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Nuclear envelope proteins modulate proliferation of vascular smooth muscle cells during cyclic stretch application

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Cyclic stretch is an important inducer of vascular smooth muscle cell (VSMC) proliferation, which is crucial in vascular remodeling during hypertension. However, the molecular mechanism remains unclear. We studied the effects of emerin and lamin A/C, two important nuclear envelope proteins, on VSMC proliferation in hypertension and the underlying mechano-mechanisms. In common carotid artery of hypertensive rats in vivo, our findings establish that the pathogenetic role of emerin and lamin A/C repression in stretch-induced VSMC proliferation and suggest mechanobiological mechanism underlying this process that involves the sequence-specific binding of emerin and lamin A/C to specific transcription factor motifs.

Significance

The proliferation of vascular smooth muscle cells (VSMCs) in response to excessive cyclic stretch is crucial in vascular remodeling during hypertension. To elucidate the molecular mechanism, we studied the mechanobiological roles of emerin and lamin A/C, two important components of nuclear envelope proteins localized beneath the inner nuclear membrane. We found that emerin and lamin A/C play significant roles in the mechanical modulation of VSMC proliferation. The repressed expression of emerin and lamin A/C mediates the stretch-induced VSMC proliferation, which is important in vascular remodeling during hypertension. Emerin and lamin A/C bind to the respective sequencing-specific motifs of transcription factors to mediate the molecular mechanisms underlying the hyperstretch-induced VSMC dysfunction.


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number of diseases, such as cardiomyopathy and muscular dystrophy (14, 15, 18). Because our previous work revealed that lamin A/C might contribute to the vascular remodeling in response to shear stress (12), we hypothesized that NE proteins might be mechanical-sensitive molecules that participate in the VSMC functions induced by cyclic stretch.

In the present study, we investigated the effects of emerin and lamin A/C on VSMC proliferation in response to hypertension and studied the mechanobiological mechanisms involved. The results provided insights into the roles of these two important INM proteins in the transcriptional regulation of VSMC proliferation.

**Results**

**Hypertension Represses the Expression of NE Proteins in Vivo.** After 1 wk of abdominal aorta coarctation, the operated rats exhibited a marked level of hypertension (mean arterial pressure 161.7 ± 14.9 mmHg in hypertensive rats vs. 96.9 ± 9.9 in sham controls, \( P < 0.01 \)), a marked increase of cell proliferation in the media of common carotid arteries (Fig. 1A), and a significant suppression of emerin and lamin A/C expression in the common carotid arteries as compared with the sham-operated controls (Fig. 1B and Fig. S1).

The increased cyclic mechanical stretch in hypertension has been shown to play an important role in VSMC proliferation (19). We hypothesized that cyclic stretch may modulate VSMC proliferation by inducing the expression of emerin and lamin A/C.

**Cyclic Stretch Modulates the Expression of NE Proteins and the Proliferation of VSMCs in Vitro.** Compared with the group subjected to the normal level (5%) of cyclic stretch (20) for 24 h, a high level (15%) of cyclic stretch (21) significantly increased the proliferation of VSMCs, as shown by BrdU ELISA (Fig. 2A).

The effects of different levels of cyclic stretch on the expression of emerin and lamin A/C proteins were studied at 6, 12, and 24 h. Compared with the normal 5% cyclic stretch, the 15% cyclic stretch decreased the expression of emerin (at 12 and 24 h but not at 6 h) and lamin A/C (at all time points: 6, 12, and 24 h) (Fig. 2B).

Compared with 5% cyclic stretch, 15% cyclic stretch decreased the mRNA level of emerin at the 24-h time point but not at 6 and 12 h. The 15% cyclic stretch showed no significant effect on mRNA level of lamin A/C at any of the time points (6, 12, and 24 h) (Table S1). The proteasome inhibitor MG-132(R) \((C_9H_8N_3O_5)\) (10 \( \mu \)M) was used to detect possible lamin A/C and emerin degradation during the application of cyclic stretch. We found that MG-132(R) reversed, at least partially, the repression of emerin and lamin A/C protein expression induced by 15% cyclic stretch (Fig. 2C).

**Cyclic Stretch Modulates the Proliferation of VSMCs via NE Proteins in Vitro.** To confirm the effects of emerin and lamin A/C on cyclic stretch-induced VSMC proliferation, VSMCs were transfected with emerin or lamin A/C target siRNA (Fig. 3A and Fig. S3 A and B). The results indicate that the proliferation of VSMCs under static conditions is increased significantly by the repression of either emerin or lamin A/C (Fig. 2F). Transfection of a plasmid overexpressing lamin A increased the expression of both lamin A and lamin C (Fig. S3C), and plasmids overexpressing emerin and lamin A significantly decreased VSMC proliferation (Fig. 2F).

These results indicate that a pathological (15%) level of cyclic stretch (21) decreases the expression of emerin and lamin A/C and increases the proliferation of VSMCs.
VSMC proliferation under 5% cyclic stretch (Fig. 3B). In contrast, transfection with a plasmid overexpressing emerin or lamin A (Fig. 3C and Fig. S4B) reversed the effect of high (15%) cyclic stretch on VSMC proliferation (Fig. 3D).

These results suggest that the NE proteins emerin and lamin A/C are crucial mechanorheostatic molecules participating in the modulation of VSMC proliferation. The increase in VSMC proliferation induced by the decreased expression of emerin and lamin A/C in response to pathologically increased cyclic stretch may be involved in the pathogenesis of vascular remodeling during hypertension.

**ChIP with Microarray Analysis Revealed the Binding Between NE Proteins and Chromatin.** To demonstrate the possible mechanism by which NE proteins regulate VSMC proliferation, ChIP with microarray (ChIP-on-chip) and bioinformatics analyses were used to detect the DNA-binding ability of emerin and lamin A/C and to demonstrate whether this binding affects transcription factors related to proliferation. DNA extractions from VSMCs were incubated with emerin or lamin A/C antibody, and the pulled-down DNA was analyzed by CpG Island Plus Refseq Promoter arrays. The results reveal that 1,030 DNA segments were immunoprecipitated with emerin (Table S2), and 1,046 DNA segments were immunoprecipitated with lamin A/C (Table S2).

The primary functions of the immunoprecipitated DNA segments were classified by Gene Ontology (GO) annotations using the Database for Annotation, Visualization, and Integrated Discovery (DAVID) v. 6.7 (https://david.ncifcrf.gov/summary.jsp). Fig. 4 shows that the DNA segments immunoprecipitated with emerin or lamin A/C are involved in different functional categories. The top five prominent functional categories for DNA segments immunoprecipitated with emerin were phosphophosphate (232 DNA segments), cytoplasm (122 DNA segments), acetylation (103 DNA segments), nucleotide-binding (81 DNA segments), and zinc (68 DNA segments) (Table S3): the top five prominent functional categories for DNA segments immunoprecipitated with lamin A/C were phosphophosphate (249 DNA segments), cytoplasm (124 DNA segments), nucleus (121 DNA segments), acetylation (102 DNA segments), and nucleotide-binding (81 DNA segments) (Table S3).

These results suggest that both emerin and lamin A/C can bind with DNA segments, but the cellular functions involved differ somewhat.

**Motifs of Transcription Factors Enriched in DNA Segments Binding with NE Proteins.** To assess whether the binding of DNA segments with emerin or lamin A/C is sequence specific, we used Multiple Em for Motif Elicitation (MEME) (22) and Discriminative Regular Expression Motif Elicitation (DREME) (23) web service to visualize the locations of matches to the promoters of transcription factor (24). The specific motifs in the DNA segments binding with emerin were CCNGGA, CCMGCC, and ABTTCCG (Fig. 5A), and those binding with lamin A/C were CCGGAAA, GCGCGYC, and DAAGAAA (Fig. 5B). Table S4 shows the transcription factors revealed by the ChIP-on-chip assay and includes the sequence-specific motifs in their promoter regions.

These results suggest that emerin and lamin A/C bind to specific DNA segments, including the promoter regions of transcription factors. To detect whether this sequence-specific binding is involved in VSMC proliferation, Ingenuity Pathway Analysis (IPA), ChIP-quantitative PCR (qPCR), and Protein/DNA array were used to detect the binding of emerin or lamin A/C to the promoter regions of specific transcription factors.

**Binding of Emerin and Lamin A/C with the Promoter Regions of Transcription Factors Participates in VSMC Proliferation.** Using IPA software (content version: 14197757) (www.ingenuity.com/products/ipa), we investigated the functions of the transcription factors whose promoter regions were immunoprecipitated with emerin or lamin A/C (24). Six transcription factors related to emerin and four related to lamin A/C were involved in VSMC proliferation (Table S4). We then detected the role of altered emerin and lamin A/C expression in the activation of these transcription factors.

Using the Protein/DNA array, we detected the activation of 10 transcription factors revealed by ChIP-on-chip and motif analyses (Fig. 5C). The activation of four transcription factors related to VSMC proliferation showed a tendency to increase when emerin and lamin A/C were repressed by siRNA transfection.
Cyclic Stretch Alters the Ability of Emerin and Lamin A/C to Bind to the Promoter Region of Transcription Factors. After different levels of cyclic stretch were applied for 24 h, DNA extracts from the VSMCs were incubated with emerin or lamin A/C antibody, and the immunoprecipitated DNA segments were analyzed by qPCR to quantify the promoter regions of transcription factors related to VSMC proliferation (Table S4). The results showed that, as compared with 5% cyclic stretch, 15% stretch decreased the binding of emerin to the promoter regions of E2F1, IRF1, KLF4, and SP1 and decreased the binding of lamin A/C to the promoter regions of E2F1, IRF1, KLF4, KLF5, SP1, and STAT1 (Fig. 5 D and E).

Increased Expression of NE Proteins Represses VSMC Proliferation in Vivo. To demonstrate further the possible protective effects of emerin and lamin A/C on VSMC proliferation during hypertension, their overexpression was induced by the transcutaneous injection of lentiviruses around the common carotid artery of hypertensive rats in vivo (Fig. 6 A and B). The lentivirus of lamin A significantly increased the expression of both lamin A and lamin C (Fig. 6B and Figs. S3C and S4C). In comparison with the negative control, emerin and lamin A/C overexpression significantly decreased cell proliferation in the media of the common carotid arteries of hypertensive rats (Fig. 6C).

Discussion
The nuclear lamins form a mesh-like network of intermediate filaments localized mainly at the INM and play a major role in maintaining the mechanical stability and shape of the nucleus (13, 25). There are four lamin isoforms in mammalian cells: A-type lamins, including lamin A and lamin C, which are splice variants encoded by Lhma, and B-type lamins, including lamin B1 and B2 encoded by Lmnb1 and Lmnb2, respectively (25, 26). Lamin B1 and B2 are essential proteins that are expressed in all cells throughout development (4, 8, 26), whereas lamin A and C are expressed only in differentiated cells. The differential expression

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Fig. 5. Motifs of transcription factors enriched in DNA segments binding with emerin or lamin A/C. (A) The specific motifs in the DNA segments immunoprecipitated with emerin. (B) The specific motifs in the DNA segments immunoprecipitated with lamin A/C. (C) Emerin or lamin A/C-target siRNA modulated the activations of transcription factors in Table S4. The red font indicates the factors involved in the proliferation of smooth muscle cells. (D and E) After immunoprecipitation with emerin (D) or lamin A/C (E), qPCR detected the ChiP levels of promoter regions of transcription factors related with “proliferation of (vascular) smooth muscle cells” in Table S4 after cyclic stretch was applied for 24 h. Values are expressed as mean ± SD (n = 4).

Fig. 6. (A and B) Local injection of emerin (A) or lamin A (B) lentiviruses (lenti) significantly increased the expression of emerin or lamin A/C in common carotid arteries of the hypertensive rats. (C) Immunofluorescence staining against BrdU revealed that locally injected lentiviruses of emerin or lamin A remarkably decreased VSMC proliferation in the media of common carotid arteries of hypertensive rats. For Western blot, GAPDH was used for normalization. Values are expressed as mean ± SD. **P < 0.01 vs. the negative control (NC) (n = 6).
patterns of laminas suggest that lamin A/C may be important for inducing or maintaining the differentiated state. Recently, the differential expression of lamin A/C has been detected in cells subjected to different kinds of mechanical stimuli and has been shown to be involved in differential cellular functions. Harada et al. (27) reported that differentially expressed lamin A/C can modulate cell migration and survival in human mesenchymal stem cells and two cancer cell lines. Swift et al. (13) found that lamin A, but not lamin B, is changed by matrices of different stiffness and participates in the differentiation of mesenchymal stem cells induced by the stiffness of the culture matrix. Consistent with the results reported here indicating that cyclic stretch may posttranslationally regulate lamin A/C, a 40-kDa lower band of lamin A/C (Fig. S4) indicates cleavage of lamin A/C that is regulated by adhesion and cell mechanics, as shown by Buxboim et al. (28). Furthermore, our current study demonstrates that, in addition to lamin A/C, the expression of emerin in VSMCs also is modulated by mechanical cyclic stretch and subsequently induces VSMC proliferation.

Emerin acts as an anchor of NE to INM and binds to lamin A/C at the nucleolus (26). The mutations in EMD (encoded emerin, located on chromosome X in humans and mice) and LMNA (encoded lamin A and lamin C, located on chromosome 1 in humans and chromosome 3 in mice) are related to similar diseases characterized by progressive skeletal muscle weakening, abnormal fat deposition, premature aging, and complex cardiac syndrome, including dilated cardiomyopathy and life-threatening irregular heart rhythms (29, 30). Embryo fibroblasts cultured from lamin A-deficient (Lmna−/−) mice (30, 31) and from emerin-deficient (Emd−/− for males or Emd−/− for females) mice (30) demonstrate defective nuclear mechanics and impaired transcription of mechanically activated genes. In the aortic media, the single-nucleotide mutation of LMNA at G608G decreases the expression of mechanotransduction proteins such as vinculin, transgelin, and vimentin in VSMCs under high (but not under normal) shear stress (32). The results of this study using the hypertensive animal model and cultured VSMCs suggest that emerin and lamin A/C have protective effects and that the repressed expression of emerin and lamin A/C by pathologically elevated (15%) cyclic stretch (21) may be important in the abnormal VSMC proliferation in hypertension. All these results suggest that both emerin and lamin A/C are important mechano-responsive molecules that play important roles in cardiovascular functions.

Using ChIP-on-chip analysis to analyze the molecular mechanisms by which emerin and lamin A/C modulate VSMC functions, we found 1,300 DNA segments binding with emerin and 1,046 binding with lamin A/C. Using IPA software, we further analyzed the DNA segments immunoprecipitated with emerin or lamin A/C (Table S3) that participate in the modulation of cell proliferation. Interestingly, in addition to their role in the proliferation of smooth muscle cells (Table S4), these DNA segments are involved in the proliferation of many other types of cells (e.g., neuronal cells, fibroblasts, and others), suggesting that emerin and lamin A/C may have universal effects on cellular proliferation. Our present research revealed that the decreased expression of emerin and lamin A/C attenuates their binding to the promoter region of transcription factors and that these changes negatively regulate VSMC proliferation under different conditions (static, 5% cyclic stretch, and 15% cyclic stretch) (Fig. S5). Our previous study also revealed that 15% cyclic stretch accelerated apoptosis of VSMCs (33); that finding, combined with our present results, suggests that a pathological level of cyclic stretch may induce rapid VSMC turnover. It will be very informative to demonstrate the potential roles of emerin and lamin A/C in VSMC apoptosis induced by mechanical stimuli. However, the molecular mechanisms involved in cell turnover probably are quite complex, and this subject deserves further investigation beyond our present work, which focuses on the mechanobiological mechanisms of VSMC proliferation.

Although it had been reported that nuclear lamin A/C and emerin link with chromatin (14, 15), the mechanism and character of their binding are still unclear. It has been demonstrated that some kinds of chromatin-binding proteins link the INM to the chromatin and are involved in the organized localization of chromatin within the nucleus, DNA replication, and mRNA synthesis (34). For example, BAF binds chromatin with both emerin (35) and lamin A (36) in vivo and in vitro. In addition to its binding via other proteins, there is evidence that lamin A may bind to DNA with some specific sequences. Zullo et al. (37) reported that discrete DNA regions characterized as (GA)n repeats are associated with the binding of chromatin and lamin A and are not affected by BAF knockdown. Artificially generated tandem arrays containing (GA)n repeats revealed their colocalization with lamin A (37). Ottaviani et al. (38) demonstrated the ability of cis-acting elements containing (GA)n and CCCTC-binding factor (CTCF) to bind with lamin A/C. Our results showed that the DNA sequences binding with lamin A/C do not have the (GA)n repeats but do have two motifs with a high G/A ratio, CCGGAA and DAAGAAA, and one motif with a high G/C ratio, GCCGCYG. Interestingly, emerin also has three sequencing-specific binding motifs, two of which, CCNNGGA and CCMGCC, have a high G/C ratio. The DNA fragments that bind with emerin are not the same as those that bind with lamin A/C, suggesting that emerin and lamin A/C regulate cellular functions via different mechanisms.

Our present results demonstrate the sequencing-specific binding of emerin or lamin A/C to promoter regions of various transcription factors, but many other questions remain to be answered. Thus, it is still unclear whether the DNA binding of emerin and lamin A/C modulated by cyclic stretch is direct or involves a complex. Our present work demonstrates that the expressions of emerin, lamin A, and lamin C are correlated with each other (Fig. S3), suggesting complex interactions among different kinds of NE proteins. The mechano-transduction network in the nucleus and the roles of NE protein interactions need further studies. In summary, our current results indicate that pathologically elevated cyclic stretch represses the expression of two NE proteins, emerin and lamin A/C, which may play important roles in vascular remodeling during hypertension. The repressed expression of emerin and lamin A/C is a pathogenic factor in the stretch-induced VSMC proliferation. The sequencing-specific DNA binding of both emerin and lamin A/C to the promoter regions of specific transcription factors may play a significant role in the molecular mechanisms underlying stretch-induced VSMC functions.

Materials and Methods

The animal investigation conforms to the guidelines in the Guide for the Care and Use of Laboratory Animals (39) published by the US National Institutes of Health, and the protocol was approved by the Animal Research Committee of Shanghai Jiao Tong University.

Hypertensive Animal Models. Renal hypertensive rats were generated by abdominal aortic coarctation (40). Male Sprague–Dawley rats, weighing 150 ± 20 g, were randomly assigned to sham-operated and abdominal aorta-constriction groups.

Application of Mechanical Stretch. For the application of mechanical cyclic stretch, VSMCs were plated on type I collagen-coated flexible silicone-botted plates (Flexcell International) and then were subjected to cyclic stretch produced by a computer-controlled vacuum (FX-400T Strain Unit; Flexcell International) as previously described (4). Cells cultured under the same conditions but not subjected to mechanical strain were used as the static control.

ChIP. Cells were fixed in 1% formaldehyde for 10 min at room temperature, followed by quenching with glycine and rinsing with cold PBS. Afterward, cells were collected and lysed. DNA were released and sonicated into 200-
700-bp fragments. A chromatin aliquot was incubated overnight with 5 μg anti-emerin antibody (Abcam), anti-lamin A/C antibody (Abcam), or control rabbit IgG (Abcam). Antibody-coupled magnetic beads (Invitrogen) were added, washed, and eluted. DNA fragments associated with emerin, lamin A/C, or control antibodies were eluted and purified using the One-Day Chromatin Immunoprecipitation Kit (Millipore). Input genomic DNA was obtained through similar elution and purification procedures.

**ReSseq Promoter Array and MOTIF Assay.** For the ChIP-on-chip assay, samples were hybridized with the CpG ReSseq Prom MeDIP Array (NimbleGen), which covers 15,287 promoters (the design region is about ~3,880 bp to +970 bp of the transcription start site). For each ChIP-on-chip dataset, the sequences for the summit region (201 bp) spanning 100 bp up- and downstream from the summit of each peak were retrieved. The top 500 sequences with the highest peak score were selected for MOTIF analysis based on MEME (22) and DREME (23).

**Statistical Analysis.** Each experiment was performed at least in triplicate, and all values are expressed as mean ± SD. The Student’s t test was used to compare two groups, and multiple comparisons among the groups were performed using one-way ANOVA and the Student-Newman-Keuls test for post hoc comparisons. A value of P < 0.05 was regarded as statistically significant.

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