

Cell Adhesion Molecules in Chronic Tissue Disorders: Current Therapeutic Perspectives

Ricardo Alvarez*

Department of Clinical Immunology, Iberian Institute of Biomedical Sciences, Madrid, Spain

DESCRIPTION

Cell adhesion molecules are specialized surface proteins that regulate physical interactions among leukocytes, endothelial cells, epithelial cells, fibroblasts, platelets, and components of the extracellular matrix. These molecular systems are essential for preservation of tissue architecture, regulation of cellular migration, maintenance of vascular integrity, wound repair, and coordinated communication among numerous cell populations [1]. Their biological importance extends from embryonic development through adult tissue maintenance, continuously directing cellular positioning and movement according to physiological requirements. Carefully controlled expression and activation of adhesion molecules allow circulating leukocytes to reach sites of infection or tissue injury while preventing unnecessary infiltration into healthy organs. Disturbances affecting these regulatory mechanisms have been associated with persistent tissue dysfunction involving the gastrointestinal tract, lungs, kidneys, skin, joints, nervous system, cardiovascular tissues, and liver [2]. Increasing understanding of adhesion molecule biology has encouraged development of therapeutic strategies designed to regulate cellular trafficking while preserving essential physiological defense mechanisms.

Several major families of adhesion molecules participate in cellular interactions throughout the body. Selectins regulate the earliest stages of leukocyte recruitment by promoting transient contact between circulating leukocytes and vascular endothelial cells [3]. Integrins provide stronger adhesive interactions that permit firm attachment and migration through the vascular wall. Members of the immunoglobulin superfamily, including intercellular adhesion molecules and vascular cell adhesion molecules, function as ligands for leukocyte integrins during tissue recruitment. Cadherins maintain stable cell-to-cell junctions within epithelial and endothelial tissues, whereas additional adhesion systems coordinate communication with extracellular matrix proteins. Together these molecular families establish a highly organized network responsible for maintaining tissue homeostasis.

Leukocyte recruitment from the bloodstream into tissues follows a carefully coordinated sequence of biological events. Initial contact occurs when selectins expressed on activated endothelial cells interact with carbohydrate ligands located on circulating leukocytes [4]. These relatively weak interactions permit leukocytes to roll along the endothelial surface despite continuous blood flow. Rolling provides sufficient time for exposure to chemokines displayed on endothelial membranes, preparing leukocytes for subsequent activation. This multistep process ensures that migration occurs only at appropriate anatomical locations.

Chemokines presented on endothelial surfaces activate leukocyte integrins through intracellular signaling pathways that rapidly increase their binding affinity [5]. Activated integrins subsequently recognize endothelial ligands such as intercellular adhesion molecule-1 and vascular cell adhesion molecule-1, producing firm adhesion that arrests leukocyte movement. Following stable attachment, leukocytes migrate between adjacent endothelial cells or, less frequently, directly through endothelial cell bodies before entering surrounding tissues [6]. These sequential events are regulated precisely to balance effective host defense with preservation of vascular integrity.

Endothelial cells perform an active role in regulation of adhesion molecule expression. Exposure to cytokines, microbial products, metabolic alterations, or mechanical stress modifies endothelial production of selectins, intercellular adhesion molecules, vascular cell adhesion molecules, and chemokines [7]. These changes influence the quantity and type of leukocytes recruited into specific tissues according to local biological requirements. Following resolution of tissue injury, expression of adhesion molecules gradually decreases, limiting continued cellular infiltration.

Neutrophils are among the earliest leukocytes recruited through adhesion molecule interactions. Their migration into affected tissues supports phagocytosis, production of reactive oxygen species, release of antimicrobial granules, and formation of extracellular traps when appropriate [8]. Macrophages, monocytes, dendritic cells, and lymphocytes subsequently enter tissues through related mechanisms involving distinct

Correspondence to: Ricardo Alvarez, Department of Clinical Immunology, Iberian Institute of Biomedical Sciences, Madrid, Spain, E-mail : ricardo.alvarez@iibs-spain.edu

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combinations of adhesion molecules and chemokine receptors. Differential expression of these molecular systems contributes to selective recruitment of specific cellular populations during various physiological conditions.

Cell adhesion molecules also regulate interactions within lymphoid tissues. Naïve lymphocytes continuously circulate through lymph nodes, spleen, and mucosal lymphoid structures while surveying for antigens. Specialized endothelial cells expressing characteristic adhesion molecules permit controlled entry of circulating lymphocytes into these organs [9]. Within lymphoid tissues, additional adhesion systems coordinate communication among dendritic cells, lymphocytes, stromal cells, and extracellular matrix components, supporting antigen presentation and development of adaptive cellular responses.

Cadherins contribute significantly to preservation of epithelial and endothelial barrier integrity. E-cadherin maintains stable junctions between epithelial cells lining the gastrointestinal tract, respiratory tract, and skin, limiting penetration of microorganisms and environmental substances [10]. Vascular endothelial cadherin performs similar functions within blood vessels, regulating vascular permeability while maintaining structural stability. Disturbances affecting cadherin expression may impair barrier function and facilitate inappropriate leukocyte infiltration.

Mechanical forces influence adhesion molecule activity through mechanotransduction pathways. Blood flow generates shear stress affecting endothelial expression of selectins, intercellular adhesion molecules, and vascular cell adhesion molecules. Tissue stiffness, extracellular matrix composition, and cellular contractility similarly regulate integrin signaling and cytoskeletal organization. These biomechanical influences demonstrate that adhesion molecule function depends not only upon biochemical signals but also upon physical characteristics of the tissue environment.

CONCLUSION

Cellular metabolism has emerged as another important regulator of adhesion biology. Activation Continued

investigation into cell adhesion molecules is expanding understanding of cellular migration, vascular biology, tissue architecture, extracellular matrix regulation, and intercellular communication. These scientific developments are expected to support increasingly selective therapeutic strategies capable of restoring physiological cellular trafficking while preserving essential protective functions. Ongoing collaboration among laboratory researchers, clinicians, pharmaceutical scientists, and biomedical engineers will remain fundamental for translating these discoveries into practical clinical applications that improve long-term outcomes for individuals affected by chronic tissue disorders.

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