

Radiofrequency ablation for hepatocellular carcinoma induces glypican-3 peptide-specific cytotoxic T lymphocytes

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Abstract. Glypican-3 (GPC3), a carcinoembryonic antigen, is an ideal target for anticancer immunotherapy against hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC). In this study, we attempted to compare the induction of the GPC3-specific T-cell-mediated immune response after locoregional therapies in HCC patients and tumor-bearing mice. Twenty-seven HCC patients treated with locoregional therapies, including radiofrequency ablation (RFA), surgical resection and transcatheter arterial chemoembolization (TACE), were prospectively enrolled in this study. Additionally, we performed RFA experiments using a mouse

model. GPC3-specific T-cell response was investigated pre-treatment and post-treatment by an interferon- γ enzyme-linked immunospot assay using peripheral blood mononuclear cells from HCC patients and lymph node cells from tumor-bearing mice. Circulating GPC3-specific cytotoxic T lymphocytes (CTLs) were increased in 5 of 9 patients after RFA and in 4 of 9 patients after TACE, but in only 1 of 9 patients after surgical resection. All 7 patients with GPC3-expressing HCCs exhibited an increase in GPC3-specific CTLs after RFA or TACE, whereas none of the 7 patients did after surgical resection. The number of increased GPC3-specific CTLs after RFA was significantly larger than that after surgical resection ($P=0.023$). Similarly, the frequency of GPC3-specific CTLs after RFA was significantly greater than that after surgical resection in the mouse model ($P=0.049$). We validated for the first time the stronger effect on the immune system brought by RFA compared with surgical resection for HCC patients and tumor-bearing mice. Combined treatment of RFA and immunotherapy is a reasonable strategy against HCC.

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Abbreviations: GPC3, glypican-3; HCC, hepatocellular carcinoma; RFA, radiofrequency ablation; TACE, transcatheter arterial chemoembolization; CTL, cytotoxic T lymphocyte; CT, computed tomography; TNM, tumor-node-metastasis; UICC, the Union for International Cancer Control; PBMC, peripheral blood mononuclear cell; IFN, interferon; ELISPOT, enzyme-linked immunospot; HSP105, heat shock protein 105; CMV, cytomegalovirus; AFP, α -fetoprotein; PIVKA-II, protein induced by vitamin K absence or antagonist II; hTERT, human telomerase reverse transcriptase; MRP3, multidrug resistance-associated protein 3

Key words: hepatocellular carcinoma, radiofrequency ablation, glypican-3, cytotoxic T lymphocyte, immunotherapy

Introduction

Hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC) is one of the most common and most serious cancers worldwide (1). Locoregional therapies, including radiofrequency ablation (RFA), surgical resection, and transcatheter arterial chemoembolization (TACE), are recognized as the gold-standard therapies for HCC patients whose cancer lesions are limited to the liver (2). However, the recurrence rate remains quite high despite potentially curative treatment (3,4). The reasons for this are as follows: first, a multicentric new tumor frequently occurs from underlying active hepatitis or cirrhosis and, second, a small tumor undetectable by imaging modalities frequently exists before treatment and would be left untreated (5). Therefore, the establishment of effective adjuvant therapy to prevent recurrence is urgently required, and

clinical trials are ongoing throughout the world (6). However, at the present time, there is no universal consensus (2,7,8).

Previous studies have reported that local tumor ablation treatments, such as RFA and cryoablation, not only destroy tumor tissue but also induce a marked inflammatory response both locally and systemically (9,10). Unlike surgical resection, tumor ablation treatment generates tumor cell necrosis (11), followed by the release of tumor-associated antigens (12). These antigens can be uptaken, processed, and presented by dendritic cells (10,13), and then an antigen-specific T-cell-mediated immune response can be induced (9). If this induction is sufficiently steady and reliable, it may provide the basis for adjuvant immunotherapy, which is an attractive strategy.

Glypican-3 (GPC3) belongs to the glypican family of heparan sulfate proteoglycans that are linked to the outer surface of the cell membrane through a glycosylphosphatidylinositol anchor (14). GPC3 is one of the carcinoembryonic antigens overexpressed in HCC (15-17). We have shown that GPC3 is an ideal target for anticancer immunotherapy because its expression is specifically detected in ~80% of HCCs even in the early stages and is correlated with a poor prognosis (18-21). Moreover, GPC3-specific cytotoxic T lymphocytes (CTLs) have a high level of killing activity against HCC tumor cells (22). We have finished the phase I clinical trial of a GPC3-derived peptide vaccine for patients with advanced HCC (unpublished data), and just started the phase II clinical trial for adjuvant therapy after curative resection or RFA.

In this study, our aim was to determine if the GPC3-specific T-cell-mediated immune response is strengthened after locoregional therapies in HCC patients and tumor-bearing mice. Moreover, we evaluated the hypothesis that the post-treatment immune response may provide the basis for adjuvant immunotherapy.

Materials and methods

Patient population and treatment of HCC. Twenty-seven patients with primary HCC were prospectively enrolled in this study from January to November 2007 at the National Cancer Center Hospital East, in Japan. The eligibility criteria included primary HCC, which would undergo locoregional therapies with curative intent. Three treatment groups of nine patients each would undergo RFA, surgical resection, or TACE, respectively. Treatment selection in each patient was in accordance with the Japanese HCC treatment guidelines (2). Other inclusion criteria included HLA-A24 or HLA-A2 gene-positive status, as determined by commercially-available genomic DNA typing tests (Mitsubishi Chemical Medience, Tokyo, Japan), and no other active malignancy. HCC was diagnosed using dynamic computed tomography (CT). Tumor stage was assigned according to the tumor-node-metastasis (TNM) classification of the Union for International Cancer Control (UICC) (23). All RFA procedures were performed percutaneously under ultrasound guidance. Curative treatment was defined as complete necrosis of the tumor lesion confirmed by dynamic CT after RFA, a negative surgical margin confirmed histopathologically after resection, and complete lipiodol deposition after TACE.

All patients gave written informed consent before entering the study and this study was approved by the Ethics Committee

of the National Cancer Center, conforming to the ethical guidelines of the 1975 Declaration of Helsinki.

Collection of blood samples and preparation of peripheral blood mononuclear cells. Venous blood (20-30 ml) from each patient was collected both before treatment and one month after treatment. Peripheral blood mononuclear cells (PBMCs) were separated from whole blood using LeucoSep[®] tubes (Greiner Bio-One, Frickenhausen, Germany) by means of density gradient centrifugation.

Identification of GPC3-specific CTLs in HCC patients. In order to identify GPC3-specific CTLs, the proportion of cells producing interferon (IFN)- γ upon stimulation with GPC3 peptide was assessed by an *ex vivo* IFN- γ enzyme-linked immunospot (ELISPOT) assay using pooled PBMCs from HCC patients. Defrosted PBMCs (1×10^6 cells/well) were cultured in duplicate using 96-well flat-bottomed plates (BD Biosciences, San Jose, CA) with HLA-A24-restricted GPC3₂₉₈₋₃₀₆ peptide (EYILSLEEL) or HLA-A2-restricted GPC3₁₄₄₋₁₅₂ peptide (FVGEFFTDV) ($10 \mu\text{mol/l}$) with 100 U/ml recombinant human interleukin-2 (IL-2) for 20 h. The negative control consisted of medium alone or HLA-A24- or HLA-A2-restricted heat shock protein 105 (HSP105) peptide, and the positive control included the HLA-A24- or HLA-A2-restricted cytomegalovirus (CMV) peptide. The number of spots, which indicated the presence of IFN- γ secreting cells, was automatically counted using the Eliphoto system (Minerva Tech, Tokyo, Japan). For an exact comparison of the frequency of GPC3-specific CTLs existing at pre- and post-treatment, the obtained mean values of the number of spots with non-peptide-pulsed samples (1×10^6 PBMCs) at pre- and post-treatment were equalized and set to zero, and then the actual number of GPC3-, CMV-, or HSP105-specific spots was calculated. The Δspot was defined as the difference in the number of spots with each antigen between pre- and post-treatment.

Mice. Female BALB/c mice (H-2^d), 6-8 weeks of age, were obtained from Charles River Laboratories Japan (Yokohama, Japan). The mice were maintained under specific-pathogen-free conditions. All animal procedures were performed in compliance with the guidelines by the Animal Research Committee of the National Cancer Center, Japan.

Tumor cell lines. A subline of the BALB/c-derived GPC3-negative colorectal adenocarcinoma cell line, Colon 26 (24), was provided by Dr Kyoichi Shimomura (Astellas Pharma, Tokyo, Japan). Colon 26/GPC3 is an established stable GPC3-expressing cell line (18). The cells were cultured in RPMI-1640 medium supplemented with 10% fetal bovine serum, 100 U/ml penicillin, and 100 $\mu\text{g/ml}$ streptomycin in humidified 5% CO₂ at 37°C.

RFA experiment using a mouse model. The mice were shaved at the tumor area and the contralateral flank. After attachment of the electricity-conducting pad (ground pad) onto the contralateral side, an RFA needle with 5-mm active tip (Cool-tip[™], Valleylab, Boulder, CO) was inserted into the middle of the tumor. Impedance could be evaluated on the RFA lesion generator system (RFG-3B model, Radionics, Burlington, MA).

Treatment was started by delivering RFA energy. During two treatment cycles of 10 sec, the temperature could be monitored using the thermistor and thermocouple in the tip of the probe. Treatment was considered successful if a tip temperature of 60-70°C was reached.

Identification of GPC3-specific CTLs in mice. BALB/c mice were immunized beforehand by peptide vaccination with K^d-restricted GPC3₂₉₈₋₃₀₆ peptide (50 µg/mouse) emulsified with incomplete Freund's adjuvant twice at a 7-day interval as described previously (20). The day after the second vaccination, the mice were challenged subcutaneously with Colon 26/GPC3 tumor cells (1x10⁵ cells/100 µl) on their shaved back and, 5 days later, the mice underwent therapeutic RFA or surgical resection for the established tumor. After the next 5 days, the mice were sacrificed and bilateral inguinal lymph nodes were obtained. CD8⁺ T cells were isolated from lymph node cells using anti-mouse CD8α (Ly-2) microbeads (Miltenyi Biotec, Bergisch Gladbach, Germany) and an IFN-γ ELISPOT assay was performed without prior *in vitro* stimulation. For the IFN-γ ELISPOT assay, CD8⁺ lymph node cells (3x10⁵ cells/well) were used as effector cells, and Colon 26 and Colon 26/GPC3 cells (3x10⁴ cells/well) as target cells. These cells were cultured in duplicate using 96-well flat-bottomed plates (BD Biosciences) with 100 U/ml recombinant murine IL-2 for 20 h. The number of spots after RFA or surgical resection was compared with that without treatment.

Immunohistochemical analysis. To investigate GPC3 expression in HCC tissues, we performed immunohistochemical staining of GPC3 in biopsy specimens or resected specimens from HCC patients. The paraffin-embedded blocks were analyzed using monoclonal anti-GPC3 antibody (dilution 1:300, BioMosaics, Burlington, VT) as described previously (17,21). The results were classified into two groups according to the area of GPC3-positive staining cells as follows: -, negative (<10%) and +, positive (≥10%).

To investigate tumor-infiltrating lymphocytes, we performed immunohistochemical staining of CD4 and CD8 in resected specimens from an HCC patient using monoclonal anti-CD4 or CD8 antibody (dilution 1:20, Novocastra, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK).

Statistical analysis. Statistical analyses were performed using χ^2 test, Mann-Whitney U test, or Kruskal-Wallis rank test. Differences were considered significant at P<0.05. Data were analyzed with the StatView 5.0 software package (Abacus Concepts, Calabasas, CA).

Results

Demographics and clinical characteristics. The characteristics of all 27 patients are represented in Table I. The three groups of 9 patients received RFA (RFA1-9), surgical resection (RES1-9), or TACE (TAE1-9), respectively. Among them, 21 patients had the HLA-A24 gene and 7 had the HLA-A2 gene. One patient had both HLA-A24 and -A2, and the HLA-A2-restricted GPC3₁₄₄₋₁₅₂ peptide was used for the IFN-γ ELISPOT assay in this patient. Among the three treatment groups, tumor size in the RFA group (mean: 16.4 mm) was significantly smaller than

that in the resection group (mean: 43.2 mm) (P=0.001) and the TACE group (mean: 44.1 mm) (P=0.001). Similarly, tumor stage in the RFA group was less advanced than that in the resection group (P=0.018) and TACE group (P=0.005). There was no statistically significant difference in Child-Pugh classification grade among the three groups (P=0.128). In this study, all treatments were considered to be curative according to the definitions described in Materials and methods. Moreover, all groups reduced the levels of α -fetoprotein (AFP) and protein induced by vitamin K absence or antagonist II (PIVKA-II) in most of HCC patients after treatment (data not shown). The diagnosis of HCC was histopathologically confirmed by biopsy specimens or resected specimens from 21 patients. GPC3 expression was detected by immunohistochemical staining in 14 of 21 patients.

Analysis of GPC3-specific CTLs in HCC patients. As shown in Table I, GPC3-specific CTLs were detected in 11 and 15 of 27 patients at pre- and post-treatment, respectively. In total, 19 patients had GPC3-specific CTLs at either pre- or post-treatment. There was no statistically significant correlation between the presence of GPC3-specific CTLs and clinical features, including HLA-A type (P=0.126), age (P=0.750), gender (P=0.764), HCV infection (P=0.674), HBV infection (P=0.764), Child-Pugh classification grade (P=0.404), tumor multiplicity (P=0.674), tumor size (P=0.650), HCC staging (P=0.155), serum AFP level (P=0.288), and serum PIVKA-II level (P=0.094). Among the 21 patients who had the information about GPC3 expression in their HCC tissue, patients with GPC3-expressing HCCs had GPC3-specific CTLs more frequently than those with GPC3-negative HCCs, but the difference was not statistically significant (P=0.053).

Changes in GPC3-specific CTLs between before and after treatment. In order to analyze the effect of anticancer treatment on GPC3-specific T-cell response, we compared the frequency of GPC3-specific CTLs in PBMCs before treatment with that after treatment. As shown in Table I and Fig. 1, an increase in GPC3-specific CTLs was found in 5 of 9 patients after RFA and in 4 of 9 after TACE, but in only 1 of 9 patients after resection. Of note, all of the 7 patients with GPC3-expressing HCCs exhibited an increase in GPC3-specific CTLs after RFA or TACE, whereas none of the 7 patients with GPC3-expressing HCCs did after surgical resection. The Δ spot of GPC3 in the RFA group (mean: 24.4 spots) was larger than that in the resection group (mean: -7.2 spots) (P=0.023). The Δ spot of GPC3 in the TACE group (mean: 36.9 spots) was also larger than that in the resection group, but the difference was not statistically significant (P=0.096). In contrast, the Δ spot of CMV showed no difference among the three groups (P=0.498). Neither the existence of GPC3-specific CTLs before or after treatment, nor the changes between before and after treatment had statistically significant correlation with patient survival according to the log-rank test in each treatment group (neither disease-free nor overall), with the 27-month mean follow-up period (data not shown).

The representative data on changes in CT images and serum levels of tumor markers between before and after treatment is shown in Fig. 2. All three patients (RFA3, RES6, and TAE5) had GPC3-expressing HCCs. Both the CT images and

Table I. Patient characteristics and glypican-3-specific cytotoxic T lymphocytes.

Patient	HLA	Age (yrs.)	Gender	Etiology	Child-Pugh	No. of tumor	Tumor size (mm)	T ¹	N ¹	M ¹	AFP (<9.5 ng/ml)	PIVKA-II (<40 mAU/ml)	GPC3 expression ²	GPC3-specific CTLs ³		
														Pre	Post	Change Δ spot ⁴
RFA1	A24	73	F	HBV	A	2	26	2	0	0	4.0	228	-	4	0	-4
RFA2	A24	68	M	HCV	B	1	20	1	0	0	5.0	300	+	10	24	+14
RFA3	A2	50	M	HCV	A	1	15	1	0	0	63.3	25	+	0	88	+88
RFA4	A24	79	F	HCV	A	1	10	1	0	0	484.2	30	+	0	10	+10
RFA5	A24	69	M	HCV	A	1	15	1	0	0	2.3	57	-	0	0	+/-
RFA6	A24	60	M	HCV	A	1	17	1	0	0	15.1	23	-	0	0	+/-
RFA7	A2	73	M	HCV	A	1	20	1	0	0	97.3	51	+	3	88	+85
RFA8	A2/A24	64	M	HBV/HCV	B	1	15	1	0	0	39.9	17	+	0	31	+31
RFA9	A2	60	M	HCV	B	1	10	1	0	0	92.0	19	-	19	15	-4
RES1	A24	48	M	HBV	A	1	20	1	0	0	19.7	38	+	32	15	-17
RES2	A24	66	F	HCV	A	1	26	2	0	0	63.4	77	+	20	3	-17
RES3	A24	64	M	HCV	A	2	30	2	0	0	10.1	276	+	12	0	-12
RES4	A2	72	M	-	A	1	60	2	0	0	9.2	1500	+	3	1	-2
RES5	A24	70	M	HCV	A	1	20	1	0	0	4.2	25	+	0	0	+/-
RES6	A24	42	M	HBV/HCV	A	2	98	3	0	0	15115.0	22477	+	50	30	-20
RES7	A2	75	M	-	A	1	75	2	0	0	22.8	10341	-	0	3	+3
RES8	A24	52	M	HCV	A	1	30	1	0	0	16.0	234	+	0	0	+/-
RES9	A24	60	M	HBV	A	1	30	1	0	0	15.6	23	-	0	0	+/-
TAE1	A2	64	M	-	A	3	30	2	0	0	10.7	98	+	0	330	+330
TAE2	A24	78	F	HCV	B	1	60	1	0	0	2483.0	3932	ND	34	0	-34
TAE3	A24	77	F	-	A	>5	35	3	0	0	180.2	11538	ND	0	3	+3
TAE4	A24	77	M	HCV	A	2	80	4	0	0	20014.0	241	ND	0	0	+/-
TAE5	A24	55	M	HBV	A	2	30	2	0	0	3.7	24	+	0	23	+23
TAE6	A24	77	M	-	A	>5	42	2	0	0	1407.0	1661	ND	0	20	+20
TAE7	A24	63	F	HCV	A	>5	32	2	0	0	640.3	270	ND	0	0	0
TAE8	A24	74	M	-	A	1	18	1	0	0	3.8	12	-	0	0	+/-
TAE9	A24	62	M	HCV	A	3	70	3	0	0	46.8	1907	ND	10	0	-10

¹Tumor stage was assigned according to the tumor-node-metastasis (TNM) classification of the Union for International Cancer Control (UICC). ²GPC3 expression was evaluated by immunohistochemical staining; +, positive; -, negative. ³Peripheral blood was taken from each patient before and after treatment, and GPC3-specific CTLs were measured by *ex vivo* interferon- γ enzyme-linked immunospot assay; +, increase; -, decrease; +/-, no change. ⁴The Δ spot was defined as the difference in the number of spots with each antigen between pre- and post-treatment. F, female; M, male; HBV, hepatitis B virus; HCV, hepatitis C virus; AFP, α -fetoprotein; PIVKA-II, protein induced by vitamin K absence or antagonist II; GPC3, glypican-3; ND, not determined.

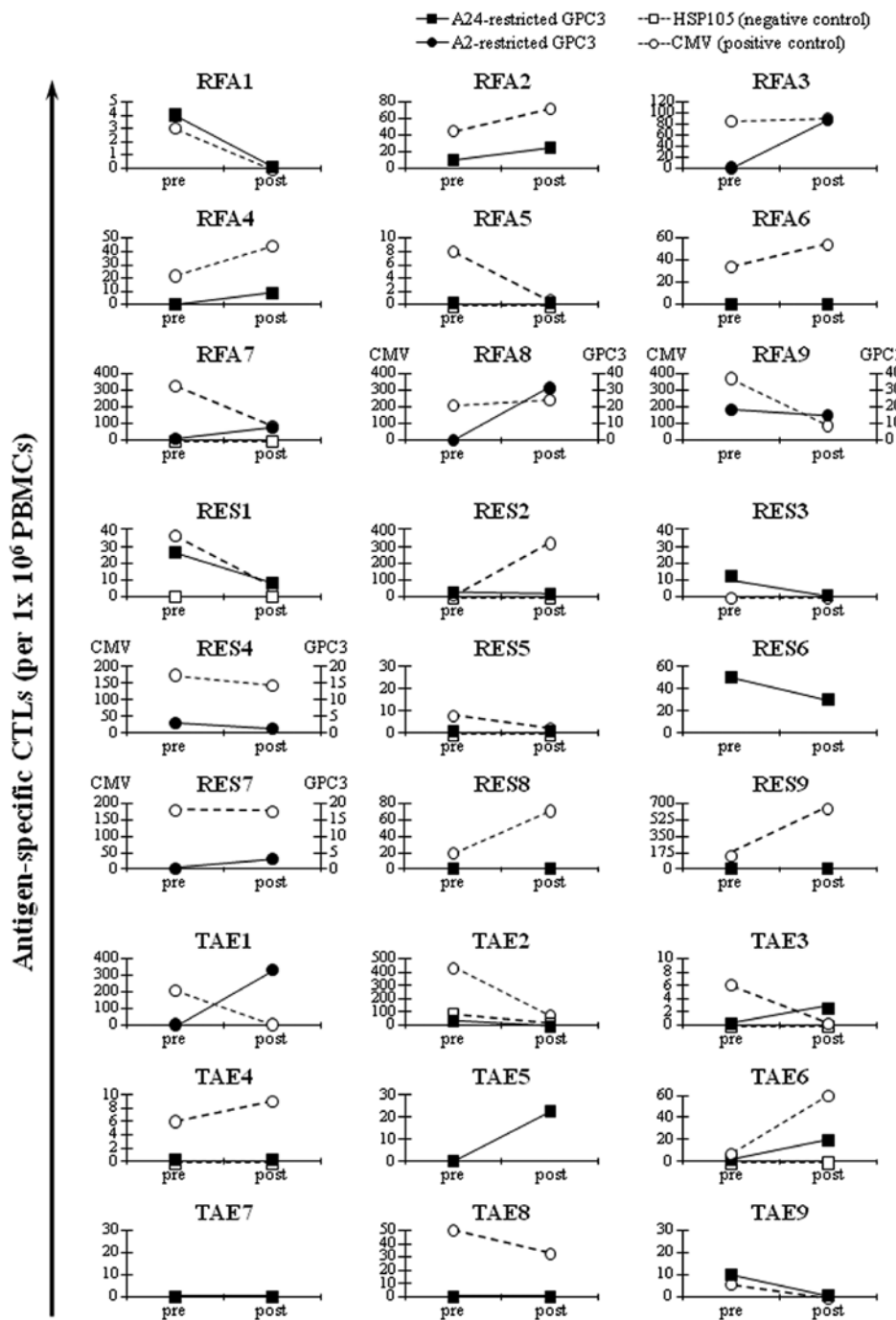


Figure 1. Kinetics of glypican-3 (GPC3)-specific CTLs between before and after treatment in each patient. A direct *ex vivo* interferon- γ enzyme-linked immunospot assay of PBMCs was performed before treatment and one month after treatment. The data are expressed as the number of interferon- γ producing cells, which indicate the CTLs specific with HLA-A24-restricted GPC3₂₉₈₋₃₀₆ peptide (EYILSLEEL) (■) or HLA-A2-restricted GPC3₁₄₄₋₁₅₂ peptide (FVGEFFTDV) (●). Heat shock protein 105 (HSP105) peptide (□) and cytomegalovirus (CMV) peptide (○) were used as the negative and positive control, respectively.

kinetics of tumor markers indicated that their treatment was effective. The frequency of GPC3-specific CTLs increased after RFA (RFA3) and TACE (TAE5), whereas it decreased after surgical resection (RES6).

RFA has the potential to strongly induce T-cell-mediated immune response: A case report. A 70-year-old woman was admitted because of recurrent HCCs. Thirteen months earlier, the patient had undergone RFA for primary HCC located in the S5/8 region of the liver. CT detected two recurrent HCCs:

one was contiguous to the previously ablated S5/8 region and the other was a distant tumor located in the S6 region. We performed surgical resection for these recurrent HCCs. Immunohistochemical examination of CD8 in the resected tumors revealed that a marked number of CD8⁺ T cells had infiltrated not only into the surrounding recurrent tumor but also into the distant recurrent tumor after RFA (Fig. 3). On the other hand, few CD4⁺ T cells were observed in these tumors (data not shown). Immunohistochemical analyses showed the expression of GPC3 and HLA class I in these tumors (data not

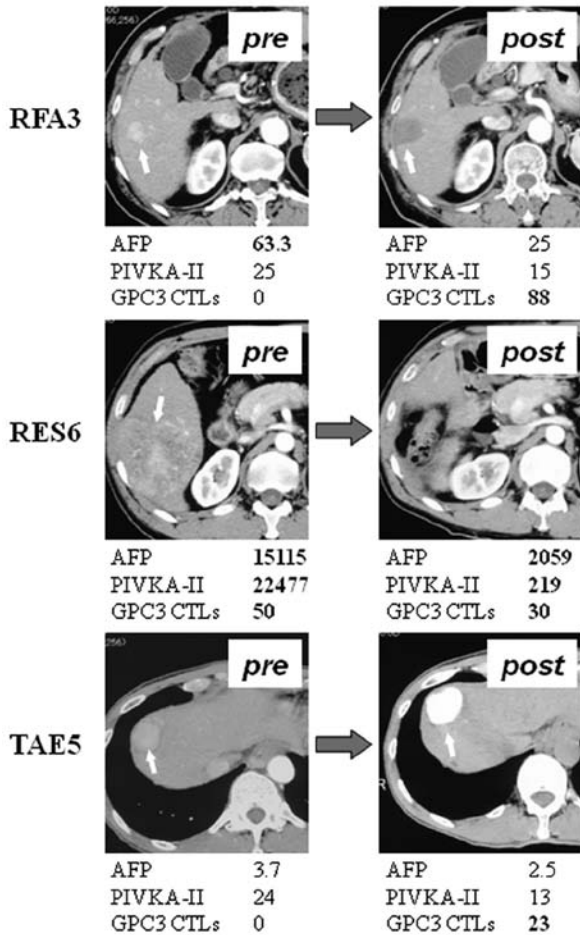


Figure 2. Changes in computed tomography images, serum levels of tumor markers, including α -fetoprotein (AFP) and protein induced by vitamin K absence or antagonist II (PIVKA-II), and glypican-3 (GPC3)-specific CTLs in PBMCs between before and after treatment in patients RFA3, RES6, and TAE5. White arrows indicate nodules of hepatocellular carcinoma at pre- and post-treatment. The bold letters show the abnormal levels of tumor markers or the positive response of GPC3 specific CTLs.

shown). These findings suggest that RFA not only activates the immune response systemically but also induces local infiltration of CTLs into the tumors.

Analysis of immune response induced by RFA in a mouse model. The experimental schedule is shown in Fig. 4A. The IFN- γ ELISPOT assay with CD8⁺ T cells from the lymph nodes of mice demonstrated that the number of spots against both Colon 26 ($P=0.049$) and Colon 26/GPC3 ($P=0.049$) was larger after RFA compared to without treatment. On the other hand, the number of spots did not increase after surgical resection. These results suggest that RFA induced a significantly larger number of both Colon 26- and Colon 26/GPC3-reactive CTLs compared to no treatment or surgical resection (Fig. 4B).

The difference in number of spots between Colon 26 and Colon 26/GPC3 in each mouse, which represents GPC3-specific CTLs, is shown in Fig. 4C. As an effect of prior peptide vaccination, GPC3-specific CTLs were detected in the no treatment group. The frequency of GPC3-specific CTLs increased after RFA and decreased after surgical resection. As a result, the frequency of GPC3-specific CTLs after RFA was significantly greater than that after surgical resection ($P=0.049$).

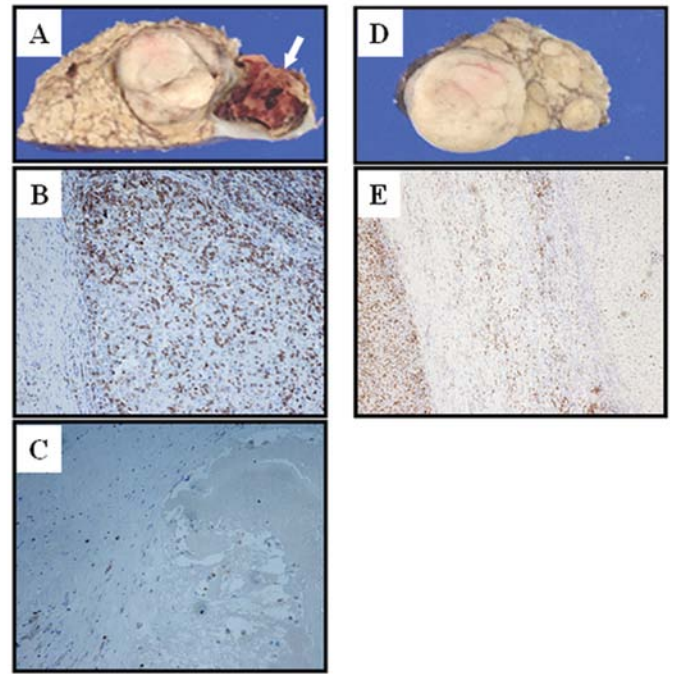


Figure 3. Macroscopic features and immunohistochemical examination of CD8⁺ T cells in the resected tumors that had recurred after radiofrequency ablation. (A and D) show the cut surface of the resected specimens. (A) The white arrow indicates the post-ablated lesion to which a recurrent tumor was contiguous. The other recurrent tumor was distant from the post-ablated lesion (D). A marked number of CD8⁺ T cells had infiltrated into the contiguous recurrent tumor (B) and the distant recurrent tumor (E), whereas few CD8⁺ T cells had infiltrated into the post-ablated necrotic lesion (C). Magnification x100 (B and C) and x40 (E).

These results suggest that RFA induced a significantly larger number of GPC3-specific CTLs compared to surgical resection (Fig. 4C).

Discussion

We previously reported that 39% of HCC patients had detectable GPC3-specific CTLs by a direct *ex vivo* IFN- γ ELISPOT assay (25). In this study, GPC3-specific CTLs were detectable before treatment in 11 of 27 patients (41%). Additionally, when we analyzed the patients with a prior treatment for HCCs using the same methods, 11 of 21 (52%) patients had detectable GPC3-specific CTLs (data not shown). These results are favorable for anticancer immunotherapy because the antigen-specific T-cell-mediated immune response could be detected without *in vitro* stimulation. As for frequency, GPC3-specific CTLs were detectable in ~40% of HCC patients, whereas AFP-, human telomerase reverse transcriptase (hTERT)-, and multidrug resistance-associated protein 3 (MRP3)-specific CTLs have been detected in 5-20, 6-12, and 14-21% of HCC patients with a single epitope peptide, respectively (26-28). As for tumor stages, a GPC3-specific immune response is frequently detected even in the early stages (24), whereas AFP-specific CTLs are more frequently detected in patients with advanced HCC (26). These results suggest that GPC3 has strong immunogenicity and GPC3-specific T-cell-mediated immunotherapy is suitable for adjuvant therapy against HCC because the induction of tumor-specific immune response in

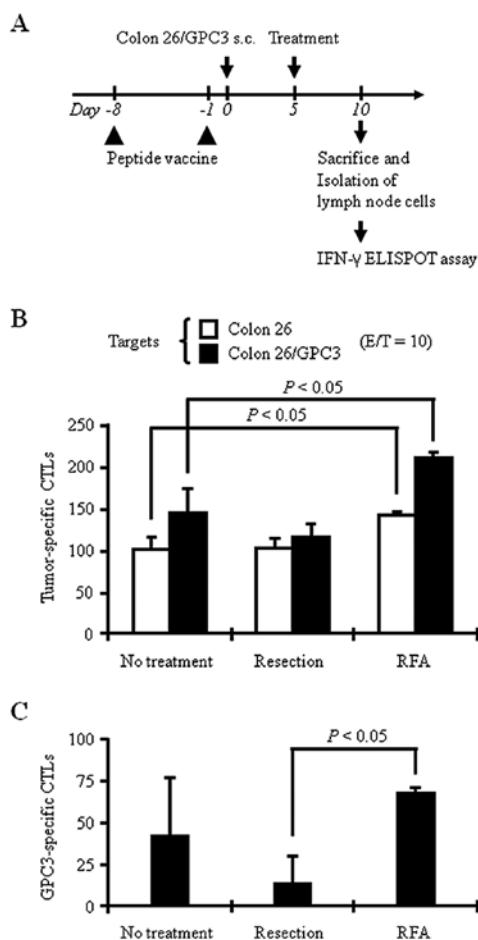


Figure 4. Investigation of the glypican-3 (GPC3)-specific immune response in a mouse model. (A) Experiment schedule. (B) An *ex vivo* interferon (IFN)- γ enzyme-linked immunospot (ELISPOT) assay of CD8⁺ lymph node cells (effector, 3×10^5 cells/well) against Colon 26 and Colon 26/GPC3 (target, 3×10^4 cells/well). No treatment column indicates the group of mice that received only the peptide vaccination and no therapy for the established tumor. The data are expressed as the mean + SD. Three mice were used for each group. Effector/target ratio=10. (C) The frequency of GPC3-specific CTLs, which is calculated from the difference in the number of spots between Colon 26 and Colon 26/GPC3 in each mouse.

the early stages would be more effective for suppression of tumor growth.

The association between the induction of an antigen-specific immune response and the antigen expression in tumor tissue remains unclear. In this study, we obtained the result that the presence of GPC3-specific CTLs in PBMCs potentially had a positive correlation with GPC3 expression in tumor tissue, but the correlation was not statistically significant. On the other hand, Mizukoshi *et al* showed a negative correlation between the frequency of MRP3-specific CTLs and MRP3 expression level (28). Moreover, Benavides *et al* showed that even antigen-naïve patients had pre-existing immunity (29). First, this may be because of tumor heterogeneity of cancer tissue. In most cases, the whole tumor cannot be evaluated and, in the case of truly antigen-naïve patients, antigen-specific CTLs cannot exist in theory. Second, antigen expression may be negative if antigen-specific CTLs have killed all of the antigen-expressing tumor cells as described by Jäger *et al* (30). As for the changes in an antigen-specific immune response between before and after treatment, in this study, we showed impressive data that all

patients with GPC3-expressing HCCs exhibited an increase in GPC3-specific CTLs after RFA or TACE, whereas no patient with GPC3-expressing HCCs did after surgical resection.

This is the first study to compare locoregional therapies, including RFA, surgical resection, and TACE, in terms of antigen-specific T-cell response in HCC patients and tumor-bearing mice. Half the patients after RFA or TACE showed an increase in GPC3-specific CTLs, which might have been induced by the treatment, whereas only 1 of 9 patients after resection showed an increase and more than half the patients after resection showed a decrease. Similarly, the frequency of GPC3-specific CTLs increased after RFA and decreased after resection in a mouse model. These results suggest that RFA induced a stronger GPC3-specific immune response compared to surgical resection. RFA destroys tumor tissue and causes local necrosis followed by the release of tumor-associated antigens (12), whereas all of the tumor-associated antigens must be completely removed after resection. With regard to TACE, whereas the results of an IFN- γ ELISPOT assay after TACE were as encouraging as that after RFA, we have no other favorable data on the immune response after TACE. Although further investigation is required, TACE, which is also a necrosis-inducing treatment, might induce an antigen-specific immune response.

A limitation of this study is the patient selection in the three kinds of locoregional therapy. Current treatment guidelines for HCC including the Japanese ones, which we followed in this study, recommend RFA to earlier HCCs and TACE to more advanced HCCs than those which receive surgical resection (2,31-33). Therefore, selection bias is unavoidable under the circumstances. To overcome this problem, we added a murine study. The advantage of RFA over surgical resection in the induction of GPC3-specific CTLs was demonstrated also in a mouse model.

The correlation between antitumor immune response and clinical response is controversial. In this study, a significant contribution of GPC3-specific CTLs toward an optimal prognosis was not demonstrated. Mizukoshi *et al* reported that enhancement of T-cell response did not last for long and did not contribute to the prevention of HCC recurrence (34). In view of the highly complex nature of the human immune system, patient prognoses might not be determined only by the CTL response. Previous studies have demonstrated that the release of tumor-derived antigens by necrosis-inducing treatment causes sufficient signaling to activate not only antigen-specific CTL response but also antigen-specific helper T-cell response (35,36), antigen-specific antibody response (36), and non-antigen-specific natural killer cell response (37). However, the mechanisms for cancer escape from immunosurveillance would suppress the efficiency of these immune responses (38). In the literature, tumor-infiltrating lymphocytes in HCC are associated with better prognosis (39), but, in our case, tumor-infiltrating CTLs were actually insufficient for suppression of cancer recurrence despite the massive infiltration. For successful anticancer immunotherapy, the development of an innovative strategy to link antitumor immune response with clinical response and to provide a survival benefit for cancer patients is necessary, and so we have just started the clinical trial of a GPC3-derived peptide vaccine for adjuvant therapy after RFA.

In conclusion, our results demonstrate that RFA has a stronger effect on the immune system compared with surgical resection. Although further investigation is necessary, the data on immune response support the rationale for combined immunotherapy for HCC patients.

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