Chronic inflammation in intracranial aneurysm formation

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Intracranial aneurysm (IA) is a cerebrovascular disease usually affected the bifurcation sites of intracranial arteries. IA is socially important because IA can develop a lethal subarachnoid hemorrhage after rupture. However, today, there is no medical treatment for IAs because of the lack of knowledge regarding the mechanisms regulating IA formation. Experimental analyses using human IA specimen have revealed the presence of long-lasting inflammation in IA lesions. In other point of view, from studies of flow dynamics, IA formation is presumed to be triggered under high wall shear stress loaded on arterial bifurcations. Nonetheless, the mechanisms regarding how IA formation is regulated under high wall shear stress and how the inflammation lasts for a long period remain to be elucidated. Recently, experimental studies using rodent IA models have revealed a critical role of prostaglandin (PG) E2 signaling to IA formation. In brief, COX-2, a PGE₂-producing enzyme, is induced under high wall shear stress in endothelial cells. COX-2-producing PGE₂, then, activates NF-κB, a critical transcription factor for IA formation, via EP2. Because NF-κB transcriptionally induces COX-2, a positive feedback loop consisting of COX-2-PGE₂-EP2-NF-κB signaling is formed and high wall shear stress induced inflammation becomes chronic. Here, as a result of NF-κB-mediated MCP-1 induction, macrophages infiltrate in IA walls and expand inflammation into whole arterial walls beyond endothelial cells via secreting a large amount of pro-inflammatory molecules. In summary, the presence of positive feedback loop and macrophage infiltration are two key events regulating the chronicity of inflammation contributing to IA formation.

Rec.8/29/2013, Acc.9/10/2013, pp283-287

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Key words chronic inflammation, intracranial aneurysm, macrophage, NF-κB, prostaglandin
Inflammation and Regeneration     Vol.33  No.5    November  2013

Chronic inflammation and intracranial aneurysm

population\(^1\). Social importance of IA depends on a resultant subarachnoid hemorrhage after rupture, because IA itself is an asymptomatic lesion before rupture in most every case. Subarachnoid hemorrhage is a devastating disease with quite a high mortality rate, which reaches 30 to 50 %, and also a high morbidity rate despite the intensive treatment and recent advancement of therapeutic devices\(^2\). Treatment to prevent the rupture of pre-existing IA is, therefore, socially demanded. Today, IA is treated only by surgical procedures, microsurgical clipping and endovascular coiling\(^3\). These surgical manipulations have greatly developed and certainly provide the certain level of safety. However, considered with the nature of IA as an asymptomatic lesion before rupture, there is a considerable rate of complications such as an ischemic complication or brain damage\(^3\). Furthermore, there is no therapeutic strategy available for patients without surgical indications, such as patients with small IAs or with a high estimated risk of surgical procedures. Current problem of IA treatment is, therefore, the lack of less invasive medical treatment to prevent a rupture of IA and a resultant subarachnoid hemorrhage. To overcome the current situation, the mechanisms regulating IA formation and rupture need to be revealed and therapeutic targets for IA treatment should be identified.

Involvement of inflammation in intracranial aneurysm of human

Various analyses using human specimen have clarified the presence of inflammation in IA lesions and proposed the notion that active inflammatory responses contribute to the pathogenesis of IA\(^4-5\). For example, in histopathological analyses, infiltration of inflammatory cells, especially most abundantly macrophages, is demonstrated\(^6-7\). Furthermore, in comprehensive gene expression analyses, the induction of pro-inflammatory genes, such as TNF-\(\alpha\), in IA lesions is identified and, through subsequent bioinformatics analyses, the activation of inflammation-related cascades is extracted\(^8-10\). Epidemiologically, patients with sepsis or autoimmune-vasculitis are more likely to develop IAs\(^1\).

In other point of view, hemodynamic force, especially high wall shear stress, has been recognized as a trigger of IA formation through the studies regarding hemodynamics in IA lesions\(^11-13\). For example, at the neck portion of IA where IA formation initiates or at the prospective site of IA formation in intracranial arteries, usually a bifurcation site, wall shear stress is much higher than surrounding arterial walls\(^11-13\). However, how high wall shear stress regulates IA formation remains to be elucidated.

Unfortunately, however, because of the considerable limitations related with experiments using human specimen, we cannot fully understand the underlying mechanisms of IA formation, for example how high wall shear stress induces inflammation and regulates IA formation how inflammation becomes chronic. To clarify the mechanisms regulating IA formation, therefore, animal models of IA have been developed\(^14-16\). These animal models, indeed, greatly contribute to the clarification of some of the regulatory mechanisms of IA formation as discussed in following section.

Chronic inflammation and intracranial aneurysm formation

Experimental findings achieved from animal models of IA have clarified the critical role of chronic inflammation in the pathogenesis of IA formation\(^5\)-17. In these animal models, IAs are induced by the increase of hemodynamic stress on contralateral arterial bifurcations of intracranial arteries through hemi-carotid ligation and salt overloading without direct handling of intracranial arterial walls\(^14,16\). Because IAs are spontaneously induced by the hemodynamic force like human IAs and IAs induced in animals share the similar histopathological findings with human IAs such as the disruption of the internal elastic lamina and the degenerative change of media, these animal models of IA are considered as appropriate models for human IAs\(^14,16\). Using these animal models, contribution of pro-inflammatory molecules, such as NF-\(\kappa\)B\(^18\), IL-1\(\beta\)\(^19\), Matrix Metalloproteinase-9 (MMP-9)\(^20\), inducible nitric oxide synthase (iNOS)\(^21\) and monocyte chemoattractant protein-1 (MCP-1)\(^22,23\) to IA formation has been revealed supporting the notion that IA is a chronic inflammatory disease of intracranial arterial walls as proposed from human studies\(^5\). Here, because NF-\(\kappa\)B regulates the induction of a wide range of pro-inflammatory genes, including genes involved in the pathogenesis of IA, as a critical transcription factor in inflammatory settings, we have focused on NF-\(\kappa\)B as a critical mediator of IA formation. Indeed, all the NF-\(\kappa\)B deficiency in mice\(^18\), the inhibition of transcriptional activity by decoy oligonucleotides\(^18\) and the pharmacological inhibition by some compounds in rats\(^24,25\) significantly suppressed IA formation through inhibiting inflammatory responses in IA walls.

As previously discussed, high wall shear stress seems to greatly influence IA formation as an inducer revealed by analy-
ses of fluid dynamics. Consistent with these presumptions, IA formation in animal models, histologically characterized as the disrupted internal elastic lamina and degenerative change of media, initiates at the site loaded on high wall shear stress and high walls shear stress gradient\(^{26,27}\). Furthermore, induction of pro-inflammatory molecules, which regulates IA formation, can be detected at the region loaded on high wall shear stress\(^{26}\), suggesting that high wall shear stress triggers inflammation resulting in IA formation. We have recently identified prostaglandin (PG) signaling as a cascade linking high wall shear stress with inflammation in IA walls\(^{26}\). Because inhibition of COX-2, enzyme for PGE\(_2\) synthesis, or deficiency of one of PGE receptor subtype, EP2, significantly suppress IA formation in animal models through the inhibition of inflammation such as NF-\(\kappa\)B activation in IA lesions\(^{26}\), COX-2-PGE\(_2\)-EP2 signaling cascade plays the critical role for IA formation via regulating inflammation in intracranial arterial walls. Here, because COX-2 is shown to be induced under shear stress in endothelial cells\(^{30}\), COX-2-PGE\(_2\)-EP2 signaling cascade is presumed to be induced under shear stress in intracranial arteries. Indeed, in primary endothelial cells from human carotid artery, laminar shear stress induces COX-2 and also EP2 expression at the force-dependent manner\(^{29}\). Consistent with these findings, COX-2 and EP2 induction is found in endothelial cells of IA walls from the early stage of IA formation confirming that COX-2-PGE\(_2\)-EP2 signaling cascade functions in these cells also in vivo probably under the shear stress\(^{29}\). Further, EP2 stimulation activates NF-\(\kappa\)B in these cells in \textit{vivo}, suggesting the regulation of NF-\(\kappa\)B activation in endothelial cells by PGE\(_2\)-EP2 signaling\(^{29}\). Importantly, a deficit in PGE\(_2\)-EP2 signaling abolishes NF-\(\kappa\)B activation in IA walls and vice versa\(^{29}\). Considered with the findings that NF-\(\kappa\)B-mediated MCP-1 induction in endothelial cells, exacerbate and spread the inflammation into whole arterial walls through secreting a wide range of pro-inflammatory molecules such as cytokines (IL-1\(\beta\) etc.)\(^{19}\), chemoattractants for inflammatory cells (MCP-1 etc.)\(^{20}\), tissue-destructive proteinases (MMP-9, cathepsins etc.)\(^{20,33}\), reactive oxygen\(^{24}\) and so on (Fig.1). Furthermore, MCP-1 secreted from macrophages further recruit macrophages themselves and forms the autocrine loop resulting the long-lasting and exacerbated inflammation in IA walls\(^{17}\).

Here, recent studies regarding the fluid hemodynamics have implied that low wall shear stress, not the high wall shear which triggers the IA formation, contributes to the enlargement of IA\(^{16}\). For example, in the region of enlargement, wall shear stress is significantly lower than that in surrounding aneurysm walls\(^{59}\). Considered with the findings that inhibition of inflammation in IA walls effectively suppresses not only the incidence but also the enlargement of IAs in animal models and that inflammatory responses including macrophage infiltration is augmented during IA formation\(^{5,18}\), the initiation and enlargement of IA may share common mechanisms in term of inflammation. However, there is no experi-

Fig.1 Schema of the proposed mechanisms regulating the long-lasting (chronic) inflammation contributing to IA formation
mental evidence regarding the molecular mechanisms linking low wall shear stress with the enlargement of IA. Because IA can cause devastating subarachnoid hemorrhage after rupture, the mechanism regulating the enlargement and, of course, the rupture of IA, should be carefully examined in near future to develop a novel therapeutic strategy for IA.

In summary, recent experimental findings mainly achieved using animal models of IAs provide the notion that IA is a chronic inflammatory disease of intracranial arteries. The mechanisms regulating the chronicity of inflammation are, first, the formation of positive feedback loop including COX-2-PGE2-EP2-NF-κB signaling triggered by high wall shear stress at the early stage of IA formation, which amplifies the inflammation in endothelial cells, and, second, the infiltration of macrophages via NF-κB-mediated MCP-1 induction in endothelial cells in IA walls which spreads inflammation into whole IA walls.

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to all the researchers, collaborators, technical assistants and secretaries contributing to researches cited in the present manuscript. We also thank grants supporting our research works.

Source of funding

None

Conflict of interests

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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