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microRNA-29 mediates a novel negative feedback loop to regulate SCAP/SREBP-1 and lipid metabolism

Peng Ru and Deliang Guo

Department of Radiation Oncology, The Ohio State University James Comprehensive Cancer Center and College of Medicine, Columbus, OH 43210, USA

Abstract

The membrane-bound transcription factors, SREBPs (sterol regulatory element-binding proteins), play a central role in regulating lipid metabolism. The transcriptional activation of SREBPs requires the key protein SCAP (SREBP-cleavage activating protein) to translocate their precursors from the endoplasmic reticulum to the Golgi for subsequent proteolytic activation, a process tightly regulated by a cholesterol-mediated negative feedback loop. Our previous work showed that the SCAP/SREBP-1 pathway is significantly upregulated in human glioblastoma (GBM), the most deadly brain cancer, and that glucose-mediated *N*-glycosylation of SCAP is a prerequisite step for SCAP/SREBP trafficking. More recently, we demonstrated that microRNA-29 (miR-29) mediates a previously unrecognized negative feedback loop in SCAP/SREBP-1 signaling to control lipid metabolism. We found that SREBP-1, functioning as a transcription factor, promotes the expression of the miR-29 family members, miR-29a, -29b and -29c. In turn, the miR-29 isoforms reversely repress the expression of SCAP and SREBP-1. Moreover, treatment with miR-29 mimics effectively suppressed GBM tumor growth by inhibiting SCAP/SREBP-1 and *de novo* lipid synthesis. These findings, recently published in *Cell Reports*, strongly suggest that delivery of miR-29 *in vivo* may be a promising approach to treat cancer and metabolic diseases by suppressing SCAP/SREBP-1-regulated lipid metabolism.

Keywords

Lipid metabolism; SCAP; SREBP-1; miR-29; glioblastoma; cancer

Lipids are essential components of the cells, particularly phospholipids and cholesterol, constituting the basic structure of cell membrane system [1, 2]. Furthermore, lipids also serve as important signaling molecules, regulating various cellular functions[3]. Dysregulation of lipid metabolism contributes to the pathogenesis of various metabolic syndromes, i.e., atherosclerosis, steatosis, obesity and diabetes [4]. Therefore, interfering with the dysregulated lipid metabolism in metabolic diseases has been a long-term focus of basic

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Correspondence: Deliang Guo, deliang.guo@osumc.edu.

Conflicting interests

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research and pharmacological development [4, 5]. Nevertheless, the still incomplete understanding of the molecular mechanisms underlying the alteration of lipid metabolism significantly hinders progress.

The family of basic helix-loop-helix transcription factors, SREBPs (sterol regulatory element-binding proteins), plays a central role in lipid metabolism by controlling the *de novo* synthesis of fatty acids, phospholipids, cholesterol, and also cholesterol uptake, which were initially discovered by Nobel Laureates Brown & Goldstein around 20 years ago [3–7]. SREBPs are comprised of three members, SREBP-1a, -1c and -2. SREBP-1a and -1c that are encoded by the same gene using different transcriptional start sites, resulting in a distinct exon 1 and around a 20 amino acid longer N-terminus in SREBP-1a than in -1c [8, 9]. SREBP-2 is encoded from a different gene and mainly controls cholesterol synthesis and uptake while SREBP-1c regulates fatty acid synthesis. In contrast, SREBP-1a is able to execute all three functions, i.e., fatty acid synthesis, cholesterol synthesis and cholesterol uptake [6, 10–14].

Brown & Goldstein put forth an elegant model of the regulation of SREBP activation through a cholesterol-mediated negative feedback loop (Fig. 1) [4, 6]. After translation, SREBPs immediately bind to the key protein, SCAP (SREBP-cleavage activating protein), to form a complex. SCAP further binds to Insig (insulin-induced gene protein), an endoplasmic reticulum (ER)-anchored protein, resulting in the formation of the Insig/SCAP/SREBP complex, which is retained in the ER by high levels of cholesterol [15–17]. When cholesterol levels decrease, SCAP dissociates from Insig, resulting in the degradation of Insig. SCAP then interacts with COPII proteins that translocate the SCAP/SREBP complex from the ER to the Golgi, where SREBPs are sequentially cleaved by site-1 and site-2 proteinases to release their transcriptionally active N-terminal fragments that enter into the nucleus to promote the transcription of lipogenic genes including *Insig-1* [4, 6, 10, 11, 17, 18]. Consequently, the levels of cholesterol and Insig are restored to bind again to the SCAP/SREBP complex, which is then retained in the ER, resulting in the reduction of lipid synthesis and uptake (Fig. 1) [19–22].

To explore whether other factors are critical for SCAP/SREBP trafficking, we investigated the role of glucose-mediated *N*-glycosylation modification of the SCAP protein, and showed that it was a prerequisite step for SCAP/SREBP trafficking and activation upon cholesterol reduction [23–25]. We found that *N*-glycosylation stabilizes SCAP and reduces its association with Insig-1, allowing SCAP/SREBP movement from the ER to the Golgi (Fig. 1). Our study demonstrated that glucose is an essential activator of SCAP/SREBP trafficking, while cholesterol functions as a key inhibitor of this process [23–25].

Recent evidence shows that lipid metabolism is largely altered in cancer cells [26–33]. Our previous studies were the first to demonstrate that lipid metabolism is reprogrammed in glioblastoma (GBM) [29, 33–36], the most common primary brain tumor and one of the most lethal of all cancers [36–41]. Our data show that GBM tumors bearing amplification of the tyrosine kinase receptor, EGFR, or expressing the constitutively active EGFRvIII, which lacks a portion of the extracellular ligand binding domain due to the deletion of exons 2–7 of the *EGFR* gene [39, 42, 43], were greatly dependent on SREBP-1-mediated lipogenesis and

cholesterol uptake for their rapid growth^[34, 36, 44, 45]. We found that EGFR/EGFRvIII activates SREBP-1 via PI3K/Akt signaling to promote lipid synthesis^[6, 10, 36], and that EGFR signaling enhances glucose uptake to promote SCAP *N*-glycosylation and SCAP/SREBP-1 trafficking^[23–25].

SREBP proteins were recently reported to be upregulated in various cancers and now emerge as promising molecular targets for cancer treatment^[33, 44, 46]. Nevertheless, the pharmacological development to directly target SCAP/SREBP has not been successful so far, and alternative means to block this pathway are needed. Thus, we turned our attention to microRNAs (miRNAs), small non-coding RNAs that greatly affect the expression and translation of a large number of genes^[47,48]. miRNAs are involved in many biological processes, i.e., cell growth, development, differentiation, survival, etc.^[47–49]. Moreover, miRNAs have been shown to be involved in tumorigenesis where they function as tumor suppressors or oncomiRs^[50], and to regulate lipid metabolism^[51–53].

We identified miRNA-29 as a critical mediator of a novel negative feedback loop in the regulation of SCAP/SREBP-1 signaling^[54], providing a promising new approach to target GBM. The miRNA-29 family includes 3 members, miR-29a, -29b and -29c, which share the same seed sequence. miR-29b is encoded by pri-miR-29b1 and pri-miR-29b2, which are located on different chromosomes but generate the same mature miR-29b. Interestingly, pri-miR-29a and pri-miR-29b1 are both located on chromosome 7 and share the same promoter. Similarly, pri-miR-29b2 and pri-miR-29c are located on chromosome 1 and are co-transcribed by the same promoter^[55,56].

In our study, we found that expression of all 3 mature miR-29s was positively correlated with SREBP-1 gene expression in samples from a large cohort of GBM patients with altered EGFR (amplification or mutation)^[55]. Furthermore, activating EGFR/PI3K/Akt signaling via EGF stimulation significantly enhanced the expression of all 3 miR-29s in GBM cell lines. Interestingly, both SREBP-1a and -1c directly bind to the promoter region of miR-29a/b1 and miR-29b2/c, activating their expression and generating mature miRNA-29a, -29b and -29c. We also showed that the 3'-untranslated region (3'-UTR) of SREBP-1 has binding sites for miR-29, and demonstrated that miR-29a, -29b and -29c inhibited the mRNA and protein levels of SREBP-1 by directly binding to these complementary sites. Importantly, our intracranial GBM xenograft studies show that miR-29 treatment significantly suppressed tumor growth via inhibition of SCAP/SREBP-1 and lipid synthesis^[54].

miR-29 has been shown to be transcriptionally inhibited by transcription factors such as c-Myc, TGF- β and *NF- κ B* in cancer cells^[57–59]. Our study was the first to show that miR-29 expression is controlled by SREBP-1, and that miR-29 is directly involved in the regulation of lipid metabolism. This newly discovered negative feedback loop regulation of SCAP/SREBP-1 by miR-29 further demonstrates that lipid homeostasis is elegantly regulated by multi-layer of mechanisms in addition to cholesterol and glucose regulation^[23–25, 54]. Considering the simple synthesis and easy delivery of mature microRNAs, miR-29 treatment may be a feasible and promising approach to treat cancers and other metabolic diseases.

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Abbreviations

miR-29	microRNA-29
SREBPs	sterol regulatory element-binding proteins
SCAP	SREBP-cleavage activating protein
GBM	glioblastoma
Insig	insulin-induced gene
ER	endoplasmic reticulum
3'-UTR	3'-untranslated region

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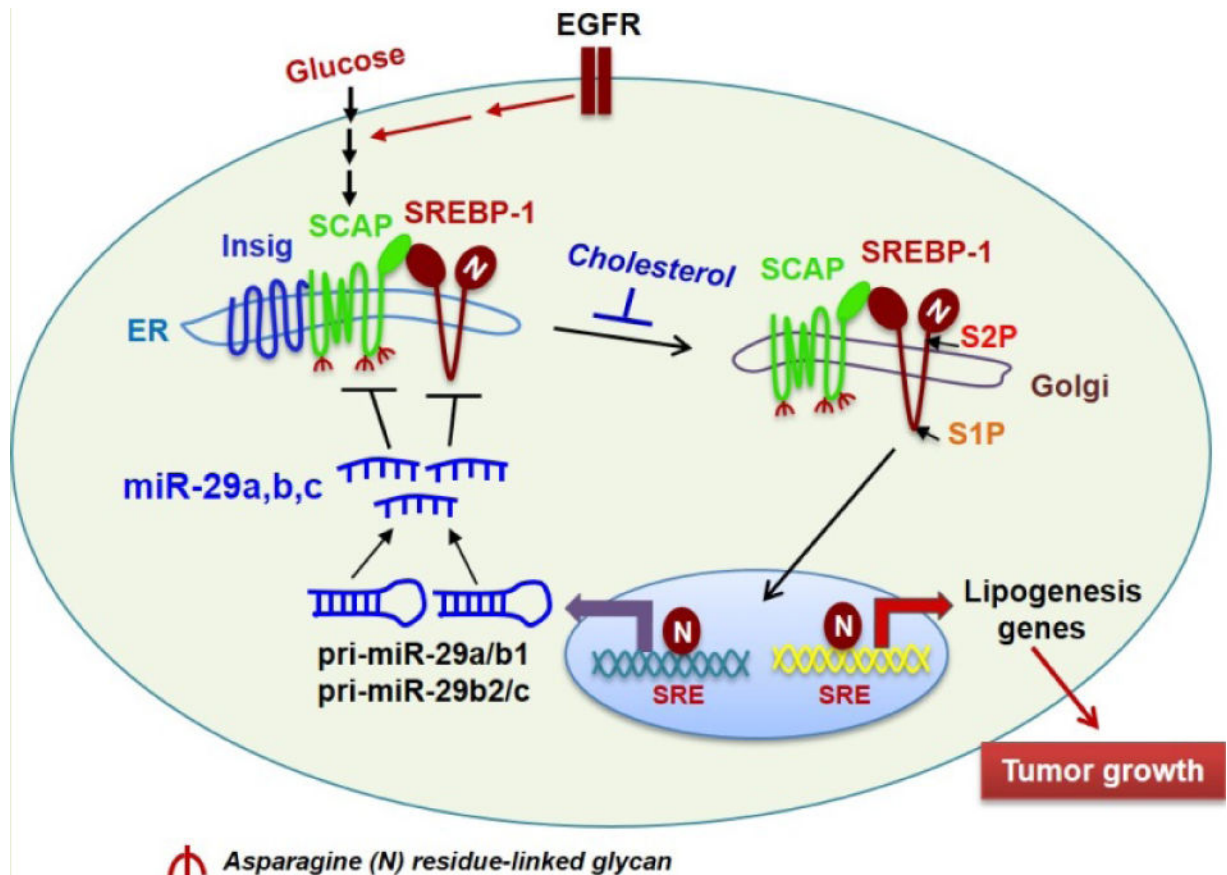


Figure 1. miR-29 mediates a novel negative feedback loop in SCAP/SREBP-1 signaling and regulates lipid metabolism

Our previous study showed that glucose-mediated SCAP *N*-glycosylation enables SCAP/SREBP-1 trafficking from the ER to the Golgi for subsequent proteolytic activation. Furthermore, EGFR signaling enhances glucose uptake, thereby increasing SCAP *N*-glycosylation and SREBP-1 activation to promote tumor growth [23–25]. High levels of cholesterol increase the association of Insig and SCAP, resulting in the retention of the complex in the ER [6]. Our newly discovered negative feedback loop shows that SREBP-1 transcriptionally activates the expression of pri-miR-29a/b1 and pri-miR-29b2/c, which generate the mature miR-29a, -29b and 29c. In turn, miR-29 reversely inhibits the expression of SCAP and SREBP-1 by binding to their 3'-UTRs, resulting in the downregulation of lipogenesis genes [55]. SRE, sterol regulatory element (SREBP-binding motif present in the promoters of SREBP target genes). S1P, site 1 protease. S2P, site 2 protease.