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RNA Sequencing Identifies Transcriptionally-Viable Gene Fusions in Esophageal Adenocarcinomas

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Abstract

Esophageal adenocarcinoma (EAC) is a deadly cancer with increasing incidence in the U.S., but mechanisms underlying pathogenesis are still mostly elusive. In addressing this question, we assessed gene-fusion landscapes by comprehensive RNA sequencing (RNAseq) of 55 pre-treatment EAC and 49 non-malignant biopsy tissues from patients undergoing endoscopy for Barrett's esophagus. In this cohort, we identified 21 novel candidate EAC-associated fusions occurring in 3.33%-11.67% of EACs. Two candidate fusions were selected for validation by PCR and Sanger sequencing in an independent set of pre-treatment EAC (N=115) and non-malignant (N=183) biopsy tissues. In particular, we observed RPS6KB1-VMP1 gene fusion as a recurrent

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event occurring in ~10% of EAC cases. Notably, EAC cases harboring RPS6KB1–VMP1 fusions exhibited significantly poorer overall survival as compared to fusion-negative cases. Mechanistic investigations established that the RPS6KB1–VMP1 transcript coded for a fusion protein which significantly enhanced the growth rate of non-dysplastic Barrett's esophagus cells. Compared to the wild-type VMP1 protein, which mediates normal cellular autophagy, RPS6KB1–VMP1 fusion exhibited aberrant subcellular localization and was relatively ineffective in triggering autophagy. Overall, our findings identified RPS6KB1–VMP1 as a genetic fusion that promotes EAC by modulating autophagy-related processes, offering new insights into the molecular pathogenesis of esophageal adenocarcinomas.

INTRODUCTION

The incidence of esophageal adenocarcinoma (EAC) has increased rapidly in the past few decades while remaining a highly morbid and mortal disease (1). In fact, EAC is now the most common esophageal malignancy in the United States. Despite the recognition of Barrett's esophagus (BE) as a pre-malignant condition, mechanisms underlying EAC progression remain unclear (2). Somatic gene-fusions in cancers are being increasingly recognized for their potential tumorigenic roles across malignancies, and can be attractive as diagnostic and therapeutic molecular targets. Here we used whole-transcriptome RNA sequencing (RNAseq) to map and characterize transcriptionally-viable gene-fusions on a genome-scale in EACs.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Detailed methods are provided as supplementary methods

Patient samples

We compiled a discovery set of 109 samples for RNAseq, consisting of 55 pre-treatment EACs, 49 non-malignant tissue samples, and 5 EAC cell lines. We also compiled an independent validation set ($N=298$) of 115 pre-treatment EACs and 183 normal/non-malignant tissue samples.

Survival Analysis

Kaplan-Meier plots and survival differences were estimated using the Peto-Prentice test (3).

Whole-genome sequencing

Whole-genome sequencing was performed on FLO-1 cell line DNA. BreakDancer (4) was used to identify for structural/copy-number aberrations in the vicinity of the RPS6KB1–VMP1 fusion breakpoint.

Copy-number assay

Primary tissue DNAs were evaluated for copy-number alterations using TaqMan assay for genes in the vicinity of the RPS6KB1–VMP1 fusion breakpoint.

Cell lines

Cell lines were obtained as follows: Cos7 and CP-A cells (ATCC), HEK-293FT (Life Technologies), FLO-1 and SKGT4 (kindly provided by Dr. Navtej Buttar, Mayo Clinic), JH-EsoAd1 (kindly provided by Drs. James Eshleman and Anirban Maitra, Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine), OE19 and OE33 (Sigma). All cell lines were obtained in 2014 and tested for authenticity using STR genotyping, and were screened periodically for mycoplasma contamination.

Generation of stable CP-A cells

CP-A cells were infected with replication-deficient lentivirus to stably express full-length RPS6KB1–VMP1 (E1-F7, E4-E7) fusion, or tubulin beta class I (TUBB) control transcript.

Cell growth assay

CP-A cells, stably expressing each of the fusion or control gene transcripts, were assessed for growth over a course of 120 hours following seeding using the automated IncuCyte system.

Co-localization analysis of LC3A/B with RPS6KB1–VMP1 and VMP1 proteins

Cos7 cells, carrying empty vector, or V5-His containing full-length RPS6KB1–VMP1 or VMP1 transcript, were incubated with anti-microtubule-associated protein 1 light chain 3 (LC3B) and anti-V5 antibodies, followed by incubation with Alexa-conjugated secondary antibodies and imaging using a Leica SP8 super resolution confocal microscope.

Co-immunoprecipitation of Beclin1 with RPS6KB1–VMP1 and VMP1 proteins

Total cell lysates from Cos7 cells, carrying empty vector or V5-His containing full-length RPS6KB1–VMP1 or VMP1 transcript, were immunoprecipitated using anti-V5 agarose beads. Western blots were performed with anti-V5 HRP and anti-Beclin1 antibodies.

Western blot analysis of LC3A/B

Cos7 and CP-A cells expressing full-length RPS6KB1–VMP1 or VMP1 or vector/baseline control transcripts were grown in nutrient-depleted medium, and subsequently treated with 30μM Chloroquine for 4 hours at 37°C. LC3A/B protein expression was subsequently assessed by Western blot using anti-LC3A/B antibody.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Discovery of candidate gene-fusions in EACs

We used the deFuse algorithm (5) to detect putative gene-fusions in EAC and non-malignant tissues, included in the RNAseq discovery sample set (Supplementary Tables S1, S2, and S3). We identified 23 candidate EAC-associated fusion transcripts, retaining an open reading frame and occurring in 3.33%-11.67% of EACs (Supplementary Table S4), of which 21 (91%) were confirmed by PCR and Sanger sequencing analyses of the fusion-junctions in respective samples (Supplementary Table S4), likely suggesting a false-positive rate of 9% in the informatics-based discovery in this study. Next, of these 21 PCR-confirmed candidate

fusions, we prioritized two fusions, OSBPL1A (Oxysterol binding protein-like 1A)–LAMA3 (laminin alpha 3), and RPS6KB1 (ribosomal protein S6 kinase)–VMP1 (vacuole membrane protein 1) (Supplementary Fig. S1) for further studies based on the following criteria: we compared the 23 fusions from our study with prior whole-genome DNA sequencing studies in EACs reporting on structural variants (6,7), and found fusions affecting the *LAMA3* gene to be common across the two prior (6,7) and our current study. On the other hand, RPS6KB1–VMP1 fusion had been previously described in breast cancers where its expression was found to be associated with poorer survival in breast cancer patients (8). Accordingly, we prioritized OSBPL1A–LAMA3 and RPS6KB1–VMP1 for further validation analysis. Of note, two versions of RPS6KB1–VMP1 fusion (E1–E7, E4–E7) were identified (Supplementary Fig. S1) by deFuse and/or by PCR-based cloning in the discovery EAC samples, both of which lacked the full RPS6KB1 kinase domain and encoded a truncated VMP1 protein.

RPS6KB1–VMP1 is a recurrent fusion in EACs with prognostic potential

Assessment of the two candidate fusions using PCR and Sanger sequencing in an independent set of EAC ($N=115$) and normal/non-malignant ($N=183$) tissues (Supplementary Table S5) revealed RPS6KB1–VMP1 (E1–E7) as a recurrent fusion present in 9.56% of EACs, but not detectable in normal/non-malignant tissue samples (Supplementary Table S6, Fig. 1B). On the other hand, the E4–E7 RPS6KB1–VMP1 isoform and the OSBPL1A–LAMA3 fusions were not detected in any of the EACs (Supplementary Table S6) or in the normal/non-malignant tissues in the validation cohort.

We next evaluated the clinical significance of the RPS6KB1–VMP1 (E1–E7) fusion by assessing its association with overall survival in stage III EAC patients. EAC patients harboring RPS6KB1–VMP1 fusion exhibited significantly poorer overall survival than fusion-negative patients (Fig. 1C, $P=0.0084$), consistent with the findings in breast cancer (8). Additionally, the overall survival of fusion-positive EAC patients remained poor even after adjusting for age at diagnosis and tumor grade using a Cox proportional hazards model ($P=0.051$), highlighting the prognostic potential of this fusion.

Potential genomic mechanisms underlying RPS6KB1–VMP1 fusion

VMP1 and *RPS6KB1* genes are both localized on the same strand on chromosome 17q23.1, with *VMP1* gene located 5' to the *RPS6KB1* gene. Given that VMP1 is the 3' partner of the RPS6KB1–VMP1 fusion (Fig. 1A), it is unlikely that transcription readthrough or trans-splicing may be the underlying causative mechanism of this fusion. Indeed, the deFuse algorithm suggests this fusion could be a consequence of genomic rearrangements in the chromosome 17q23.1 region (Supplementary Table S2), likely resulting from tandem DNA duplications in this chromosomal locus. Interestingly, copy-number aberrations, a consequence of such tandem duplication events, are frequently observed in chromosome 17q in EACs (9,10). Consistent with this, whole-genome DNA sequencing in the RPS6KB1–VMP1 expressing FLO-1 (EAC-48) cell line revealed copy-number gains in the vicinity of *RPS6KB1* and *VMP1* genes (Supplementary Fig. S2). Additional qPCR-based copy-number analysis in a set ($N=10$) of fusion-positive primary EACs also revealed significant copy-number gains in 17q23.1 genomic locus, accounting for 40% of EACs tested

(Supplementary Fig. S2). These findings, taken together with the prior report in breast cancer (8), strongly suggest that genomic rearrangements, potentially resulting from tandem duplications in the 17q23 locus, facilitate fusion between *RPS6KB1* and *VMP1* in a subset of fusion-positive EACs.

Protein-coding potential of RPS6KB1–VMP1 fusion transcript

We evaluated whether the RPS6KB1–VMP1 transcript indeed codes for protein or represents a non-coding fusion transcript. To test this, we performed Western blot analyses in Cos7 cells ectopically expressing the E1-E7 and E4-E7 fusion transcripts, and in FLO-1 cells endogenously expressing the fusion transcripts (Fig. 2A), using specific antibodies against N- and C-terminal regions of the native RPS6KB1 protein. As expected, while the endogenous RPS6KB1 protein was detected using either N- or C-terminal anti-RPS6KB1 antibodies, only the N-terminal antibody detected the fusion protein (Figs. 2B and 2C) in these cells. Taken together, these findings suggest that the RPS6KB1–VMP1 transcript can code for a fusion protein in mammalian cells. We nonetheless note that the low levels of the endogenous fusion protein observed in the FLO-1 cells (Fig. 2B) is consistent with the relatively low observed RNA read counts of the RPS6KB1–VMP1 fusion isoforms in the FLO-1 cell line (Supplementary Table 2).

Functional characterization of RPS6KB1–VMP1 fusion

Assessment of transforming potential of RPS6KB1–VMP1 (E1-E7) using the standard NIH/3T3 model did not reveal this fusion as inducing neoplastic transformation (Supplementary Fig. S3). This is in line with prior studies suggesting that many of the gene-fusions identified in tumors are not sufficient to drive malignant transformation *per se*, and that additional genomic aberrations are likely required for neoplastic transformation (11). Given that the RPS6KB1–VMP1 fusion is detected in the FLO-1 EAC cell line, we also attempted to evaluate whether knock-down of the fusion transcript in FLO-1 impairs anchorage-independent growth. However, repeated attempts to design and induce siRNA-mediated knock-down of the RPS6KB1–VMP1 fusion transcript in FLO-1 cells were technically unsuccessful. Therefore, as an alternative approach, we proceeded to functionally characterize this fusion using a widely-employed non-dysplastic BE cell line model (CP-A), especially given that the vast majority of EACs arise from BE.

We found CP-A cells stably expressing the RPS6KB1–VMP1 (E1-E7) fusion isoform to exhibit a significant increase in growth rate ($P < 0.001$), that was evident at higher cell densities during the later time-points (Fig. 3A). Since high cell density has been shown to be a potent inducer of cellular autophagy (12,13), and RPS6KB1–VMP1 encodes a truncated VMP1, a well-known autophagy-inducing protein (14), we hypothesized that this fusion may be defective in triggering cellular autophagy. We accordingly proceeded to assess the potential effects of this fusion on cellular autophagy processes. Given that VMP1 triggers the formation of autophagosomes by recruiting LC3 (14), we speculated that the RPS6KB1–VMP1 fusion with a truncated VMP1 may not co-localize with LC3/autophagosomes. Indeed, as shown in Fig. 3B, while VMP1 exhibited striking co-localization with LC3B as distinct punctae, RPS6KB1–VMP1 fusion proteins showed a diffuse localization pattern. In line with this, co-immunoprecipitation studies revealed the

RPS6KB1-VMP1 (E1-E7) fusion as neither exhibiting interaction with Beclin1 (Fig. 3C), another key promoter of autophagy (14,15), nor inducing LC3A/B-II protein expression, a marker of active autophagy processes (15), in Cos 7 cells. This finding was independently confirmed in nutrient-deprived CP-A cells where TUBB showed a marked induction of the active LC3A/B-II protein, as compared to the RPS6KB1-VMP1 (E1-E7) fusion isoform (Fig. 3D). Incidentally, our observation of tubulin as a potent inducer of active LC3A/B-II protein (Fig. 3D) is in line with its known role in stimulating autophagy under nutrient-deprived conditions (16). Also interestingly, cells expressing the RPS6KB1-VMP1 (E1-E7) isoform exhibited reduced levels of LC3A/B-I protein when compared to the controls (Fig. 3D), suggesting that the E1-E7 fusion may additionally exert dominant-negative effects on cellular autophagy processes. Taken together, these findings suggest that the RPS6KB1-VMP1 fusion may play a role in EAC pathogenesis via impairing cellular autophagy, resulting either from VMP1 haploinsufficiency and/or due to dominant-negative effects of the E1-E7 fusion on cellular autophagy processes. Further studies are warranted to delineate the timing and significance of autophagy pathway deregulations during EAC pathogenesis.

In summary, our study provides genome-scale characterization of transcriptionally-viable gene-fusions in EACs. Intriguingly, apart from the candidate EAC-associated fusions listed in Supplementary Table S4, our RNAseq informatics analysis also detected additional fusions that were present in both EAC and matched normal SQ tissues but not in normal gastric or unmatched BE tissues in the RNAseq dataset (Supplementary Table S7). While we did not prioritize such fusions in this study nor did we determine if these are selectively occurring in squamous tissue derived from patients with cancer, deciphering the role of these additional fusions in EAC pathogenesis and their potential utility as early biomarkers of disease progression clearly warrants separate investigation.

Supplementary Material

Refer to Web version on PubMed Central for supplementary material.

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Figure. 1. RPS6KB1–VMP1 fusion in EACs

(A) (Top) conserved protein domains in RPS6KB1 and VMP1, along with their length in amino acids (aa). (Middle) native gene exons included in the RPS6KB1–VMP1 fusion transcript. (Bottom) PCR amplified product spanning the E1–E7 isoform of the RPS6KB1–VMP1 fusion-junction, along with the Sanger sequencing chromatogram of the fusion-junction in representative EAC and matched SQ tissues used in the discovery RNAseq study.

(B) Representative agarose gel images of RPS6KB1–VMP1 (E1-E7) fusion-junction PCR product from matched SQ and fusion-positive primary EAC tissue RNAs ($N=11$ pairs), included in the validation (val) cohort. Beta-2-microglobulin (B2M) was used as an endogenous RNA control. **(C)** Kaplan-Meier survival curves for Stage III EACs with or without the RPS6KB1–VMP1 (E1-E7) fusion.

Figure 2. Assessing the protein-coding potential of RPS6KB1-VMP1 fusion in mammalian cells
(A) Representative gel image showing the expression of full-length RPS6KB1-VMP1 fusion transcripts (E1-E7, E4-E7) in FLO-1 cell line RNA. DNA ladder (L). **(B)** Western blot analysis using an N-terminal (inverted Y) anti-RPS6KB1 primary antibody in FLO-1 and Cos7 cells ectopically expressing full-length RPS6KB1-VMP1 fusion transcripts or vector. (Right) radiographic image of FLO-1 and vector-carrying Cos7 cells at ~5 minute exposure (Long-exposure). **(C)** Western blot analysis using a negative control C-terminal (inverted Y) anti-RPS6KB1 primary antibody in Cos7 and FLO-1 cells from above showing no detection of the fusion protein.

Figure 3. Functional characterization of the RPS6KB1-VMP1 fusion

(A) (Top) effect of RPS6KB1-VMP1 fusion transcripts on CP-A cell growth. Y-axis represents the average confluence values of two independently-derived stable clones per experimental arm, with 12 replicates each, normalized to time zero (X-axis). The error bars represent the standard error of the means. (Bottom) PCR analyses of fusion transcripts in RNA derived from CP-A cells transfected with control gene (TUBB) or fusion transcripts, and Western blot analysis demonstrating fusion protein detection with the N-terminal anti-RPS6KB1 antibody. (B) (Top) localization of ectopically expressed RPS6KB1-VMP1 and VMP1 proteins in Cos7 cells, detected by anti-V5 antibody (green fluorescence), and endogenous LC3B protein, a marker of autophagosome (red fluorescence). Note the diffuse staining pattern of RPS6KB1-VMP1 fusion protein, as opposed to the specific co-localization of VMP1 with LC3B protein (scale bar, 10 μ m). (Bottom) Western blot analysis demonstrating the protein expression of ectopically expressed VMP1 and RPS6KB1-VMP1 fusion in Cos7 cells. (C) Immunoprecipitation (IP) and immunoblotting (IB) analysis in Cos7 cells demonstrating the lack of interaction of RPS6KB1-VMP1 (E1-E7) fusion protein with Beclin1, as compared to the RPS6KB1-VMP1 (E4-E7) fusion or VMP1 protein. Western blot analysis demonstrates equivalent amounts of endogenous Beclin1 protein present in Cos7 total cell lysates (TCL) across treatment groups. (D) (Top) Western blot analysis using anti-LC3A/B antibody in Cos7 cells, following nutrient-depletion and chloroquine treatment, showing significant induction of LC3A/B-II product in VMP1 expressing cells, as compared to Cos7 cells carrying the RPS6KB1-VMP1 (E1-E7) fusion. Also note the reduction in the protein levels of LC3A/B-I in RPS6KB1-VMP1 (E1-E7) expressing cells as compared to vector control. Western blot analysis demonstrates protein expression of ectopically expressed VMP1 and RPS6KB1-VMP1 fusion transcripts in Cos7 cells. (Bottom) Western blot analysis using anti-LC3A/B antibody in CP-A cells, stably

expressing RPS6KB1–VMP1 fusion or control TUBB transcripts, after nutrient-depletion and chloroquine treatment. Note the significant induction of LC3A/B-II product in TUBB expressing CP-A cells, as compared to the CPA-cells carrying the RPS6KB1–VMP1 (E1-E7) fusion.

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