Establishment of a HEK293T cell line able to site-specifically integrate and stably express GDNF by rAAV-2 vector

Jinju Zhang 1, Yun Zhang 1, Xiaomei Liu, Jingjing Xiang, Chun Zhang *

CAS Key Lab of Bio-Medical Diagnostics, Suzhou Institute of Biomedical Engineering and Technology, Chinese Academy of Sciences, Suzhou 215163, PR China
University of Chinese Academy of Sciences, Beijing 100049, PR China

ABSTRACT

Background: Using recombinant adeno-associated virus 2 (rAAV-2), we attempted to establish a HEK293T cell line that is able to site-specifically integrate and stably express glial cell line-derived neurotrophic factor (GDNF).

Results: Recombinant vector with enhanced green fluorescent protein (EGFP) and GDNF (pTR-PS-EGFP-IRES-GDNF), as well as that carrying Rep genes and SV40 promoters (pSVAV2) were constructed and packed. HEK293T cells were co-infected with rAAV-2/EGFP-GDNF and rAAV-2/SVAV2 virus separately at 1 × 10^4, 1 × 10^5, and 1 × 10^6 of multiplicity of infection (MOI). The efficiency of transduction was detected using flow cytometry. Additionally, the infected HEK293T cells were separately validated by touchdown polymerase chain reaction (PCR) and Western-blot. After 72 h of transduction, the rate of EGFP positive cell was 22%, 45% and 49% at the MOIs of 1 × 10^4, 1 × 10^5 and 1 × 10^6, respectively. On the 3rd, 6th and 9th day of cell passage, there was no significant difference in the cell viability and proliferation rate between transduction and control groups. Importantly, touchdown PCR showed that there was a specific PCR amplified product band in the lane of infected cells. Furthermore, GDNF expression was detected in the infected cells after 15 and 180 d of cultivation.

Conclusions: A HEK293T cell line able to site-specifically integrate and stably express GDNF was established.

1. Introduction

Gene therapy is being used in treatment for multiple kinds of inherited diseases [1,2]. By transferring viruses carrying genes of interest into the target cells, gene therapy can result in an improvement of the clinical status of a patient or even cure a disease [3]. Neurotrophic factors are crucial for the development, function, and survival of neurons. Glial cell line-derived neurotrophic factor (GDNF), a kind of multiple efficient neurotrophic factor separated from rat glioma cell line B49 by Lin et al. [4], can activate the MAP kinase signaling pathway in cultured sympathetic neurons and support the survival of sympathetic neurons as well as sensory neurons of the nodose and dorsal root ganglia [5]. Furthermore, GDNF is considered as the most potent survival factor for motor neurons [6]. A recent study has shown that GDNF is important for the differentiation of Schwann cells into their native phenotype in order to improve functional nerve regeneration [7]. Therefore, GDNF is an ideal candidate gene for nerve injury and neurodegenerative diseases.

Adeno-associated virus (AAV), a small single-stranded DNA virus, is one of the four Parvoviridae family genera and has been the vector of choice in recent clinical trials of neurological diseases [8,9]. AAV is able to integrate into a specific site on human chromosome 19 (19q13.4), which is known as AAVS1 [10]. Due to multiple advantages, including high efficiency of transduction of postmitotic tissues in vivo, long-term stable transgene expression and high security without inflammation or immune response, AAV vectors and recombinant AAV (rAAV) vectors have been widely applied to the establishment of transgenic cell lines and gene therapy [11,12,13].

In this study, using rAAV-2 vector, we attempted to establish a stable HEK293T cell line, which is able to site-specifically integrate and express exogenous GDNF. The established stable cell line may contribute to the further study of GDNF gene therapy.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Recombinant vector construction

Both pTR-PS-EGFP-IRES-GDNF and pSVAV2 recombinant plasmid vectors [14] were constructed using standard molecular cloning method [15]. The GDNF target gene of 738 bp was amplified by...
polymerase chain reaction (PCR), and a gel fragment of 726 bp was extracted using a QiAamp Gel Extraction kit (OMEGA Bio-Tek, Doraville, GA, USA) after Cla I digestion. Similarly, internal ribosome entry site (IRES) sequence with a length of 695 bp was synthesized. Then, Not I and Cla I Enzyme cutting sites were separately inserted into 5′ and 3′ ends of the IRES sequence. Subsequently, a gel fragment of 684 bp was extracted using a QiAamp Gel Extraction kit (OMEGA Bio-Tek, Doraville, GA, USA) after double digestion. After being connected using DNA connection kit (TaKaRa, Tokyo, Japan), the connection product of plasmid vector pTR-P5-EGFP (6297 bp), GDNF target gene fragment and IRES sequence fragment were transferred to the competent cells Sure-2 prepared and saved by our laboratory. Positive clones were selected and cultivated. Afterwards, plasmids were extracted using a Plasmid DNA Extract kit (Qiagen, Valencia, CA, USA) and purified using a Plasmid DNA Purification kit (Qiagen, Valencia, CA, USA).

Then, recombinant intermediate plasmid pTR-P5-EGFP-ires-GDNF was validated by PCR and sequencing (sequenced by Sangon Biotech Co., Ltd., Shanghai, China) after digestion with Not I and Cla I (Takara, Tokyo, Japan). Similarly, pSVRep carrying rep gene and SV40 promoter were digested with EcoR V and Hind III (Takara, Tokyo, Japan), and then it was inserted into pAV2 digested by BmgBI I and Hind III (Takara, Tokyo, Japan) to obtain recombinant intermediate plasmid pSV2AV2. After digestion, the recombinant plasmid was also validated by PCR and sequencing (sequenced by Sangon Biotech Co., Ltd., Shanghai, China).

2.2. Packing, purification and identification of recombinant virus

According to the molar ratio of 1:1 (N/P = 20), pTR-P5-EGFP-ires-GDNF and pSV2AV2 were separately co-infected with pDG into HEK293T cells using the calcium phosphate coprecipitation method [16]. Thus, rAAV-2/EGFP-ires-GDNF and SV2AV2 viruses were synthesized, respectively. Then, viruses were purified and concentrated by the method of cesium chloride gradient centrifugation [17]. In addition, titers of rAAV-2/EGFP-ires-GDNF and rAAV-2/SV2AV2 recombinant virus solutions were measured by fluorescent quantitative PCR in an ABI 7500 Real-Time PCR system (Applied Biosystems, USA), respectively, using a fluorescence quantitative PCR kit (Tiangen Biotech Co. Ltd., China). The PCR program was followed as follows: 94°C for 5 min, 30 cycles of 94°C for 5 s and 60°C for 20 s.

2.3. Recombinant virus transduction

HEK293T cells purchased from cell bank of Typical culture preservation commission, Chinese academy of sciences, were cultured in 24-well plates filled with 90% Dulbecco’s modified eagle medium (DMEM, Gibco, Grand Island, NY, USA) supplemented with 10% Fetal Bovine Serum (FBS, Gibco, Grand Island, NY, USA). When the cells spread to 70–80% of the plate, the culture solution was removed, and 200 μL DMEM containing 2% FBS was added to the plates. Then, rAAV-2/EGFP-GDNF and rAAV-2/SV2AV2 (rAAV-2/EGFP-GDNF:rAAV-2/SV2AV2 = 50:1) recombinant virus was added to the new media with 3×10^4 MOI of virus per well, HEK293T cells were infected at different MOIs (1×10^4, 1×10^5 and 1×10^6) respectively. Then, nuclear DNA of the infected HEK293T cells expressing EGFP were separated by the pTR-P5-EGFP vector and the pAV2 vector (Fig. 1d). The PCR program was followed as follows: 94°C for 2 min, 5 cycles of 98°C for 10 s and 74°C for 30 s, 5 cycles of 98°C for 10 s and 72°C for 30 s, 5 cycles of 98°C for 10 s and 70°C for 30 s, 30 cycles of 98°C for 10 s and 68°C for 30 s, as well as 68°C for 7 min. The enzyme used in PCR was KOD-Plus-Neo enzyme (Toyobo Life Science Co. Ltd., Japan). After PCR amplification, the PCR products were separated on 1% agarose gel was conducted to detect whether pTR-P5-EGFP-ires-GDNF had been integrated into human chromosome 19 AAVS1 locus in human embryonic 19. After 15 and 180 d of cultivation, the screened infected cells were collected and then tested using standard Western-blot as described previously by Aussen et al. [19], to identify whether the had GDNF or not. The blots were probed with rabbit anti-GDNF (1:500; Santa Cruz, USA) and horseradish peroxidase conjugated goat anti-rabbit (1:10,000; Abgent, USA) antibodies.

2.5. Statistical analysis

The experimental data were expressed by mean ± standard deviation (SD). The one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to conduct comparison among groups and the SPSS 21.0 software was applied to perform statistical tests on the experimental data. The P < 0.05 was regarded as statistically significant.

3. Results

3.1. Vector construction and titer determination

After GDNF was digested by Cla I, as well as IRES was digested by Not I and Cla I, they were linked to pTR-P5-EGFP vector, which produced pTR-P5-EGFP-ires-GDNF recombinant vector (7703 bp) (Fig. 1a). Meanwhile, pSVRep was digested by EcoR V and Hind III, subsequently, it was linked to pAV2 digested by BmgBI I and Hind III to obtain pSV2AV2 recombinant vector (8669 bp) (Fig. 1b). Positive clones were examined by colony PCR, and DNA sequencing after digestion declared that GDNF and pSVRep were separately integrated into the pTR-P5-EGFP vector and the pAV2 vector (Fig. 1d). Titers of rAAV-2/EGFP-GDNF and SV2AV2 recombinant virus solutions were 1×10^11 vg/mL and 8×10^11 vg/mL, respectively.

3.2. Efficiency of transduction

To investigate the transduction efficiency of the recombinant virus, HEK293T cells were infected at different MOIs (1×10^4, 1×10^5...
and $1 \times 10^6$). After 72 h, the green fluorescence of EGFP-expressing HEK293T cells was measured using flow cytometer to assess transduction efficiency. The rate of EGFP positive cells at the MOIs of $1 \times 10^4$ and $1 \times 10^6$ was 45% (Fig. 2b) and 49% (Fig. 2c), respectively, whereas just 22% (Fig. 2a) of the cells were EGFP positive at the MOI of $1 \times 10^4$. In addition, there was no significant difference of the cell viability and proliferation rate between the transduction groups and the control group ($P>0.05$) (Table 1).

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**Fig. 1.** Vector construction (bars: 100 μm). (a) Schematic representation of pTR-P5-EGFP-IRES-GDNF recombinant vector. (b) Schematic representation of pSVAV2 recombinant vector. (c) Expression of EGFP in HEK293T cells observed under a fluorescence microscope. (d) Electrophoresis result of colony PCR products for pTR-P5-EGFP-IRES-GDNF and pSVAV2 recombinant vector. Lane M: DNA marker; Lane 1: pTR-P5-EGFP-IRES-GDNF; Lane 2: pSVAV2.

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**Fig. 2.** Fluorescence microscopic images of EGFP expression after 24 h of transduction (bars: 100 μm) and flow cytometry results of EGFP expression after 72 h of transduction in HEK293T cells with the ratio of rAAV-2/EGFP-GDNF to rAAV-2/SVAV2 at 50:1 when MOI was $1 \times 10^4$ (a), $1 \times 10^5$ (b) and $1 \times 10^6$ (c), respectively.
were established. The was seen under in the lane of the infected cells, a distinct PCR amplification product band (1000 bp) was detected, but there was not in the lane of the non-infected cells (Fig. 4). According to the Western-blot test, there was a distinct electrophoretic band in the lanes of the infected cells which proved that cell lines integrated with exogenous genes were successfully established. Then, cells were collected and nuclear DNA was extracted, and only in the lane of the infected cells, a distinct PCR amplified product band was detected, but there was not in the lane of the non-infected cells (Fig. 4). According to the Western blot test, there was a distinct electrophoretic band in the lanes of the infected cells after 15 and 180 d of cultivation, respectively (Fig. 5).

3.3. Screening and identification of the stable cell line

The infected HEK293T cells expressing EGFP were separated by flow cytometry fluorescence instrument, and cell strains for identification were established. The fluorescent expression of monoclonal cell strain was seen under fluorescence microscope (Fig. 3a). Meanwhile, the rate of fluorescent cell was 99.7% when tested with FCM (Fig. 3b), which proved that cell lines integrated with exogenous genes were successfully established. Then, cells were collected and nuclear DNA was extracted. Afterwards, touchdown PCR was conducted, and only in the lane of the infected cells, a distinct PCR amplified product band (1000 bp) was detected, but there was not in the lane of the non-infected cells (Fig. 4). According to the Western-blots test, there was a distinct electrophoretic band in the lanes of the infected cells after 15 and 180 d of cultivation, respectively (Fig. 5).

4. Discussion

GDNF is an ideal candidate gene for the therapy of nerve injury and neurodegenerative diseases [20]. In this study, to establish a stable cell line able to express GDNF, rAAV-2 vector was used for the delivery of GDNF into HEK293T cells. A recombinant vector carrying EGFP and GDNF (pTR-P5-EGFP-ires-GDNF), as well as pSVAV2 were constructed. Afterwards, they co-infected HEK293T cells at different MOIs, and cell viability and proliferation rate were calculated. Besides, the stable infected cells were screened and validated by touchdown PCR and Western-blots.

Results showed that the rate of EGFP-positive cells at the MOIs of $1 \times 10^5$ and $1 \times 10^6$ was obviously higher than that at the MOI of $1 \times 10^4$. Transduction of AAV-2 into target cells was mediated by heparan sulfate proteoglycan, which is a type of cell-surface receptor [21]. Thus, efficiency of transduction enhanced along with the enlargement of MOI before binding between rAAV-2 and its receptor reached equilibrium. When binding between rAAV-2 and its receptor achieved a balance, efficiency of transduction was no longer of obvious enhancement along with the amplification of MOI. These declared that $1 \times 10^6$ was the optimal MOI.

Furthermore, on the 3rd, 6th and 9th d of cell passage, there was no significant difference of the cell viability and proliferation rate between the transduction groups and control group, indicating that after infection of rAAV-2 vector, the cell viability and proliferation rate of HEK293T cells were still stable. A similar result was previously reported by Yoshioka et al. [22]. The stable cell viability and proliferation rate are likely due to the high biosafety of rAAV-2 vector [23, 24]. Besides, in each group, the cell viability was stable (keeping about 96%) over time after transduction, indicating that the difference of MOI was not an influential factor of cell viability and proliferation after transduction. Taken together, it proved that the survivability of HEK293T cells was not affected by the transduction of rAAV-2 vector carrying GDNF.

In this study, the touchdown PCR assay showed that pTR-P5-EGFP-IRES-GDNF had been integrated into AAAS1 locus on human chromosome 19. AAAS1 locus is a specific site that can be integrated by AAV [10]. A previous study reported by us has demonstrated that rAAV-SVAV2 carrying green fluorescent protein (GFP) gene is able to integrate at AAAS1 locus on chromosome 19 in the HeLa cell genome, and GFP is expressed stably for 35 passages [14]. Additionally, there was GDNF expression in the infected cells after 15 and 180 d of cultivation, suggesting that GDNF was expressed for a long time in HEK293T cells. A similar study has used a rAAV-GDNF vector to express GDNF long-term (6 months) nigral dopamine neurons and striatal target cells [25]. These results demonstrated that rAAV is a highly efficient vector system for long-term expression of GDNF.

Previous studies on gene therapy of nervous system diseases have used lentiviral vectors [26], AAV2 [27] or AAV5 [28] for GDNF delivery into eukaryotic cells. Compared with AAV vectors, lentiviral vectors have a large cloning capacity, whereas, they can integrate into the cell genomes, which are highly favorable for long-term expression of transgenes in the nervous system, but meanwhile it raises a set of important safety issues that may limit their clinical use [29]. Both

Table 1

The cell viability and proliferation rate between the transduction groups and the control group (when cultivated for 3, 6 and 9 d).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>Cell viability (%)</th>
<th>Proliferation rate</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 d</td>
<td>6 d</td>
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<tr>
<td>MOI = 0</td>
<td>96.07 ± 1.61</td>
<td>96.01 ± 1.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MOI = $1 \times 10^4$</td>
<td>96.24 ± 1.65</td>
<td>96.26 ± 1.22</td>
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<tr>
<td>MOI = $1 \times 10^5$</td>
<td>96.38 ± 1.64</td>
<td>96.33 ± 1.31</td>
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<tr>
<td>MOI = $1 \times 10^6$</td>
<td>96.05 ± 1.68</td>
<td>96.09 ± 1.42</td>
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Note: All the transduction groups were compared with the control group at the same time. Cell viability was calculated as follows: amount of viable cells (amount of viable cells + amount of dead cells) / total amount of cells × 100%; cell proliferation rate was counted for each group as follows: amount of viable cells on the 3rd, 6th or 9th d/amount of viable cells of original culture.

Fig. 3. Fluorescence microscopic image of EGFP expression in HEK293T cells (bars: 100 μm) (a) and the rate of EGFP positive cells (b) after cultivation for 180 d. MOI used is $1 \times 10^5$. 
AAV2 and AAV5 have a highly effectivity in the delivery of its transgene into nerve cells and have been widely used for the gene therapy study. However, by contrast, rAAV vectors have a higher biosecurity due to the removal of 96% of viral genome [29], and they are considered as the most promising and commonly-used vectors in gene therapy research. Therefore, in this study, rAAV2-mediated GDNF transfer in HEK293T cells is promising in the application of future clinical study. We can use this HEK293T cell line to extract GDNF, and purify it for the application of further GDNF-related studies, such as gene therapy for nerve injury and neurodegenerative diseases.

Despite the aforementioned results, this study has several limitations. For example, the GDNF expression in the infected cells needs to be detected quantificationally. The Rep and Cap expression in the infected cells should have been determined. In our further study, we will solve these issues.

In conclusion, a cell line able to stably express GDNF was established using AAV-2, and the HEK293T cell line was expected to be applied to further GDNF-related studies, such as gene therapy for nervous system diseases.

References


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