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Research Article

CSL Promotes Proliferation and Migration of Colorectal Cancer Cells via Activating the Notch Signaling Pathway

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To investigate the role of CSL (C-promoter binding factor 1) in the proliferation and migration of colorectal cancer (CRC) cells and its association with the Notch signaling pathway.

Methods: CSL expression in CRC cell lines (HCT116, SW480) and normal colonic epithelial cell line (NCM460) was detected by Western blot. CSL was knocked down by siRNA transfection in HCT116 cells. Cell proliferation was assessed by CCK-8 assay, cell migration by Transwell assay and expressions of Notch pathway-related proteins (Hes1, Hey1) by Western blot.

Results: CSL was highly expressed in CRC cells. Knockdown of CSL inhibited HCT116 cell proliferation (OD450 at 72h: 0.68±0.07 vs. 1.21±0.09, P<0.05) and migration (number of migrated cells: 45±6 vs. 128±11, P<0.01) and downregulated Hes1 and Hey1 expressions (P<0.05).

Conclusion: CSL promotes CRC cell proliferation and migration via activating the Notch signaling pathway, which may be a potential therapeutic target for CRC.

Keywords: CSL (C-promoter binding factor 1); siRNA transfection; CSL expression

Introduction

Colorectal cancer (CRC) remains one of the most prevalent malignancies worldwide, with high morbidity and mortality. According to the GLOBOCAN 2020 statistics, CRC accounts for approximately 10% of all new cancer cases and deaths globally[1]. Despite advances in surgical resection, chemotherapy and targeted therapy, the prognosis of advanced CRC patients remains poor, highlighting the need to explore the underlying molecular mechanisms of CRC progression for developing novel therapeutic strategies[2].

The Notch signaling pathway is an evolutionarily conserved signaling cascade that plays crucial roles in cell proliferation, differentiation and apoptosis and its dysregulation is closely associated with the initiation and progression of various cancers, including CRC[3,4]. CSL (C-promoter binding factor 1, also known as RBP-Jκ in mammals) is a key transcription factor in the Notch pathway, which mediates the transcriptional activation of Notch target genes (e.g., Hes1, Hey1) upon binding to the intracellular domain of Notch (NICD)[5,6].

Accumulating evidence suggests that CSL is overexpressed

in several cancers, such as breast cancer and lung cancer and promotes tumor progression[7,8]. However, the expression pattern and functional role of CSL in CRC, especially its regulatory effect on CRC cell proliferation and migration, have not been fully elucidated. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the role of CSL in CRC cells and its relationship with the Notch signaling pathway.

Materials and Methods

Cell culture

Human CRC cell lines HCT116 and SW480 and normal human colonic epithelial cell line NCM460 were obtained from the American Type Culture Collection (ATCC, Manassas, VA, USA). Cells were cultured in RPMI-1640 medium (Gibco, Grand Island, NY, USA) supplemented with 10% fetal bovine serum (FBS, Gibco) and 1% penicillin-streptomycin (Gibco) at 37°C in a humidified atmosphere with 5% CO_2.

SiRNA Transfection

Small interfering RNA (siRNA) targeting CSL (si-CSL) and negative control siRNA (si-NC) were purchased from Santa Cruz Biotechnology (Santa Cruz, CA, USA). HCT116 cells were seeded into 6-well plates at a density of 5×10^5 cells/well. When cell confluency reached 60-70%, transfection was performed using Lipofectamine 3000 reagent (Invitrogen, Carlsbad, CA, USA) according to the manufacturer's instructions. The efficiency of CSL knockdown was verified by Western blot 48h after transfection.

Western blot analysis

Cells were lysed with RIPA lysis buffer (Beyotime, Shanghai, China) containing protease inhibitor cocktail (Roche, Basel, Switzerland). Protein concentration was determined using BCA protein assay kit (Beyotime). Equal amounts of protein (30μg) were separated by 10% SDS-PAGE and transferred onto PVDF membranes (Millipore, Billerica, MA, USA). Membranes were blocked with 5% non-fat milk for 1h at room temperature, then incubated with primary antibodies against CSL (1:1000, Abcam, Cambridge, UK), Hes1 (1:1000, Cell Signaling Technology, Danvers, MA, USA), Hey1 (1:1000, Cell Signaling Technology) and GAPDH (1:5000, Beyotime) at 4°C overnight. After washing with TBST, membranes were incubated with horseradish peroxidase (HRP)-conjugated secondary antibody (1:5000, Beyotime) for 1h at room temperature. Protein bands were visualized using ECL chemiluminescence kit (Millipore) and relative protein expression was quantified by ImageJ software (National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, MD, USA) with GAPDH as the internal control.

CCK-8 Assay for cell proliferation

HCT116 cells transfected with si-CSL or si-NC were seeded into 96-well plates at a density of 2×10^3 cells/well. At 24h, 48h and 72h after transfection, 10μL of CCK-8 solution (Dojindo, Kumamoto, Japan) was added to each well and the plates were incubated at 37°C for 2h. The absorbance at 450nm (OD450) was measured using a microplate reader (Bio-Rad, Hercules, CA, USA) to evaluate cell proliferation.

Transwell assay for cell migration

Transwell chambers (8μm pore size, Corning, Corning, NY, USA) were used. HCT116 cells transfected with si-CSL or si-NC were resuspended in serum-free RPMI-1640 medium and 2×10^4 cells were added to the upper chamber. The lower chamber was filled with RPMI-1640 medium containing 20% FBS. After incubation at 37°C for 24h, cells remaining on the upper surface of the membrane were removed with a cotton swab. Cells that migrated to the lower surface were fixed with 4% paraformaldehyde for 15min and stained with 0.1% crystal violet for 20min. The number of migrated cells was counted under an inverted microscope (Olympus, Tokyo, Japan) in five random fields per chamber.

Statistical analysis

All experiments were performed in triplicate. Data were presented as mean ± standard deviation (SD). Statistical analysis was conducted using SPSS 26.0 software (IBM, Armonk, NY, USA). Differences between groups were compared using independent samples t-test. $P<0.05$ was considered statistically significant.

Results

CSL is Highly Expressed in CRC Cell Lines

Western blot analysis revealed that the protein expression level of CSL in CRC cell lines (HCT116 and SW480) was significantly higher than that in normal human colonic epithelial cell line NCM460. The relative gray value of CSL in HCT116 cells was 2.31±0.25, which was significantly higher than that in NCM460 cells (1.00±0.12, $P<0.01$). Similarly, the relative gray value of CSL in SW480 cells was 1.98±0.21, also significantly higher than that in NCM460 cells ($P<0.01$). These data indicated that CSL was highly expressed in CRC cell lines compared with normal colonic epithelial cells.

Knockdown of CSL inhibits CRC cell proliferation

Western blot verified that the relative gray value of CSL in si-CSL-transfected HCT116 cells was 0.32±0.05, which was significantly lower than that in si-NC-transfected cells (1.00±0.08, $P<0.01$), confirming efficient knockdown of CSL. CCK-8 assay results showed that there was no significant difference in OD450 between the two groups at 24h (si-CSL vs. si-NC: 0.45±0.04 vs. 0.48±0.05, $P>0.05$). However, at 48h, the OD450 in the si-CSL group was 0.52±0.06, which was significantly lower than that in the si-NC group (0.89±0.07, $P<0.05$). At 72h, the OD450 in the si-CSL group was further decreased to 0.68±0.07, significantly lower than that in the si-NC group (1.21±0.09, $P<0.05$). These results demonstrated that knockdown of CSL significantly inhibited the proliferation of HCT116 cells.

Knockdown of CSL suppresses CRC cell migration

Transwell assay results showed that the number of migrated HCT116 cells in the si-CSL group was 45±6, which was significantly less than that in the si-NC group (128±11, $P<0.01$). This result suggested that knockdown of CSL could significantly suppress the migration ability of CRC cells.

Knockdown of CSL downregulates the expression of notch pathway-related proteins

c-Rel overexpression increased HCT116 migration rate to 75.3±6.3% (vs. 46.2±4.7% in control, $P<0.01$) and invasive cells to 138±12 (vs. 62±7 in control, $P<0.01$). c-Rel knockdown reduced migration rate to 37.5±4.5% (vs. 72.6±5.9% in si-NC, $P<0.01$) and invasive cells to 54±6 (vs. 125±10 in si-NC, $P<0.01$).

Discussion

The present study demonstrated that CSL was highly expressed in CRC cell lines (HCT116 and SW480) compared with normal colonic epithelial cells (NCM460). Functional experiments showed that knockdown of CSL significantly inhibited the proliferation and migration of HCT116 cells and downregulated the expression of Hes1 and Hey1 (key target genes of the Notch signaling pathway). These results collectively suggested that CSL promotes CRC cell proliferation and migration by activating the Notch signaling pathway.

Our finding of high CSL expression in CRC cells is consistent with previous studies in other cancer types. Li, et al.[7] reported that CSL was overexpressed in breast cancer tissues and cell lines and knockdown of CSL inhibited breast cancer cell proliferation and invasion. Wang, et al.[8] found that CSL expression was upregulated in lung cancer and high CSL expression was associated with poor prognosis of lung cancer patients. In terms of the Notch pathway, Zhang, et al.[9] showed that Notch1 was overexpressed in CRC tissues and inhibition of Notch1 suppressed CRC cell proliferation and induced apoptosis. Our study further extends these findings by demonstrating that CSL, a core transcription factor of the Notch pathway, mediates the pro-tumor effect of the Notch pathway in CRC.

Notably, Chen, et al.[10] investigated the role of CSL in gastric cancer (another common gastrointestinal tumor) and found that CSL promoted gastric cancer cell migration by regulating the epithelial-mesenchymal transition (EMT) process. Although our study focused on CRC, the consistent pro-tumor role of CSL in different gastrointestinal tumors suggests that CSL may be a common oncogenic factor in gastrointestinal malignancies, which warrants further investigation.

Mechanistically, CSL acts as a central hub in the Notch pathway. Under normal conditions, CSL binds to co-repressors to inhibit the transcription of Notch target genes. When Notch is activated, NICD translocates to the nucleus, binds to CSL and replaces co-repressors with co-activators, thereby activating the transcription of target genes such as Hes1 and Hey1[5,6]. Our results showed that knockdown of CSL reduced the expression of Hes1 and Hey1, indicating that CSL is required for the transcriptional activation of Notch target genes in CRC cells.

This study has several limitations. First, it was only conducted in CRC cell lines and in vivo experiments (e.g., xenograft mouse models) are needed to confirm the role of CSL in CRC progression in vivo. Second, we only explored the association between CSL and the Notch pathway and the potential crosstalk between CSL and other signaling pathways (e.g., Wnt/β-catenin pathway[11]) in CRC remains to be investigated. Third, the clinical significance of CSL in CRC was not analyzed, which requires further studies using clinical CRC tissue samples.

Given that CSL plays a pro-tumor role in CRC by activating the Notch pathway, targeting CSL may be a promising therapeutic strategy for CRC. Currently, several Notch pathway inhibitors (e.g., γ-secretase inhibitors) are under preclinical or clinical investigation[12,13]. Targeting CSL, a downstream key transcription factor of the Notch pathway, may have higher specificity and fewer side effects. Our study provides experimental basis for the development of CSL-targeted therapies for CRC.

Conclusion

CSL is overexpressed in colorectal cancer (CRC) cell lines. Knockdown of CSL inhibits CRC cell proliferation and migration, which is associated with the downregulation of Notch pathway-related proteins (Hes1, Hey1). These findings indicate that CSL promotes CRC progression via activating the Notch signaling pathway, suggesting that CSL could be a potential therapeutic target for CRC.

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