E2F1 Responds to Ultraviolet Radiation by Directly Stimulating DNA Repair and Suppressing Carcinogenesis

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Abstract

In response to DNA damage, the E2F1 transcription factor is phosphorylated at serine 31 (serine 29 in mouse) by the ATM or ATR kinases, which promotes E2F1 protein stabilization. Phosphorylation of E2F1 also leads to the recruitment of E2F1 to sites of DNA damage, where it functions to enhance DNA repair. To study the role of this E2F1 phosphorylation event in vivo, a knock-in mouse model was generated, in which serine 29 was mutated to alanine. The S29A mutation impairs E2F1 stabilization in response to ultraviolet (UV) radiation and doxorubicin treatment, but has little effect on the expression of E2F target genes. The apoptotic and proliferative responses to acute UV radiation exposure are also similar between wild-type and E2f1S29A/S29A mice. As expected, the S29A mutation prevents E2F1 association with damaged DNA and reduces DNA repair efficiency. Moreover, E2f1S29A/S29A mice display increased sensitivity to UV-induced skin carcinogenesis. This knock-in mouse model thus links the ability of E2F1 to directly promote DNA repair with the suppression of tumor development. Cancer Res; 74(12); 3369–77. ©2014 AACR.

Introduction

Members of the E2F family of transcription factors regulate the expression of genes involved in a variety of processes, including cell-cycle progression, DNA replication, differentiation, and apoptosis (1). The transcriptional activity of the E2F family is regulated through association with the retinoblastoma (Rb) tumor suppressor and related proteins, p107 and p130. The generation of mouse models inactivated for individual E2F genes has revealed the complexity and overlapping functions of the E2F family (1, 2). For example, mice lacking E2F1 are viable and fertile but display cell-type-specific defects in some tissues, including defective negative selection of T cells in younger mice and exocrine gland hyperplasia and testicular atrophy in older mice (3, 4). Moreover, inactivation of E2F1 in transgenic mice expressing Myc under the control of a p53 promoter significantly accelerates tumor development (5). In sharp contrast, inactivation of E2F1 in Rb+/− mice significantly reduces spontaneous tumor development in that model (6). Taken together, these findings demonstrate that endogenous E2F1 can either enhance or inhibit tumorigenesis depending on the experimental context.

The mechanism by which E2F1 suppresses tumor development is unclear, but may be related to its role in the DNA damage response (7–11). The ATM and ATR kinases phosphorylate human E2F1 at serine 31, a site not conserved in other E2F family members (12). E2F1 phosphorylation at this site creates a binding motif for 14-3-3, which contributes to E2F1 stabilization (13). E2F1 is also acetylated on several lysine residues in response to agents that cause DNA double-strand breaks, which enhances the ability of E2F1 to bind and activate some proapoptotic genes, such as p73, and induce apoptosis (14–18). However, E2F1 is not acetylated in response to UV radiation so E2F1 does not transcriptionally activate p73 or participate in UV-induced apoptosis (18). In fact, the absence of E2F1 seems to increase the apoptotic response to UV radiation (19, 20).

Phosphorylation of E2F1 at serine 31 also creates a binding motif for a BRCT domain in the TopBP1 protein and this interaction represses E2F1 transcriptional activity independent of retinoblastoma (21, 22). Phosphorylation of E2F1 and binding to TopBP1 also recruits E2F1 to sites of DNA double-strand breaks where it forms foci that colocalize with BRCA1 (21). Moreover, cells lacking E2F1 are impaired for the recruitment of some DNA repair factors to sites of double-strand breaks and display genome instability (23). E2F1 also accumulates at sites of UV-induced DNA damage dependent on ATR and serine 31 of E2F1 (24). E2F1 was shown to stimulate nucleotide excision repair (NER) dependent on serine 31 but independent of its DNA binding or transactivation domains. The ability of E2F1 to enhance NER correlated with E2F1-dependent recruitment of the GCN5 histone acetyltransferase to sites of UV-induced DNA damage, increased H3K9...
acetylation, and enhanced colocalization of NER factors with damaged DNA (25). Taken together, these findings suggest that E2F1 stimulates the repair of several types of DNA damage and that E2F1 phosphorylation by ATM/ATR is critical for this transcription-independent function.

Here we describe the generation of a knock-in mouse model in which E2F1 serine 29 (equivalent to human serine 31) is mutated to alanine (E2f1S29A/S29A mice). As expected, E2F1 stabilization in response to UV radiation and doxorubicin treatment was impaired by the E2F1 S29A mutation but the expression of several E2F target genes and the apoptotic and proliferative responses to UV were similar between E2f1S29A/S29A and wild-type mice. E2F1 was unable to associate with DNA containing UV photoproducts in cells from E2f1S29A/S29A mice and this correlated with decreased association of GCN5, acetylated H3K9, and NER factors with damaged DNA. Consistent with these findings, the S29A knock-in mutation reduced DNA repair efficiency and enhanced sensitivity to UV-induced skin carcinogenesis. This mouse model highlights the importance of E2F1 as a downstream target of ATR for enhancing NER in the context of chromatin and suppressing skin tumor development.

Materials and Methods

Generation of E2f1S29A/S29A knock-in mouse model

Genomic DNA containing E2f1 exon 1 was amplified by PCR and cloned using standard procedures. Site-directed mutagenesis was used to create a two base pair substitution that resulted in a silent mutation in codon 28 (a serine) and altering codon 29 from a serine to an alanine. This mutation also created an AviII site, which can be used for genotyping purposes to identify the knock-in allele (E2f1tm1Dgj, synonym E2f1S29A). The targeting vector as shown in Fig. 1A was electroporated into mouse embryonic stem cell clones and digested with BamHI and AviII using standard procedures to identify correctly targeted embryonic stem clones. Chimeric mice were developed using two positive clones. Chimeric mice were crossed with FVB mice to produce F1 generation of heterozygous mice. One heterozygous mouse was crossed with FLPer mice to excise the Neo-cassette from the targeted allele. For UV carcinogenesis experiments, mice containing the S29A knock-in allele were backcrossed seven times to the FVB strain before mating heterozygous mice to produce homozygous knock-in and wild-type sibling control mice.

UV irradiation

UVB treatment of mice was performed using a panel of FS20 sunlamps in an irradiation chamber as previously described (19). For UVB-induced skin carcinogenesis, the dorsal skin of 4- to 5-week-old mice was shaved and 24 hours later mice were exposed to 3,370 J/m² of UVB. This treatment...
continued three times per week for up to 48 weeks or until tumors reached approximately 1 cm in size. Histologic examination confirmed that the tumors were squamous cell carcinoma (SCC).

**Cells and antibodies**

Primary mouse embryonic fibroblasts (MEF) were isolated from 13.5 days old embryos derived from crossing heterozygous mice following standard procedures and maintained in DMEM supplemented with 15% FBS, penicillin–streptomycin, and 100 μg/mL of mercaptoethanol. Mouse primary keratinocytes were isolated from 2-day-old mice following previously described protocol (26) and cultured in defined keratinocyte-SFM (Life Technologies, catalog no. 10744019). The following antibodies were used in the study: anti-E2F1 (C20; Santa Cruz, cat. no. sc-193), anti-CPD (Cosmo Bio; clone TDM-2, cat. no. CAC-MN-DND-001), anti-p53 (Novus Biologicals, cat. no. NB200-103), anti-p53S (Cell Signaling, cat. no. 3305S), anti-H3K9ac (Cell Signaling, cat. no. bs-6634R), anti-TPA (Santa Cruz, sc-853), anti-GCN5 (Cell Signaling, cat. no. 3305S), anti-H3K9Ac (Cell Signaling, cat. no. 9649S), anti-p53 (Novus Biologicals, cat. no. NB200-103), GAPDH (GenScript, cat. no. A00191), and normal rabbit IgG (Cell Signaling, cat. no. 2729).

**Western blot analysis**

Western blotting was performed according to previously described procedure (24). For detecting E2F1, whole cell lysates were resolved on SDS-PAGE and transferred onto PVDF membranes described procedure (24). For detecting E2F1, whole cell lysates were then performed. Brieﬂy, cells were cross-linked with 1% formaldehyde (ﬁnal) for 10 minutes at room temperature with gentle rocking. Cross-linking was blocked by addition of glycine and incubating for 5 minutes at room temperature. Nuclei were isolated and incubated with micrococcal nuclease and sonicated in 1× ChIP buffer containing a protease inhibitor cocktail (Roche) and a phosphatase inhibitor cocktail (Roche) to produce chromatin fragments ranging from 200 to 1,000 base pairs. An enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA) was used to measure the amount of CPD in the immunoprecipitated DNA. Alternatively, primers specific for sequences flanking an I-PpoI cut site on mouse chromosome 10 were used to examine enrichment at a DNA double-strand break.

**ELISA for DNA photoproducts**

An ELISA was used to measure the amount of CPD and 6-4PP present in UV-damaged DNA using anti-CPD and anti-6-4PP antibodies (Cosmo Bio Co. Ltd.) following manufacturer’s instructions. Briefly, 96-well polystyrene plates (Thermo cat. no. 2801) were coated with 50 μL of 0.003% protamine sulfate overnight at 37°C. Plates were washed with 100 μL distilled water and stored in the dark until used. Plates were coated with DNA obtained from ChIP or directly isolated from UV-treated cells (0.02 μg/mL for CPD and 2 μg/mL for 6-4PP) for 30 minutes at 37°C. Plates were washed 5 times with PBS-T (0.05% Tween-20 in PBS), blocked with 2% FBS in PBS, incubated with appropriate dilutions of anti-CPD and anti-6-4PP antibodies, detected with biotin-F (ab)2 fragment of anti-mouse IgG (H+L) and peroxidase-streptavidin using o-phenylene diamine as a substrate.

**UV repair assay**

Repair of UVB-induced damage was determined by measuring the amount of 6-4PP and CPD remaining in genomic DNA over time as previously described (19). Brieﬂy, the dorsal skins of mice were shaved 24 hours before a single UVB dose of 1,000 J/m2. At various time points post-UVB, epidermis from the exposed skin was collected and genomic DNA was isolated using Sigma GenElute Mammalian Genomic DNA Isolation Kit. Equal amounts of DNA were coated onto 96-well microtiter plate precoated with protamine sulfate. The DNA photoproducts CPD and 6-4PP were detected by ELISA using anti-CPD and anti-6-4PP antibodies (Cosmo Bio Co. Ltd.) following manufacturer’s protocol. Two mice for each genotype and time point were analyzed.

**Results**

**Development of an E2f1S29A/S29A knock-in mouse model**

The E2f1 knock-in targeting construct contained point mutations that changed codon 29 from a serine to alanine and also created an AvrII restriction site (Fig. 1A). The Genetically Engineered Mouse Facility at MD Anderson Cancer Center generated embryonic stem cell clones using this construct and, after Southern blot analysis of embryonic stem cell genomic DNA (Fig. 1B), created chimeric mice from correctly targeted embryonic stem cell clones. The Neo cassette was then excised by crossing F1 generation heterozygous mice with FLPReR mice (Fig. 1A). Sequencing of E2f1 exon 1 confirmed the presence of the S29A mutation and no other mutation. PCR across the remaining Frt site in the knock-in allele was subsequently used to distinguish wild-type, heterozygous and homozygous S29A mutant mice (Fig. 1C). As expected, E2f1S29A/S29A mice were obtained with the expected Mendelian frequency and seemed developmentally normal, similar to E2f1−/− mice (3, 4).

It has been reported that young adult E2f1−/− mice have an enlarged thymus, increased thymic cellularity, and a higher...
fraction of mature, single positive (CD4$^+$ and CD8$^+$) thymocytes (3). E2f1$^{S29A/S29A}$ mice lack these phenotypes, demonstrating that the S29A mutation is insufficient to cause a defect in thymocyte homeostasis as is observed in E2f1$^{-/-}$ mice (Supplementary Fig. S1). In addition, older E2f1$^{S29A/S29A}$ mice do not seem to have phenotypes associated with older E2f1$^{-/-}$ mice, such as testicular atrophy or exocrine gland hyperplasia (4).

**Effects of the S29A mutation on E2F1 protein stabilization, expression of target genes, and induction of apoptosis in response to DNA damage**

Various forms of DNA damage lead to E2F1 protein stabilization in a process involving E2F1 phosphorylation at S31/S29 by ATM or ATR (12, 13, 27, 28). Consistent with those studies, E2F1 protein levels are induced at 1 hour and peak at 8 hours in wild-type primary keratinocytes exposed to UV radiation. In contrast, E2F1 protein induction in response to UV radiation was impaired in E2f1$^{S29A/S29A}$ keratinocytes (Fig. 2A). Treatment with doxorubicin, which causes DNA double-strand breaks, did increase E2F1 protein levels in S29A knock-in MEFs but to a lesser extent than in response to DNA double-strand breaks independent of ATM/ATR phosphorylation through a process involving E2F1 acetylation (15).

Although E2F1 protein stabilization is defective in E2f1$^{S29A/S29A}$ keratinocytes, expression of the E2F target genes Ccna2 (cyclin A2) and Ccne1 (cyclin E) is similar between wild-type and S29A knock-in keratinocytes before and after UV irradiation (Fig. 2C and D). Expression of Xpc, another E2F target gene known to be upregulated in response to UV (29), is only modestly affected by the E2F1 S29A mutation (Fig. 2E). Expression of another NER gene, Xpa, is also similar between wild-type and E2f1$^{S29A/S29A}$ keratinocytes before and after UV exposure (Fig. 2F). E2F1 is also implicated in the induction of the E2F target gene Trp73.
in response to agents that cause DNA double-strand breaks (18, 22, 30). As expected, treatment of MEFs with doxorubicin strongly induced Trp73 gene expression but this was unaffected by the E2F1 S29A knock-in mutation (Supplementary Fig. S2A).

Previous studies demonstrated that E2f1−/− mice have an enhanced apoptotic response to UV radiation (19, 20). To determine the effect of the E2F1 S29A knock-in mutation on the apoptotic response to UV radiation, E2f1S29A/S29A mice and wild-type sibling controls were exposed to 3,370 J/m² of UVB. Skin samples were taken 24 hours later mock treated or exposed to 3,370 J/m² of UVB. Twenty-four hours postirradiation, skin samples were taken, fixed with formalin, and slides processed for immunohistochemistry. A, an antibody specific for cleaved lamina A was used to identify apoptotic cells and the average number of positive keratinocytes per 10 mm of epidermis was determined from three independent mice per group. B, the average number of epidermal keratinocytes staining positive for Ki67, a marker of proliferation, was determined from three independent mice per group.

**Figure 3.** The S29A mutation does not affect the apoptotic or proliferative responses to UV. Young adult wild-type and E2f1S29A/S29A mice were shaved and 24 hours later mock treated or exposed to 3,370 J/m² of UVB. Twenty-four hours postirradiation, skin samples were taken, fixed with formalin, and slides processed for immunohistochemistry. A, an antibody specific for cleaved lamina A was used to identify apoptotic cells and the average number of positive keratinocytes per 10 mm of epidermis was determined from three independent mice per group. B, the average number of epidermal keratinocytes staining positive for Ki67, a marker of proliferation, was determined from three independent mice per group.

The S29A mutation impairs recruitment of E2F1 to sites of DNA damage

Phosphorylation of human E2F1 at serine 31 was shown to recruit E2F1 to sites of DNA double-strand breaks through a phospho-specific interaction with the BRCT domain-containing protein TopBP1 (21). To examine E2F1 recruitment to DNA double-strand breaks, we used a system employing an inducible form of the I-PpoI endonuclease followed by ChIP (31, 32). Like phosphorylated ATM (pATM), which is an inducible form of the I-PpoI endonuclease followed by DNA double-strand breaks, we used a system employing containing protein TopBP1 (21). To examine E2F1 recruitment to sites of UV-induced DNA damage and this also requires phosphorylation of human E2F1 at serine 31 (24). To examine the association of E2F1 and other proteins with UV damaged DNA, ChIP was performed followed by an ELISA that quantitatively measures CPD photoproduct in DNA. Antibody to E2F1 efficiently immunoprecipitated CPD-containing DNA from wild-type MEFs treated with UV but not from UV-treated E2f1S29A/S29A MEFs (Fig. 4A and Supplementary Fig. S3A). Taken together, these results demonstrate that blocking E2F1 phosphorylation by ATM/ATR impairs association of E2F1 with both DNA double-strand breaks and UV-induced DNA damage.

**E2f1S29A/S29A mice have reduced NER efficiency and increased sensitivity to UV-induced carcinogenesis**

Our previous studies demonstrated that E2F1 promotes the repair of UV-induced DNA damage by recruiting the GCN5 histone acetyltransferase to damaged sites to induce H3K9 acetylation and increase accessibility to the DNA repair machinery (25). Consistent with those findings, the E2F1 S29A mutation impaired association of GCN5 and acetylated H3K9 with chromatin containing UV damaged DNA (Fig. 4B and C). Likewise, association of the DNA repair factors XPC and XPA with CPD-containing chromatin was also diminished by the E2F1 S29A mutation (Fig. 4). The amount of total protein immunoprecipitated with these antibodies was similar between genotypes before and after UV treatment (Supplementary Fig. S3A). The E2F1 S29A mutation did not affect the association between E2F1 and GCN5 either before or after UV exposure (Supplementary Fig. S3A). Taken together, these findings suggest that E2F1 S29A is involved in recruiting GCN5 to chromatin containing CPD photoproducts, and this is important for H3K9 acetylation and efficient recruitment of NER factors to damaged DNA.

Mice and cells lacking E2F1 repair UV-damaged DNA less efficiently than wild-type mice and cells (19, 24, 29). To determine whether the S29A mutation would also reduce NER
efficiency, the dorsal skins of E2f1S29A/S29A and wild-type control mice were shaved and exposed to a single dose of UVB at 1,000 J/m². Genomic DNA was isolated from UV-exposed epidermis at various time points postirradiation and an ELISA was used to measure the amounts of 6-4PP and CPD. The levels of 6-4PP remaining in UV-treated epidermal DNA was significantly higher in E2f1S29A/S29A mice compared with wild-type mice between 3 and 24 hours post-UV (Fig. 5A). The CPD is repaired less efficiently than 6-4PP but a significant difference between E2f1S29A/S29A and wild-type mice.

Figure 4. Association of E2F1, GCN5, H3K9ac, and NER factors with UV-induced DNA damage is impaired in E2f1S29A/S29A cells. Wild-type (E2f1+/+) and E2f1S29A/S29A MEFs were exposed to 250 J/m² of UVB and ChIP was performed 30 minutes postirradiation with the indicated antibodies: E2F1 (A), GCN5 (B), H3K9ac (C), XPC (D), XPA (E), and control IgG (F). An ELISA was used to measure the amount of CPD in immunoprecipitated DNA. The relative enrichment of CPD in genomic DNA was calculated from two independent samples per group subjected to ELISA in triplicate.

Figure 5. E2f1S29A/S29A mice display decreased NER efficiency. A, the dorsal skin of E2f1S29A/S29A and wild-type sibling control mice were shaved and exposed once to 1,000 J/m² of UVB. Genomic DNA was isolated from the exposed epidermis at the indicated time points and the amounts of 6-4PP (A) and CPD (B) were measured by ELISA using anti-6-4PP and anti-CPD antibodies, respectively. Two mice per genotype for each time point were used and each sample was subjected to ELISA in duplicate. *, statistical significance using the 2-sample test for equality of proportions with continuity correction.
in CPD removal could be observed at later time points (Fig. 5B). These results demonstrate that similar to E2f1−/− mice, E2f1S29A/S29A mice have reduced capacity to repair UV-induced DNA damage (19).

Humans and mice impaired for NER are highly susceptible to skin cancer (33). To determine the effect of the S29A mutation on UV carcinogenesis, E2f1S29A/S29A and wild-type sibling control mice were exposed to 3,370 J/m² of UVB three times per week for 48 weeks. E2f1S29A/S29A mice were significantly more susceptible to UV-induced skin cancer with a 95% skin tumor incidence at the end of the study compared with 68% incidence for wild-type sibling mice (Fig. 6A). Consistent with this increased susceptibility to UV carcinogenesis, E2f1S29A/S29A mice had more than twice as many p53-positive keratinocytes in their epidermis after 5 weeks of UV treatment compared with similarly treated wild-type mice (Fig. 6B). UV exposure is known to induce clones of p53-positive keratinocytes in human and mouse skin that represent precancerous lesions with p53 mutations (34, 35). These findings suggest that the impaired NER because of the E2f1 S29A mutation leads to increased p53 mutations and skin tumor development in response to UV radiation.

Discussion

ATM/ATR-mediated phosphorylation of E2F1 is thought to be a major mechanism by which E2F1 transcriptional activity is regulated in response to DNA damage (7, 10, 12). However, we find that mutation of this conserved phosphorylation site in murine E2F1 has little effect on the regulation of classical E2F target genes in response to UV radiation or doxorubicin. Consistent with those findings, the apoptotic and proliferative responses of E2f1S29A/S29A mice to UV was indistinguishable from wild-type mice. It is possible that other E2F family members can compensate for the impaired stabilization of the E2F1 S29A mutant protein in response to DNA damage. Indeed, several other E2F family members, including E2F3, are also known to respond to DNA damage signals (36–38).

In addition to regulating E2F1 protein stability, phosphorylation of E2F1 at S31/S29 also regulates its subcellular localization and recruitment to sites of DNA damage (7, 21, 24). Accumulation of E2F1 at DNA double-strand breaks involves a phosho-specific interaction between E2F1 phosphorylated at S31/S29 and the sixth BRCT domain of TopBP1 (21). This same mechanism is likely involved in the recruitment of E2F1 to sites of UV-induced DNA damage (24). Interestingly, the DNA-binding domain of E2F1 is dispensable for E2F1 foci formation at double-strand breaks and the colocalization of E2F1 with DNA photoproducts (21, 24). The association of E2F1 with damaged DNA correlates with an enhanced recruitment of DNA repair factors and increased repair efficiency (23, 24). This transcription-independent function for E2F1 at sites of DNA damage seems to be unique among the E2F family because the S31/S29 phosphorylation site is not found in other E2F proteins.

The stimulation of NER by E2F1 involves the E2F1-dependent recruitment of GCN5 to damaged DNA, increased H3K9 acetylation, and relaxation of chromatin structure (11, 25). As expected, the S29A knock-in mutation prevented E2F1 association with UV-damaged DNA and decreased the association of GCN5, H3K9ac, and NER factors (e.g., XPA and XPC) with CPD-containing DNA. This correlates with E2f1S29A/S29A mice having reduced repair capacity and increased sensitivity to UV-induced skin carcinogenesis. Although E2F1 can regulate the expression of some genes involved in NER (29, 39), we find little evidence that E2F1 deficiency or the S29A mutation significantly affects the expression of NER factors before or after UV exposure (24). Instead, the ability of E2F1 to alter chromatin structure

Figure 6. E2f1S29A/S29A mice have increased sensitivity to UV-induced skin carcinogenesis. A, the dorsal skin of 4 to 5 weeks old E2f1S29A/S29A (N = 21) and wild-type sibling control (N = 22) mice were shaved and exposed to 3,370 J/m² of UVB three times per week for 48 weeks. A statistically significant difference in skin tumor incidence over time was observed using the log-rank Mantel–Cox test (P = 0.0012). B, young adult wild-type (E2f1+/−) and E2f1S29A/S29A mice were exposed to 3,370 J/m² UVB three times per week as above for 5 weeks. Twenty-four hours after the last treatment, skin samples were taken and immunohistochemically stained for p53. The average number of positive cells per mm of epidermis is presented from three mice per genotype. Bars, SD; *, P = 0.0026, statistical significance using the 2-sample independent t test.
at sites of damage and to enhance access to the repair machinery may be the major mechanism by which E2F1 suppresses UV carcinogenesis. Whether a similar mechanism is involved in E2F1-mediated tumor suppression in other contexts is unclear but this can now be addressed using the E2F1S29A/S29A mouse model.

Disclosure of Potential Conflicts of Interest

No potential conflicts of interest were disclosed.

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