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Abstract

Sialic acids are abundant acidic sugars decorating the cell surfaces of vertebrates and their close relatives, but rarely found in other taxa – with the striking exception of certain bacterial commensals and pathogens of vertebrates. Siglecs are a family of sialic acid recognizing receptors in mammals that mediate a variety of functions in different biological processes. The CD33-related Siglecs (CD33rSiglecs) are prominent on immune cells and play a role in distinguishing self and non-self by recognizing sialoglycans as “self-associated molecular patterns.” Some pathogenic microorganisms exploit this self-recognition system by molecular mimicry of ligands or by direct binding, thus averting detection and elimination by the innate immune system. A subset of CD33rSiglecs with cell-activating properties may have evolved to counter such exploitation by

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pathogens. In keeping with this, some show extreme sequence identity in their binding domains with respective inhibitory counterparts. Human null polymorphisms have been described for some CD33rSiglecs, which may be explained by counteracting evolutionary selective forces imposed by different pathogens. Two CD33rSiglecs appear to have been inactivated in our ancestors, just prior to the origin of the human species. Environmental factors associated with civilization may have also played a role in shaping the genetics and functions of these receptors.

Keywords

Molecular mimicry • Pathogens • Polymorphisms • Self-associated molecular patterns • Sialic acids

Introduction: Sialoglycans as Self-Associated Molecular Patterns (SAMPs)

Sialic acids are a group of acidic sugars with 9-carbon backbones, primarily found on the outermost ends of glycans displayed on vertebrate cell surfaces (Angata and Varki 2002). The distribution of sialic acids is restricted to vertebrates and their close relatives (e.g., echinoderms), with some exceptions, as explained later. These properties (i.e., cell-surface display and limited species distribution) makes them good candidates to be used as one of the “signatures of self” or “self-associated molecular patterns (SAMPs),” as opposed to “pathogen-associated molecular patterns (PAMPs),” i.e., molecular cues in the self/non-self discrimination by the vertebrate immune system (Varki 2011). In fact, sialic acids have long been known to interact with factor H, sparing host cell surfaces from the attack of alternate pathway of complement while allowing activation of complement system and formation of complement pore complex on foreign objects (e.g., bacteria, fungi, parasites) which do not express sialic acids. Another major group of proteins that recognize glycans containing sialic acids are Siglecs, a family of closely related lectins belonging to the immunoglobulin superfamily (Crocker et al. 2007). Most Siglecs are expressed on cells of immune system and have an inhibitory signaling property (by recruiting tyrosine phosphatases) that is compatible with their role as negative regulator of immune system to prevent development of autoimmunity (Lajaunias et al. 2005).

However, this self-recognition system involving sialic acids and Siglecs is not flawless. Once bacteria acquire the capability to display sialic acids (or its molecular mimicry) on their surface, the system can be exploited. Although the metabolic cost of sialic acid biosynthesis is relatively high as compared with more common 6-carbon sugars (as it requires *N*-acetylhexosamine and pyruvate for its biosynthesis), such a strategy has been indeed adopted by some bacteria.

Bacterial Molecular Mimicry That Targets the Sialic Acid-SAMP Recognition System

Some pathogenic bacteria (most of which are a part of normal flora and only cause diseases in an opportunistic mode) express sialic acids by various mechanisms, including (1) *de novo* biosynthesis by convergent evolution (Lewis et al. 2009), (2) scavenging of sialic acid or CMP-sialic acid from the host, and (3) adsorption of sialylated glycoconjugates from the host. In addition, some bacteria have developed proteins that “mimic” sialic acids. These molecular mimicry mechanisms have been shown to provide a selective advantage. Some examples of bacteria-Siglec interaction are listed in Table 1.

Sialic acid-dependent engagement of Siglec-9 by group B streptococcus (GBS) type III has been shown to dampen neutrophil responses to the bacteria (Carlin et al. 2009b). Moreover, engagement of Siglec-5 by group B streptococcus (GBS) type Ia was also shown to dampen neutrophil response, but in this case the interaction is independent of sialic acid and is instead mediated by β -protein on GBS (Carlin et al. 2009a). These results clearly demonstrate that bacterial pathogens, even the closely related ones, have adopted different strategies to engage inhibitory Siglecs to their advantage. These selective forces may have driven the rapid evolution of Siglecs, as suggested from the comparative genomic and functional analyses of CD33-related Siglecs (CD33rSiglecs) in closely related primate species (Angata et al. 2004; Padler-Karavani et al. 2014). These findings are consistent with the hypothesis that the evolution of CD33rSiglecs has been driven by the “dual” constraints imposed on them. This involves the necessity to avoid exploitation by the pathogens that engage Siglecs while also keeping up with the changing landscape of host sialome (which is driven by a separate set of pathogens that utilize sialic acids for infection).

While these “passive” strategies to hide away from pathogens may be necessary and effective, other strategies, such as “active” detection of these pathogens and counterattack, are conceivable. One candidate is the non-inhibitory Siglec-1 (sialoadhesin), which is expressed on some macrophages and can carry out phagocytosis of sialylated pathogens (Jones et al. 2003). Would there be any other countermeasures that vertebrates have adopted to counter these pathogens?

Activating-Type Siglecs: Countermeasures Against Siglec-Exploiting Pathogens?

Activating-type Siglecs, or those interacting with adapter protein DAP12 (that has immunoreceptor tyrosine-based activating motif (ITAM) and in turn recruits tyrosine kinase Syk), have been discovered in the past decade. By analogy to the Ly49 family of receptors, it has been proposed that the activating-type Siglecs may have emerged to counteract pathogens that exploit inhibitory counterparts (Angata et al. 2006). In the case of humans, Siglec-14 and Siglec-16 appear to fit this description, as they show extreme sequence identity with Siglec-5 and Siglec-11, respectively, and also show at least partial overlap with their respective inhibitory counterpart in terms of expression

Table 1 Pathogens known to interact with Siglecs

Pathogen	Pathogen molecule involved	Human Siglec involved	Outcome	References
Bacteria				
<i>Neisseria meningitidis</i>	Sialic acids on LPS	Sialoadhesin/ Siglec-1 Siglec-5	Enhanced binding and phagocytosis	(Jones et al. 2003)
<i>Campylobacter jejuni</i>	Sialic acids on LPS	Sialoadhesin/ Siglec-1 Siglec-7	Modulation of factors affecting helper T-cell differentiation	(Avril et al. 2006; Heikema et al. 2010; Bax et al. 2011)
Group B <i>Streptococcus</i> type III	Sialic acids on LPS	Siglec-9 Siglec-E (mouse)	Attenuated immune responses	(Carlin et al. 2009b) (Chang et al. 2014)
Group B <i>Streptococcus</i> type Ia	β-protein (Sia-independent)	Siglec-5/14	Siglec-5: attenuated immune responses Siglec-14: enhanced immune responses	(Carlin et al. 2009a; Ali et al. 2014)
		Siglec-13 (chimpanzee)	Siglec-13: attenuated immune responses	(Wang et al. 2012)
<i>Pseudomonas aeruginosa</i>	Sialic acids on glycoproteins, adsorbed from human body fluid	Siglec-9	Attenuated immune responses	(Khatua et al. 2012)
Non-typeable <i>Haemophilus influenzae</i>	Sialic acids on LOS + Sia-independent interaction	Siglec-5/14	Siglec-5: attenuated immune responses Siglec-14: enhanced immune responses	(Angata et al. 2013)
Viruses				
Porcine reproductive and respiratory syndrome virus (PRRSV)	Sialic acids on GP5 envelope glycoprotein	Sialoadhesin/ Siglec-1 (pig)	Enhanced infection	(Delputte and Nauwynck 2004; Van Breedam et al. 2010)

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

Pathogen	Pathogen molecule involved	Human Siglec involved	Outcome	References
Human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)	Sialic acids on gp120 envelope glycoprotein	Sialoadhesin/ Siglec-1	Enhanced infection	(Rempel et al. 2008; Zou et al. 2011)
Varicella zoster virus (VZV), herpes simplex virus (HSV)	Glycoprotein B (involvement of sialic acids is not reported)	Myelin-associated glycoprotein/ Siglec-4	Enhanced infection	(Suenaga et al. 2010)
Eukaryotes				
<i>Trypanosoma cruzi</i>	Sialic acids acquired from host glycoproteins by <i>trans</i> -sialidase	Siglec-E (mouse)	Attenuated immune responses	(Erdmann et al. 2009)
<i>Candida albicans</i>	Zymosan (?)	Siglec-7	Enhanced immune responses	(Varchetta et al. 2012)

This table is updated from: <http://www.glycoforum.gr.jp/science/glycomicrobiology/GM09/GM09E.html>

patterns. While Siglec-14 has been shown to enhance activation of myeloid cells (Yamanaka et al. 2009; Yasui et al. 2011; Ali et al. 2014), the activating function of Siglec-16 has not been formally demonstrated.

However, a protein that can recognize a “signature of self” and activate the immune system may be a double-edged sword, as it could elicit an autoimmune reaction. While here must be some mechanism to prevent or control the damage, it is still elusive. Theoretically, there are some possible mechanisms for these receptors to activate the cells only when they are engaged by pathogens, while avoiding triggering autoimmune responses, such as requirement for the “priming” signal from other PAMP sensors, requirement for a ligand with much higher density than those found in the host, and specialization to the pathogen molecule and concomitant loss of SAMP recognition ability (as suggested for some other receptor families). Yet still, under some circumstances, activating-type Siglecs may harm the host and thus its absence may be favored. Loss of activating-type Siglecs in humans may be explained by this double-bind situation.

Polymorphic Loss of Human Activating-Type Siglecs

Human *SIGLEC14* and *SIGLEC16* have polymorphisms that render these genes inactive in some humans. In the case of *SIGLEC14*, an allele was found in which *SIGLEC14* and *SIGLEC5* are fused, resulting in the loss of the segment encoding

Siglec-14 (also resulting in the generation of *SIGLEC14/5* fusion gene, which encodes a protein identical to Siglec-5 in terms of amino acid sequence). In the case of *SIGLEC16*, a 4-nucleotide deletion polymorphism in exon 2 (coding N-terminal immunoglobulin-like domain) results in premature termination. Both of these “null alleles” are found at high frequency in modern human population (Yamanaka et al. 2009; Cao et al. 2008).

Loss of human Siglec-14 has been associated with two distinct outcomes: attenuated protection against GBS infection (Ali et al. 2014) and protection against exacerbation of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) (Angata et al. 2013). It is more straightforward to interpret the former phenotype, as it can be explained by the loss of auxiliary signaling from Siglec-14 that enhances the inflammatory response against the pathogen and its elimination. On the other hand, the latter phenotype is somewhat more complex, and it is interpreted that the acute inflammatory response caused by bacterial infection (non-typeable *Haemophilus influenzae* was used as a model pathogen) on top of the underlying chronic inflammation triggers excessive inflammation, which results in the exacerbation of the disease.

COPD is a tobacco-related disease of predominantly older population (>40 years old), which argues against its possible involvement as a selective force in human evolution. However, a situation similar to COPD caused by indoor fire use and bacterial infection associated with it may be found in pre-historic human societies as well and may be relevant to the polymorphic loss of Siglec-14. Alternatively, co-infection by influenza virus and *Haemophilus influenzae*, which is known to result in much higher mortality rate, may provide an explanation. Cross-species transmission of bird influenza virus to human is enhanced in the environment that contains wild fowl (a natural host of the virus), domestic bird (e.g., chicken or duck), pig, and human. Such an environment is found in agricultural settings in Asia, and this fact might explain the higher frequency of *SIGLEC14*-null allele in Asia. In any case, because both fire usage and agriculture are unique to humans, it would be worth testing if the null polymorphism of *SIGLEC14* and *SIGLEC16* is unique to human as compared with other primates.

Complete Loss of Human Activating-Type Siglecs

In addition to the polymorphic loss of activating-type Siglecs in humans described above, *SIGLEC13* is universally lost in humans, while it is maintained in other lineages of primates (Angata et al. 2004). *SIGLEC17* is also inactivated by a single nucleotide deletion in exon 2 (and by a single nucleotide substitution that mutates the arginine residue essential for sialic acid recognition) in humans (Wang et al. 2012). Both chimpanzee Siglec-13 and functionally “resurrected” human Siglec-17 recognize sialylated bacteria (*Escherichia coli* K1 and GBS), although the recognition does not involve sialic acids but protein(s) on these bacteria. These Siglecs interact with DAP12 and enhance tumor necrosis factor α (TNF α) response of myeloid cells to low-dose lipopolysaccharide. Surprisingly, engagement of Siglec-13 by *E. coli* K1 or GBS results in the suppression of TNF α production (Wang et al. 2012).

Thus, it may be too simplistic to assume that all DAP12-associated Siglecs act as activating receptors under all circumstances. Regardless, population genetics-based analysis implies that the losses of both *SIGLEC13* and *SIGLEC17* were under positive selection (Wang et al. 2012). In other words, the losses of these Siglecs were beneficial for humans. Is there any coherent explanation for the emergence and subsequent loss of activating-type Siglecs?

An inhibitory Siglec may be lost if the benefit of its loss (avoidance of pathogen exploitation) outweighs the drawback (possible development of autoimmunity). Alternatively, an activating-type Siglec may be born to counter the pathogen that exploits the inhibitory Siglec. However, once the threat of the original pathogen is gone, excessive reaction against another pathogen (or commensal) or host's own cells may become a selective disadvantage, and absence of such activating-type Siglec may be preferred. Loss of the activating-type Siglec may occur under such situation, leaving the inhibitory Siglec unaffected (i.e., the activating-type Siglec works as a sacrifice for the inhibitory Siglec; Fig. 1). Thus, it is possible that the utility of activating-type Siglec as a countermeasure against a particular pathogen may be inherently short-lived. It would be interesting to test if the typical evolutionary life span of activating Siglecs is shorter than that of inhibitory Siglecs by comparative genomics analysis. Further study is obviously needed.

Examples of Siglec Interaction with Non-bacterial Pathogens

Other classes of microorganisms also appear to exploit “sialic acids-Siglecs” system to their benefit. Examples of non-bacterial pathogens that interact with Siglecs are listed in Table 1. Several enveloped viruses have been reported to interact with Siglecs, with overall end results in favor of the viruses (enhanced infection). Glycan compositions of enveloped viruses naturally reflect that of the host cells and should contain some sialic acids. As long as the density of sialic acids is sufficiently high, any envelope virus has opportunity to interact with Siglec, which may enhance their infection, as many Siglecs are known to be endocytosed upon engagement.

The eukaryotic pathogen *Trypanosoma cruzi* (the parasite that causes Chagas disease) uses its trans-sialidase to transfer host sialic acid to its cell surface mucin-like glycoproteins. This modification may enhance its binding to Siglecs (Erdmann et al. 2009). Although the model used by the study is mouse Siglec-E and not immediately relevant to humans, its human functional equivalent Siglec-9 may be involved in the case of human disease.

Conclusions and Perspectives

As the reported examples of pathogen-Siglec interactions are still limited, the conclusions and patterns we can draw from the literature may be still sketchy and insufficient. Further study will reveal rules and exceptions regarding the mechanisms and consequences of pathogen-Siglec interactions and provide clues for

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