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Inhibition of Telomerase Activity in Cancer Cell Progression: A Promising Therapeutic Avenue

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Abstract

Telomerase, a specialized reverse transcriptase enzyme, plays a crucial role in maintaining telomere length and cellular immortality. In most somatic cells, telomerase activity is low or absent, leading to progressive telomere shortening with each cell division and eventual cellular senescence. However, in cancer cells, telomerase is frequently reactivated, allowing for indefinite cell division and contributing to tumour growth and progression. Targeting telomerase activity has emerged as a promising therapeutic strategy for cancer treatment. This review study provides an in-depth analysis of the current knowledge on preventing the cancer cell progression by using telomerase inhibitors, focusing on the mechanisms of telomerase inhibitors, preclinical and clinical studies, challenges, and future prospects.

IndexTerms: Telomeres, Telomerase, cancer, tumour cells, Telomerase inhibitors, Telomerase reverse transcriptase (TERT), telomerase RNA component (TERC)

INTRODUCTION

Inhibition of telomerase activity has emerged as a promising strategy in the fight against cancer. Telomerase is an enzyme that plays a crucial role in maintaining the length and stability of telomeres, the protective caps at the telomeres (ends of chromosomes). Inhibition of telomerase activity in cancer cells has been recognized as a potential therapeutic approach. By targeting telomerase, researchers aim to induce telomere shortening, leading to cellular senescence or apoptosis, thereby limiting the replicative potential of cancer cells and inhibiting tumour growth and progression [1]. Various approaches have been explored to inhibit telomerase activity, including the use of small molecule inhibitors, synthetic oligonucleotides [2], G-quadruplex stabilizers [3], and other novel compounds. While significant progress has been made in preclinical studies and early-phase clinical trials, challenges remain, such as drug delivery, specificity, and potential resistance mechanisms. Nevertheless, the inhibition of telomerase activity represents a promising avenue for targeted cancer therapy, offering a potential means to halt cancer cell progression without affecting normal cells. Continued research and clinical investigations are essential to further refine these approaches and potentially revolutionize cancer treatment strategies [4].

Telomeres and telomerase

Telomeres are repetitive sequences of DNA found at the ends of linear chromosomes in eukaryotic cells, including humans and other animals, as well as plants. They serve a crucial role in protecting the integrity and stability of the genetic material during cell division [5]. The structure of a telomere consists of short DNA sequences repeated in tandem. In humans, the typical telomere repeat sequence is TTAGGG, which may be repeated thousands of times, forming a protective cap at the end of each chromosome [6]. During normal cell division, the DNA replication process is not entirely perfect, and a small portion of the telomere is lost with each cell division cycle. This phenomenon is known as the "end-replication problem." Over time, if telomeres become too short or are completely eroded, the genetic material of the chromosome itself may be damaged, leading to various cellular issues. To counteract the progressive shortening of telomeres, cells employ an enzyme called telomerase [6,7].

Telomerase (a ribonucleoprotein complex) is an enzyme that plays a vital role in maintaining the length and integrity of telomeres, the protective caps at the ends of linear chromosomes in eukaryotic cells. It is a specialized reverse transcriptase, meaning it has

the unique ability to synthesize DNA using an RNA template [8,9]. Telomerase works by adding repetitive DNA sequences (typically TTAGGG in humans) to the ends of chromosomes, compensating for the loss of telomeric DNA that occurs during each round of cell division [9]. This helps prevent the gradual shortening of telomeres over time and ensures the stability of the genetic material during cell replication. The core components of telomerase include the telomerase reverse transcriptase (TERT) protein, which provides the catalytic activity, and the telomerase RNA component (TERC or TR) that serves as the template for synthesizing the new DNA repeats [10]. Telomerase can elongate telomeres by adding back the lost repetitive DNA sequences, thus maintaining their length and stability. Telomerase activity is particularly high in stem cells and certain germ cells but is typically low in most somatic cells, which limits their ability to continuously divide and contributes to cellular aging [11]. In cancer cells, telomerase activity can become reactivated, allowing the cells to maintain their telomere length indefinitely, leading to uncontrolled cell proliferation and a hallmark feature of cancer, immortality. Research into telomeres has garnered significant interest in the fields of aging, cancer, and cellular biology. Understanding telomere dynamics and how they are regulated can provide valuable insights into aging processes, disease development, and potential therapeutic targets [12].

Telomerase Activity in Cellular Aging and Cancer Development

Telomerase activity counteracts the natural erosion of telomeres during cell division, ensuring the stability and integrity of the genome. In humans, telomerase is typically high during early development, in certain stem cells, and in germ cells (sperm and egg cells) [13]. However, in most somatic cells (non-reproductive cells), telomerase activity is low or absent, leading to a progressive shortening of telomeres with each cell division. This shortening is considered a contributing factor to the cellular aging process [14]. Interestingly, telomerase has also been linked to cancer development. In many cancer cells, telomerase activity becomes reactivated, allowing the cells to maintain their telomere length indefinitely. This enables uncontrolled cell proliferation, as continuous cell division can occur without the usual limitations imposed by telomere shortening. The cancer cells often upregulate telomerase, conferring them with a proliferative advantage and allowing for continuous cell division, a hallmark of cancer cell progression [15]. Targeting telomerase is a promising area of research in cancer therapy [16], as inhibiting its activity could potentially limit the growth of cancer cells. Understanding the regulation and function of telomerase is a significant area of study in cellular and molecular biology, with implications for aging, cancer, and potential therapeutic interventions.

Strategies to inhibit the activity of telomerase inside the tumor cells

Several telomerase inhibitors have been investigated as potential therapeutic agents to inhibit telomerase activity in cancer cells [17]. It is important to note that research in this area is ongoing, and new inhibitors may have been developed or tested since then. Telomerase inhibitors work by targeting different components of the telomerase enzyme, interfering with its ability to elongate telomeres. By inhibiting telomerase activity, these inhibitors induce telomere shortening, leading to cellular senescence or apoptosis in cancer cells [18]. Here is a more detailed explanation of how telomerase inhibitors achieve this:

1. Using synthetic oligonucleotides to target TERC

Synthetic oligonucleotides can be custom-designed to specifically bind to the TERC RNA component of telomerase. Imetelstat (GRN163L) is one such synthetic oligonucleotide that targets the RNA template component (TERC or TR) of telomerase [19]. By binding to the RNA template, Imetelstat interferes with the ability of telomerase to elongate telomeres, leading to telomere shortening and cellular senescence or apoptosis in cancer cells. Imetelstat has been tested in various clinical trials for different cancer types [20]. GRN510 is another synthetic oligonucleotide that specifically targets the RNA template component of telomerase. Like Imetelstat, GRN510 interferes with telomerase function and induces telomere shortening in cancer cells [21].

2. Inhibiting Telomerase Catalytic Activity

Many telomerase inhibitors directly target the catalytic subunit of telomerase, known as telomerase reverse transcriptase (TERT) [22]. TERT is responsible for the enzymatic activity of telomerase, adding repetitive DNA sequences to the ends of chromosomes. Inhibitors like BIBR1532 and MST-312 [23,24] can directly target and bind to TERT and disrupt its enzymatic function, preventing the telomere elongation and leads to telomere shortening in cancer cells. Preclinical studies have shown promising results, and BIBR1532 has been investigated in early-phase clinical trials [23]. MST-312 is a natural product derived from a marine sponge that inhibits telomerase activity. It disrupts the telomerase complex and interferes with telomere maintenance in cancer cells, leading to growth arrest and apoptosis [24].

3. Interfering with Telomerase RNA Template

Telomerase inhibitors that interfere with the telomerase RNA template function are synthetic molecules designed to bind to the telomerase RNA component (TERC). For example, GAPDH promotes the senescence of cancer cells by interacting with the telomerase RNA component [25]. By disrupting the proper interaction between TERC and the telomerase enzyme, they prevent the accurate synthesis of telomeric DNA repeats during telomere extension. Imetelstat and GRN510, target the telomerase RNA template component (TERC or TR), which serves as the template for the synthesis of telomeric DNA repeats. These inhibitors bind to the telomerase RNA, blocking its interaction with telomerase reverse transcriptase and preventing accurate synthesis of telomeric DNA [21, 26]. As a result, telomerase activity is inhibited, leading to telomere shortening in cancer cells. This gradual shortening of telomeres can induce cellular senescence or apoptosis, limiting the growth and progression of cancer cells. Targeting the TERC RNA template with inhibitors holds promise as a potential strategy for cancer therapy, but further research is needed to optimize their design and effectiveness.

4. Stabilization of G-Quadruplex

Telomerase inhibition by G-quadruplex stabilization involves targeting the telomeric DNA structures known as G-quadruplexes. G-quadruplexes are four-stranded DNA structures that form at the telomeres [27]. Certain molecules, such as G-quadruplex stabilizers, can bind to these G-quadruplexes, stabilizing their structure and preventing telomerase access to the telomeres. As a result, telomerase activity is hindered, leading to telomere shortening in cancer cells [28]. The loss of telomere maintenance impedes

continuous cell division and may induce cellular senescence or apoptosis, thereby limiting the growth and progression of cancer cells. RHPS4 (Geron 5618, BRACO-19), is one of the G-quadruplex stabilizers. that form within the telomeric DNA. RHPS4 hinders the telomerase enzyme from interacting with telomeric DNA and elongating the telomeres, therefore resulting in telomere shortening and growth inhibition in cancer cells [29]. G-quadruplex stabilization is being explored as a potential targeted approach in cancer therapy, but further research is required to optimize its effectiveness and safety.

Telomestatin is a natural product derived from Streptomyces bacteria that exhibits potent telomerase inhibitory activity [30]. It is a G-quadruplex stabilizer, which means it binds to and stabilizes the G-quadruplex structures formed at the telomeres. Telomestatin specifically targets the G-rich single-stranded overhangs at the 3' ends of telomeres, where the G-quadruplex structures form. By binding to and stabilizing these G-quadruplexes, Telomestatin prevents telomerase from accessing the telomeric DNA and adding new telomeric repeats during cell division [31]. As a result, telomerase activity is inhibited, leading to gradual telomere shortening with each cell division. The progressive loss of telomere length eventually triggers cellular senescence or apoptosis in cancer cells, limiting their ability to continuously divide and grow. The role of Telomestatin as a telomerase inhibitor makes it a promising candidate for cancer therapy. By selectively targeting cancer cells that have high telomerase activity, Telomestatin offers a potentially targeted and less toxic approach to hinder tumor growth and progression [30]. However, further research and development are required to optimize its efficacy and safety for clinical use.

5. Competition with Telomerase Substrates

Some telomerase inhibitors, like FLT (3'-Deoxy-3'-fluorothymidine) is a telomerase inhibitor that competes with the natural substrate, thymidine, for binding to the telomerase enzyme. When FLT is present, telomerase may mistakenly use it as a substrate during telomere elongation [32]. However, FLT lacks the necessary components for further telomere extension. As a result, the telomerase enzyme becomes unable to continue adding telomeric repeats, leading to telomere shortening. This inhibition of telomerase activity limits the replicative potential of cancer cells and can potentially hinder tumor growth and progression [33]. FLT and similar inhibitors offer a targeted approach to disrupt telomerase function in cancer cells without affecting normal cells, making them promising candidates for cancer therapy. However, further research is needed to optimize their effectiveness and safety.

Preclinical Studies and clinical trials

In vitro and in vivo preclinical studies have demonstrated the potential of telomerase inhibition as an effective anticancer approach. Telomerase inhibitors such as Imetelstat, are tested in cell cultures using cancer cell lines with high telomerase activity [34]. Telomerase inhibitors have been shown to induce telomere shortening, leading to cellular senescence or apoptosis in cancer cells. In various animal models such as Genetically Engineered Mouse Models (KRAS LA1) [35] and xenograft models [36], telomerase inhibition has been associated with tumor growth suppression, increased tumor cell death, and reduced metastatic potential. In Pharmacokinetics and toxicity studies, the body's absorption, distribution, metabolism, and excretion of telomerase inhibitors like Triethylenetetramine (TETA) are studied, along with their potential toxic side effects on normal tissues [37]. Telomerase inhibitors are being conjugated with other cancer therapies to assess synergistic effects and enhance treatment efficacy, this is known as Combination therapy studies [38].

Clinical trials exploring telomerase inhibitors as potential cancer therapies have been conducted in multiple cancer types, including breast, lung, prostate, and hematological malignancies. While some early-phase trials showed promising results in terms of safety and efficacy in humans, others faced challenges related to drug delivery, toxicity, and resistance [39]. Combination therapies, such as combining telomerase inhibitors with standard chemotherapy or immunotherapy [40], are being investigated to enhance treatment efficacy. Some of the early-phase trials have shown promising results, indicating that telomerase inhibition could be a viable approach in treating cancer.

Challenges and Future Perspectives:

Despite the promising potential of telomerase inhibition, several challenges need to be addressed. There are various challenges of Ensuring the specificity, drug delivery, overcoming resistance, managing toxicity, optimizing combination therapies, and identifying predictive biomarkers. Telomerase activity itself can serve as a diagnostic and prognostic biomarker in cancer [41]. Detection of telomerase activity in body fluids, such as blood or urine, may aid in early cancer detection and monitoring treatment responses [42]. Telomerase-based assays are also being explored as non-invasive tools for cancer diagnosis [43]. Drug delivery to tumor cells and off-target effects remain significant hurdles. Additionally, the emergence of resistance to telomerase inhibitors poses a concern. Further research is needed to develop more potent and selective inhibitors, identify biomarkers to predict treatment response, and optimize treatment regimens. Advancements in drug design, targeted delivery methods, personalized treatment approaches, exploring telomerase vaccines, and conducting extensive clinical trials for efficacy and safety evaluation.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, telomerase inhibitors disrupt the proper functioning of telomerase, preventing the enzyme from maintaining or elongating telomeres in cancer cells. Inhibition of telomerase activity holds great promise as a targeted therapeutic approach for cancer treatment. By preventing telomere maintenance, telomerase inhibitors can limit cancer cell proliferation, induce cell cycle arrest, and sensitize cancer cells to other treatments. Despite challenges, ongoing research in this field offers hope for the development of more effective and personalized cancer therapies, leading to improved patient outcomes. Telomerase inhibition represents an exciting and evolving area of cancer research with significant potential to transform cancer treatment. Continued efforts in understanding telomerase biology and overcoming existing challenges will pave the way for innovative and targeted therapies that disrupt cancer cell progression, providing new avenues for cancer patients worldwide.

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