THE LINKER REGION IN RECEPTOR GUANYLYL CYCLASES IS A KEY
REGULATORY MODULE: MUTATIONAL ANALYSIS OF GUANYLYL CYCLASE C

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Running head: Linker region in receptor guanylyl cyclases

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Receptor guanylyl cyclases are multidomain proteins, and ligand binding to the extracellular domain increases levels of intracellular cGMP. The intracellular domain of these receptors is composed of a kinase homology domain (KHD), a linker of ~70 amino acids, followed by the C-terminal guanylyl cyclase domain. Mechanisms by which these receptors are allosterically regulated by ligand binding to the extracellular domain, and ATP binding to the KHD, are not completely understood. Here we examine the role of the linker region in receptor guanylyl cyclases by a series of point mutations in receptor guanylyl cyclase C. The linker region is predicted to adopt a coiled coil structure and aid in dimerization, but we find that the effects of mutations neither follow a pattern predicted for a coiled coil peptide, nor abrogate dimerization. Importantly, this region is critical for repressing the guanylyl cyclase activity of the receptor in the absence of ligand, and permitting ligand-mediated activation of the cyclase domain. Mutant receptors with high basal guanylyl cyclase activity show no further activation in the presence of non-ionic detergents, suggesting that hydrophobic interactions in the basal and inactive conformation of the guanylyl cyclase domain are disrupted by mutation. Equivalent mutations in the linker region of guanylyl cyclase A also elevated the basal activity and abolished ligand- and detergent-mediated activation. We therefore have defined a key regulatory role for the linker region of receptor guanylyl cyclases which serves as a transducer of information from the extracellular domain via the KHD to the catalytic domain.

Introduction

In transmembrane receptors, a series of conformational changes are required to transmit the information of ligand binding (an extracellular signal) to the interior of the cell, resulting in either altered interaction with signaling intermediates or in the regulation of a catalytic activity present in the receptor. In these multidomain receptors, where the ligand binding and effector domains are present in the same polypeptide chain, the relay of conformational changes is under the exquisite control of post-translational modifications or precise structural alterations.

Receptor guanylyl cyclases (GCs) have an N-terminal extracellular ligand-binding domain, a single transmembrane domain and a C-terminal intracellular domain (1). Binding of ligands to the extracellular domain elicits a conformational change that increases the guanylyl cyclase activity of the receptor, resulting in increased cGMP production. The intracellular domain of receptor GCs contains a
A sequence of ~70 amino acids is found between the KHD and the guanylyl cyclase domain of receptor GCs, which we refer to here as the linker region (13). This region is predicted to form an amphipathic α-helix, and could also adopt a coiled coil conformation (14,15). The linker region is also present in soluble (cytosolic) guanylyl cyclases where it connects the N-terminal heme-binding regulatory domain to the C-terminal catalytic cyclase domain. The linker region is suggested to act as a dimerization module in receptor GCs (16-18), and has also been implicated in heterodimerization of the α and β subunits of soluble guanylyl cyclases (19,20). However, there are several reports to the contrary that indicate that the linker does not affect the dimerization of receptor GCs (14,15). Nevertheless, the critical importance of the linker in regulating the activity of receptor GCs is shown by the fact that mutations in this region of the retinal guanylyl cyclase (RetGC-1) are associated with autosomal dominant cone-rod dystrophy in humans (16,21). We show here through extensive mutational and biochemical analysis that the linker regions in two receptor GCs, GC-C and guanylyl cyclase A (GC-A), play an important role in repressing the catalytic activity of the receptors in the absence of their ligands. In addition, our results provide for the first time a molecular explanation for detergent-enhanced guanylyl cyclase activity in this family of receptors, and suggest a mechanism for this activation that could involve a hydrophobic interaction between the linker region and the guanylyl cyclase domain.
Materials and Methods

Generation of mutations in the linker region of GC-C and GC-A Human GC-C cDNA (pBSK-GC-C) (22) was used as template for the generation of mutations in the linker region of GC-C using the single mutagenic oligonucleotide based protocol described earlier (23). The mutagenic primers used are given in Supplementary Table 1. pBSK-GC-CL764K/L768K double mutant was obtained by performing mutagenesis with the L768K primer using pBSK-GC-CL764K mutant DNA as the template. Following mutagenesis, a fragment encoding GC-C was excised from the respective mutant pBSK-GC-C by digestion with XhoI (or SalI in cases where the mutagenic primer introduced an XhoI site) and XbaI and ligated into XhoI-XbaI digested pCDNA3, to allow expression in mammalian cells.

A HindIII fragment from pCMV-GC-A (24) representing the KHD and a part of the linker region was cloned into the HindIII site of pGEM-11Zf(+) (Promega Life Science, USA) to generate the plasmid pGEM-11Zf-GC-AKHD-LR. This was subsequently used as template for the generation of L812P, M816P and Y819P mutations in the linker region of GC-A, using the respective mutagenic primer as detailed in Supplementary Table 1. The mutant plasmids, pGEM-11Zf-GC-AKHD-LR-L812P, pGEM-11Zf-GC-AKHD-LR-M816P and pGEM-11Zf-GC-AKHD-LR-Y819P were digested with HindIII in order to excise the mutated GC-A fragment and replaced into HindIII digested pCMV-GC-A to generate pCMV-GC-A-L812P, pCMV-GC-A-M816P and pCMV-GC-A-Y819P, respectively. The presence of the desired mutation and the absence of any missense mutations were confirmed by sequencing (Macrogen, South Korea).

Generation of pCDNA3-GCC-GST A 786 bp PCR product was amplified using pCDNA3-GC-C as the template using forward primer, GC-C2496f and reverse primer GC-C3291r HindIII, (Supplementary Table 1). The reverse primer introduced a leucine in place of the stop codon. The PCR product was digested with SphiI and HindIII, and the larger 559 bp fragment, consisting of the C-terminal domain of GC-C with mutation at the stop codon was used to replace a similar fragment in pBSK-GC-C (22), to generate the plasmid pBSK-GC-CAtop. Full length mutant GC-C was digested with XhoI and HindIII, and cloned into pEGFP-N2 (Invitrogen) to generate the plasmid pEGFP-N2-GC-C.

The GST gene was amplified by PCR from pGEX-5X-1 plasmid with suitable primers (Supplementary Table 1) and the PCR product (758 bp) was digested with HindIII-NotI. A HindIII-NotI digestion of pEGFP-N2-GC-C resulted in the release of the GFP cDNA, which was subsequently replaced by the similarly digested PCR product of GST in order to generate the plasmid pGST-N2-GC-C.

pGST-N2-GC-C was digested with SphiI-XbaI and the 1,300 bp fragment (representing a part of GC-C along with the C-terminal GST tag) was used to replace a similarly digested fragment in pBSK-GC-C to generate pBSK-GCC-GST. The clone pBSK-GCC-GST was digested with XhoI-XbaI-PvuI, which resulted in the excision of GCC-GST as a XhoI-XbaI fragment and was subsequently cloned into a similarly digested pCDNA3 vector. This resulted in the generation of pCDNA3-GCC-GST, which would express GC-C with a GST tag at its C-terminus in mammalian cells.

Measurement of ligand-stimulated cGMP production in HEK293T cells HEK293T cells were cultured in DMEM medium containing 10% fetal calf serum as described earlier (3). Wild-type and mutant GC-C or GC-A were expressed in HEK293T cells by transient transfections using PEI (polyethylenimine) lipid (Polysciences, Inc., USA). Ligand-stimulated guanylyl cyclase activity was measured 72 h post-transfection in monolayer culture of cells in 24-well plates. The cell monolayer was incubated with serum and antibiotic containing DMEM containing 500 µM IBMX (3-isobutyl-1-methylxanthine) for 30 min at 37°C in a 5% humidified CO2 incubator. ST (10⁻⁷ M, to GC-C expressing cells) or ANP (10⁻⁶ M to GC-A expressing cells) or ANP (10⁻⁶ M to GC-A expressing cells)
expressing cells) was then added and incubation continued for another 30 min (in case of ST stimulation of GC-C) or 60 min (in case of ANP stimulation of GC-A), following which the cells were lysed in 200 µl of 0.1 N HCl. Cyclic GMP produced was measured by radioimmunoassay as described earlier (25).

Preparation of membrane fraction from HEK293T cells Confluent cell monolayers were washed with chilled phosphate buffered saline (PBS, 10 mM sodium phosphate buffer, pH 7.2 and 0.9% sodium chloride) and scraped into homogenization buffer (50 mM HEPES, pH 7.5, 100 mM NaCl, 5 mM EDTA, 1 mM dithiothreitol, 5 µg/ml soyabean trypsin inhibitor, 5µg/ml leupeptin, 5 µg/ml aprotinin, 2 mM phenylmethylsulfonyl fluoride and 1 mM sodium orthovanadate). The cell lysate was sonicated and centrifuged at 12,000 g for 60 min at 4°C. The pellet obtained was resuspended in a buffer containing 50 mM HEPES, pH 7.5, 10 µg/ml leupeptin, 10 µg/ml aprotinin, 1 mM sodium orthovanadate and 20% glycerol. The protein concentration was estimated by using a modification of the Bradford protein assay (26).

Western Blot analysis Cells following transfection were directly lysed in SDS sample buffer and subjected to Western Blot analysis using the GCC:C8 monoclonal antibody to GC-C essentially as described earlier (2). In cells transfected with GC-A encoding plasmids, a polyclonal antibody to GC-A (a kind gift of Dr. Lincoln R. Potter, University of Minnesota, USA) was used. In some cases, membranes prepared from transfected cells were used for Western blot analysis with the respective antibodies. Blots were developed by enhanced chemiluminescence.

Receptor binding assays An analogue of ST, ST$_{Y72F}$ was iodinated using Na$^{125}$I as described earlier (25). Membrane protein (50 µg) was incubated in binding buffer (50 mM HEPES, pH 7.5, 4 mM MgCl$_2$, 0.1% bovine serum albumin, 10 µg/ml aprotinin and 10 µg/ml leupeptin) with approximately 100,000 cpm of $^{125}$I-ST$_{Y72F}$ for 1 h at 37°C in the presence (non-specific binding) or absence of 10$^{-7}$ M of unlabelled ST, in a total volume of 100 µl. For Scatchard analysis, membrane protein was incubated with varying concentrations (10$^{-11}$-10$^{-9}$ M) of $^{125}$I-labelled ST$_{Y72F}$ for 1 h at 37°C. Following incubation, samples were filtered through GF/C filters (Whatman) and washed with 5 ml of chilled 10 mM sodium phosphate buffer (pH 7.2), containing 0.9% NaCl and 0.2% BSA, through a filtration unit (Millipore, USA). The filters were dried and the associated radioactivity was measured. Saturation binding and Scatchard analyses were carried out using Graph Pad Prism5 Software.

In vitro guanylyl cyclase assays Membrane prepared from mammalian cells was incubated in assay buffer (60 mM Tris-HCl, pH 7.5, containing 500 µM IBMX, and an NTP regenerating system consisting of 7.5 mM creatine phosphate and 10 µg creatine phosphokinase) in the presence of 1 mM MgGTP or 1mM MnGTP, with free metal concentrations maintained at 10 mM. Detergent-mediated activation was determined with membrane protein (2 µg) incubated in assay buffer in the absence or presence of 0.1% Lubrol-PX. In order to study the effect of ATP, assays were performed in the absence or presence of 1 mM MgATP along with 0.1 % Lubrol-PX, 1 mM MgGTP and 10 mM free MgCl$_2$. The concentrations of free Mg and Mg-GTP/ATP complexes present in assays were calculated using Maxchelator (http://www.stanford.edu/~cpatton/maxc.html). All assays were incubated at 37°C for 10 min for the production of cGMP. The assay was terminated by the addition of 400 µl of 50 mM sodium acetate buffer, pH 4.75, and boiling of the samples. After centrifugation, the supernatant was taken for cGMP radioimmunoassay as described earlier (25).

Modelling of the cyclase domain The recently solved crystal structures of Cyg12, a soluble cyclase from Chlamydomonas reinhardtii (an eukaryote; pdb: 3ET6); (5) and Cya2 from Synechocystis PCC6803 (a prokaryote; pdb: 2W01) (6) were used as templates to generate
the models of the inactive and active states, respectively, of the cyclase domain of GC-C. The Cyg12 cyclase domain shows 60% similarity (43% identity) while the Cya2 cyclase domain shows 46% similarity (25% identity) to the cyclase domain of GC-C. Multiple cyclase domain sequences were used in generating the alignment of the templates and target sequences using ProbCons (27) and checked manually. Models were generated using MODELLER (9v6 release) (28). The stereo chemical quality of the models was assessed with PROCHECK (29). Structures were visualized and analyzed using PyMol.

Results

Predicted structure of the linker region The linker region of about 70 residues is conserved in all members of the receptor GC family (Fig. 1A) (13). Secondary structure prediction of this stretch of residues in GC-C using JPRED (30) and PSI-PRED (31) suggested the presence of an amphipathic \( \alpha \)-helix between residues 760 and 800 (Fig. 1B). The COILS algorithm (32) was used to compute the probability of coiled coil formation in this region, and amino acid residues between positions M761 to A788 were predicted to form a coiled coil structure (Fig. 1C) with four heptad repeats identified in this region.

That this region of the receptor could adopt a helical structure was shown by using a synthetic peptide of residues 761 to 788 which was able to form a helix as measured by circular dichroism in the presence of 10% trifluoroethanol. The ratio of mean residual ellipticity at 222 nm and 208 nm was found to increase with increasing peptide concentrations, indicating that this helix had the potential to oligomerize (Supplementary Figure 1, and Supplementary Table 2). We therefore were justified in suggesting that this region of GC-C could indeed form a coiled coil structure under favorable conditions.

The \( a \) and \( d \) positions in a coiled coil heptad repeat are known to form the inter-helical hydrophobic core (the most common residues in these positions are L, I and V) and this hydrophobic interaction is known to be the dominant determinant of coiled coil stability. Another factor for inter-helical stability in coiled coils is the ionic interaction between residues at positions \( e \) and \( g \) which are usually occupied by K and E (33). Inspection of the predicted heptad repeats of the GC-C coiled coil region shows that the \( e \) and \( g \) positions are not always charged residues. Therefore, the \( a \) and \( d \) positions are likely to be important in providing the interaction energy in the coiled coil region of GC-C.

Mutational analysis of a and d positions in the putative coiled coil region of GC-C The leucine residue at position 764, which occupies the hydrophobic \( d \) position in heptad I in GC-C, is conserved in GC-A and GC-B and is conservatively substituted to a methionine residue in GC-D, GC-E, GC-F and GC-G (Fig. 1A). L768 also shows a high degree of conservation and occupies the hydrophobic \( a \) position in heptad II of the predicted coiled coil region of these receptors (Fig. 1A). We therefore mutated leucines at positions 764 and 768 in GC-C to lysine to disrupt the hydrophobic \( a \) and \( d \) positions in the coiled coil interface, while retaining the helical nature of this region.

GC-C\( _{L764K} \), GC-C\( _{L768K} \) and the double mutant (GC-C\( _{L764K/L768K} \)) were expressed in HEK293T cells, and membranes from untransfected cells and cells expressing wild type or mutant GC-C were tested for their ability to bind the ST peptide. Membranes prepared from untransfected cells showed no ST-binding activity indicating that HEK293T cells do not express GC-C (data not shown). The mutant receptors were able to bind ST peptide with affinities comparable to that of the wild type receptor (Fig. 2A). Western Blot analysis of the corresponding membranes using a GC-C specific monoclonal antibody showed the presence of both the differentially glycosylated forms of GC-C of sizes 130 kDa and 145 kDa (Fig. 2B inset). This suggested that the mutations in the linker region did not affect the trafficking of the mutant receptors to the cell.
surface, since we have shown earlier that the 145 kDa form of GC-C is found only on the plasma membrane in HEK293 cells (34). Guanylyl cyclase assays using MnGTP as substrate with membranes expressing either the wild type or mutant receptors showed efficient cGMP production (Fig. 2B), thus confirming the functional integrity of the guanylyl cyclase domain of the mutant receptors. No immunoreactive bands corresponding to GC-C could be detected in membranes prepared from untransfected cells, and guanylyl cyclase activity present in HEK293T membranes was < 5% of the activity detected in cells transfected with GC-C.

When HEK293T monolayers expressing GC-C_L764K were treated with ST peptide, no increase in cGMP level was seen (Fig. 2C) indicating that L764 is critically required for transmission of the ligand binding signal to activation of the catalytic cyclase domain. Most interestingly, HEK293T monolayers expressing GC-C_L768K or GC-C_L764K,L768K mutant receptors showed elevated levels of cGMP accumulation in the basal state that could not be stimulated further with the addition of ST peptide (Fig. 2C). The fact that the L768K mutation overrides the properties of the L764K mutation in the double mutant suggests that the L768 residue plays an important role in retaining the receptor in an inactive conformation in the basal state.

Proline-scanning mutagenesis of the linker region
Given the dramatic effects of mutations of L764 and L768 residues, it became imperative to test the importance of other residues in this region on GC-C function. Proline residues are known to disrupt the regular helical structure by the introduction of a kink and a change in the ‘face’ of the helix relative to other secondary structural elements in the protein. We therefore generated proline mutants from residue Y760 (one residue upstream of the predicted coiled coil) to Y786, as well as E789P and L796P mutants. Mutant proteins were expressed in mammalian cells, and membrane fractions prepared from the cells showed that all mutant proteins were present as 145 and 130 kDa forms, indicating proper folding and export to the membrane (Fig. 3A). In vitro ligand binding assays were performed, and as shown in Fig. 3B, all mutants bound the ST peptide, and binding correlated to the expression of the mutant receptors as judged by Western Blot analysis. Furthermore, in vitro guanylyl cyclase assays using MnGTP as the substrate demonstrated that all mutant receptors retained catalytic activity (data not shown).

Transfected HEK293T cells were treated with ST and intracellular cGMP levels measured (Fig. 3C). Untransfected cells showed no cGMP production in response to ST addition. Interestingly, some of the mutants showed intracellular cGMP accumulation even in the absence of ST (which is a reflection of ligand-independent guanylyl cyclase activity). Q769P, Y771P, S772P, N774P and H777P mutant receptors showed highly elevated intracellular cGMP levels in the absence of ligand. L768P, L770P, L775P, and L785P mutant receptors showed moderately high levels of cGMP in the basal state, while the remaining mutants showed basal levels of intracellular cGMP. Most remarkably, the constitutive activation of the guanylyl cyclase domain on introduction of single point mutations in the region from Y771-H777 follows a periodic repeat pattern, wherein mutations at every third residue in the stretch (R773 and E776) failed to give a constitutively active receptor.

Of the mutants with low basal activity, M761P, T763P and R766P showed ligand-stimulated cGMP production in response to ST treatment (Fig. 3C). None of the constitutively active mutant receptors, except the L770P mutant, showed any further increase in cGMP levels upon ST treatment. The majority of the mutants in the linker region were very poorly responsive or unable to respond to ST treatment, suggesting the importance of this region in generating the correct conformation for ligand-induced activation of GC-C.

Effects on ligand binding, ligand-stimulatable activity and in vitro guanylyl
cyclase activity were similar with the introduction of either proline or lysine residues at 764 or 768 positions in the linker. This observation suggested that the effects seen were not due to a gross structural distortion introduced by the proline residues but due to the disruption of certain critical interactions. Conservative substitutions of leucine residues at positions 768 and 775 to isoleucine were generated and Y771 was conservatively substituted with a phenylalanine residue. These mutations restored the wild type phenotype in GC-C, and showed ligand-stimulated cGMP production, and low basal activity (Supplementary Figure 2). In contrast, the L764I mutant remained unresponsive to ST stimulation indicating that either the hydrophobic nature of the residue at 764 position alone was not the critical determinant of receptor functioning, or a highly specific interaction of leucine residue with the other helix of the coiled coil dimer is lost even in the L764I mutant (Supplementary Figure 2).

Role of the coiled coil region in oligomerization of GC-C Nucleotide cyclases must dimerize in a head-to-tail fashion to be able to produce cGMP from GTP (35,36). However, we were interested in determining if the mutant receptors could heterodimerize with the wild type receptor, in order to delineate the contribution of the linker region in receptor oligomerization.

Wild type GC-C was expressed as a GST fusion (GCC-GST) to aid in distinguishing the wild type and mutant receptors on a Western Blot on the basis of molecular weight (Fig. 4A and 4B insets). GCC-GST and GC-C\textsubscript{L764P} mutant plasmids (with a 6-fold more GC-C\textsubscript{L746P} plasmid than GCC-GST plasmid) were co-transfected in HEK293T cells, and ST-induced intracellular cGMP levels were monitored. As shown in Fig. 4A, the presence of mutant receptor in the same cell resulted in reduced ST-induced cGMP production by the wild type receptor. This indicated that the L764P mutant receptor was able to heterodimerize with the wild type receptor, and that the heterodimeric receptor had similar properties as the GC-C\textsubscript{L764P} homodimer (no ST stimulation).

In order to study the ability of GC-C\textsubscript{L768P} to functionally heterodimerize with the wild type receptor, HEK293T cells were co-transfected with GCC-GST plasmid along with GC-C\textsubscript{L768P} mutant plasmid (ratio of 6:1). The hypothesis was that if the two receptors were able to heterodimerize, then the higher concentration of the wild type receptor (with low basal activity) should inhibit the high basal activity of the GC-C\textsubscript{L768P} mutant receptor. Indeed, an inhibition of the high basal activity of GC-C\textsubscript{L768P} was observed in the presence of high levels of the wild type receptor (Fig. 4B) indicating that the two receptors are able to heterodimerize. These data confirm that the mutation in the coiled coil region does not drastically affect the dimerization ability of the receptors, possibly because a single mutation in a coiled coil region is unable to dramatically reduce the ability of the coiled coil to form a dimer.

Detergent-mediated activation of GC-C is modulated by residues in the coiled coil region Results described so far have established that the linker region is an important regulatory feature in GC-C. The activity of receptor GCs is markedly enhanced in vitro in the presence of non-ionic detergents, but the molecular basis for this activation is not known. Membranes prepared from cells expressing the linker region mutants were subjected to in vitro guanylyl cyclase assays in the absence or presence of 0.1 % Lubrol-PX and high substrate concentration (10 mM MgGTP). Mutant receptors that showed robust ST-stimulated cGMP production were activated by detergents to an extent seen with the wild type receptor (Supplementary Fig. 3). Amongst the mutant receptors with low basal activity, some (Y760P to R767P, E776P, T783P and Q784P) showed an increase in guanylyl cyclase activity in the presence of detergent, in a manner similar to that of wild type GC-C, while others (R773P, L778P, V779P, E780P, E781P, R782P, Y786P, E789P and L796P) failed to do so (Supplementary Fig. 3). Interestingly, none of the constitutively active mutant receptors were

7
further activated by the Lubrol-PX (Supplementary Fig. 3). Representative examples of some mutant receptors phenotypes are shown in Fig. 5. Thus, we can suggest that in the wild type receptor, the linker region forms hydrophobic interactions that keep the receptor in a conformation that possesses low guanylyl cyclase activity. In the presence of ligand (or detergent) these hydrophobic interactions are removed, thereby allowing the cyclase domain to dimerize in such a way that optimal guanylyl cyclase activity is seen. Our mutational analysis has therefore suggested for the first time, the molecular basis for detergent mediated activation of GC-C.

The KHD regulates the activity of the guanylyl cyclase domain by its ability to bind ATP (2). Detergent-mediated activity is inhibited in the presence of ATP, suggesting that the disruption of hydrophobic interactions brought about by detergents may be reversed subsequent to the ATP-induced conformational change in the KHD. Since some constitutively active mutant receptors showed no detergent-stimulated activity, it is possible that these conformations are locked in an active state. We therefore wished to test if the presence of ATP could ‘unlock’ this state and restore basal levels of cGMP production. The guanylyl cyclase activity of all mutants that showed elevated basal activity could not be inhibited by ATP in the presence of detergent (Supplementary Figure 2). Representative examples are shown in Fig. 5. Therefore, it is possible that the coiled coil region in GC-C may also interact with the KHD on one face of the helix and regulate ATP interaction. Thus, in receptors with low basal activity, the linker region could be sandwiched between the KHD and the guanylyl cyclase domain, restraining the conformation of the guanylyl cyclase domain.

The coiled coil region plays a similar regulatory role in GC-A Results described so far have served to establish the important role played by the linker region in regulating the activity of GC-C. The linker region shows ~ 45% sequence identity across all receptor GCs (13) (Fig. 1A), but the average sequence similarity is as high as 67% as calculated using BLOSUM62 substitution matrix implemented in MatGAT (37). In order to generalize the features of the linker region in another receptor guanylyl cyclase, mutations were generated in the important $a$ and $d$ positions in the putative coiled coil region of GC-A. Single point proline mutations were generated at L812 ($d$ position), M816 ($a$ position) and Y819 ($d$ position) residues in rat GC-A (equivalent to L764, L768 and Y771 in GC-C, respectively). Expression of mutant GC-A proteins in membranes prepared from HEK293T cells was checked by Western Blot analysis using a polyclonal antibody to GC-A, raised to the last 17 carboxyl-terminal amino acids of GC-A (38). As shown in Fig. 6A, the mutant proteins were expressed to equivalent levels and showed the characteristic differentially glycosylated forms of GC-A (39). The mutant receptors were catalytically active when cGMP production was measured in the presence of MnGTP as a substrate (data not shown). While HEK293T monolayers expressing GC-A$_L812P$ showed low intracellular cGMP production, similar to wild type GC-A, they showed no ANP-stimulated cGMP production (Fig. 6B). Moreover, cells expressing GC-A$_M816P$ and GC-A$_Y819P$ showed high basal levels of intracellular cGMP that were not further stimulated by ligand treatment, as was seen in GC-C by mutations at equivalent positions. Finally, the activation of GC-A by Lubrol-PX was measured. The in vitro guanylyl cyclase activity of the GC-A$_L812P$ mutant receptor was activated by Lubrol-PX in a manner similar to the wild type receptor, and therefore shows properties equivalent to the L764P mutation in GC-C. However, the guanylyl cyclase activities of GC-A$_M816P$ and GC-A$_Y819P$ were not activated by detergent, as was seen in mutant GC-C receptors (L768P and Y771P). ATP-mediated effects are markedly different between GC-A and GC-C, in that the presence of ATP increases ANP-stimulated activity of GC-A many fold, in contrast to the more modest increase seen with GC-C and ST.
We observed no change in the activity of wild type GC-A or mutant receptors in the presence of detergent and ATP (data not shown). Clearly, there are specific regulatory features in the interaction between the KHD and the GC domain in receptor GCs which await further analysis. Nonetheless, our studies have revealed a common role for the linker region in receptor GCs. Since the highest homology between receptor GCs is in the catalytic cyclase domain, we suggest that specific residues in the linker region, through their interactions with the cyclase domain, assist in repressing guanylyl cyclase activity. Detergents can disrupt these interactions leading to high cGMP production by generating the conformation of the receptor that mimics the ligand-activated state.

Discussion

This is the first comprehensive study on the role of the putative coiled coil region in receptor GCs. Based on the phenotypes of the mutations that were observed, and a lack of similarity in properties of mutants generated in equivalent positions in a coiled coil, we suggest that this region in guanylyl cyclases may not adopt a classical coiled coil helical structure. Instead, we suggest that a helix is formed by this linker region, where the amphipathic nature of the helix presents a hydrophobic stretch that may interact with regions on the guanylyl cyclase domain, thereby acting as a clamp to ensure low levels of cGMP production.

High intracellular cGMP accumulation would result from conversion of MgGTP to cGMP, since mM concentrations of Mg\(^{2+}\), but only trace Mn\(^{2+}\), is found within the eukaryotic cell (41). The fact that all the mutant receptors possessed in vitro guanylyl cyclase activity when measured using MnGTP as a substrate showed that the cyclase domains were able to dimerize in a functional manner when Mn\(^{2+}\) was present as the metal co-factor. Perhaps the larger size and flexible co-ordination geometry of Mn\(^{2+}\) (42) allows it to bind and form a functional catalytic site even in the presence of mutations that render the guanylyl cyclase domain poorly active when measured with MgGTP as a substrate. Nevertheless, since some linker mutant receptors showed robust guanylyl cyclase activity even when MgGTP alone was used as a substrate, we suggest that the linker region has an inhibitory role on the receptor guanylyl cyclase domain, perhaps by preventing the two catalytic domain subunits from juxtaposing themselves in a way suitable for catalysis, in the absence of the ligand.

Interestingly, interspersed amongst the high basal mutants were residues which when mutated to proline reduced the guanylyl cyclase activity to levels seen in the wild type receptor. Based on the periodicity that is observed, it is tempting to suggest that this region of the receptor (residues Y771 to H777P) could show an alteration in the regular \(\alpha\)-helical structure and generate interactions similar to those seen in a \(3_{10}\) helix. It is not clear however, if this structural variation is seen in the basal conformation of the receptor, or is a pre-requisite structural transition mimicking the ligand-activated state of the receptor.

We show that the phenotypes of mutations at equivalent positions in GC-C and GC-A are similar, indicating conservation of the role of these residues in these receptors. Naturally occurring mutations in the linker region of RetGC-1 have been identified in patients with autosomal cone-rod dystrophy (43,44). All mutations include a change in the R838 residue, corresponding to the R782 position in GC-C. These mutations showed guanylyl cyclase activity when measured using MnGTP in one study (45) or MnGTP and the non-ionic detergent Triton-X100 in other studies (16,46). Since all the mutants in GC-C were active in the presence of MnGTP, and we saw detergent-mediated effects when MgGTP was used as a substrate, we cannot comment on whether mutations in RetGC-1 abrogated detergent-stimulated activity, as is seen with the R782P mutant in GC-C. However, mutant receptors showed a ~3 fold reduction in basal activity in comparison to the wild type receptor when assayed in the presence of MgGTP (45).
In none of these studies, were intracellular levels of cGMP measured in cells overexpressing the mutant receptors, possibly because RetGC-1 is activated only in the presence of GCAPs. Mutations at R838 showed an increased sensitivity to GCAP-1 stimulation of cyclase activity, and the inhibition potential of Ca\(^{2+}\) was decreased (16). In these studies, it was assumed that the coiled coil region forms a parallel dimer and mutation of the critical R838 disrupts the dimerization interface leading to movement of the C-terminal parts of the two helices away from each other. Molecular dynamic simulations with the modeled coiled coil region suggested that mutation of R838 led to the lengthening of the coiled coil region thereby affecting the regulation of cyclase domain by GCAP-1 and Ca\(^{2+}\). The distinct mechanisms of regulation of GC-C (by an extracellular ligand) and RetGC-1 (by the intracellular GCAPs) may result in different phenotypes in linker region mutants. However, we predict that the lack of activation by detergent in mutations at certain positions in the linker region could be seen in all receptor GCs including RetGC-1, when assayed in the presence of MgGTP.

A mutation in the catalytic domain of GC-A (E974A) has been reported that results in phenotypes very similar to many of the constitutively active mutants in GC-C (and GC-A) described in the current study (47). Full length GC-AE974A is constitutively active, shows no further ANP-mediated activation, and no regulation by ATP. In addition, a construct (HCAT) that contains a fragment of the C-terminal region of the KHD, the entire linker region and the guanylyl cyclase domain also shows higher in vitro guanylyl cyclase activity than the wild type protein (47). It is therefore conceivable that the E974 residue may interact with residues in the linker region, and disruption of this interaction, either by mutation of the E residue, or by mutation of interacting residues in the linker region (suggested by our study), could result in the same phenotype. However, it is important to note that the N-terminal residues of the catalytic domain (to which the linker sequences are attached) may lie on a face of the protein opposite to that of the E974 residue (based on modeling analysis; data not shown). Therefore, an alternative explanation can be provided for the phenotype of the E974A mutant by stating that mutations in the linker region, that result in constitutive activity of receptor guanylyl cyclases, bring about a conformational change in the cyclase domain involving the conserved residue at position E974 in GC-A. Clearly these hypotheses are likely to be verified when the structure of a receptor guanylyl cyclase is described, or combination mutations are made in both the linker and the E974 residue in GC-A.

Mutations in the linker region of GC-C caused essentially three distinct phenotypes, as summarized in Fig. 7A. The fact that very few mutants possessed wild type-like activity in terms of ligand and detergent stimulatability indicated that this region is critical for proper functioning of receptor GCs. A number of mutants lay in the upper left hand quadrant of the graph, and these represented mutant receptors that had lost all ligand stimulated activity, but retained detergent-stimulated guanylyl cyclase activity. The most interesting mutant receptors (with the exception of R773P) were those in the lower left hand quadrant of the graph, which showed highly elevated basal guanylyl cyclase activity and no further ligand- or detergent-mediated activation. This suggested to us that detergents activate the wild type receptor by disrupting hydrophobic interactions that are held in place by residues whose mutation results in high basal activity. It is important to note, however, that mutations of some charged residues as well as hydrophobic residues also resulted in high basal activity, indicating that these charged residues may play a role in correct positioning of the regulatory hydrophobic region.

The fact that ATP-mediated regulation is also lost in the mutant receptors which have high basal activity suggests that the linker region could also interact with the KHD. Since the cyclase domains need to form head to tail dimers, we suggest that the linker region could form anti-parallel helices, one face of which lies
along the active site of the cyclase domain. The other face of the linker region could juxtapose to the KHD, with the KHD domains lying parallel to each other. We suggest this topology based on our mutational analysis and the effects that mutations in the linker region have on both ATP-mediated interaction with the KHD, and guanylyl cyclase activity.

An example of a nucleotide cyclase whose activity is regulated by sequences N-terminal to the cyclase domain is well demonstrated both biochemically and structurally by Rv1264, a pH-sensing adenylyl cyclase from *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*. This enzyme has maximum activity at an acidic pH 6.0, and has an N-terminal regulatory domain and a C-terminal cyclase domain connected by a small linker (48). The N-terminal domain is autoinhibitory to the cyclase domain of the enzyme (49), and interestingly, a mutation in this region of Rv1264 (D107A) led to an increase in Vmax (3-fold) with a little change in Km. The full length crystal structure of Rv1264 revealed the conformational changes that are responsible for the pH-dependent switch between the active and inactive states of the enzyme. In the inactive state, the linker between the N-terminus and the catalytic domain attains a helical conformation and the same region is a random coil in the active state (48). This structural change along with others facilitate the cyclase domains from two monomers to come in an appropriate head-to-tail orientation in the active state (48). Therefore evidence for dramatic structural changes brought about by residues N-terminus to a nucleotide cyclase domain is available, strengthening our suggestion that such conformational changes can be speculated to occur in the linker region of GC-C in conjunction with the N-terminal KHD and the C-terminal guanylyl cyclase domain to attain a ligand-mediated activated state.

Some Class III nucleotide cyclases show regulation of their catalytic activity by associated HAMP (histidine kinases, adenylyl cyclases, methyl accepting chemotactic receptors and phosphatases) domains. For example, point mutations in the HAMP domain of the mycobacterial adenylyl cyclase Rv3645 that were designed to remove hydrophobic surfaces, led to a stimulation of Rv3645 adenylyl cyclase activity. In contrast, similar mutations in the HAMP domain of Rv1318c only marginally increased the activity of the associated cyclase domain, indicating specificity in the regulation brought about by the HAMP domains (50).

Till date, two guanylyl cyclase domain structures have been solved (5,6). The Cya2 (cyanobacterial) catalytic domain structure is similar to the structure of the activated adenylyl cyclase whereas the Cyg12 (*Synechocystis*) catalytic domain is thought to be in the inactive conformation (because of dimethylarsenic additions to cysteine residues). We modeled the cyclase domain of GC-C into these two cyclase structures to generate inactive and active states, in order to hypothesize on the role of the linker region in activating the cyclase domain. In the model of the active (Cya2) conformation of GC-C, helix \( \alpha_3 \) is found closer to the active site and helix \( \alpha_4 \) in the second monomer compared to the inactive (Cyg12) structure (Fig. 7B). This movement as suggested by Winger et al (6), is important for positioning the nucleotide correctly in the active site allowing catalysis. It was also suggested that regulatory proteins/domains can interact with the cyclase domain by docking on to the cavity formed between the \( \alpha_1-\alpha_2 \) loop and \( \alpha_3-\beta_4 \) loop and regulate the activity of the cyclase domain, as seen with the adenylyl cyclase. It is possible that the linker region, that can form helical structures in the circular dichroism experiment, interacts with the cyclase domain, similar to the docking of the Gs\( \alpha \) switch II helix in adenylyl cyclases (36). However, given the limitations of computational methods to model loops in protein tertiary structure, it is not possible for us to conclusively say that this is the mode of regulation of the cyclase domain of receptor GCs by the associated linker region. Taken together, the mechanisms of activation of the
cyclase domain remain speculations as of now, and await the structural determination of a guanylyl cyclase domain with the regulator linker region, and of course the entire intracellular domain. Nevertheless, we have shown in this study that the linker region of receptor GCs has a critical role to play in regulating not only the guanylyl cyclase activity of these receptors, but also in the relay of conformational changes that occur from the extracellular domain and the KHD to the cyclase domain.

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References

Footnotes ANP, atrial natriuretic peptide; GC, guanylyl cyclase; GC-A, guanylyl cyclase A; GC-C, guanylyl cyclase C (heat-stable enterotoxin receptor); GCAP-1, guanylyl cyclase activating protein 1; GST, glutathione S-transferase; IBMX, 3-isobutyl 1-methyl xanthine; KHD, kinase homology domain; Ret GC-1, retinal guanylyl cyclase; ST, heat-stable enterotoxin

FIGURE LEGENDS

Fig. 1: Sequence analysis of the linker region in receptor GCs. A. Multiple sequence alignment of the linker region of receptor GCs generated by MUSCLE (51), and depicted using ClustalX 2.0 (ftp://ftp.ebi.ac.uk/pub/software/clustalw2). Hsap, Homo sapiens; Rnor, Rattus norvegicus; Mmus, Mus musculus. Shaded boxes indicate residues that are similar in all the sequences. The human GC-E gene is a pseudogene (52). B. Helical wheel representation of the linker residues (Met761-Ala788) of GC-C, showing the amphipathic nature of the helix, with a predominance of hydrophobic residues on one face of the helix and a predominance of hydrophilic residues on the other. Hydrophobic residues are shown in light grey, while predominantly hydrophilic residues are shaded in black. C. Residue positions in the predicted heptad repeats in the coiled coil structure adopted by the linker region based on the COILS program (32).

Fig. 2: Characterization of GC-C_L764K, GC-C_L768K and GC-C_L764K/L768K mutants. A. Membranes prepared from HEK293T cells expressing the wild type or mutant receptor were incubated with varying concentrations of [125I]-labelled ST_Y72F for 1 h at 37°C. Following incubation, samples were filtered and bound radioligand was monitored. Data was analyzed using GraphPad Prism and values shown are representative of assays repeated at least twice. B. Membrane protein prepared from HEK293 cells expressing the wild type or mutant GC-C receptors were taken for in vitro guanylyl cyclase assays using MnGTP as the substrate. The assay was performed twice and values represent the mean ± S.E.M. of duplicate determinations. C. HEK293T cells expressing GC-C_WT, GC-C_L764K, GC-C_L768K or GC-C_L764K/L768K were treated with ST (10^-7 M) for 30 min. Cells were lysed and intracellular cGMP levels determined. Data shown is the mean ± S.E.M. of duplicate measurements of a representative experiment, with n=3. Inset shows a Western Blot of whole cell lysates prepared from HEK293T cells transfected with GC-C_WT, GC-C_L764K, GC-C_L768K or GC-C_L764K/L768K using GCC:C8 monoclonal antibody.

Fig. 3: Proline scanning mutagenesis in the linker region of GC-C. A. Membrane protein prepared from HEK293T cells expressing mutant GC-C receptors was subjected to Western Blot analysis using GCC:C8 monoclonal antibody. B. HEK293T membrane protein expressing wild type or mutant GC-C receptors was incubated with [125I]-labelled ST_Y72F in the presence or absence of unlabelled ST (10^-7 M). Following incubation, samples were filtered and bound radioligand was monitored. C. HEK293T cell monolayers expressing either wild type or mutant GC-C receptors, were either untreated (basal cGMP) or treated with ST peptide and intracellular cGMP measured. Assays were performed on three independent sets of transfections, and values correspond to the mean ± S.E.M. of duplicate determinations carried out in a single representative experiment. Only the wild type, M761P, L763P, R766P and L770P mutant receptors showed significant ST-stimulated cGMP accumulation (p < 0.01) across multiple experiments.

Fig 4: Mutations in the linker region of GC-C do not affect oligomerization. A. HEK293T cells were co-transfected with a fixed concentration of GCC-GST plasmid and a 6-fold higher concentration of GC-C_L764P plasmid, and 72 h following transfection, were treated with 10^-7 M ST, and intracellular cGMP levels monitored. Assays were repeated three times, with duplicate determinations. Values represent the mean ± S.E.M. of duplicate determination in a single experiment. Inset: Membrane protein was prepared
from parallel transfections and used for Western Blot analysis using GCC:C8 monoclonal antibody. Lane 1, GC-C-GST alone; lane 2, GCC-GST and GC-C co-transfection. B. HEK293T cells were co-transfected with a fixed concentration of GC-C_L768P mutant plasmid and 6-fold higher amounts of GCC-GST plasmid and 72 h post transfection, cells were lysed and intracellular cGMP levels monitored. Data shown is the mean ± S.E.M. of duplicate measurements of a representative assay (n=3). Inset: Membrane protein prepared from parallel transfections were taken for Western Blot analysis using GCC:C8 monoclonal antibody. Lane 1, GC-C alone; lane 2, GC-C and GCC-GST co-transfection.

**Fig 5: Detergent-mediated activation and ATP-mediated regulation of wild type GC-C and representative linker region mutants.** Membrane protein prepared from HEK293T cells expressing the mutant receptor were assayed for guanylyl cyclase activity using 1 mM MgGTP as the substrate and 10 mM free MgCl₂, in the absence or presence of 0.1% Lubrol-PX. Assays were also performed in the presence 0.1% Lubrol-PX and 1 mM MgATP, using 1 mM MgGTP as substrate and 10 mM free MgCl₂. The amount of cGMP produced was monitored and data shown is the mean ± S.E.M. of duplicate measurements of assays repeated thrice. Mutant receptors from Y760P to R767P, E776P, T783P and Q784P showed a significant detergent-stimulated activity (* p < 0.02), and also at least a 2-fold reduction in guanylyl cyclase activity in the presence of ATP (Supplementary Figure 3). Inset shows a western blot of membrane preparations prepared from cells expressing wild type or mutant GC-C receptors. Membranes prepared from untransfected cells (UT) showed no bands corresponding to GC-C on Western blot analysis. Guanylyl cyclase activity measured in these membranes was ~ 1 pmol cGMP/min/mg protein, and no change in activity was seen in the presence of Lubrol-PX, with or without ATP.

**Fig 6: Characterization of GC-A linker mutants.** A. Membrane protein prepared from HEK293T cells expressing wild type GC-A or the linker region GC-A mutants were taken for Western Blot analysis using GC-A polyclonal antibody. B. HEK293T monolayers transfected with wild type GC-A or mutant GC-A were incubated in the absence or presence of 10⁻⁶ M ANP, following which the cells were lysed and intracellular cGMP levels were measured. Data shown is the mean ± S.E.M. of duplicate measurements of a representative experiment, with experiments repeated thrice. C. Membrane protein (2 µg) prepared from HEK293T cells expressing wild type or mutant GC-A receptors was used for *in vitro* guanylyl cyclase assay in the presence of 0.1% Lubrol-PX using 1 mM MgGTP and 10 mM free MgCl₂. The amount of cGMP produced was monitored and data shown is the mean ± S.E.M. of duplicate measurements of a representative assay, with the assay repeated thrice.

**Fig 7: The role of the linker region in GC-C.** A. A summary of the phenotypes of the linker mutations from Y760 to H777 in terms of their ligand and detergent-stimulatable properties. Three groups of mutations can be defined, with the majority severely compromised in ligand-mediated activation of GC-C, even though they show significant activation in the presence of detergent. B. Superposition of the models generated using the available crystal structures of guanylyl cyclase domains [pdb: 3ET6 and 2W01] indicating the movement of the helix α₃ in the activation of the cyclase domain.
Figure 1 Saha et al
Figure 2 Saha et al
Figure 3 Saha et al
Figure 4 Saha et al
Saha et al Figure 5
Figure 6 Saha et al
Figure 7 Saha et al
The linker region in receptor guanylyl cyclases is a key regulatory module: mutational analysis of guanylyl cyclase C
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