Substrates for Cell Adhesion Prepared via Active Site-Directed Immobilization of a Protein Domain

William L. Murphy,†,§ Kwesi O. Mercurius,†,§ Shohei Kōde,‡ and Milan Mrksich*,†

University of Chicago, Department of Chemistry and Institute for Biophysical Dynamics, and Department of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology, Chicago, Illinois 60637

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Recent studies in basic cell biology and bioengineering call for model substrates that present active proteins, with control over protein density, pattern, and orientation, to more directly mimic the natural extracellular matrix (ECM). Herein we demonstrate a strategy for controlled, irreversible immobilization of a cell adhesion protein domain onto an otherwise bioinert substrate with well-defined protein orientation and density. Our approach uses a tri(ethylene glycol)-terminated self-assembled monolayer presenting a phosphonate ligand that is used to immobilize an engineered fusion protein. One component of the fusion protein, the 22 kDa serine esterase cutinase, reacts with the surface-bound ligand to form a site-specific covalent adduct, and the second component of the fusion protein is therefore immobilized on the surface. Here we use this approach to immobilize an engineered version of the 12 kDa 10th domain of fibronectin (FnIII10Eng) to direct cell adhesion. Substrates presenting this protein mediated rapid attachment and spreading of Swiss 3T3 fibroblasts, while substrates presenting cutinase or the phosphonate ligand alone did not support cell attachment. In addition, we used Chinese hamster ovary cells engineered to express specific integrin receptors to show that FnIII10Eng interacts with multiple integrin cell surface receptors, including human αV and α5-containing integrins. This general approach, in principle, can be used to immobilize any protein with an available gene sequence, providing an enabling technique for fundamental cell biology and tissue engineering.

Introduction

An important theme in biosurface chemistry has aimed to develop model biological substrates that directly mimic properties of the protein extracellular matrix (ECM). The ECM plays a central role in organizing cells into tissue and operates by presenting ligands that bind cell surface receptors. This work has led to substrates that present short, bioactive peptides on highly bioinert substrates in lieu of nonspecifically adsorbed ECM proteins to examine cell adhesion, migration, and differentiation.1–5 For example, Hubbell and co-workers utilized an Arg-Gly-Asp (RGD)-terminated glass substrate to study the influence of ligand spacing on α5β1 integrin-mediated cell adhesion and focal contact formation,2,6 and Mooney and co-workers used bioinert alginate hydrogels that presented RGD to study the relative influence of substrate mechanics and RGD ligand spacing on myoblast phenotype.4 These studies have achieved control over ligand–receptor interactions, making it routine to probe cell–substrate interactions while avoiding complicating factors associated with adsorbed ECM protein layers, such as cell-mediated surface remodeling and limited ligand availability.1–2,12 A key limitation of the model substrates that present peptide ligands is that they do not approach the complexity of the natural ECM. There is a need to develop model substrates that present active proteins, with control over protein density, pattern, and orientation, to more directly mimic the ECM. Herein we demonstrate a strategy for controlled immobilization of a cell adhesion protein domain onto an otherwise bioinert substrate with well-defined protein orientation and density, using a covalent immobilization approach that we developed in a previous study.13 The resulting system more closely mimics the natural ECM and represents a general protein immobilization strategy that can be used to create functional ECM model systems.


§ Authors contributed equally.
† To whom correspondence should be addressed. Milan Mrksich, Department of Chemistry, University of Chicago, 5735 S. Ellis Ave., Chicago, IL 60637. Phone: 773-702-1651. Fax: 773-702-0805. E-mail: mmrkscih@uchicago.edu.
‡ Department of Chemistry and Institute for Biophysical Dynamics.
* Department of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology.

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sequence. The FnIII10Eng domain was previously engineered to bind optimally to human \( \alpha_v \beta_3 \) integrin receptors to mediate cell adhesion.

**Results and Discussion**

**Protein Synthesis and Characterization.** To construct the cutinase-FnIII10Eng fusion protein, we first amplified the cutinase gene from Fusarium solani genomic DNA and ligated it into a pET-22b(+) vector (Novagen) to yield the pCut22b plasmid, as described previously. We confirmed the presence of the correct inserts by bidirectional DNA sequencing. Cells were grown at 37 °C to \( A_{600} = 0.5 \) before induction with 0.5 mM isopropyl \( \beta\)-D-thiogalactopyranoside at 25 °C for 18 h. Cells were collected by centrifugation at 5000 g for 15 min and resuspended in 20 mL of PBS. Expressed protein was then liberated via sonication, and the resulting solution was clarified by centrifugation.

**Protein Immobilization.** We used surface plasmon resonance (SPR) spectroscopy to characterize the immobilization of the cutinase-FnIII10Eng fusion protein to a monolayer presenting the phosphonate ligand. We prepared monolayers as described previously. In the SPR experiment, PBS was first flowed over the surface for 3 min to establish a baseline refractive index level, followed by a solution of protein in the same buffer for 30 min to observe binding. Finally, we replaced the protein solution with PBS for 3 min to quantify the amount of irreversibly bound protein. Both the cutinase and the cutinase-FnIII10Eng fusion proteins bound irreversibly to monolayers presenting the phosphonate ligand. We prepared monolayers to characterize cell adhesion to substrates presenting cutinase-FnIII10Eng on a bioinert background. Monolayers (EG)3-terminated monolayers that did not contain the phosphonate ligand did not support immobilization of the protein to the surface, demonstrating that the monolayer phosphonate ligand did not support immobilization of protein to the surface, demonstrating that the monolayer was inert to nonspecific protein adsorption. In addition, cutinase-FnIII10Eng fusion proteins did not bind to monolayers presenting the phosphonate ligand in the presence of soluble p-nitrophenylphosphate, demonstrating that the protein immobilization was directed by the active site of cutinase.

**Cell Adhesion.** We prepared a series of monolayers to characterize cell adhesion to substrates presenting cutinase-FnIII10Eng on a bioinert background. Monolayers display in a previous study. We amplified the FnIII10Eng gene from this plasmid and cloned it into the pCut-22b plasmid. The resulting plasmid (pCut-FnIII10Eng) encoded a gene for FnIII10Eng fused to the C-terminus of cutinase. We expressed cutinase-FnIII10Eng in Escherichia coli [BL21(DE3), Novagen] harboring pCutFnIII10Eng with a T7 expression system. Then we purified the fusion protein via size-exclusion chromatography using a Sephadex G-75 column (75 cm × 2 cm, 1 mL/min) equilibrated with phosphate-buffered saline (PBS) (15 mg active protein from a 500 mL culture at 95% purity). We also expressed, purified, and characterized cutinase alone to use as a control. We confirmed cutinase activity of the expressed proteins (alone and in the cutinase-FnIII10Eng fusion protein) with an established colorimetric assay based on the hydrolysis of p-nitrophenyl butyrate. Matrix-assisted laser desorption ionization time-of-flight (MALDI-TOF) mass spectrometry (m/z = 33,531; m/z = 33,483) confirmed the appropriate molecular weight of cutinase-FnIII10Eng.

**Design Rationale**

Our approach to prepare model substrates that present protein domains is illustrated in Figure 1. The strategy employs a self-assembled monolayer (SAM) of alkanethiols on gold that presents a phosphonate ligand among tri(ethylene glycol) \((\text{EG})_3\) groups. The \((\text{EG})_3\) groups serve to prevent nonspecific interactions of proteins with the surface, and the phosphonate group serves to immobilize a fusion protein. One component of the fusion protein, the 22 kDa serine esterase cutinase, interacts with the phosphonate ligand, which mimics the tetrahedral transition state of an ester hydrolysis and is attacked by the catalytic serine residue (Ser-120) of cutinase to form a site-specific covalent adduct. The other component, the 12 kDa 10th domain of fibronectin III (FnIII10Eng), is an ECM protein that contains the RGD cell adhesion integrin receptors to support immobilization of cutinase fusions, and the cutinase-FnIII10Eng fusion proteins bound irreversibly to monolayers presenting the phosphonate ligand (Figure 2). Application of 0.1% (w/v) sodium dodecyl sulfate (SDS) to the surface after protein immobilization did not remove either protein from the surface (data not shown). This result indicated that the immobilization was covalent, as SDS is a detergent that rapidly removes noncovalently immobilized molecules from a surface. 20 (EG)3-terminated monolayers that did not contain the phosphonate ligand did not support immobilization of protein to the surface, demonstrating that the monolayer was inert to nonspecific protein adsorption. In addition, cutinase-FnIII10Eng fusion proteins did not bind to monolayers presenting the phosphonate ligand in the presence of soluble p-nitrophenylphosphate, demonstrating that the protein immobilization was directed by the active site of cutinase.

**Figure 1.** Schematic representation of (A) the enzyme-directed protein immobilization approach, (B) the monolayer presenting phosphonate groups for immobilization of cutinase fusions, and (C) the reaction of a serine active-site residue with the phosphonate ligand to give covalent immobilization of the protein.

**Protein Synthesis and Characterization.** To construct the cutinase-FnIII10Eng fusion protein, we first amplified the cutinase gene from Fusarium solani genomic DNA and ligated it into a pET-22b(+) vector (Novagen) to yield the pCut22b plasmid, as described previously. We confirmed the presence of the correct inserts by bidirectional DNA sequencing. Cells were grown at 37 °C to \( A_{600} = 0.5 \) before induction with 0.5 mM isopropyl \( \beta\)-D-thiogalactopyranoside at 25 °C for 18 h. Cells were collected by centrifugation at 5000 g for 15 min and resuspended in 20 mL of PBS. Expressed protein was then liberated via sonication, and the resulting solution was clarified by centrifugation.

(16) PCR primers: 5'-CTAGGATCCATGCAGGTTTCTGATGTTCCG-3' and 5'-TCGATCTCGAGTTACTATTTACCTTTTTTACC-3'; from Genosys.
(17) Cloning was via the BamH1 and Xho1 restriction sites, at the 3'-end (C-terminus) of the cutinase gene; restriction enzymes were from New England Biolabs.
(18) We confirmed the presence of the correct inserts by bidirectional DNA sequencing. Cells were grown at 37 °C to \( A_{600} = 0.5 \) before induction with 0.5 mM isopropyl \( \beta\)-D-thiogalactopyranoside at 25 °C for 18 h. Cells were collected by centrifugation at 5000 g for 15 min and resuspended in 20 mL of PBS. Expressed protein was then liberated via sonication, and the resulting solution was clarified by centrifugation.
(19) All SPR experiments were performed with a Biacore 1000 instrument; all experiments used a flow rate of 1 \( \mu\)L/min at 25 °C in PBS (pH = 7.4).
express the human α5 subunit, efficiently attached and spread on monolayers presenting cutinase-FnIII10Eng (Figure 3e,f). These data suggest that adhesion to FnIII10Eng is mediated by both the human αv and α5 integrin subunits. We also qualitatively observed that adhesion of these engineered CHO cells occurred more rapidly to FnIII10Eng-presenting substrates when compared with RGD-peptide-presenting substrates that we have used previously. As expected, none of these cell types adhered to monolayers presenting cutinase (Figure 3g-i) or the phosphonate ligand only (data not shown), again confirming the biospecificity that is intrinsic to monolayers that present ligands against a background of oligo(ethylene glycol) groups. We also examined Swiss 3T3 fibroblast attachment to surfaces presenting cutinase-FnIII10Eng after preincubation of the cells in solutions containing soluble cutinase-FnIII10Eng or fibronectin (10 μg/mL) to preocuppy receptors for fibronectin. No cell attachment was observed in these conditions (Figure 3j,k), indicating that cell adhesion to the cutinase-FnIII10Eng-presenting substrates is indeed mediated by FnIII10Eng.

We performed immunoblocking experiments with the engineered CHO cell line and IMR-90 human fibroblasts to further characterize the role for human αv, and α5 integrin subunits in cell adhesion to our engineered 10th domain of fibronectin III. Cells were preincubated in their respective media containing antibodies against human α5 integrin (P1D6, Invitrogen), human α5β3 integrin (LM609, Chemicon), or both anti-α5 and anti-αvβ3, prior to cell seeding onto each surface type. We then counted the number of adherent cells 1 h after cell seeding. There was a 3-fold decrease in binding of CHO-B2/v7 cells to monolayers presenting FnIII10Eng in the presence of an antibody to α5β3 integrin (Figure 4), indicating that cell adhesion is partially mediated by the human α5 integrin subunit. This partial inhibition was expected because the FnIII10Eng and the anti-αvβ3 antibody used here have comparable affinity (sub-nM) to human αvβ3. There was also a 3-fold decrease in binding of CHO-B2/v7 cells in the presence of an antibody to the α5 integrin subunit (Figure 4), indicating that cell adhesion is also partially mediated by integrins containing the α5 subunit (e.g., αvβ5). However, in each case the presence of the antibody did not completely inhibit cell adhesion to FnIII10Eng. In addition, IMR-90 human fibroblasts were adherent to substrates presenting cutinase-FnIII10Eng in the presence and absence of anti-α5, anti-αvβ3, and both antibodies together, but these cells adhered and spread as readily in the presence of each individual antibody or both antibodies together (data not shown). Taken together, these results indicate that both human αv and human α5 integrin subunits are important for cell attachment to FnIII10Eng but that they are likely not the only integrin receptors capable of binding to this cell adhesion domain.

These results reveal that the engineered 10th domain of type III fibronectin, developed to specifically bind to the human α5β3 integrin in a monovalent interaction, can mediate cell adhesion through at least two types of human integrin receptor subunits, α5 and αv. This is perhaps not surprising, as previous studies have shown that CHO-B2/v7 cells and CHO-B2/vα27 cells are capable of interacting with adsorbed fibronectin, and the interac-

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21) Albino Swiss 3T3 fibroblasts and IMR-90 human lung fibroblasts (obtained from ATCC, Manassas, VA) were cultured in DMEM + 10% fetal bovine serum (FBS) + antibiotics. For all cell adhesion assays on SAMS, cells were harvested by trypsin/EDTA treatment, collected, and then washed and resuspended in their respective growth medium. Suspensions of 150 000 cells/mL were added to each substrate and incubated at 37 °C for 1 h. Substrates were then washed 3× with PBS, fixed in 3.7% paraformaldehyde at 37 °C for 20 min, mounted with DAPI (400 μg/mL) was added to the medium of the B2/v7 and B2α27 cells. CHO cells expressing GFP-labeled Paxillin (a generous gift from Dr. Erkki Ruoslahti, Burnham Institute, La Jolla, CA) were cultured in α-MEM + 10% FBS + antibiotics. G418 (400 μg/mL) was added to the medium of the B2/v7 and B2α27 cells. CHO cells expressing GFP-labeled Paxillin (a generous gift from Dr. Erkki Ruoslahti, Burnham Institute, La Jolla, CA) were cultured in α-MEM + 10% FBS + antibiotics. G418 (400 μg/mL) was added to the medium of the B2/v7 and B2α27 cells. CHO cells expressing GFP-labeled Paxillin (a generous gift from Dr. Erkki Ruoslahti, Burnham Institute, La Jolla, CA) were cultured in α-MEM + 10% FBS + antibiotics. G418 (400 μg/mL) was added to the medium of the B2/v7 and B2α27 cells.
tions are mediated by complexes of human $\alpha_v$ and human $\alpha_5$ with the $\beta_1$ integrin subunit produced by CHO cells. Based on these previous studies using the same engineered CHO cells that we used herein, we can speculate that human $\alpha_v$ and $\alpha_5$ subunits likely complex with $\beta_1$ integrin subunits produced endogenously by CHO cells to form active complexes that bind to immobilized FnIII10Eng.

Previous studies have routinely used flow cytometric analysis and integrin layers adsorbed on tissue culture polystyrene to demonstrate specific binding of integrin receptors to ECM ligands. The interaction between cell surface receptors and ECM ligands during cell adhesion is polyvalent in nature, often involving clustering of multiple integrin receptors on the cell surface. Integrin clustering is likely to lead to differences in both the thermodynamics and kinetics of receptor–ligand binding in adherent cells when compared with cells suspended in solution (e.g., during flow cytometry). Therefore, flow cytometric analysis of integrin–receptor interactions may not represent an appropriate analysis of integrin–ligand interactions. In addition, modest changes in ligand density and affinity can have dramatic effects on cell adhesion. Consequently, studies with conventional adsorbed protein layers (e.g., integrin layers) are difficult to interpret due to the ambiguity in the density of adsorbed protein units that are active and able to interact with a ligand. Therefore, it is difficult to make assertions about cell–ECM interactions using flow cytometry or adsorbed integrin monolayer assays. Our study represents a functional evaluation of the interaction of human $\alpha_v$ or $\alpha_5$-containing integrins with FnIII10Eng, which is perhaps a more appropriate analysis of a ligand for cell adhesion. The fundamental contrast between our surface-chemistry-based method and flow cytometry or assays using adsorbed protein layers may have broad implications for studying other types of receptor–ligand interactions, particularly those involving ECM proteins.

This study demonstrates that the enzyme-directed protein immobilization approach is applicable to creating well-defined and more complex substrates for cell adhesion. This system achieves the same level of control over receptor–ligand interactions as peptide presentation approaches developed previously. However, it also addresses limitations in existing peptide immobilization strategies, as it allows for presentation of a 12 kDa cell adhesion protein in a well-defined orientation and with controlled density on a bioinert SAM background. This approach is advantageous over peptide immobilization when the biological activity of a protein cannot be attributed to a specific peptide residue or when the biological activity of a peptide residue is influenced by nonadjacent residues in the protein structure. In addition, our approach allows for control over the density of biologically active protein on a substrate, which is not achievable in the case of protein adsorption onto tissue.
Cutinase-directed protein immobilization is also advantageous when compared with other covalent protein immobilization approaches such as thiol-maleimide and amide bond formation, due to the indirect nature of the protein immobilization (the cutinase active site responsible for immobilization lies on the opposite side of the protein from the C-terminal fusion site, so that the protein to be immobilized has no interaction with the substrate and is not structurally altered by the immobilization procedure) and the specificity of the protein–substrate interaction, which renders protein purification unnecessary. Further, this approach is, in principle, general in the type of protein that can be immobilized, provided that the sequence encoding the protein of interest can be cloned into the cutinase gene. Therefore, enzyme-directed protein immobilization may serve as an enabling technique in fundamental cell biology and applications in tissue engineering and allow for more direct mimicry of the natural extracellular matrix.

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