer activity and solubility have recently been developed (13, 14, 19). One compound in particular, diphenyl difluoroketone (EF24), is active in anticancer screens and has considerably less toxic effect than the commonly used chemotherapeutic drug cisplatin (17, 20). In this article, we show results of our in vitro experiments showing that EF24 inhibits cell proliferation, prevents colony formation, and promotes G2-M arrest of colon and gastric cancer cells. Our in vivo studies with HCT-116 colon cancer cell tumor xenografts in nude mice revealed that EF24 suppresses cancer cell proliferation and angiogenesis and induces cell cycle arrest and apoptosis, coupled with the reduction of the expression of colon cancer–promoting genes, including cyclooxygenase-2 (COX-2), interleukin-8 (IL-8), and vascular endothelial growth factor (VEGF).

Materials and Methods

Cells and reagents. HCT-116, HT-29 colon, and AGS gastric adenocarcinoma cells (all from American Type Culture Collection) were grown in DMEM and RPMI 1640 containing 10% heat-inactivated fetal bovine serum (FBS; Sigma Chemical Co.) and 1% antibiotic-antimycotic solution (Mediatech, Inc.) at 37°C in a humidified atmosphere of 5% CO2. Curcumin was purchased from LKT Laboratories. EF24 was synthesized at the Institute of Organic and Medicinal Chemistry, University of Pecs (Pecs, Hungary).

Proliferation and apoptosis assays. To assess proliferation, cells were seeded onto 96-well plates at a density of 1 × 104 per well and allowed to adhere and grow overnight in 10% heat-inactivated FBS containing DMEM or RPMI 1640. The cells were then treated with increasing doses of EF24 in 10% FBS containing DMEM or RPMI 1640. Analysis of cell proliferation was performed by enzymatic assay as described above (21). For apoptosis,
Results

**EF24 inhibits intestinal cancer cell proliferation.** We first determined the effect of EF24 and curcumin on cell proliferation in a variety of cultured cancer cell lines (Fig. 1A). EF24 significantly suppresses proliferation of colon cancer cell lines HCT-116 and HT-29 and a gastric cancer cell line (AGS) within a 24-h period, which continues to 72 h (Fig. 1B). More importantly, the effects were observed at a dose of 1 μmol/L, a dose at which curcumin had no significant effect on HCT-116 cell proliferation. Similar results were observed with esophageal, lung, breast, pancreatic, and cervical cancer cells (data not shown). In contrast, EF24 did not affect the proliferation of normal mouse embryonic fibroblasts cells treated with 5 μmol/L concentration, whereas hydrogen peroxide significantly affected it (Fig. 1C), suggesting that EF24 is not toxic to normal cells. To determine the long-term effect of EF24 treatment, cells were treated with 1 μmol/L EF24 for 24 h, following which the cells were allowed to grow in normal medium. EF24 treatment suppresses colony formation in a dose-dependent manner in all three cell lines (Fig. 1D), suggesting that EF24 effects on the cells are irreversible. Again, at this 1 μmol/L dose, curcumin did not affect cell growth and colony formation (Fig. 1D).

**EF24 induces cell cycle arrest and apoptosis.** At a sufficiently high dose, curcumin is known to induce apoptosis of cancer cells. Cell cycle analysis was performed to determine the mechanism by which EF24 affects cancer cells. EF24 (1 μmol/L) induced growth arrest of the HT-29 and AGS cells within 24 h at the G2-M stage and subsequently at the G0 hypodiploid/fragmented DNA stage at 48 hours (Fig. 2; Supplementary Fig. S1). Similar results were observed in HCT-116 cells (data not shown). These data suggest that the cells were undergoing apoptosis. Caspase-3 is a key effector molecule in the apoptosis pathway involved in amplifying the signal from initiator caspases, such as caspase-8 (22, 23). Increases in effector molecules such as Bax and Bak result in the cleavage of proapoptotic molecules, which are then translocated into the mitochondria to activate the intrinsic apoptotic pathway (24). Increased activation of caspase-3 and caspase-7 was observed in HCT-116 cells (data not shown). These data suggest that EF24 is inducing apoptosis (Fig. 2B). Western blot analyses of HCT-116 cell lysates showed a significant increase in the activated caspase-3 in cells treated with 5 μmol/L EF24 (Fig. 2C). In addition, 5 μmol/L EF24 inhibited the expression of antiapoptotic genes Bcl-2 and Bcl-xL protein but it had no detectable effect on the expression levels of apoptosis-promoting total Bax protein (Fig. 2D). This result in decreased Bcl-2 to Bax and Bcl-xL to Bax protein ratios (Supplementary Fig. S2). These data suggest that EF24 is a potent inducer of apoptosis even at low doses where no such effect is observed with curcumin.

**EF24 inhibits tumor growth.** To evaluate the role of EF24 in tumor proliferation in vivo, we examined the ability of EF24 to suppress the growth of human cancer cell xenografts in nude mice. Colon cancer cell–induced xenograft tumors were allowed to develop and grow to a size of 500 mm3, following which EF24 was given i.p. for 3 weeks daily. EF24 significantly inhibits the growth of the tumor xenografts (Fig. 3A). The excised tumors from the EF24-treated animals ranged from 200 to 300 mg, whereas those from the control group weighed <120 mg (Fig. 3B and C). In addition, tumor volumes were significantly decreased (Fig. 3D). Whereas the
control tumors continue to grow during the treatment period reaching a size of 2,000 mm³, tumors in the EF24-treated animals did not grow. No apparent toxicity effects were observed in the EF24-treated animals (data not shown). Furthermore, tumors began to regress in the EF24-treated animals that were allowed to continue living past the 21-day period (data not shown). In our tests, no control animals were allowed to remain alive after 21 days. To evaluate whether EF24 administration affects normal physiology, we treated non–tumor-bearing mice weekly at exactly the same 200 μg/kg body weight dose for 3 weeks. There was no apparent change in liver weight, spleen weight, or body weight in the animals (data not shown). These data imply that EF24 is a potential therapeutic for treatment of colon cancers and that it is relatively nontoxic to mice.

**EF24 inhibits the signaling of tumor cell survival.** Survival signals that originate from extracellular cues result in the activation of the phosphatidylinositol 3-kinase (PI3K)/AKT and/or the mitogen-activated protein kinase (MAPK)/extracellular signal-regulated kinase (ERK) pathways. The PI3K pathway plays a crucial role in the survival of various cell types (24). Activated AKT phosphorylates numerous proteins that have been implicated in the control of the cell cycle to ultimately stimulate cell growth and inhibit apoptosis (25). Western blot analyses of HCT-116 cell lysates showed a significant dose- and time-dependent decrease in cell number in all three cells when compared with untreated controls and curcumin. EF24 treatment resulted in a significant dose-dependent decrease in cell number in all three cells when compared with untreated controls and curcumin. EF24 does not affect the proliferation of normal mouse embryonic fibroblast cells treated with 5 μmol/L EF24 for 48 h using hexosaminidase enzyme activity. EF24 inhibits cell growth as indicated by colony formation assays using HCT-116, HT-29, and AGS cells. These cells were incubated with 1 μmol/L EF24 for 24 h and subsequently allowed to grow into colonies. As indicated by counts performed 10 d after incubation, EF24, but not curcumin, inhibits colony-forming units. Results are representative of three independent experiments.

**Figure 1.** EF24 inhibits intestinal cancer cell proliferation. A, the topological structures of curcumin (diferuloylmethane) and EF24 (diphenyl difluoroketone). B, EF24 inhibits proliferation of HCT-116, HT-29, and AGS cells. These cells were incubated with increasing doses of EF24 (0.01–10 μmol/L) for 24-, 48-, and 72-h periods and analyzed for cell proliferation using hexosaminidase enzyme activity. EF24 treatment resulted in a significant dose-dependent decrease in cell number in all three cells when compared with untreated controls and curcumin. C, EF24 does not affect the proliferation of normal mouse embryonic fibroblast cells treated with 5 μmol/L EF24 for 48 h using hexosaminidase enzyme activity. D, EF24 inhibits cell growth as indicated by colony formation assays using HCT-116, HT-29, and AGS cells. These cells were incubated with 1 μmol/L EF24 or curcumin for 24 h and subsequently allowed to grow into colonies. As indicated by counts performed 10 d after incubation, EF24, but not curcumin, inhibits colony-forming units. Results are representative of three independent experiments.
EF24 inhibits expression of cancer-promoting genes and angiogenesis. COX-2, a key rate-limiting enzyme in prostaglandin production, is overexpressed at multiple stages of colon carcinogenesis (30–32). Knockdown of COX-2 activity by either nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs or by deletion of the COX-2 gene results in the suppression of intestinal polyposis in Apcmin/+ mice (30–32). Previous studies have shown increased levels of COX-2 mRNA in colorectal adenomas, adenocarcinomas, and colon cancer cell lines (33, 34). Therefore, we next determined the effects of EF24 treatment on COX-2 expression. EF24 treatment reduced COX-2 mRNA and protein levels in HCT-116 cells (Fig. 5A and B). Interestingly, protein levels of both COX-2 and VEGF were rapidly reduced within 2 hour of treatment with EF24, suggesting the presence of posttranslational control mechanisms in regulating expression of these genes.

Figure 2. EF24 induces cancer cell apoptosis. A, DNA content (propidium iodide) and cell cycle analysis of EF24-treated cells. HT-29 cells were treated with EF24 for 24 and 48 h. M1, sub-G1-G0 peak; M2, G1 phase; M3, S phase; M4, G2-M phase. Apoptosis was measured as the percentage of cells containing hypodiploid amounts of DNA (sub-G1-G0 peak). EF24 treatment leads to increased number of cells in the G2-M phase after 24 h as indicated by the increase in M4 peaks compared with control. Increase in M1 peaks at 48 h indicates that EF24 induces apoptosis after 48 h. Graphs are representative of data collected from at least three experiments. B, EF24 treatment induces apoptosis in HCT-116, HT-29, and AGS cells. HCT-116, HT-29, and AGS cells incubated with 1 μmol/L (top) and 5 μmol/L (bottom) of EF24 were analyzed for apoptosis. EF24 treatment increased number of apoptotic cells compared with either curcumin-treated or untreated control. *, P < 0.001. C, EF24 induces caspase-3, an apoptosis mediator. Lysates from HCT-116 cells incubated with 5 μmol/L EF24 were analyzed by Western blotting for caspase-3 protein expression levels using rabbit anti–caspase-3 antibody. EF24-treated cells show cleaved (activated) caspase-3, whereas untreated cells have no cleaved caspase-3. D, EF24 reduces expression of antiapoptotic proteins Bcl-2 and Bcl-xL in treated cells when compared with untreated cells. Lysates from HCT-116 cells incubated with 5 μmol/L EF24 were analyzed by Western blotting for Bcl-2, Bcl-xL, and Bax protein expression levels. Whereas both Bcl-2 and Bcl-xL were reduced, Bax expression was not affected by EF24 treatment.
Immunohistochemistry showed a diffused cytoplasmic staining for COX-2 in the epithelial cells in the control tumors, and the expression was higher subepithelial myofibroblasts (Fig. 6D). However, COX-2 staining was significantly reduced in both the epithelial cells and myofibroblasts in EF24-treated tumors.

VEGF and IL-8 are potent inducers of capillary growth into the tumor, and without angiogenesis, tumor growth normally stops at a diameter of about 1 to 2 mm. Prostaglandins and the other tumor-promoting mediators are known to induce the expression of VEGF and IL-8 in epithelial cells. Hence, we also determined the effect of EF24 on expression of these two genes in colon cancer cells. Both VEGF and IL-8 expression were significantly reduced in HCT-116 cells (Fig. 5A–C). Similarly, VEGF and IL-8 levels were significantly reduced in the EF24-treated tumor xenografts (Fig. 6A–C). We also determined the effect of EF24 on tumor vascularization by staining for the endothelial-specific antigen CD31. As shown in Fig. 6D, EF24 treatment leads to a significant reduction in CD31 staining and to the obliteration of the normal vasculature that is associated with tumor angiogenesis. We also calculated the microvessel density and found it to be significantly decreased following EF24 treatment (Fig. 6D).

Discussion

Our results indicate that the novel curcumin analogue EF24 possesses great potential as a promising anti–colon therapeutic agent. Colon cancer is a common malignancy in economically developed countries, particularly in North America, Europe, and Australia, and has emerged as one of the leading causes of cancer-related deaths in the Western world. The significant morbidity of surgery, radiation, and chemotherapy for colon cancer has led searches for less toxic alternative therapies. Many studies have shown that curcumin suppresses the proliferation of a variety of tumor cells, including breast, colon, oral, lung, melanoma, myeloma, leukemia, and prostate carcinoma (10, 11, 35–43). The data presented in the article show that EF24 selectively inhibits the proliferation of colon cancer cells, suppresses the formation of colon cancer cell colonies, inhibits cell survival signaling, promotes cell cycle arrest and apoptosis, and inhibits cancer-promoting genes. In vivo, EF24 decreases tumor size, volume, and microvessel density and suppresses mRNA expression and protein levels of the colon cancer–promoting genes COX-2, IL-8, and VEGF.

Because curcumin is poorly absorbed through the intestine, more potent and soluble curcumin analogues have been developed (17). Furthermore, as shown in our studies, at low doses, curcumin did not have a therapeutic effect. Similar results were observed in studies on squamous cell carcinomas, where a dose of 3.75 μmol/L curcumin did not affect growth of the cells (44). Consequently, higher doses are required. Synthetic chemical analogues to molecularly targeted chemotherapeutic drugs and chemopreventive photochemical confound a myriad of molecular events in host and tumor tissues. These events include the acquisition of self-sufficient growth signals, insensitivity to signals that usually inhibit proliferation, use of survival pathways to evade apoptosis, initiation of angiogenesis to ensure sufficient oxygen and nutrient supply, and metastatic spread.
EF24 and Anticancer Cancer Activity

Figure 4. EF24 inhibits AKT and ERK activation required for cell survival. A and B, HCT-116 cells were pretreated with 10 μmol/L EF24 for 2 h followed by treatment with EGF (100 ng/ml) for the indicated time (0–15 min). Lysates from EF24 treatment showed significant reduction in the EGF-mediated AKT and ERK phosphorylation at all time points. C and D, AKT and ERK phosphorylation was significantly lower in tumor xenografts from EF24-treated animals when compared with controls.

Figure 5. EF24 inhibits the expression of cancer-promoting genes. A, real-time reverse transcription-PCR analysis of total RNA from HCT-116 cells following 1 μmol/L EF24 treatment for 24 h showed reduction in the expression of COX-2, VEGF, and IL-8 mRNA. B, lysates from EF24 treatment caused significant reduction of COX-2 and VEGF protein levels in HCT-116 cells. C, medium from EF24-treated cells showed significantly lower levels of IL-8 protein.

supply, and attainment of the ability to invade and metastasize (45). EF24 molecule interferes with the progression of cancer by disrupting many of the characteristic cancer-promoting events more effectively than curcumin. EF24 inhibits proliferation of HCT-116 colon cancer cells, promotes apoptosis, prevents angiogenesis of tumors in mice xenografts, and decreases tumor growth. In cell cycle analyses, EF24 was observed to increase the number of cells in the G2-M phase at 24 hours. At the same time, there are
significantly higher levels of apoptosis. These data imply that EF24 treatment leads to mitotic catastrophe in which the proliferating cancer cells undergo cell death but not necessarily an arrest in the G2-M phase of the cell cycle. This was further supported through our observation that the majority of cells were present in the sub-G0 phase at 48 h following treatment.

The effects of EF24 on in vivo activity are dependent on the bioavailability of drug at the site of the tumor. Dietary curcumin is poorly absorbed through the intestinal tract. This results in good availability of the compound only to the surface epithelial cells of the intestine and colon but significantly poor availability of the compound to those cells that develop at the deeper tissue locations in the intestine and colon or if the tumor is malignant and is localized in other sites. This has led to the development of analogue with better bioavailability. In our studies, we observed marked suppression of tumor growth in mice xenograft with EF24 treatment. However, further studies are needed to confirm and extend the present study to use EF24 as an effective therapy for colorectal cancer. Absorption and pharmacokinetic properties of EF24 in particular need to be identified in future studies; however, preliminary studies indicate that EF24 seems to have low toxicity in liver, kidney, and spleen and allows mice treated with EF24 to maintain normal weight gain (19). In addition, EF24, like curcumin, seems to mediate its actions through multiple molecular targets, including COX-2, VEGF, and IL-8. Because COX-2 overexpression during colon carcinogenesis causes resistance to apoptosis (46), treatment of colon cancer cells with EF24 may potentially restore susceptibility to apoptosis. Furthermore, IL-8 overexpression has been correlated with the inflammation-related risk of sporadic colorectal cancer (47), so treatment with EF24 may also potentially ameliorate the inflammatory responses that are associated with the development of cancer. Finally, VEGF is important in angiogenesis and promotion of tumor growth, and the ability of EF24 to inhibit VEGF expression is yet another molecular mechanism by which EF24 may function to prevent colorectal cancer.

In this study, we have shown that EF24 suppressed EGF-mediated signaling. However, colon cancer cells, including HCT-116 cells, are known to express autocrine factors such as prostaglandins,
insulin-like growth factors, and progranulin, which activate many cellular pathways (48–53). It would be interesting to determine whether EF24 is equally potent in inhibiting these signal transduction pathways.

In conclusion, our studies show that EF24 treatment of intestinal cancer cells results in growth inhibition in vitro and in vivo. Our in vitro and in vivo studies in combination with the observation that EF24 does not affect proliferation of normal human fibroblasts strongly suggest that EF24 has promising potential for use as a therapeutic or chemopreventative agent for intestinal cancer. Similar to curcumin, EF24 also seems to have multiple molecular targets and its enhanced potency in cancer cell lines and xenograft tumors renders it a strong candidate for therapeutic applications for colon cancer as well as other cancers and inflammatory disease states.

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