

Liquid-crystalline ordering of antimicrobial peptide-DNA complexes controls

TLR9 activation

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Introductory paragraph

Double-stranded DNA (dsDNA) can trigger type I interferon (IFN) production in plasmacytoid dendritic cells (pDCs) by binding to endosomal Toll-like receptor-9 (TLR9)¹⁻⁵. It was recently shown that complex formation between DNA and antimicrobial peptides can lead to autoimmune diseases via amplification of pDC activation^{1,2}. Here, we demonstrate that a broad range of cationic molecules can lead to similar effects, and elucidate the criterion for TLR9 activation by combining synchrotron x-ray scattering, computer simulations, and measurements of pDC IFN production. TLR9 activation depends crucially on both the inter-DNA spacing and the multiplicity of parallel DNA ligands in the self-assembled liquid-crystalline peptide-DNA complex. Molecular complexes that present a 2-D grill-like arrangement of DNA at the optimum spacing can interlock with multiple TLR9 like a zipper, and lead to multivalent electrostatic interactions that drastically amplify binding and thereby the immune response. Our results suggest that it is possible to control TLR9 activation and modulate immune responses deterministically.

Main Text

TLR9 binding of DNA is complex and multi-factorial¹⁻⁴. Microbial DNA is typically transported into intracellular compartments during the process of infection and triggers IFN- α production in pDCs via the binding of unmethylated CpG motifs to endosomal TLR9. Host-derived (Self)-DNA released in the context of cell death can also activate TLR9 in pDC via its sugar backbone⁴,

but this does not normally occur due to the limited access of extracellular self-DNA to endosomal compartments⁵. However, in autoimmune diseases such as psoriasis¹ and lupus², self-DNA can form complexes with the antimicrobial peptide (AMP) LL37, and potently activates TLR9 in pDCs leading to type I IFNs production and disease exacerbation. Recent findings posed a significant challenge to understanding immune responses modulated by TLR9: other antimicrobial peptides including human defensins HBD2 and HBD3⁶, and several chromatin-derived proteins can form complexes with DNA and promote TLR9 binding⁷ and activation^{8,9}. One possibility is that complex formation can protect self-DNA from enzymatic degradation¹⁰, and thereby enable endosomal access required for TLR9 receptor binding. However, this process is not sufficient for activation in pDCs, since other peptides complexed with DNA are unable to activate TLR9. At present, the selection criteria for TLR9 activation by complexed DNA are not understood.

Here, we show why a broad range of cationic molecules besides LL37 can complex with DNA and trigger interferon production in pDCs, while many other cationic molecules do not. We delineate the governing physical criterion for such high interferon secretion, by combining synchrotron Small Angle X-ray Scattering (SAXS), fluorescence microscopy, computer simulations, and measurements of IFN- α production by pDCs. Both IFN-inducing and non-IFN inducing cationic molecules form complexes with DNA and transport it into TLR9 containing endosomes of pDC. The key determinant for activation is the self-assembled structure of the liquid-crystalline peptide-DNA complex, especially the inter-DNA spacing between parallel DNA ligands. Using a coarse-grained computational model we show that electrostatic

interactions between TLR9 and DNA are optimized when DNA columnar complexes have an inter-DNA spacing that is commensurate with the steric size of TLR9 receptors – allowing for ‘interdigitation’ of multiple receptors and ligands like teeth in a zipper. The presentation of optimally-spaced, parallel DNA ligands results in a new form of multivalent interaction¹¹ that drastically increases the number of active, ligand-bound receptors and thereby leads to potent IFN induction in pDCs.

We first assess the relationship between pDC activation and the structure of DNA complexes by using three prototypical examples of DNA-peptide complexes. HIV TAT is a polycationic peptide that can penetrate cells¹² and gain endosomal access. We find that incubation of pDCs with TAT-DNA complexes does not produce significant levels of IFN- α in pDCs (Fig. 1). TAT-DNA complexes efficiently enter TLR9-containing endosomal compartments (Fig. 2b), however, suggesting that endosomal access is not sufficient for strong IFN induction in pDCs. SAXS measurements show that DNA is organized into a columnar arrangement within TAT-DNA complexes similar to many phases of DNA (and other biological polyelectrolytes) condensed by multivalent cations¹³. Diffraction peaks from TAT-DNA complexes are observed at $q_{100} = 2.48 \text{ nm}^{-1}$, $q_{101} = 3.08 \text{ nm}^{-1}$, and $q_{110} = 4.41 \text{ nm}^{-1}$ (Fig. 1a), characteristic of a columnar hexagonal lattice with parameters $a = 2.90 \text{ nm}$, $c = 3.50 \text{ nm}$ (Fig. 3d)¹⁴, which corresponds to a bundle-like complex with close-packed DNA. Like TAT peptide, human β -defensin-3 (HBD3) is polycationic, and is capable of condensing DNA and accessing TLR9 in endosomes (Fig. 2b). In contrast to TAT peptide, HBD3-DNA complexes induce strong $\sim 2200 \text{ pg/ml}$ IFN- α production in pDCs, which is $\sim 100\text{x}$ higher than IFN- α production from TAT-DNA complexes, consistent

with extant results⁶. SAXS measurements (Fig. 1a) show that DNA within HBD3-DNA complexes also form a columnar phase. A DNA correlation peak is observed at $q_{\text{DNA}} = 1.92 \text{ nm}^{-1}$, indicating that the inter-DNA spacing in HBD3-DNA complexes is 3.25 nm which is considerably larger than the spacing in TAT-DNA complexes. Likewise, we find that LL37, which accesses TLR-containing endosomes (Fig. 2b) and induces high levels of IFN- α production in pDCs (Fig. 1b), also self-assembles with DNA into a columnar structure with an inter-DNA spacing $a_{\text{DNA}} = 3.40 \text{ nm}$ (Fig. 3a&b) significantly larger than the DNA diameter. These measurements suggest that the inter-DNA spacing in liquid crystalline columnar DNA-complexes correlates with induced IFN- α production by pDCs.

To test this hypothesis, we measured pDC activation for a broad range of self-assembled DNA complexes with different inter-DNA spacings by repeating the above analysis with a diverse set of natural and synthetic cationic agents, including peptides (R9, TAT, polylysine (MW \sim 70,000), hBD3d, NLS, penetratin, HBD3, LL37) as well as non-peptide cationic molecules (hexamine cobalt, tris(ethylenediamine) cobalt, protamine sulfate, PEI750k, PAMAM dendrimers (G3, G4, G6)) (Supplementary Table S1). SAXS measurements show these cationic agents condense DNA into ordered columnar complexes with a range of inter-DNA spacings from $a_{\text{HexamineCo}} = 2\pi/q_{\text{HexamineCo}} = 2.43 \text{ nm}$ for Hexamine cobalt (III) to $a_{\text{G3}} = 2\pi/q_{\text{G3}} = 4.37 \text{ nm}$ for PAMAM dendrimer G3 (Fig. 1b). A crucial criterion for pDC activation in these DNA complexes is the inter-DNA spacing: Strong IFN- α responses are induced by complexes with first peak positions between $1.8\text{-}2.0 \text{ nm}^{-1}$ corresponding to inter-DNA spacings near $a \sim 3.5 \text{ nm}$ (Fig. 1b), whereas complexes with a spacings that deviate from this value induce weaker

responses. Changes in salt levels over the range of physiological concentrations present in endosomes did not alter the structures of representative polycation-DNA complexes or their inter-DNA spacings to a degree sufficient to change activation profiles (Supplementary Fig. S2). Importantly, DNA complexed with polycations that induce strong and those that induce weak IFN- α responses *both* can access endosomes and colocalize with TLR9 (Fig. 2). The colocalization of non-inducing complexes with TLR9 demonstrates that cellular entry and trafficking cannot be solely responsible for their lack of activity. The efficiency of endosomal access may, in principle, modulate the degree of IFN- α response of polycation-DNA complexes that induce IFN- α production. These results show that the presentation of spatially periodic DNA with spacing comparable to TLR receptor size can drastically increase IFN- α production by pDCs. The ‘sweet spot’ of 3-4 nm spacing is suggestive. The low distance cut-off is roughly the steric size of TLR receptors¹⁵⁻¹⁷, which defines the distance of closest approach between receptors. The large distance cut-off is consistent with strong electrostatic interactions expected in this system, which allows anionic DNA to interact with both the inside and outside surfaces of adjacent cationic TLR9 receptors, and thereby ‘crosslink’ such receptors into a zipper-like ligand-receptor array (Fig. 1 c&d). To test the plausibility of these explanations for the striking observations in Figure 1, we will need to construct a suitable quantitative model.

Since a single ordered columnar DNA complex (‘DNA bundle’) can bind transversely and effectively present a spatially-periodic ‘grill’-like array of parallel DNA chains to multiple TLR9 receptors, there is potential for multivalent binding effects (Fig. 1d). The degree of multivalency can be estimated via the measured domain size (Fig. 3a) of DNA ordering (Fig. 3b-e). Generally,

in systems where ligands are able to form multiple weak bonds with target receptors, one can expect to observe ‘super-selectivity’, i.e. binding increasing sharply with receptor concentration¹¹. Binding of immune complexes to TLR9 receptors is more complex, and depends sensitively on inter-DNA spacing in the bundle; we observe a dramatic ~ 100 -fold change in IFN- α production as the distance between DNA chains in a complex shifts ~ 0.5 nm. These systems are at present not accessible to all-atom simulations. Therefore, to investigate the origin of TLR9 amplification, we developed a coarse-grained computational model.

We first consider binding of TLR9 receptors to an isolated DNA chain. If there are κ available binding sites on DNA to which receptors can attach, the expected number of receptors, n_B , that are actually bound to the DNA is less than κ :

$$\frac{n_B}{\kappa} = \frac{e^{-\varepsilon/k_B T}}{1 + e^{-\varepsilon/k_B T}} \quad (1)$$

where ε is the binding free energy of receptors to DNA, which depends on DNA-TLR9 interactions and on the density of receptors on the membrane (see Model in Supplementary Information). In the case of weak binding, $e^{-\varepsilon/k_B T} \ll 1$, this simplifies to $n_B \approx \kappa e^{-\varepsilon/k_B T}$. For $\varepsilon \approx 4 k_B T$, the TLR9 receptors will cover less than 2% of an isolated DNA chain. When DNA chains are arranged into a bundle, however, the electrostatic interactions between TLR9 molecules and DNA are different: Each cationic TLR9 molecule can now interact with three anionic DNA chains (Fig. 4a), the one in the TLR9 binding groove, and the two immediately adjacent to it. The effective binding free energy is then:

$$\varepsilon^* = \varepsilon + 2U(a) \quad (2)$$

where $U(a)$ is a sum of all additional interactions between a TLR9 molecule and an adjacent DNA chain (electrostatic interaction is represented by the screened Yukawa potential and steric repulsion between TLR9 and DNA by the Lennard-Jones 12 term, see Model and Fig. S4 in Supplementary Information). The binding free energy ε^* to a bundle decreases (binding becomes stronger) when the spacing between DNA is reduced – until the spacing is so small that steric effects become important. The binding is strongest for commensurately spaced DNA chains that allow ‘interdigitation’ between TLR9 and the periodic DNA array, where multiple receptors and ligands interlock in an alternating manner. Such optimal ordered structures can recruit and bind many TLR9 molecules (Fig. 4b and Supplementary Fig. S4) and trigger an orders of magnitude stronger pDC response than the mismatched structures.

To test this hypothesis, we performed Monte Carlo simulations to determine the equilibrium number of bonds, $n_B(a)$, formed between TLR9 receptors and a DNA array with set ligand number $\kappa = 6$ (extracted from the LL37-DNA domain size, Fig. 3a) and given spacing a . For strong binding ($\varepsilon < 2 k_B T$), the number of formed bonds does not depend strongly on DNA spacing; n_B is appreciable for expanded bundles with large a . This regime is inconsistent with our observations (Fig. 1b) since bundles with large a (small q) do not induce high amounts of IFN- α production (see Supplementary Note S7). In the weak binding scenarios, $\varepsilon = 3 k_B T$, $5 k_B T$ and $7 k_B T$, the curves follow the experimental trend and exhibit a pronounced maximum at $2\pi/a^* \approx 2 \text{ nm}^{-1}$ (Fig. 4b), corresponding to the optimal lattice spacing $a^* \approx 3 \text{ nm}$. These conditions

approach the close-packing limit for DNA chains and TLR9. At smaller spacing, steric repulsion prevents binding and leads to the sharp decrease in n_B . Therefore, the self-organization of an interlocking receptor-ligand array strongly enhances binding of DNA bundles to TLR9 receptors.

The single TLR9-DNA bonds are relatively weak, but their number n_B increases significantly with the decreasing lattice spacing – up to a ratio $n_B(a^*)/n_B(\infty)$ of approximately 5 to 10. The possibility to form many weak bonds increases dramatically the combinatorial entropy and thus decreases the free energy $F(a)$ for DNA bundles binding to the receptor-decorated membrane. The number of all active (i.e. bound to DNA) receptors is determined by the product of the number of bound DNA bundles and the average number of bonds each bound bundle makes with receptors:

$$N_A(a) \propto n_B e^{-F(a)/k_B T} \quad (3)$$

Accounting for these different layers of statistical mechanical effects from multivalent binding, one can clearly see (Fig. 4c) that the response of the cell from receptor activation, $N_A(a)$, becomes strongly amplified. This can be seen in a Langmuir-like analytical model (see Analytical theory in Supplementary Information) that predicts exponential scaling of $n_B(a)$ with the binding strength, while the total activation $N_A(a)$ shows a much stronger double-exponential dependence¹⁸. The degree of selectivity can be defined as a ratio of cell activation in optimally condensed ($a = a^*$) and expanded ($a \rightarrow \infty$) bundles:

$$\gamma^A \equiv \frac{N_A(a^*)}{N_A(\infty)} \quad (4)$$

Experimental observations predict $\gamma \approx 100$ (Fig. 1b), which agrees with numerical simulations and theory based on this plausibility model with a reasonable choice of parameters (Fig. 4d). Moreover, these results are robust: The same trends are observed qualitatively when effects from monovalent salt (Supplementary Fig. S5) and noise (allowing the DNA to diffuse about their average position in the 2D lattice) (Supplementary Fig. S6) are incorporated into the simulations.

The simplified quantitative model above strongly suggests that electrostatic self-assembly between DNA, cationic ligands, *and* TLR9 can drive a drastic amplification of the number of active receptors. Importantly, TLR9 activation depends on both the inter-DNA spacing and the number of DNA ligands in the complex, since both factors contribute strongly to multivalency and binding amplification. The above effects can operate in concert with other processes such as protection from enzymatic degradation¹⁰, receptor cooperativity¹⁹, and downstream consequences of active TLR9 receptors.

In vitro experiments have used cationic liposomes to form DNA complexes that are internalized in dendritic cells and transfected cell lines to modulate TLR9 activation^{1,6,20}, but the microscopic mechanism is not understood. Consistent with our model, cationic lipids can also organize DNA into a rich polymorphism of spatially-periodic structures, including 2-D lamellar structures with tunable inter-DNA spacings^{21,22}. The emerging picture implies that pDC activation is not

deterministically controlled by uncorrelated binding between individual ligands and receptors; rather, the induced organization of immune ligands into optimal periodic structures can result in massive binding enhancement, and thereby strongly amplify immune response.

Although our explanatory model is relatively simple, the empirical results described here have broad implications for controlling immune response. It will be interesting to determine whether natural AMPs can bind to and organize DNA fragments from permeated pathogens, and thereby enable multivalent presentation to TLR9 and promote adaptive immune responses. Since TLR9 activation is highly sensitive to inter-DNA spacing in ordered electrostatic complexes, knowledge of their structures can inform immunotherapies. The data here suggest that cationic proteins, peptides, or other cationic agents less than 0.5 nm in size or greater than 2.0 nm in size do not activate TLR9, since steric constraints will prevent them from forming a TLR9-DNA zipper. The behavior of cationic proteins or peptides in the intermediate size regime between 0.5 nm and 2.0 nm can be engaged via straightforward computer simulations²³ if the structures are known, since electrostatic binding in aqueous environments depend on charge distribution, shape, and binding orientation of the protein. Importantly, these results suggest that TLR9 activation can be attenuated by engineering the inter-DNA spacing to suppress the receptor-ligand zipper arrays via competitive binding, and potentially suppress inflammation in autoimmune diseases like psoriasis. Likewise, by leveraging fundamental understanding of electrostatic self-assembly^{23,24}, we can deterministically trigger immune responses in the context of vaccines, and predict which synthetic nano-sized objects are likely to induce adventitious inflammatory response, with strong implications for nanotoxicology.

Methods

Self-assembled DNA complexes preparation. For SAXS, monodispersed Lambda DNA (BioLabs) is precipitated and resuspended in aqueous solution, at 100mM NaCl or a buffer composed of 10mM HEPES and 100 mM NaCl adjusted to pH = 7.4, 5.4 or 5.0, depending on the condensing agent. Self-DNA was used in the cell experiments. Peptide-based cationic agents ($\geq 95\%$ purity, Anaspec) include: R9 (RRRRRRRRR), poly K (MW $\sim 70,000$), TAT (YGRKKRRQRRR), hBD3d derivative (KSSTRGRKSSRRKK), NLS (PKKKRKV), ANTP Penetratin (RQIKIWFQNRRMKWKKGG), HBD3 (GIINTLQKY YCRVRGGRC AVL SCLPK EEQIGK CSTRGRKCCRRKK), and human LL37 (LLGDFFRKSKEKIGKEFKRIVQRIKDFLRNLPRTES). Non-peptide based cationic agents include cobalt hexamine, cobalt Tris(ethylenediamine), protamine sulfate, Polyethyleneimine (M_w $\sim 750,000$), PAMAM Dendrimer (G3, G4, G6), which are all used without further purification. Complexes were formed between each cationic agent and DNA by incubating the agent with DNA (10 mg/ml for SAXS, 10 $\mu\text{g}/\text{ml}$ for cells) at specific charge ratios. For a given cationic agent the same charge ratios were used in both SAXS and cell experiments.

Cell Experiments

pDC isolation and stimulation. Human blood pDCs were isolated from buffy coats obtained from the blood of healthy donors at the Service Regional Blood Bank, Lausanne, Switzerland. After separation of mononuclear cells by Ficoll centrifugation, pDCs were purified by using a pDC negative selection cocktails (Plasmacytoid dendritic cell isolation kit II) to reach 99% purity. Purified pDCs were seeded into 96-well round-bottom plates at $5 \times 10^4/\text{well}$ in 200 μl

RPMI 1640 (GIBCO, Carlsbad, CA) supplemented with 10% fetal calf serum (FCS) (Atlanta Biologicals, Lawrenceville, GA). Supernatants of stimulated pDCs were collected after overnight culture. Cytokine levels in the supernatants were determined by using ELISA kits for human IFN- α (PBL Biomedical Laboratories, New Brunswick, NJ).

Uptake of complexes. Uptake of DNA complexes by pDCs was visualized by using human DNA (BioChain, Hayward, CA) labeled with AlexaFluor⁴⁸⁸ by using the Ulysis Nucleic Acid Labeling Kit (Molecular Probes, Carlsbad, CA), according to the standard protocol provided by the manufacturer as previously described. After 4 h of pDC stimulation with DNAAlexa⁴⁸⁸ - containing complexes, stimulated pDC were washed and the percentage of Alexa⁴⁸⁸-positive cells was determined by flow cytometry. Self-DNA was used at 10 μ g/ml.

Normalized IFN- α production. To provide a more accurate view of the ability of DNA complexes to trigger endosomal TLR9 activation, IFN- α levels were normalized by the percentages of pDC that have actually internalized the complexes. The normalization controls for variations in IFN- α production due to variations in the uptake of these complexes by pDCs. Uptake of DNA complexes was conducted as described in “Uptake of complexes” section.

Cell staining and imaging of endosomal trafficking. pDCs were stimulated with AlexaFluor⁴⁸⁸-labelled CpG 2006 (Trilink) in complex with the following cationic peptides: LL37, hBD3d, TAT₄₆₋₆₀, and non-peptide cationic molecules: tris(ethylenediamine) cobalt,

hexamine cobalt. Cells were washed after 1h of stimulation and further incubated for a total of 4 h, transferred onto coverslips pretreated with poly-lysine, fixed for 15 min in 4% para-formaldehyde, and permeabilized in PBS supplemented with 0.5% Triton X 100 (Sigma-Aldrich) and 1% normal goat serum (Jackson ImmunoResearch Laboratories). Samples were then stained with a rat anti-human TLR9 (CD289) (eBiosciences) together with a mouse anti-human transferrin-receptor (CD71) (eBiosciences) monoclonal antibodies followed by AlexaFluor⁵⁴⁶-labelled anti rat (Invitrogen) and AlexaFluor⁶⁴⁷-labelled anti-mouse (Life Technologies) in permeabilization buffer. Slides were washed and mounted in Prolong Gold antifade mounting media (Molecular Probes) before imaging.

Imaging was performed using a Zeiss LSM 710 laser scanning confocal microscope with an oil immersion objective (63×/1.4 numerical aperture).

SAXS experiments

SAXS measurements. We measure a phase diagram for complexes formed between each cationic agent and DNA, by incubating them with DNA (10 mg/ml) at specific charge ratios. After thorough mixing and centrifugation, the complexes are hermetically sealed in 1.5 mm quartz capillaries (Hilgenberg GmbH, Mark-tubes, Code No: 4017515, & Charles Supper Co., MA). SAXS measurements were performed at beamline 4-2 of the Stanford Synchrotron Radiation Laboratory (SSRL; Menlo Park, CA). Monochromatic X-rays with energies 9-12 keV were used. A Rayonix MX225-HE detector (pixel size 73.2 × 73.2 μm) was used to collect the scattered radiation. Samples were also measured using the California NanoSystems Institute (CNSI) SAXS spectrometer at UCLA (incident wavelength, $\lambda = 1.54 \text{ \AA}$) and a MAR345 image

plate detector (pixel size $150 \times 150 \mu\text{m}$). Identical samples were prepared and measured at different times after preparation using multiple light sources to ensure consistency in data. The 2D SAXS powder patterns were azimuthally integrated using the Nika 1.48 package (<http://usaxs.xor.aps.anl.gov/staff/ilavsky/nika.html>) for Igor Pro 6.22 and Fit2D (<http://www.esrf.eu/computing/scientific/FIT2D/>).

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Acknowledgments

This work is supported by NIH grant 1UO1 AI082192-01, NSF grant DMR1106106, EU grants ARG-ERC-COLSTRUCTION 227758 and ITN-COMPLOIDS 234810, by the Herchel Smith fund, and by the Slovenian research agency through Grant P1-0055, and the Swiss National Science Foundation (FN 310030-144072). X-ray research was conducted at Stanford Synchrotron Radiation Lightsource, SLAC National Laboratory, supported by the US DOE Office of Basic Energy Sciences under Contract No. DE-AC02-76SF00515, the Advanced Light Source, supported by the US DOE Office of Basic Energy Sciences under Contract No. DE-AC02-05CH11231, and at the UCLA CNSI.

Author Contributions

G.C.L.W., M.G., F.J., and N.W.S. conceived the project. R.L. and L.F. performed the cell experiments. F.J., N.W.S., W.X., and C.L. performed SAXS experiments; N.W.S, F.J., and C.L. analyzed SAXS data. T.C., J.D., and D.F. conceived the computational model; T.C. performed simulations. G.C.L.W., N.W.S., M.G., D.F, J.D., and T.C. wrote the manuscript; F.J. and R.L. assisted with methods section.

Competing Financial Interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Figure Legends

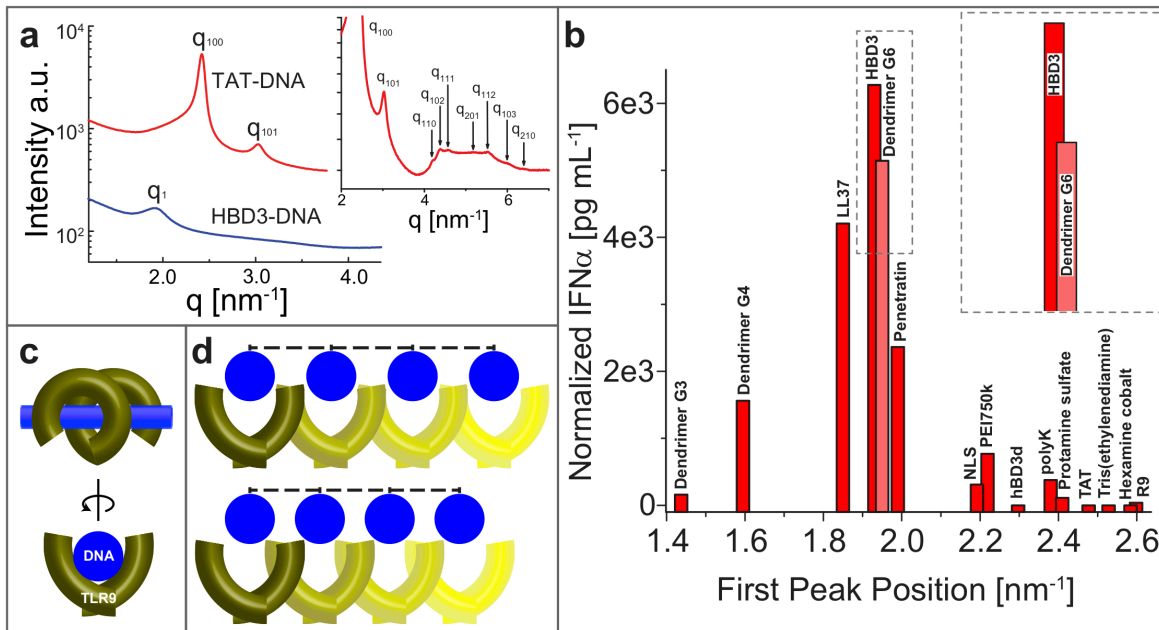


Figure 1| Interferon IFN- α production in dendritic cells through TLR9 activation depends on DNA spacing in electrostatic DNA complexes formed with polycations. a, Representative SAXS data from peptide-DNA complexes that induce strong IFN- α production in dendritic cells (DNA with the antimicrobial peptide HBD3) and those that do not (DNA with TAT cell-penetrating peptide). Higher order reflections for the TAT-DNA hexagonal lattice are shown in the upper right corner. **b**, IFN- α production by pDCs stimulated with polycation-DNA complexes, normalized for the amount of complex internalization, shows a strong correspondence with SAXS measurements of their first diffraction peak q -positions. Since the first peak position is inversely proportional to the inter-DNA spacing, a narrow range of inter-DNA spacings result in high IFN- α production levels. Inset and shading are included to distinguish HBD3 and G6 bars. **c**, Illustration of the TLR9-dsDNA complex whose structure is unknown, based on the solved structure of (homologous) TLR3 complexed with dsRNA^{15,16}. **d**, Different DNA spacings can impact TLR9 activation. Larger geometric spacings (top) between

orientationally-ordered DNA in the bundle can accommodate binding of multiple TLR9s and amplify activation, while smaller spacings (bottom) subdue activation since they sterically reduce accessibility of bundled DNA to receptors. Shading differences of adjacent TLR9 molecules indicate that they are offset along the columnar DNA lattice.

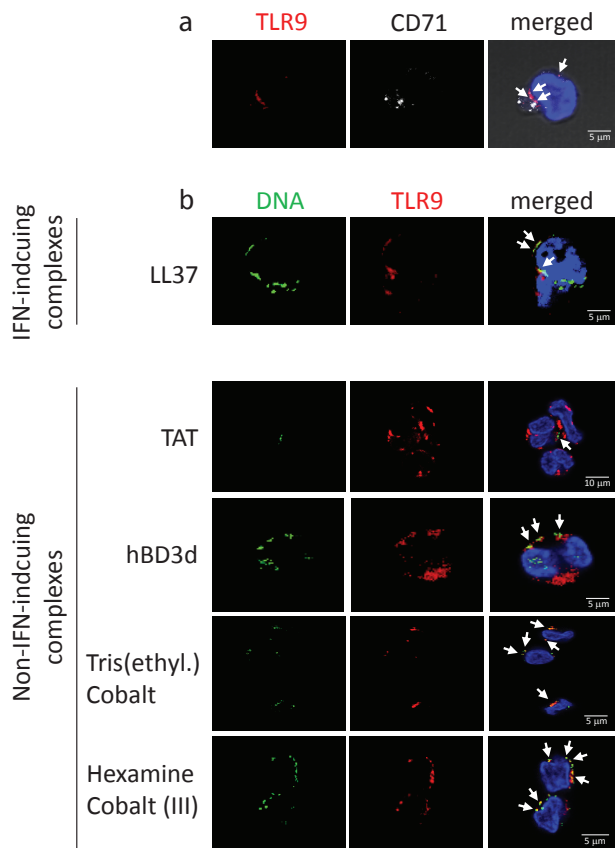


Figure 2| Both IFN-inducing and non IFN-inducing cationic molecules transport DNA to endosomal TLR9. PDCs were stimulated for 4h with CpG-2006 (AlexaFluor⁴⁸⁸) oligonucleotides complexed with either IFN-inducing (LL37) or non IFN-inducing cationic molecules (hBD3d, TAT, Tris-ethylenediamine Cobalt, hexamine Cobalt (III)). Early endosomes were stained with AlexaFluor⁶⁴⁷-labelled anti-transferrin receptor (CD71) along with an AlexaFluor⁵⁴⁶-labelled anti-TLR9. Cell nuclei were stained with DAPI and the contour of the cells was visualized by transmitted light in panel **a**. **a**, Colocalization between TLR9 and endocytic compartments is shown by the arrows. **b**, Panel shows that DNA (AlexaFluor⁴⁸⁸) complexed with IFN-inducing and non IFN-inducing molecules colocalize with TLR9 (AlexaFluor⁵⁴⁶), as highlighted by the arrows.

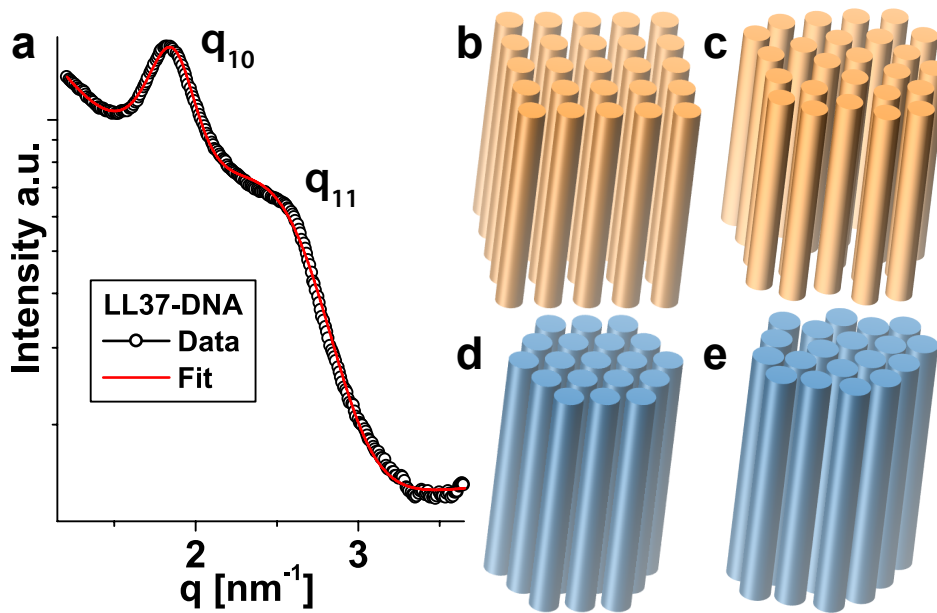


Figure 3| The presentation of ordered columnar DNA complexes, with specific inter-DNA spacings. a, Representative SAXS spectra from LL37 complexed with DNA. Diffraction peaks are observed at $q_{10} = 1.85 \text{ nm}^{-1}$, and $q_{11} = 2.68 \text{ nm}^{-1}$ which have the ratio, $1:\sqrt{2}$, characteristic of a square lattice with parameter $a = 3.40 \text{ nm}$. The average linear domain size of LL37-DNA bundles is extracted from the fitted width, w , of the (10) peak (see SAXS data fits in Supplementary Information). Schematic representations of the four main structural types of DNA-polycation complexes observed in this study: the LL37-DNA columnar square lattice, **b**, the TAT-DNA columnar hexagonal lattice, **c**, and disordered columnar arrangements of DNA with larger inter-DNA spacing such as DNA complexed with HBD3, **d**, or smaller spacing that is consistent with DNA complexed with Tris(ethylenediamine) cobalt, **e**. LL37-DNA complexes with inter-DNA spacings $a \sim 3.5 \text{ nm}$ induce much greater IFN- α production in pDCs compared with tightly-packed TAT-DNA complexes with inter-DNA spacings of $a \sim 2.9 \text{ nm}$.

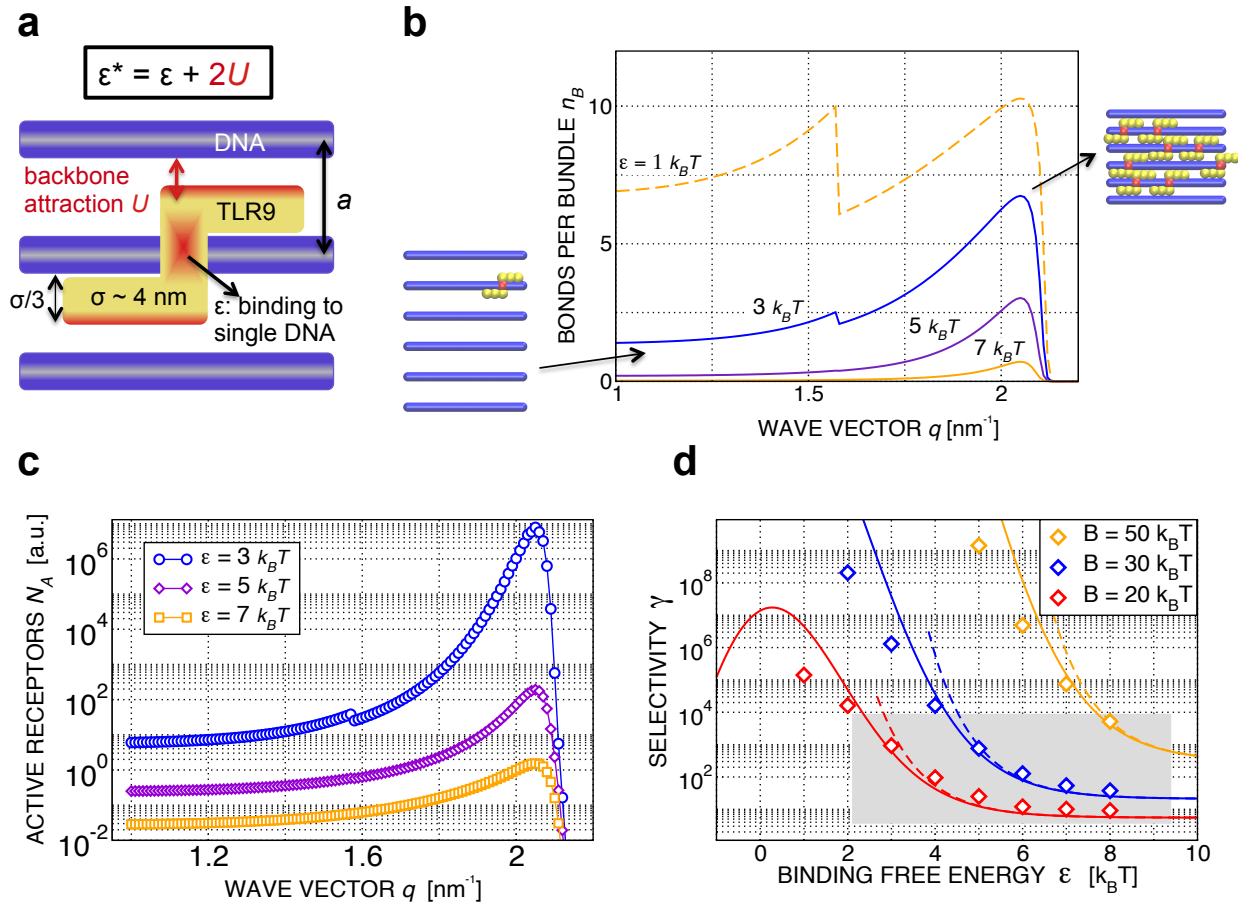


Figure 4| Coarse-grained model of TLR9 binding to DNA bundles exhibits ‘super-selective’ behavior in agreement with experimental observations. a, Schematic representation of the model: DNA are uniformly charged rods arranged in an ordered ‘grill’-like array with lattice spacing a . This mimics a DNA bundle binding to receptors on a membrane sideways. TLR9 are represented in projection as S-shaped ‘tetris blocks’ with two arms of length σ , width $\sigma/3$, and uniform charge density opposite to that of DNA. **b**, Equilibrium number of bonds, n_B , as a function of inverse lattice spacing $q=2\pi/a$, for various binding free energies ϵ , at TLR9-DNA electrostatic interaction $B = AZ_1Z_2k_B T = 30 k_B T$, where $Z_{1,2}$ are effective charges and A is a constant. Two simulation snapshots from $\epsilon = 3 k_B T$ further illustrate bond statistics. **c**, Total

number of active receptors, N_A , as a function of q at $B = 30 k_B T$. Multivalency increases the lattice-spacing-selective response. **d**, The peak-to-plateau ratio, $\gamma = N_A(a^*)/N_A(\infty)$, characterizing the degree of selectivity (see Supplementary Note S8). Symbols are from numerical simulations; solid lines represent the Langmuir theory, and dashed lines are a double-exponential approximation to the full theoretical expression (see Analytical theory in Supplementary Information). Large γ are observed over a range of different B and ε . Gray shaded area marks the parameter values that correspond to experiments.