The Epidermolysis Bullosa Acquisita Antigen (Type VII Collagen) is Present in Human Colon and Patients with Crohn’s Disease have Autoantibodies to Type VII Collagen

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Epidermolysis bullosa acquisita is an autoimmune blistering disease of the skin characterized by IgG autoantibodies against type VII collagen. Systemic diseases are often associated with epidermolysis bullosa acquisita, Crohn’s disease being the most frequent. This study sought to determine if type VII collagen, the epidermolysis bullosa acquisita autoantigen, was present in normal human colon by western blotting and immunofluorescence. The 290 kDa type VII collagen α chain was demonstrated by western blotting in four normal intraoperative colon specimens. Antibodies to type VII collagen labeled the junction between the intestinal epithelium and the lamina propria. We also used an enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay to test sera from patients with Crohn’s disease (n = 19), ulcerative colitis (n = 31), celiac disease (n = 17), rheumatoid arthritis (n = 15), and normal controls (n = 16). It was found that 13 of 19 patients with Crohn’s disease and four of 31 patients with ulcerative colitis demonstrated reactivity to type VII collagen. Sera from control subjects, patients with celiac disease or rheumatoid arthritis were negative. The sera from Crohn’s disease patients also reacted with type VII collagen by immunoblot analysis. It was concluded that patients with inflammatory bowel disease may have IgG autoantibodies to type VII collagen, which exists in both the skin and the gut. Key words: autoimmunity/inflammatory bowel disease/skin bullous diseases. J Invest Dermatol 118:1059–1064, 2002

Inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) has numerous cutaneous associations, including pyoderma gangrenosum, erythema nodosum, oral ulcers, annular erythemas, and vascular thrombosis (Raab et al., 1983). Epidermolysis bullosa acquisita (EBA), an acquired severe subepidermal blistering skin disease, is also recognized as one of the extraintestinal manifestations of IBD. IBD has been reported to be present in approximately 30% of cases of EBA, but many of these observations were made before modern diagnostic criteria for EBA were established (Sherry and Dothridge, 1962; Labell et al., 1988). Crohn’s disease (CD) is the most frequently associated condition with EBA, noted in at least 25 cases in the literature (Liveden et al., 1978; Chan et al., 1996). Only four cases of EBA associated with ulcerative colitis (UC) have been reported (Hughes and Horne, 1988). EBA has been reported in association with a number of other systemic diseases, such as rheumatoid arthritis, Hashimoto’s thyroiditis, diabetes, amyloidosis, and systemic lupus erythematosus (Chan et al., 1996).

The pathogenesis of IBD has not been established. Environmental factors, genetic factors, microorganisms, chemical mediators, and defects in the gut immune system may all play a part. There is circumstantial evidence that autoimmune mechanisms may play an important part in IBD; however, a putative autoantigen has not been identified (Braegger and MacDonald, 1994). Immunomodulatory drugs are used in the treatment of patients with IBD (Hanauer, 1996). These drugs include azathioprine, mercaptourine, corticosteroids, cyclosporine, and infliximab. These agents have effects on cellular and humoral immune function. They also inhibit the production and action of cytokines and inflammatory mediators (Hanauer, 1996).

EBA is characterized by autoimmunity to type VII collagen. Several investigators reported that type VII collagen was confined to basement membranes beneath stratified squamous epithelium such as skin, oral, anal, and vaginal mucosa (Paller et al., 1986; Visser et al., 1993). It was reported that type VII collagen was not present in normal colonic mucosa (Paller et al., 1986; Visser et al., 1993). More recently, punctuate type VII collagen staining was noted in normal colonic epithelium by immunofluorescence (Lohi et al., 1996). The purpose of this study was to investigate whether normal colonic epithelium contains full-length type VII collagen and to investigate whether patients with IBD have autoantibodies to type VII collagen.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Diagnosis of EBA Fifty-one patients whom we have seen in the Dermatology Clinics at the University of North Carolina, Stanford Medical Center and North-Western University Medical Center were evaluated. The diagnosis of EBA was made based upon the following...
TTBS with 1% bovine serum albumin (BSA; 1:2000) (Chen 1997a). The blots were washed, and then incubated for 1 h with a
After the protein separation by SDS–PAGE, the proteins were electro-
immunostaining was performed. The samples were then washed with a
Colon extract preparation/immunoblotting  Full thickness colon
colonic extract (per lane) were subjected to SDS–
Ten micrograms of colonic extract (per lane) were subjected to SDS–
Ten milligrams of connective tissue from the colon samples were
immunofluorescence  Full thickness colon samples from two patients were obtained immediately after resection for
colonic extract, which was incubated at room temperature for 2 h. After the incubation period, the sections were
Immunofluorescence  Full thickness colon samples from two patients were obtained immediately after resection and embedded in OCT compound. The tissue was cut on a Cryostat set at 5 μm and air-dried on glass slides. Sections were incubated with either LH 7.2 (Sigma), a monoclonal antibody to type VII collagen, diluted 1:25, or a polyclonal antibody to the NC1 domain of type VII collagen, diluted 1:200, at room temperature for 2 h. After the incubation period, the sections were washed three times with PBS and then overlaid with fluorescein-conjugated goat anti-mouse or anti-rabbit IgG (Dako, Carpinteria, CA), diluted 1:25, and incubated at room temperature for 1 h. The sections were then washed three times with PBS, mounted in 50% glycerol–PBS and examined using a fluorescence microscope equipped with an epilumination. Human neonatal foreskin samples sectioned and labeled with the same antibody served as positive controls. Normal colonic mucosa incubated with normal mouse IgG or normal rabbit serum, at the same dilution as the primary incubation step, served as negative controls.
In addition to immunostaining intestinal mucosa for type VII collagen, serum samples from the patients without IBD but who had IBD were tested for their ability to label salt-split human skin and monkey esophagus by indirect immunofluorescence as previously described (Woodley et al, 1984). Sera were diluted in PBS containing 10% BSA at 1:5 and 1:10 dilution and tested in a “blinded” fashion along with positive (EBA sera) and negative controls.
ELISA using recombinant NC1  A recently developed enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA) using the recombinant NC1 domain of type VII collagen as the substrate was used to detect type VII collagen autoantibodies in the sera of patients with IBD (Chen et al, 1997b, 1997c). The ELISA was performed as described (Chen et al, 1997c). Celiac disease sera were used as a relevant bowel disease control. Rheumatoid arthritis sera were used as an autoimmune disease control and normal human sera were used as a negative control. All IBD and celiac disease patients had biopsy-proven disease. Information available on each patient included the clinical activity of the disease at the time of blood sampling and the level of inflammatory markers (erythrocyte sedimentation rate and C-reactive protein). All of the serum samples were obtained from a cohort of patients and normal subjects from Dublin, Ireland.
Immunoblotting of recombinant NC1 protein with CD sera  Purified recombinant NC1 protein (100 ng per well) was run on a 6% SDS–PAGE, then electrophoretically transferred on to a nitrocellulose membrane. Cut strips of the nitrocellulose membrane were blocked overnight at 4°C with 5% BSA in TTBS. After washing with TTBS, the strips were incubated for 1 h at room temperature with sera from CD patients or normal control subjects. All sera were diluted 1:50 in 1% BSA/TTBS. The strips were then washed three times with TTBS.
Immunoreactivity was detected using a horseradish peroxidase-conjugated goat anti-human IgG (Organon-Teknika–Cappel) diluted in TTBS with 1% BSA (1:5000) for 30 min and enhanced chemiluminescence (Amerham).
RESULTS  Twenty-five percent of EBA patients have IBD  IBD has been recognized as one of the more common systemic illnesses associated with EBA (Roenigk et al, 1971; Chan et al, 1996). We have seen, identified, diagnosed and treated 51 patients with EBA since 1986. All 51 patients met the criteria outlined above for the diagnosis of EBA. Based upon complete evaluations by gastroenterologists, including endoscopy and intestinal biopsies, 12 of the 51 patients had CD and one had UC associated with EBA. These patients had their IBD diagnosed and managed by an independent gastroenterologist. Therefore, in our series the incidence of IBD in these patients with EBA is 25% (Chan et al, 1996). In addition, we have four EBA patients who do not have the diagnosis of IBD and have not sought medical care for gastrointestinal problems, but who were unable to tolerate even one 0.4 mg tablet of colchicine without experiencing the onset of diarrhea and cramping. Interestingly, all but two of 13 patients with EBA and IBD had the onset of their IBD at least 2 y before the onset of their EBA.
Full-length type VII collagen is detectable in colonic mucosa using western blotting  Using immunoblot analysis, we demonstrated that colonic extracts contain type VII collagen. In Fig 1, the anti-type VII collagen antibody labeled a 290 kDa band and a 145 kDa NC1 band in all four intraoperative colon samples (lanes 2–5), whereas no bands were detected with normal rabbit serum (lane 1). The 290 kDa band was demonstrated to be type VII collagen because a comigratory band was detected in a parallel lane of authentic type VII collagen extracted from human neonatal foreskin (lane 6).
Type VII collagen is detectable in human colonic basement membrane  In Fig 2, we used the mouse monoclonal antibody LH 7.2 and the polyclonal antibody to the NC1 domain of type VII collagen to demonstrate type VII collagen immunoreactivity in the basement membrane of the colon samples. This immunoreactivity displayed a strong linear pattern using the NC1 antibody (Fig 2a), a more granular pattern using the less sensitive LH 7.2 (Fig 2d). There is no basement membrane staining in the negative control panels using either normal rabbit (Fig 2a) or mouse sera (Fig 2b). As expected, control normal human skin displayed a strong, linear
pattern of distribution of type VII collagen at the dermal–epidermal junction using the NC1 antibody (Fig 2e) or LH 7.2 (Fig 2f).

Sera from CD patients reacted with NC1 by ELISA. We previously developed a specific and sensitive ELISA to detect autoantibodies circulating in the sera of patients with EBA and bullous systemic lupus erythematosus using recombinant NC1 (Chen et al., 1997b). Using this assay, we tested the sera from patients with CD (19), UC (31), rheumatoid arthritis (15), celiac disease (17), or normal human subjects (16 NHS). We also included 15 EBA sera as our positive control. All sera were run in the ELISA at a 1:200 dilution. The results of this analysis are shown in Fig 3 as a scatter plot. The results from negative control sera (16 NHS) were analyzed to set an appropriate threshold for this assay. All the control sera showed very low reactivity in the ELISA with OD values less than 0.25. We set 0.3 OD arbitrarily as the threshold for the ELISA (horizontal line in Fig 3). All the autoimmune disease control sera (15 rheumatoid arthritis) and gastrointestinal disease control sera (17 celiac disease) showed low reactivity with OD values less than the threshold. In contrast to the controls, 13 sera from 19 CD patients and four sera from 31 UC patients exhibited reactivity with the recombinant NC1 in the ELISA. OD values ranged from 0.38 to 1.24. As expected, all 15 EBA sera showed the strong reactivity for NC1 with OD ranging from 0.9 to 1.78.

In order to determine whether the five sera from CD patients that had weak reactivity in the ELISA (OD = 0.35–0.5) at dilutions of 1:200 actually contained autoantibodies for NC1, we performed a serum dilution titer study (Fig 4). Five sera showed increased reactivity as the sera dilution decreased from 1:1250 to 1:10. In contrast to this dilution-dependent reactivity for NC1, sera from four NHS did not show altered reactivity at different dilutions in the ELISA.

Sera from CD patients reacted with NC1 by immunoblot analysis. The CD sera were further analyzed by immunoblotting against recombinant NC1. As shown in Fig 5, the 145 kDa recombinant NC1 protein was recognized by seven CD sera at 1:50 dilutions (lanes 2–7) but not by normal sera (lane 1). Six sera from CD patients that had low titer in ELISA did not react with the

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**Figure 1. Colonic extracts contain type VII collagen.** Colonic extracts (10 μg per well) from postoperative colon (lanes 2–5) or foreskin extract (lane 6) were subjected to 6% SDS–PAGE and electrophoretically transferred on to a nitrocellulose membrane, before incubation with a polyclonal antibody to NC1 (1:2000) and horseradish peroxidase-conjugated antibody to rabbit IgG followed by enhanced chemiluminescence detection. Lane 1 is the postoperative colon immunoblotted with normal rabbit serum (1:2000). The positions of the 290 kDa type VII collagen, 145 kDa NC1, and the molecular weight marker are indicated.

**Figure 2. Type VII collagen is present in the basement membrane of colon.** Colonic tissue was cut on a Cryostat set at 5 μm and air-dried on glass slides. Sections were incubated with either LH 7.2, a monoclonal antibody to type VII collagen, diluted 1:25 (panel d), or a polyclonal antibody to the NC1 domain of type VII collagen, diluted 1:200 (panel c), at room temperature for 2 h, then with a fluorescein-conjugated goat anti-mouse or anti-rabbit IgG, diluted 1:25, and incubated at room temperature for 1 h. Panels a and b were negative control sections that stained with normal rabbit serum (1:200) and normal mouse serum (1:25), respectively. Panels e and f were positive control human skin sections staining with NC1 polyclonal antibody (1:200) and LH 7.2 monoclonal antibody (1:25), respectively. The slides were mounted in 50% glycerol–PBS and examined with a Zeiss fluorescence microscope equipped with epilumination. Scale bar: 200 μm.
NC1 in the immunoblot analysis at this dilution (data not shown). Taken together, these data show a correlation between the results of the ELISA and the immunoblot analysis.

**Indirect immunofluorescence on human skin and monkey esophagus with IBD patient serum** Seventeen sera from patients with IBD that reacted with NC1 in ELISA (and no evidence of EBA) were tested for their ability to react with frozen sections of salt-split human skin or monkey esophagus. All sera were tested at dilutions of 1:5 and 1:10. Of the 17 IBD sera tested, none reacted with either human skin or monkey esophagus and labeled the epidermal–dermal basement membrane zone.

**Lack of correlation between IBD duration and NC1 reactivity in ELISA** An attempt was made to examine if there was a correlation with the duration of the patient's IBD and the level of the OD reading in the ELISA. The disease duration of each of the patients with IBD varied considerably. The shortest duration was 8 y and the longest duration was 30 y. There was no correlation between the ELISA OD reading and the duration of the patient’s IBD. For example, the longest duration patient who had IBD for 30 y had an OD of 0.248, whereas the patient with the shortest duration of IBD of 8 y had an OD of 0.502.

**DISCUSSION**

Patients with EBA have IgG autoantibodies to type VII collagen (Woodley *et al.*, 1984). By western blotting analysis, these autoantibodies recognize two proteins in extracts of skin basement membrane: a major protein of 290 kDa and a minor protein of 145 kDa, the NC1 domain (Woodley *et al.*, 1988). Using a polyclonal antibody to recombinant NC1, we demonstrated the presence of type VII (anchoring fibril) collagen in human colonic and rectal mucosa by western blotting. The antibody labeled both 290 kDa and 145 kDa bands in four different samples of colon (Fig 1).

Visser *et al.* (1993) used colon samples from four patients with normal mucosa by colonoscopy, under observation for rectal bleeding. These samples were subjected to direct immunofluorescence using two monoclonal antibodies against type VII collagen: NP-76 and LH 7.2. Type VII collagen immunoreactivity, however, was seen in mucosa adjacent to adenomas and carcinomas and...
in adenomatous epithelium, close to the luminal surface, but not in normal epithelium. More recently, Lohi et al (1996) found that immunoreactivity for type VII collagen was confined to basement membrane of colonic epithelium in a punctate manner. Previously, other authors were unable to identify type VII collagen in colon using EBA sera and monoclonal antibodies (Paller et al, 1986).

In our immunofluorescence study, we were able to identify strong linear staining of the colonic basement membrane with a polyclonal antibody to recombinant NC1. Immunofluorescent staining of human colon for type VII collagen was probably missed previously because low titer EBA sera were used. Alternatively, the presence of type VII collagen in human colon was missed because the antibodies used were directed against a protease-sensitive domain of type VII collagen. The type VII collagen targets for these antibodies may have been degraded by the highly efficient proteolysis in gut samples after the tissues were obtained.

Both EBA and IBD are considered to be disorders of immunity. The etiologic events leading to either disease, however, are unknown. One theory of autoimmunity is that the rise of autoantibodies may result from molecular mimicry between microbial and host protein. The environment created by nonspecific events that cause cellular and tissue destruction may render normal tissue proteins immunogenic, as such these altered proteins become autoantigens. In this study we found that none of the 17 IBD sera that reacted with NC1 in ELISA labeled salt-split human skin or monkey esophagus by indirect immunofluorescence. There are several possible explanations. The first is that the ELISA is more sensitive than indirect immunofluorescence in detecting low titer autoantibodies as we demonstrated previously (Chen et al, 1997c). Another possibility is that the IBD sera bind to certain epitopes within NC1 that are not accessible in skin basement membrane but are available to the immune system in gut basement membrane. In the ELISA, however, the NC1 epitopes would be available to bind the IBD sera. As only tissue-bound autoantibodies can become pathogenic, this may explain why none of our 17 IBD patients developed EBA.

In our patient file, we identified 13 patients who had both EBA and IBD. Eleven of these 13 patients had the onset of their IBD at least 2 years before the onset of their EBA. It is not clear why some patients with IBD have EBA and others do not. It is conceivable that the sequela of IBD autoantibodies binding to gut type VII collagen (and/or other mechanisms that establish an inflammatory nidus) is tissue damage in the gut, which alters in the structural molecules in the tissue and subsequently reveals cryptic type VII collagen epitopes that become antigenic. When autoantibodies are then generated against these antigenic neo-epitopes in gut, in certain patients they may bind to skin basement membrane and invoke EBA. If this process does not occur, EBA would not develop and the patient would only have IBD. In theory, the process could work in the other direction such that a patient with EBA generates autoantibodies to skin type VII collagen that results in the revelation of type VII epitopes shared by gut basement membrane and the induction of IBD ensuing after the onset of EBA. In this scenario, the autoantibodies to the epitope in the gut would invoke inflammation and induce IBD.

In addition to the theory of pure autoimmunity causing the pathogenesis of IBD, it has also been speculated that genes related to IBD encode products that contribute to functional or structural alterations in the gastrointestinal tract. These alterations may render the tissues more susceptible to toxins, infectious agents, or autoimmune responses (Statter et al, 1993). Therefore, in addition to possible immune and environmental factors, genetic tendencies to develop CD and UC may be part of their disease pathogenesis (Satsangi et al, 1996; Hampe et al, 2001).

IBD has also been associated with circulating immune complexes and IgG immune deposits in the intestinal mucosa (Hodgson et al, 1977; Fiasse et al, 1978). Although, the tissue damage in IBD may be immune mediated, the condition is not strictly an autoimmune disease because the tissue damage is not directly caused by injury to a known autoantigen (Shanahan, 1992).

There is no conclusive evidence for a direct pathogenic role for any antibody in IBD. In the last decade, many different autoantibodies have been identified in UC and CD patients. These include pancreatic, anti-neutrophil cytoplasmic, anti-erythrocyte, anti-endothelial cell, anti-Saccharomyces cerevisiae, and anti-tropomyosin antibodies (Aldebert et al, 1997; Biancone et al, 1998; Quinton et al, 1998; Fricke et al, 1999). It is probable that antibodies in these patients are markers of underlying mucosal immune dysregulation or perhaps a response to gastrointestinal microbial antigens (Targan et al, 1995). This study demonstrated that type VII collagen antibodies are present in the sera of CD patients. It is likely that the presence of type VII collagen represents an epitope spreading phenomenon (Chan et al, 1998), in which damage to the overlying mucosa exposes antigenic epitopes of the type VII collagen molecule. These newly exposed antigenic epitopes may then invoke the immune system to mount an antibody response.

This work was presented as a paper at the Annual Meeting of the Society for Investigative Dermatology held in Washington D.C. & May 2, 1996. The work was supported by grants PO1 AR41045 and RO1 AR33625 from the National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, MD. Dr Chen was supported by a Dermatology Foundation Career Development Award. Dr O’Toole was supported by a Howard Hughes Medical Institute Physician Scientist Fellowship.

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