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2	leukemia after allogeneic hematopoietic stem cell transplantation
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Gilteritinib enhances graft-versus-leukemia effects against FLT3-ITD mutant

Abstract

21	Allogeneic hematopoietic stem cell transplantation (allo-SCT) is a
22	potentially curative therapy for FLT3 internal tandem duplication mutant (FLT3-ITD ⁺)
23	acute myeloid leukemia, but relapse rate is high. A recent study showed that sorafenib, a
24	first generation FLT3 and multikinase inhibitor, enhanced graft-versus-leukemia (GVL)
25	effects against FLT3-ITD ⁺ leukemia via interleukin-15 (IL-15) production. However, it
26	remains to be clarified whether this effect could be mediated by selective FLT3
27	inhibition. We investigated whether gilteritinib, a selective FLT3 inhibitor, could
28	enhance GVL effects against FLT3-ITD transfected Ba/F3 leukemia (Ba/F3-FLT3-ITD)
29	in mice. Oral administration of gilteritinib from day +5 to +14 after allo-SCT reduced
30	expression of the co-inhibitory receptors PD-1 and TIGIT on donor CD8^+ T cells and
31	enhanced IL-15 expression in Ba/F3-FLT3-ITD. Bioluminescent imaging using
32	luciferase-transfected Ba/F3-FLT3-ITD demonstrated that gilteritinib significantly
33	suppressed leukemia expansion after allo-SCT, whereas it did not impact the morbidity
34	or mortality of graft-versus-host disease (GVHD), resulting in significant improvement
35	of overall survival. In conclusion, short-term administration of gilteritinib after
36	allo-SCT enhanced GVL effects against FLT3-ITD ⁺ leukemia without exacerbating
37	GVHD.

39 Introduction

FMS-like tyrosine kinase 3 internal tandem duplication (FLT3-ITD), which is 40 attributed to a head-to-tail duplication of 3-400 base pairs in the juxtamembrane-domain 41 42coding sequence, is the most frequent (20-25%) mutation in adult acute myeloid leukemia (AML)^{1, 2}. The FLT3-ITD mutation is associated with a high leukemic burden 43and a poor prognosis of AML³⁻⁵. Although allogeneic hematopoietic stem cell 44transplantation (allo-SCT) potentially improves the outcomes of FLT3-ITD⁺ AML, the 45relapse rates are significantly higher in FLT3-ITD⁺ AML than those in FLT3-ITD 46 negative AML after allo-SCT⁶⁻¹⁰. 47

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FLT3 inhibitors are being developed to target constitutively activated 49FLT3-ITD signaling, which induces the proliferation and survival of leukemia cells. 50First-generation FLT3 inhibitors, such as sorafenib, are not specific to FLT3 and are 51categorized as multikinase inhibitors, whereas the second-generation FLT3 inhibitors, 5253such as gilteritinib and quizartinib, are more specific to targeting mutated FLT3. In murine models of allo-SCT, sorafenib has been shown to induce the interferon 54regulatory factor 7 (IRF7)-dependent production of IL-15 in leukemia cells, which 55promotes the expansion of donor cytotoxic T cells and potentiates graft-versus-leukemia 56(GVL) effects against FLT3-ITD⁺ leukemia⁵. However, it remains to be clarified as to 57

58	whether second-generation FLT3 inhibitors can promote GVL effects after allo-SCT. In
59	the current study, we explored the impacts of the short-term administration of
60	gilteritinib on GVHD and GVL effects after mouse allo-SCT.

62 Materials and methods

Mice: Female C57BL/6 (H-2^b) and B6C3F1 (H-2^{b/k}) mice were purchased from CLEA 63 Japan (Shimizu, Japan) and Charles River Japan (Kanagawa, Japan), respectively. Mice 64were 8-12 weeks of age at the time of transplantation and were maintained in a specific 65 pathogen-free environment. The recipient mice were randomly allocated to each 66 experimental group, thus ensuring that the mean body weight in each group 67 was similar. All the animal experiments were performed in a nonblinded fashion and 68 under the auspices of the Institutional Animal Care and Research Advisory Committee. 69 Cell line: FLT3-ITD transfected C3H-derived Ba/F3 leukemia cells (Ba/F3-FLT3-ITD), 70 FLT3-ITD-untransfected Ba/F3, and human myeloid leukemia cell line harboring 71FLT3-ITD (MOLM-13 cells) were provided by Astellas Pharma Inc. (Tokyo, Japan)¹¹. 7273C57BL/6-derived myeloid leukemia cell line C1498 was purchased from ATCC. To create a luciferase expressing Ba/F3-FLT3-ITD cell line (Ba/F3-FLT3-ITD-luc⁺), the 74retroviral vector pMSCV-luc-IRES-YFP was kindly provided by Dr. Gerard Grosveld 75(Department of Genetics, St. Jude Children's Research Hospital). 76 Briefly, Ba/F3-FLT3-ITD cells were infected with virus particles generated from HEK293T 7778 cells that were transfected with pMSCV-lus-IRES-YFP plasmid and pCL-Eco (Addgene, Cambridge, MA) in the RPMI 1640 medium supplemented with 1 µg/ml puromycin 79

(Sigma-Aldrich Japan, Tokyo, Japan) and 6 µg/ml polybrene (Nakarai Tesque, Kyoto,
Japan)¹². pCL-Eco was obtained from Dr. Inder Verma (Addgene plasmid #12371)¹³.
After infection, a single YFP expressing clone was recovered by using the limiting
dilution method.

SCT: On day 0, B6C3F1 (H-2^{b/k}) recipients were lethally irradiated with 10.5 Gy total 84 body irradiation, and split into 2 doses with 4 hr intervals, followed by i.v. injection 85 with 5×10^6 T-cell depleted BM (TCD-BM) cells either alone or in combination with 1 86 $\times 10^6$ purified T cells from major histocompatibility complex haploidentical B6 (H-2^b) 87 on day 0. The purification of T cells and TCD-BM was performed by using Pan T Cell 88 (Miltenyi 89 Isolation Kit II, mouse Biotec Japan, Tokyo, Japan) and anti-CD90-MicroBeads (Miltenyi Biotec Japan), respectively, as well as and the 90 AutoMACS Pro Separator (Miltenyi Biotec Japan). To assess the GVL effects, recipient 91mice were transferred with 5×10^4 or 5×10^5 Ba/F3-FLT3-ITD-luc⁺ cells on day 0. 9293 Gilteritinib, which was provided by Astellas Pharma Inc., was dissolved in 0.5% methylcellulose at a concentration of 1.25 mg/ml, and recipient mice were orally 94 administered with either gilteritinib at 10 mg/kg/day or vehicle from day +5 to day +14 9596 after allo-SCT.

97 Evaluation of GVHD and GVL: Survival was monitored daily, and the severity of

98	GVHD was assessed by using the GVHD scoring system with five parameters ¹⁴ .
99	Bioluminescent imaging (BLI) was conducted weekly to evaluate the GVL effects. Mice
100	were anesthetized by using isoflurane and were subcutaneously injected with 500 μ g
101	d-luciferin (Promega, Madison, WI) at 5 min before in vivo imaging. Luciferase ⁺ cells
102	were detected by using IVIS Imaging System ver. 4.3.1 (Perkin Elmer, Waltham, MA).
103	Light emission is presented as photons per second per square centimeter per steer
104	radiant (ph/s/cm ² /sr). Leukemia death was defined by the existence of
105	hepatosplenomegaly with macroscopic tumor nodules, hinder leg paralysis ¹⁵ , or
106	leukemia expansion on BLI. Deaths without these signs were attributed to GVHD. To
107	evaluate allospecific cytotoxic T lymphocyte (CTL) responses, vehicle- or
108	gilteritinib-treated recipients of TCD-BM plus T cells were i.v. injected with 3×10^6
109	untransfected Ba/F3 (allogeneic) or C1498 (syngeneic) labeled with 5 μ M CellTrace TM
110	Violet (CTV, Thermo Fisher Scientific) on day +8 after allo-SCT. CTV positive cells in
111	the bone morrow were enumerated 2 hrs after the transfer.
112	<i>Culture</i> : Ba/F3-FLT3-ITD cells or MOLM-13 cells (5×10^5 cells/well) were cultured in
113	RPM I1640 medium containing 10% FCS in 6-well plates. Cells were stimulated with
114	either gilteritinib or quizartinib (Selleck Biotech, Tokyo, Japan) at concentrations of 1.0,
115	10, or 100 nM, or sorafenib (SYNKinase, Shanghai, China) at concentrations of 0.1, 1.0,

116 or 10 μ M for 24 hrs.

Q-PCR: The total RNA extracted from the leukemia cells by using either ISOGEN II 117(Nippon Gene, Toyama, Japan) or RNeasy Kit (QIAGEN) was subjected to cDNA 118synthesis by using ReverTra Ace qPCR RT Master Mix with gDNA Remover (Toyobo 119 FSQ-301, Osaka, Japan) or SuperScript IV VILO Master Mix (Thermo Fisher 120Scientific). Quantitative PCR (Q-PCR) was performed on the CFX96 Touch Real-Time 121PCR Detection System (Bio-Rad, Redmond, WA) by using TaqMan Fast Advanced 122123Master Mix (Thermo Fisher Scientific, Waltham, MA) or on the QuantStudio 12K Flex Real-Time PCR System (Thermo Fisher Scientific), with TaqMan Gene Expression 124Master Mix (Thermo Fisher Scientific) and the following primer-probe sets. The mouse 125126 18S rRNA primer (Sigma Aldrich) probe set was 1275'-GCTCTTTCTCGATTCCGTGGG-3' for the forward primer, 5'-ATGCCAGAGTCTCGTTCGTTATC-3' 128for the primer, reverse and 129FAM-CTCCACCAAC TAAGAACGGCCATGCACC-TAMRA for the probe, or 4319413E set (Thermo Fisher Scientific). The human GAPDH primer probe set was 130 4319413E set (Thermo Fisher Scientific). The IL-15 primer-probe sets were 131Mm00434210_m1 (Thermo Fisher Scientific) for mouse cells and RT² qPCR Primer 132Assay PPH00694B (QIAGEN) for human cells. The expression levels of 18S rRNA or 133

134 GAPDH were used as a standard.



153 Results

154 *Gilteritinib promotes IL-15 production from FLT3-ITD⁺ leukemia*

First, we tested whether gilteritinib could stimulate FLT3-ITD-expressing 155156leukemia cells to produce IL-15. Ba/F3-FLT3-ITD cells and human myeloid leukemia cells harboring FLT3-ITD (MOLM-13) were cultured in the presence or absence of 157gilteritinib, quizartinib, or sorafenib for 24 hrs. All three reagents significantly 158upregulated IL-15 expression both in Ba/F3-FLT3-ITD and MOLM/13 cells in a 159partially dose-dependent manner (Figure 1, A and B). To confirm these findings in vivo, 160 lethally irradiated B6C3F1 mice were transplanted with 5×10^6 TCD-BM cells and $1 \times$ 161 10^6 purified T cells from allogeneic B6 donors combined with 1×10^5 YFP-labeled 162Ba/F3-FLT3-ITD cells. Gilteritinib at 10 mg/kg/day or vehicle was orally administered 163 from day +5 to day +8 after allo-SCT. The Q-PCR analysis showed a significant 164upregulation of IL-15 in Ba/F3-ITD cells that were purified from the spleen and bone 165166 marrow of the gilteritinib-treated mice on day +8 (Figure 1, C and D). The flow cytometric analysis showed that gilteritinib significantly reduced the co-inhibitory 167receptors, PD-1 and TIGIT on donor CD8⁺ T cells in the spleen, thus suggesting that 168169IL-15 production induced by gilteritinib inhibited T-cell exhaustion after allo-SCT (Figure 1, E to G). To evaluate allospecific donor CTL responses, vehicle- or 170

171	gilteritinib-treated recipients of TCD-BM plus T cells were i.v. injected with
172	CTV-labeled untransfected Ba/F3 (allogeneic) or C57BL/6-derived C1498 (syngeneic)
173	cells on day +8 after allo-SCT, and CTV ⁺ leukemia cells were enumerated in the bone
174	marrow 2 hrs later. We found that untransfected Ba/F3 cells were significantly reduced
175	in gilteritinib-treated mice compared to vehicle treated recipients, while the number of
176	donor-derived C1498 were comparable in vehicle- and gilteritinib-treated recipients,
177	indicating that gilteritinib enhanced allospecific donor CTL responses (Figure 1, H and
178	I).

180 Gilteritinib enhances graft-versus-leukemia effects against FLT3-ITD-mutant 181 leukemia

Next, we tested whether gilteritinib could enhance GVL effects against Ba/F3-FLT3-ITD cells after allo-SCT. Lethally irradiated B6C3F1 mice were transplanted with 5×10^{6} TCD-BM cells either alone or in combination with 1×10^{6} purified T cells from allogeneic B6 donors. Recipient mice were transferred with 5×10^{4} Ba/F3-FLT3-ITD-luc⁺ cells on day 0, and gilteritinib was administered from day +5 to day +14 after allo-SCT. The BLI demonstrated that gilteritinib had only modest anti-leukemic effects in the recipients of TCD-BM; all vehicle-treated and

189	gilteritinib-treated recipients of TCD-BM died with leukemia by day +15 and day +22,
190	respectively (Figure 2, A and B). Leukemia death was significantly suppressed in the
191	recipients of T cells compared to TCD-BM controls, thus indicating GVL effects.
192	However, all the mice succumbed to leukemia or GVHD by day +46 (Figure 2, A and
193	F). In GVHD mice, short-term administration of gilteritinib significantly suppressed the
194	expansion of Ba/F3-FLT3-ITD-luc ⁺ cells and reduced leukemia death after T-cell
195	replete allo-SCT; 12 out of 15 vehicle-treated recipients and 8 out of 15
196	gilteritinib-treated recipients after T-cell replete allo-SCT succumbed to leukemia
197	(Figure 2A). Cumulative incidence of leukemia death in gilteritinib-treated recipients
198	was 60% at day +80 and significantly lower than that in vehicle-treated allogeneic
199	recipients (Figure 2B). Importantly, gilteritinib did not impact the morbidity or
200	mortality of GVHD, thus resulting in significantly prolonged overall survival in the
201	recipients of T cells (Figure 2, C to F). Taken together, short-term gilteritinib
202	administration enhanced GVL effects against FLT3-ITD ⁺ leukemia without
203	exacerbating GVHD.

205 **Discussion**

Emerging evidence has suggested that FLT3 inhibitor is more effective in the 206 posttransplant setting than in the nontransplant setting¹⁷. The first-generation FLT3 and 207208multi-kinase inhibitor, sorafenib has been shown to induce more long-lasting remission in patients after allo-SCT than in patients relapsing after chemotherapy¹⁸⁻²⁰. Recent 209 randomized trials have demonstrated that sorafenib maintenance after allo-SCT 210significantly reduced the risks of relapse and death of FLT3-ITD positive AML^{21, 22}. 211212These findings suggest that FLT3 inhibitors can enhance GVL effects in addition to their direct cytotoxic effects on FLT3-ITD-mutated AML cells. In preclinical models, 213sorafenib activates IRF7 by downregulating activating transcription factor 4 (ATF4), 214which enhances IL-15 production from leukemia cells⁵. IL-15 from leukemia cells has 215been shown to expand CD8⁺CD107a⁺IFN- γ^+ donor cytotoxic T cells with increased 216Bcl-2 and reduced PD-1 expression levels, which enhanced GVL effects against 217FLT3-ITD-positive leukemia⁵. Recently, it has been reported that leukemia-derived 218lactic acid impaired metabolic activity of T cells inducing dysfunctional T cells²³. 219Because metabolic reprogramming is also associated with T cell exhaustion, it is 220221intriguing to evaluate if FLT3 inhibitors could modulate production of lactic acid in leukemia cells in the future studies²⁴. 222

224	Despite the findings that support the GVL-potentiating effects of sorafenib, the
225	impacts of selective FLT3 inhibitors such as gilteritinib on GVL effects have not been
226	well studied. We herein demonstrated that the administration of gilteritinib after
227	allo-SCT enhances IL-15 production from mouse FLT3-ITD-positive leukemia,
228	potentiates CTL responses of donor T cells, and promotes GVL effects after allo-SCT.
229	Long-term suppression of leukemia growth was observed in some of the
230	gilteritinib-treated T-cell-replete recipients, thus suggesting that gilteritinib contributed
231	to an immune-mediated cure of FLT3-ITD-positive leukemia after allo-HCT. Although
232	we haven't tested if other selective FLT3 inhibitors such as quizartinib affect donor
233	T-cell profiles or GVL effects after allo-SCT, enhanced IL-15 expression in
234	quizartinib-treated leukemia cells suggests that FLT3 inhibitors in general can mitigate
235	exhaustion of donor T cells and enhance GVL effects after allo-SCT.

236

IL-15 production from leukemia cells significantly reduces T-cell expression of PD-1, which is a critical molecule for tolerance induction after allo-SCT^{25, 26}, which raises the concern that FLT3-ITD inhibition can exaggerate GVHD. A randomized trial showed that maintenance therapy with sorafenib after allo-SCT can reduce the risk of

241	relapse without increasing acute or chronic GVHD ²² , whereas there was a trend towards
242	increased GVHD in another randomized trial ²¹ . It is worth noting that gilteritinib did not
243	impact the clinical GVHD scores, body weight changes, or mortality of GVHD in our
244	model, even though GVHD was more severe with shorter survival in our model,
245	compared to the previous sorafenib study, in which the delayed infusion of donor T cells
246	after allo-SCT mitigated GVHD, as has been previously shown ^{5, 27, 28} . It has been
247	suggested that sorafenib-treated leukemia cells produce both IL-15 and IL-15Ra and can
248	trans-present the IL-15/IL-15Ra complex to donor T cells ²⁹ . Thus, FLT3-ITD inhibition
249	may activate donor T cells localizing around leukemia cells, without activating T cells
250	in the GVHD target organs. Furthermore, FLT3-ITD inhibitors likely activate immunity
251	only in the presence of leukemia cells, because they require IL-15 production from
252	leukemia cells. This nature of action of FLT3-ITD inhibitors makes FLT3-ITD
253	inhibition after allo-SCT safer and enables us to elicit just enough immunity to eradicate
254	leukemia cells.

It is important to assess whether gilteritinib reduced leukemia death by enhancing GVL effects or solely by direct anti-leukemia effects of FLT3 inhibition. We consider gilteritinib enhanced GVL effects for following reasons. First, BLI analyses

259	demonstrated that leukemia cells started to expand during gilteritinib-treatment in the
260	recipients transplanted with TCD-BM alone (Figure 2A, day12), indicating that
261	gilteritinib alone is not enough to reject Ba/F3-FLT3-ITD cells after T-cell deplete
262	allo-SCT. Second, in vivo CTL assay demonstrated that gilteritinib significantly
263	enhanced allospecific CTL responses against FLT3-ITD-untransfected Ba/F3. Therefore
264	we concluded that gilteritinib reduced leukemia death at least partially by enhancing
265	GVL effects. We used short-term administration of gilteritinib to minimize the direct
266	anti-leukemia effect against Ba/F3-FLT3-ITD.

267

In summary, short-term gilteritinib administration after allo-SCT promotes 268IL-15 production from FLT3-ITD-positive leukemia cells and enhances GVL effects 269without affecting GVHD severity. Our data showing that gilteritinib enhanced GVL 270effects support the use of gilteritinib as a maintenance. However, since gilteritinib 271272effects require residual AML cells, it is unclear if maintenance is effective in the recipients with minimal amount of residual AML cells⁵. Thus, the safety and efficacy of 273gilteritinib administration after clinical allo-SCT need to be studied in future and 274275ongoing clinical trials.

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284

285 Author contributions

D.H. and T.T. developed the conceptual framework of the study, designed the experiments, analyzed the data and wrote the paper. Z.Z and Y.H. conducted experiments, analyzed data, and wrote the paper. H.S., R.K., X.C, K.Y., T.S., T.K., H.T.,

289 T.I., T.A., and H.O. conducted experiments. M.N. supervised experiments.

290

291 Conflict of Interest

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430 Figure Legends

431 Figure 1. FLT3-ITD inhibitors promote IL-15 expression in Ba/F3-FLT3-ITD cells

432	(A,B) Ba/F3-FLT3-ITD (A) or MOLM-13 (B) cells were cultured in the presence or
433	absence of gilteritinib or quizartinib at concentrations of 1.0, 10, or 100 nM or sorafenib
434	at concentrations of 0.1, 1.0, or 10 μ M for 24 hrs. RNA extracted from cells was
435	subjected to qPCR targeting IL-15. The expression levels of IL-15 were normalized to
436	18S rRNA (A) or GAPDH (B) expression levels. Data were collected in triplicate and
437	are shown as the means \pm SDs. (C-G) Lethally irradiated B6C3F1 mice were
438	transplanted with 5×10^6 TCD-BM cells and 1×10^6 purified T cells from allogeneic B6
439	donors combined with 1×10^5 Ba/F3-FLT3-ITD cells, followed by oral administrations
440	of 10 mg/kg/day gilteritinib or vehicle from day +5 to day +8 after allo-SCT. (C,D)
441	Relative expression levels of IL-15 in Ba/F3-FLT3-ITD cells purified from the spleen
442	(C) and BM (D) on day +8 after allo-SCT ($n = 14/group$). Data from three independent
443	experiments are combined and shown as the means \pm SEs. (D-F) Flow cytometric
444	analysis of spleens was performed on day +8 after allo-SCT. Histograms (E) and mean
445	fluorescence intensities of PD-1 (\mathbf{F}) and TIGIT (\mathbf{G}) on donor
446	$TCR\beta^+CD8^+CD62L^+CD44^+$ cells. Data from two independent experiments are
447	combined and shown as the means \pm SEs (n = 10/group). (H,I) Vehicle- or

gilteritinib-treated recipients of TCD-BM plus T cells were i.v. injected with 3×10^{6} CTV-labeled untransfected Ba/F3 (C, n=7/group) or C1498 (D, n=5/group) cells on day +8 after allo-SCT. CTV-labeled cells in the bone marrow were enumerated 2 hrs after the injection. Data from two independent experiments are combined. *, P < 0.05; **, P 452 < 0.01.

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454 Figure 2. Gilteritinib enhances GVL effects against Ba/F3-FLT3-ITD-luc leukemia

Lethally irradiated B6C3F1 mice were transplanted with 5×10^6 TCD-BM cells either 455alone or in combination with 1×10^6 T cells from allogeneic B6 donors and transferred 456with 5×10^4 Ba/F3-FLT3-ITD-luc⁺ cells on day 0. Recipients were orally administered 457with either gilteritinib or vehicle from day +5 to +14 after allo-SCT. Representative 458images of BLI (A), cumulative incidences of leukemia death (B), body weight (C, 459means \pm SDs), clinical GVHD scores (**D**, means \pm SDs), cumulative incidences of 460 461 GVHD death (E), and overall survival (F) in the recipients of TCD-BM treated with either vehicle or gilteritinib, and in the recipients of TCD-BM plus T cells treated with 462either vehicle or gilteritinib (n=15/group). (A) Images from one of three similar 463 464 experiments are shown. (B-F) Data from three independent experiments were combined. 465





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