CYTOKINE GENE EXPRESSION AND PRODUCTION BY HUMAN LPS-STIMULATED MONONUCLEAR CELLS ARE INHIBITED BY SULFATED

Journal of Thrombosis and Haemostasis, **2**: 1657–1662

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Cytokine gene expression and production by human LPS-stimulated mononuclear cells are inhibited by sulfated heparin-like semi-synthetic derivatives

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To cite this article: Gori AM, Attanasio M, Gazzini A, Rossi L, Lucarini L, Miletti S, Chini J, Manoni M, Abbate R, Gensini GF. Cytokine gene expression and production by human LPS-stimulated mononuclear cells are inhibited by sulfated heparin-like semi-synthetic derivatives. *J Thromb Haemost* 2004; **2**: 1657–62.

Summary. *Background*: The K5 polysaccharide obtained from *Escherichia coli* strain 010:K5:H4 is a polymer of the disaccharidic unit formed by D-glucuronic acid and N-acetylglucosamine. This structure is akin to N-acetylheparosan, the precursory polymer of heparin and of heparan sulfate. This structural affinity with N-acetylated heparin and with de-sulfated heparin makes the K5 polysaccharide extremely useful for the preparation of sulfated heparin-like semi-synthetic derivatives. It has been demonstrated that heparins are able to inhibit tissue factor and cytokine production and expression by human monocytes. *Objective*: The aim of this study was to evaluate the effects of four different heparin-like semi-synthetic derivatives on inflammatory cytokine production and expression by human mononuclear cells. *Results*: The simultaneous addition of lipopolysaccharide (LPS; 0.2 and 10 μg mL^{-1}) and the K5 polysaccharide did not inhibit interleukin (IL)-1β, IL-6 or tumor necrosis factor (TNF)-α production by stimulated mononuclear cells. IL-1β, IL-6 and TNF-α concentrations in supernatants of LPS-stimulated mononuclear cells were not influenced by the addition of N,O-sulfated K5 polysaccharide (K5-N, OS) and epimerized N-sulfated K5 polysaccharide (K5 NS epi) at 5 and 10 μg mL^{-1}, whereas the addition of epimerized N,O-sulfated K5 polysaccharide (K5-N, OS epi) (5 and 10 μg mL^{-1}) and O-sulfated K5 polysaccharide (K5-OS) (5 and 10 μg mL^{-1}) to LPS-stimulated cells caused a significant dose-dependent inhibition of IL-1β, IL-6 and TNF-α. All sulfated heparin-like semi-synthetic derivatives did not influence the IL-10 production by LPS-stimulated mononuclear cells. In LPS-stimulated cells (0.2 and 10 μg mL^{-1}), K5-OS or K5-N, OS epi at 5 and 10 μg mL^{-1} markedly decreased TNF-α mRNA expression. *Conclusions*: These results indicate that the sulfated heparin-like semi-synthetic derivatives K5-OS and K5-N, OS epi are able to inhibit both expression and production of inflammatory cytokines, whereas they do not influence the anti-inflammatory cytokine IL-10, suggesting a potential role for these products as modulators of inflammatory reactions.

Keywords: heparin derivatives, interleukin 10, proinflammatory cytokines, TNF-alpha mRNA expression.

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Received 9 November 2003, accepted 24 March 2004

Introduction

Heparin, a highly sulfated proteoglycan, has several biological actions independent of its well-known anticoagulant activity, including the ability to modulate extracellular matrix synthesis, cellular proliferation, angiogenesis, and particularly inflammation [1–6]. Mononuclear phagocytes and neutrophils are actively involved in inflammatory processes and synthesize and release a number of cytokines such as proinflammatory interleukins and, therefore, modulate the immune response through both T and B lymphocytes and the activation of accessory cells [7]. Lipopolysaccharide (LPS), a major component of the outer surface of Gram-negative bacteria, is a potent modulator of the host immune response and exhibits a variety of biological effects [8, 9]. A short exposure to LPS is sufficient to activate monocytes and macrophages to synthesize and release cytokines such as interleukin (IL)-1β, tumor necrosis factor (TNF)-α, IL-6, and IL-8, which may induce an inflammatory state [10]. Interestingly, heparins have been shown to inhibit proinflammatory cytokine production by LPS- or interferon-γ-stimulated human monocytes even when heparin is added after stimulation [11] and actively reduce the

process of leukocyte recruitment into the site of injury [12,13]. In the past years considerable efforts have been made in developing synthetic oligosaccharides endowed with the anticoagulant properties of heparins, but also in identifying the heparin-like molecule domains associated with anti-inflammatory properties. Wang *et al.* [13] generated a heparin derivative, which had a significantly lower anticoagulant activity while retaining its strong anti-inflammatory activity. In animal models non-anticoagulant heparin was able to inhibit leukocyte adhesion and transmigration *in vitro* and acute peritonitis and ischemia and reperfusion injury *in vivo* by reducing peritoneal infiltration of neutrophils, tissue edema and leukocyte deposition [13,14]. Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that heparin oligosaccharides, including non-anticoagulant tetrasaccharides, are effective L- and P-selectin inhibitors *in vitro* and have anti-inflammatory activity *in vivo* [15]. In addition, O-desulfated heparin prevented dysfunction of endothelial-dependent coronary relaxation following ischemic injury and inhibited translocation of the proinflammatory transcription nuclear factor-κB (NF-κB) from the cytoplasm to the nucleus in human endothelial cells and decreased NF-κB DNA binding in human endothelium and ischemic-reperfused rat myocardium [16]. Recently, fucan and dextran derivatives and heparin were found to modulate, in a dose-dependent manner, the release of proinflammatory cytokines by resting or LPS-stimulated human monocytes and to interact with monocyte surfaces by inhibiting LPS-binding to monocyte membranes [17].

The aim of this study was to evaluate the effects of four different heparin-like semi-synthetic derivatives on inflammatory cytokine production and expression by human mononuclear cells.

Materials and methods

Cell preparation

Mononuclear cells were obtained from citrated peripheral blood (1 : 9 v/v). Platelets were removed by centrifugation at 120 × *g* for 10 min twice; mononuclear cells were separated on a Ficoll–Hypaque (Nycomed Pharma AS, Oslo, Norway) gradient [18] and washed twice with phosphate-buffered saline–EDTA (NaCl 120 mM, Na_2HPO_4 10 mM, KH_2PO_4 3 mM, EDTA 5 mM) to eliminate further platelet contaminants. They were then resuspended (1×10^7 cells mL^{-1}) in RPMI-1640 (Gibco, Grand Island, NY, USA) containing gentamicin (100 μg mL^{-1}) (Sigma Chemical Co., St Louis, MO, USA). Mononuclear cells were > 98% viable by trypan blue exclusion and contained < 2% polymorphonuclear leukocytes and < 1% platelets.

Preparation of K5 derivatives

The capsular K5 polysaccharide obtained from *Escherichia coli* strain 010:K5:H4 is a polymer with the structure [-4)-GlcA β1-4 GlcNAc-(1-]$_n$ in which the disaccharidic units formed by D-glucuronic acid and N-acetylglucosamine are linked by a β 1 → 4 bonds. This structure is similar to N-acetylheparosan, the precursory polymer of heparin and of heparan sulfate. This structural affinity with N-acetylated heparin and with desulfated heparin makes the K5 polysaccharide extremely useful for the preparation of sulfated heparin-like semi-synthetic derivatives. Four classes of sulfated derivatives with different degrees of N and O sulfation were synthesized: (i) O-sulfated K5 polysaccharide (K5-OS), obtained by chemical O-sulfation and N-acetylation of the deacetylated K5 polysaccharide; (ii) N, O-sulfated K5 polysaccharide (K5-N, OS) obtained by chemical N and O sulfation after N-deacetylation of K5; (iii) epimerized N-sulfated K5 polysaccharide (K5-NS epi) obtained by chemical N-sulfation after N-deacetylation of K5 polysaccharide and epimerization with the enzyme glucuronyl C5 epimerase; (iv) epimerized N and O sulfated K5 polysaccharide (K5-N, OS epi) obtained by N-desacetylation/N-sulfation of K5 polysaccharide and epimerization of K5 with the enzyme glucuronyl C5 epimerase and O-sulfation.

The K5 polysaccharide derivatives were obtained from purified K5 polysaccharide prepared and purified as described by Manzoni *et al.* [19]. The K5 derivatives were obtained by the following procedures.

K5-OS The K5 polysaccharide was treated with 2 M sodium hydroxide at 50 °C for 18 h and after neutralization the solution was treated with sodium carbonate and pyridine sulphur trioxide for 6 h at 55 °C. The reaction product was then passed through a cation-exchange resin (IR-120 H+ BioRad, BioRad Laboratories, Milan, Italy) and treated with tetrabutylamonium hydroxyde in N,N,DMF. O-sulfation was carried out at 50 °C for 24 h with pyridine sulphur trioxide. The O-sulfated product was finally solubilized in deionized water at room temperature and added to sodium hydroxide and acetic anhydride.

K5-N, OS O-sulfated derivatives obtained with the above procedure were treated with sodium carbonate and pyridine sulphur trioxide up to 6 h at 55 °C and samples were purified from salts by ultrafiltration to obtain N, O-sulfted K5 polysaccharides.

K5-NS epi N-deacetylated/N-sulfated K5 polysaccharide obtained as above was treated with recombinant glucuronyl C5 epimerase immobilized on a CNBr Sepharose 4B resin (Pharmacia, Uppsala, Sweden). The reaction was carried out at 37 °C for 24 h by passing the substrate dissolved in 25 mM HEPES buffer, pH 6.5 50 mM $CaCl_2$, through the column. The epimerized product was then purified by ultrafiltration and precipitation.

K5-N, OS epi The epimerized N-sulfated K5 derivative obtained as above was dissolved in water, passed through a cation-exchange resin, reacted with an organic base, dissolved in N,N,DMF and O-sulfated at 50 °C for 24 h with pyridine sulphur trioxide.

All the samples were characterized by nuclear magnetic resonance analysis, sulphate/carboxyl ratio analysis, molecular weight determination, according to described methods [20].

All heparin-like derivative molecules were also tested for their antithrombotic/anticoagulant activity, showing no or very little (< 10 IU mg^{-1}) anti-factor Xa activity.

Cell stimulation

Human mononuclear cells isolated from 10 healthy male subjects were stimulated with LPS (0.2 and 10 μg mL^{-1}) and incubated (10^7 cells mL^{-1}) with four sulfated derivatives (5 or 10 μg mL^{-1}) with different degrees of N and O sulfation at 37 °C at 0 (PBS buffer), 5 and 10 μg mL^{-1} for 4 h: (i) O-sulfated K5 polysaccharide (K5-OS), (ii) N,O-sulfated K5 polysaccharide (K5-N, OS), (3) epimerized N sulfated K5 polysaccharides (K5-NS epi), and (iv) epimerized N and O sulfated K5 polysaccharides (K5-N, OS epi).

Cytokine determination

After incubation, mononuclear cells were centrifuged and in the supernatants IL1-β, IL-6, IL-10 and TNF-α concentrations were determined using ELISA methods (Amersham Pharmacia Biotech). The minimum detectable concentrations were 0.10 pg mL^{-1} for IL1-β, IL-6, TNF-α and 3 pg mL^{-1} for IL-10. The interassay coefficient of variation was 7.0% for all assays.

RNA preparation

Total RNA was extracted from mononuclear cells using a guanidium thiocyanate single-step isolation method [21]. Total RNA concentrations were determined by spectrophotometry.

Reverse transcription

Total RNA was first heated at 65°C for 5 min. First-strand cDNA was synthesized using 1mg total RNA $10ml^{-1}$ of final reaction volume containing 50 mM Tris–HCL pH 8.3, 3 mM $MgCl_2$, 10 mM DTT (GIBCO), 75 mM KCL, 0.125 mM each dGTP, dATP, dTTP, dCTP (Pharmacia Biotech), 1.5 ng mg^{-1} random esanucleotide primer (Pharmacia Biotech), 100 U of reverse transcriptase (GIBCO) and incubated at 37 °C for 90 min.

TaqMan polymerase chain reaction

TNF-α primers and probes were purchased from ABI (Applied Biosystem ABI, Foster City, CA, USA). TaqMan polymerase chain reaction (PCR) was performed with 5 μL of Reverse Transcriptase (RT) diluted products (50 ng of total RNA) in a total volume of 25 μL of 1 × TaqMan Mastermix (ABI) containing 100 nM forward and reverse primers and 100 nM probe. Thermocycling conditions were: 50 °C for 2 min, 95 °C for 10 min and run 40 cycles at 95 °C for 15 s, 60 °C for 1 min on the ABI Prism 7700 Detection System (ABI). The reaction is based on the use of fluorogenic probes designed to hybridize to the gene target sequence of the two PCR primers. Each probe contains a fluorescent reporter dye and a quencher dye at the 5′ and 3′ ends, respectively. In the intact probe the presence of the quencher inhibits reporter emission by quenching energy emission. During the extension phase of PCR cycling, the annealed probe is cleaved by the exonuclease activity of Taq polymerase. The cleavage produces an increase of fluorescence emission of reporter dye. This event occurs in each PCR cycle only if probe is annealed to the target sequence, which leads to an increase of fluorescence proportional to the concentration of target sequences in the initial sample.

The threshold cycle (C_T) represents the PCR cycle at which an increase in reporter fluorescence above a baseline signal can first be detected.

The percentage of TNF-α mRNA inhibition by semi-synthetic derivatives after LPS stimulus was calculated in each experiment referring the sample C_T (threshold cycle) value to the LPS-stimulated cell C_T value of the same experiment. The LPS-stimulated cell C_T value was considered 100% of mRNA expression in each experiment.

Statistical analysis

The tests were performed by SPSS (Chicago, IL, USA) 11.5 software for Windows. The results presented are the mean of 10 independent experiments with 10 different donors. The percentage inhibition of cytokine production was relative to the amounts of cytokines produced in the LPS-stimulated samples in the absence of heparin derivatives, which was taken as 100%. Results given as mean ± standard deviation. The statistical analysis were performed using analysis of variance (ANOVA) followed by the Dunnet's test for multiple comparison. All *P*-values reported are two-tailed with values of < 0.05 considered statistically significant.

Results

The incubation of mononuclear cells with the heparin derivatives (5 or 10 μg mL^{-1}) did not cause any significant decrease in cell viability (data not shown).

LPS at 0.2 and 10 μg mL^{-1} markedly stimulated mononuclear cell IL-1β, IL-6, IL-10 and TNF-α production (data not shown).

As shown in Table 1, the simultaneous addition of LPS (0.2 μg mL^{-1}) and the K5 polysaccharide (starting material) (10 μg mL^{-1}), K5-N, OS and K5-NS epi at 5 and 10 μg mL^{-1} to cellular suspensions did not inhibit IL-1β, IL-6 or TNF-α production by stimulated mononuclear cells, whereas the addition of K5-OS (5 and 10 μg mL^{-1}) and K5-N, OS epi (5 and 10 μg mL^{-1}) to LPS-stimulated cells (0.2 μg mL^{-1}) caused a significant ($P < 0.05$) decrease of IL-1β, IL-6 and TNF-α production (Table 1). The inhibitory effect of heparin derivative K5-OS seemed to be dose dependent: K5-OS (5 μg mL^{-1}) decreased 25.4 ± 14.03% of IL-1β, 10.63 ± 7.18% of IL-6 and 22.15 ± 17.61% of TNF-α production by LPS-stimulated mononuclear cells (0.2 μg mL^{-1}). We also observed a greater inhibitory effect on cytokine production when K5-OS was added at a concentration

Table 1 Effects of different heparin-like semi-synthetic derivatives on cytokine production (ng per 10^7 cells) by lipopolysaccharide (LPS) (0.2 μg mL^{-1})-stimulated mononuclear cells

	IL-1β production	IL-6 production	TNF-α production
LPS (0.2 μg mL^{-1}) + RPMI medium	0.93 ± 0.35	1.09 ± 0.53	0.99 ± 0.98
LPS (0.2 μg/ml) + K5 10 μg mL^{-1}	0.92 ± 0.35	1.08 ± 0.54	0.97 ± 0.96
LPS (10 μg mL^{-1}) + K5-OS (5 μg mL^{-1})	0.69 ± 0.29*	0.98 ± 0.50*	0.81 ± 0.89*
LPS (0.2 μg mL^{-1}) + K5-OS (10 μg mL^{-1})	0.60 ± 0.29**	0.69 ± 0.44**	0.61 ± 0.38**
LPS (0.2 μg mL^{-1}) + K5-N, OS (5 μg mL^{-1})	0.92 ± 0.36	1.07 ± 0.53	0.98 ± 0.97
LPS (0.2 μg mL^{-1}) + K5-N, OS (10 μg mL^{-1})	0.91 ± 0.34	1.06 ± 0.18	0.98 ± 0.98
LPS (0.2 μg mL^{-1}) + K5-NS Epi (5 μg mL^{-1})	0.92 ± 0.36	1.08 ± 0.53	0.98 ± 0.95
LPS (0.2 μg mL^{-1}) + K5-NS Epi (10 μg mL^{-1})	0.90 ± 0.33	1.07 ± 0.53	0.99 ± 0.98
LPS (0.2 μg mL^{-1}) + K5-N, OS Epi (5 μg mL^{-1})	0.71 ± 0.28*	0.85 ± 0.42§	0.72 ± 0.65*
LPS (0.2 μg mL^{-1}) + K5-N, OS Epi (10 μg mL^{-1})	0.56 ± 0.29**	0.61 ± 0.29**	0.53 ± 0.66**

*$P < 0.05$ vs. LPS; §$P < 0.01$ vs. LPS; **$P < 0.001$ vs. LPS.

Table 2 Effects of different heparin-like semi-synthetic derivatives on cytokine production (ng per 10^7 cells) by lipopolysaccharide (LPS) (10 μg mL^{-1})-stimulated mononuclear cells

	IL-1β production	IL-6 production	TNF-α production
LPS (10 μg mL^{-1}) + RPMI medium	5.61 ± 1.77	9.61 ± 4.35	7.88 ± 4.69
LPS (10 μg mL^{-1}) + K5 10 μg mL^{-1}	5.59 ± 1.57	9.51 ± 4.34	8.10 ± 4.84
LPS (10 μg mL^{-1}) + K5-OS (5 μg mL^{-1})	4.37 ± 1.39*	8.82 ± 4.01*	6.12 ± 3.68*
LPS (10 μg mL^{-1}) + K5-OS (10 μg mL^{-1})	3.61 ± 1.29**	6.41 ± 3.46**	4.96 ± 2.90**
LPS (10 μg mL^{-1}) + K5-N, OS (5 μg mL^{-1})	5.68 ± 1.74	9.62 ± 4.46	8.07 ± 4.64
LPS (10 μg mL^{-1}) + K5-N, OS (10 μg mL^{-1})	5.69 ± 1.62	9.17 ± 3.97	7.78 ± 4.74
LPS (10 μg mL^{-1}) + K5-NS Epi (5 μg mL^{-1})	5.63 ± 1.77	9.68 ± 4.21	7.79 ± 4.61
LPS (10 μg mL^{-1}) + K5-NS Epi (10 μg mL^{-1})	5.71 ± 2.15	9.42 ± 4.19	7.85 ± 4.57
LPS (10 μg mL^{-1}) + K5-N, OS Epi (5 μg mL^{-1})	4.24 ± 1.39*	7.60 ± 3.52§	6.10 ± 3.13*
LPS (10 μg mL^{-1}) + K5-N, OS Epi (10 μg mL^{-1})	3.41 ± 1.51**	5.62 ± 2.59**	4.91 ± 3.35**

*$P < 0.05$ vs. LPS; §$P < 0.01$ vs. LPS; **$P < 0.001$ vs. LPS.

of 10 μg mL^{-1}: 36.92 ± 11.9% for IL-1β, 38.75 ± 14.61% for IL-6, and 36.30 ± 17.1% for TNF-α. The inhibitory effect on IL-1β, IL-6 and TNF-α of K5-N, OS epi at 5 μg mL^{-1} was 23.5 ± 14.7% for IL-1β, 22.61 ± 9.7% for IL-6 and 23.75 ± 13.23% for TNF-α. K5-N, OS epi at 10 μg mL^{-1} inhibited 41.3 ± 16.80% of IL-1β, 43.36 ± 12.37 % of IL-6 and 42.50 ± 18.50 % of TNF-α production.

The simultaneous addition of LPS 10 μg mL^{-1} and the K5 polysaccharide (starting material) (10 μg mL^{-1}), K5-N, OS and K5-NS epi at 5 and 10 μg mL^{-1} to cellular suspensions did not cause any significant inhibition of IL-1β, IL-6 or TNF-α production (Table 2), whereas the addition of K5-OS (5 and 10 μg mL^{-1}) and K5-N, OS epi (5 and 10 μg mL^{-1}) to LPS-stimulated cells (10 μg mL^{-1}) caused a significant ($P < 0.05$) decrease of IL-1β, IL-6 and TNF-α production (Table 2).

The addition to cellular suspensions of all sulfated heparin-like semi-synthetic derivatives did not cause a significant inhibition of the production of the anti-inflammatory cytokine IL-10 by LPS-stimulated mononuclear cells (0.2 μg mL^{-1}). Mononuclear cells stimulated by 0.2 μg mL^{-1} of LPS produced 16.1 ± 8.1 pg mL^{-1} of IL-10. LPS (0.2 μg mL^{-1})-stimulated cells, treated with K5-N,OS, or K5-N OS epi, or K5-OS or K5-NS epi, at 10 μg mL^{-1} produced 16.5 ± 8.3, 16.3 ± 8.3, 16.7 ± 9.5, 16.8 ± 8.9 pg mL^{-1} of IL-10 respectively. Mononuclear cells stimulated with 10 μg mL^{-1} of LPS produced 96.2 ± 63.0 pg mL^{-1} of IL-10. The simultaneous addition of the heparin derivatives at 10 μg mL^{-1} to LPS (10 μg mL^{-1})-stimulated mononuclear cells did not significantly influence IL-10 production (K5-N,OS 99.1 ± 64.9; K5-N OS epi 98.7 ± 63.8; K5-OS 97.9 ± 66.2; or K5-NS epi 98.7 ± 63.8 pg mL^{-1}).

The addition of either K5-OS or K5-N, OS epi at 5 and 10 μg mL^{-1} in LPS (0.2 μg mL^{-1})-stimulated mononuclear cells resulted in a dose-dependent inhibition of TNF-α mRNA expression: K5-OS at 5 and 10 μg mL^{-1} inhibited 40.9% (from 10.0% to 74.0%) and 58.8 % (from 12.0% to 86.0%) of TNF-α mRNA expression, respectively. K5-N, OS epi at 5 and 10 μg mL^{-1} inhibited 68.0% (from 10.0% to 100.0%), and 94.3 % (from 46.0% to 100.0%) of TNF-α mRNA expression. Similar results were obtained when mononuclear cells were stimulated with 10 μg mL^{-1} of LPS: 5 μg mL^{-1} K5-OS inhibited 38.1% (from 10.0% to 68.0%), 10 μg mL^{-1} K5-OS 64.2% (from 12.0% to 88.0%), 5 μg mL^{-1} K5-N, OS epi 63.0% (from 9.0% to 100.0%), and 10 μg mL^{-1} K5-N, OS epi 92.3 % (from 46.0% to 100.0%) of TNF-α mRNA expression by LPS (10 μg $m:^{-1}$)-stimulated cells.

No inhibition of TNF-α mRNA expression was observed when the other sulfated polysaccharide derivatives K5-N,OS and K5-NS epi at 5 and 10 μg mL^{-1} were added after 3 h stimulation (data not shown).

Discussion

Our results demonstrate that sulfated heparin-like semi-synthetic derivatives and in particular the K5-OS and K5-N, OS epi are able to inhibit in a dose-dependent manner both expression and production of inflammatory cytokines, whereas they do not influence anti-inflammatory IL-10 production by LPS-stimulated human mononuclear cells, suggesting a potential role for these compounds as anti-inflammatory agents.

During immune and inflammatory processes the proinflammatory cytokines IL-1β, IL-6 and TNF-α increase many times their levels in the circulation or locally. The synthesis of several proinflammatory cytokines is inhibited by the anti-inflammatory cytokine IL-10, which is an important immunoregulatory cytokine produced by B and T lymphocytes and monocytes and macrophages [22].

Heparin is a glycosaminoglycan composed of alterning D-glucosamine and uronic acid (L-iduronic or D-glucuronid acid) residues that are heterogeneous in size and degree of sulfation. It is well known that the anticoagulant properties of heparin depend on the presence of a specific pentasaccharide sequence with high affinity to antithrombin, which enhances its inhibitory action against serine protease. Heparin, in addition to its well-known anticoagulant properties, is endowed with inhibitory activities on proinflammatory cytokines, as demonstrated in *in-vitro* studies, in which cytokine production and expression by stimulated monocytes [11, 12] decreased in the presence of unfractionated heparin. After the development of synthetic oligosaccharides, *in-vitro* and *in-vivo* studies have documented that heparan sulphate and heparin derivatives are able to bind to and regulate the metabolism of several growth factors, as well as to L-, and P-selectin [4, 6, 15, 23, 24].

In our study, the inhibitory effect of two semi-synthetic O-sulfated heparin derivatives (K5-OS and K5-N, OS epi) on cytokine production and expression is likely to be specific, as this effect is associated with a particular chemical and enzymatic modification of these molecules. In fact, the chemical modifications of the starting material (K5 polysaccharide) in terms of N-acetylation and O-sulfation enable this molecule to inhibit cytokine production and expression differently from that observed with K5-N, OS and K5-NS epi molecules, which do not contain N-acetyl groups, suggesting that N-acetylation is required for anti-inflammatory activity of the O-sulfated molecules. These data are in accordance with different studies, in which N-acetyl heparin was found to specifically bind and inhibit growth factors as well as complement components [5,25,26].

Other structural modifications, regarding the degree of sulfation and the localization of the sulphate groups, ameliorate the capability of heparin derivatives to interact with cells involved in the inflammatory processes [26–29]. In a recent report, it was also demonstrated that the interaction of heparin with P- and L-selectins is critically related to the presence of the 6-O-sulphate group and in addition the 2-O,3-O desulfation of heparin generated a potent, non-anticoagulant, anti-inflammatory activity, suggesting that appropriate sulfation of heparins plays a critical role in selectin recognition and binding [23].

In our study, the N and O-sulfation of the starting material (K5), which determines the formation of K5-N, OS polysaccharide, seems not to influence its anti-inflammatory activities (K5-N, OS does not decrease cytokine production and expression). On the other hand, the enzymatic modification of K5-N, OS by C5-epimerase produces a conformational change in the molecule and enables its anti-inflammatory activity, suggesting that, in addition to N-acetylation, epimerization is also necessary for cytokine inhibition. The possible role of the heparin derivatives rich in sulfated and epimerized regions is underlined by a recent study in which it was found that the L- and P-binding fragments include a more heavily sulfated and epimerized region [30].

A direct effect on TNF-α mRNA and cytokine proteins and an interference of the heparin-like molecules with the experimental procedures used for cytokine determination and mRNA quantification can be ruled out, as the addition of these molecules at the end of incubation did not modify cytokine production and TNF-α mRNA expression.

As the mechanisms possibly responsible for cytokine inhibition are concerned, different aspects have to be considered. First, the ability of heparin molecules to bind electrostatically to cell membranes of different cells and to internalize into the cytosolic compartment causes the inhibition of proinflammatory nuclear transcription factor activation by preventing the translocation of NF-κB from the cytoplasm to the the nucleus. Second, inhibition at a transductional level should be considered. However, our experiments cannot rule out that heparin-like molecules affect the stability of mRNA.

In conclusion, we have demonstrated that specific structural modifications [chemical (N-acetylation) and enzymatic modification (C5 epimerization)] of O-sulfated heparin-like molecules enable the inhibition of proinflammatory cytokines, without affecting the anti-inflammatory cytokine IL-10, suggesting a potential role for these molecules as anti-inflammatory agents. Heparin is known to have inhibitory effects on multiple components of the inflammation cascade, including integrins, cytokines, neutrophil-derived elastases and complement activation, but its use in clinical practice as an anti-inflammatory drug is restricted by the potential for bleeding.

The heparin-like molecules developed for this study show anti-inflammatory activities and low anticoagulant activities, so encouraging continuation of the development of specific structural modification of K5 selectively sulfated K5 derivatives in order to obtain inhibitors that might interfere with inflammatory processes.

Contribution of authors

Study design: A.M.G., R.A., G.F.G.

Laboratory investigation:

Preparation of heparin-like semi-synthetic derivatives: J.C., S.M., M.M.

Isolation of mononuclear cells and detection of cytokine production and statistical analysis: A.M.G., A.G.

RNA extraction and TNF-α mRNA expression analysis: M.A., L.R., L.L.

Writing up: A.M.G., R.A., G.F.G.

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