5-Aza-Cytidine Enhances Terminal Polyadenylation Site Usage for Full-Length Transcripts in Cells

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Abstract

As an inhibitor of DNA methyltransferases (DNMT) and anti-cancer drug, the many effects of

5-aza-cytidine (5-azaC) on gene expression remains unknown. Here we show that 5-azaC

treatment of cultured pituitary tumour cells increases the relative usage of the genomic terminal

exons (GTE) across the transcriptome. This effect is largely achieved by switching mRNA

polyadenylation (poly(A)) from proximal sites to the GTE, which have a more optimal poly(A)

signal consensus motif. Consistently, 5-azaC upregulates mRNA anti-terminators Scaf4 and

Scaf8 while downregulating the early termination enhancer E2f2. In MOLM-13 leukaemia

cells, 5-azaC similarly promotes full-length transcript production, regulating alternative

polyadenylation factors in both common and cell-specific ways. Unexpectedly, PCF11, known

to promote proximal poly(A) site usage, is upregulated in both cell lines, reminiscent of a

homeostatic effort by the tumour/cancer cells to maintain their shortened transcripts during the

5-azaC treatment. This study highlights a previously unknown aspect of 5-azaC's effect on gene

expression as a DNMT inhibitor and anti-cancer drug: to directionally promote the terminal

polyadenylation site usage to switch from the shortened to full-length transcripts of cancer cells

and consequently the alternative usage of strings of 3' exons.

Introduction

5-Aza-cytidine (5-azaC), an FDA-approved chemotherapeutic agent, binds and inactivates DNA methyltransferases (DNMT), inhibiting DNA methylation [1]. It also affects many aspects of RNA metabolism [1], but its effect on RNA processing, particularly at the exome level, is not fully understood.

DNA methylation and gene mRNA levels appear to have a gene-region-specific relationship [2]: they are negatively correlated at promoters, first exons and first introns, but positively correlated within gene-bodies [2]. Whether 5-azaC has a similar region-dependent effect on exon methylation and exon usage is unknown. Our study, initiated with this question, reveals both similar and surprising findings.

Here we analysed RNA-Seq and whole genome bisulfite sequencing (WGBS) data from GH3 pituitary tumour cells treated with 5-azaC. We specifically looked at the differential usage and methylation of genomic first, middle, and terminal exons (GTEs, to differentiate from those in transcripts). Remarkably, 5-azaC was found to promote the widespread use of strings of 3' exons and polyadenylation sites in the GTEs but without much different effects on the methylation of these exons. It also regulated genes involved in transcript length and pre-mRNA processing. Similar effects were observed in a leukaemia cell line. This suggests that 5-azaC may reverse the shortening of mRNA transcripts in tumour cells by a unique directional effect on exon usage and polyadenylation, restoring their full protein domains and functions.

Results

4. Differential effects of 5-azaC on the relative exon usage of the genomic first, middle and terminal exons (GTE) of genes

To analyze the potential exon-rank-dependent effect of 5-azaC, a DNA methylation

inhibitor, we treated GH3 pituitary tumor cells with 50μM 5-azaC and compared them with

untreated controls. Our analysis focused on the RNA sequencing data of genomic first, middle,

and terminal exons. In DEXSeq, the first and terminal exons were designated as E001 for the

positive (+) and negative (−) chromosome strands, respectively. For middle exons, we selected

E004, E005, and E006 from the DEXSeq exon/bin list, specifically choosing genes with more

than 8 exons. To further validate exon ranks, we randomly selected 100 genes from each group

to verify in Integrated Genomics Viewer. This approach revealed 1710 first exons, 1790 middle

exons, and 1875 terminal exons with a statistically significant difference upon 5-azaC treatment

(Fig. 1A, padj < 0.05).

An intriguing pattern emerged: 95% of the first exons, 59% of the middle exons, but only

8% of the terminal exons showed a reduction in relative usage; the rest exhibited an increase.

This finding suggests a distinct exon-rank-dependent impact of 5-azaC on exon usage (Fig. 1A,

**** p = 0, by hypergeometric density test between any two groups).

Furthermore, we assessed the average methylation ratio (AMR) of CpG in these samples

using available Whole-Genome Bisulfite Sequencing (WGBS) data. The AMR data

corroborated previous findings on exon-rank dependence: first exons were almost

unmethylated, while middle and terminal exons were highly methylated (Fig. S1) [2]. However,

the AMR changes induced by 5-azaC were more varied, showing both increases and decreases

among the three ranked exon groups (Fig. 1B). This pattern contrasts with the more uniform

exon usage changes of the groups, indicating that the exon-rank effect does not globally

correlate with AMR changes due to 5-azaC.

2. Transcriptome-wide switch from the proximal to the GTE poly(A) sites induced by 5-

azaC

In our study, we focused on the exon usage of 154 genes on the (+) strand and 153 genes

on the (-) strand, each with a minimum of 10 exons/bins identified in DEXSeq analysis. By

analyzing the effect of 5-azaC on the fold changes in exon usage, we observed a notable shift

to increased usage of 3′ (including the terminal) exons in 102 of these genes. For instance, in

the non-treated samples, the RNA-Seq reads for the first 6 exons of the Zmym3 gene were

predominantly about 5-fold higher than those for the 3′ exons (Fig. 2A). However, after 5-azaC

treatment, the 3′ exon levels rose to match those of the 5′ exons. The relative usage ratios of

these exons changed from less than 1.0 to more than 1.0 between exons 6 and 7. Further, RT-

PCR assays confirmed a significant increase (Fig. 2B, approximately 10-fold, $p < 0.005$, $n = 3$)

in the relative usage of the poly(A) site in the GTE following 5-azaC treatment.

The extended isoform resulting from this shift encodes 13 extra domains including

DUF3504, which is linked to DNA damage repair [3]. This suggests that the alternative

polyadenylation (APA) switch induced by 5-azaC might lead to longer protein lengths with a

complete set of functional domains. Overall, the 102 genes with single switches showed

significant clustering ($p<0.01$) in functions such as ATP binding, microtubule cytoskeleton

organization, ATPase activity, and microRNAs in cancer, as per DAVID functional clustering

analysis(Table S1).

Additionally, genes exhibiting multiple switches displayed alternative splicing events,

like exon skipping and intron retention at the switch sites. For example, intron 2 retention was

observed in the Gln1 gene post 5-azaC treatment (Fig. S2A). Moreover, the regions where

switches occurred showed significant changes in exon AMR (Fig. S2B, line graph in red). For

instance, in the Plekha5 and Pafah1b1 genes, notable changes in AMR were observed at the

switch regions (Fig. S2B). Specifically, 82 out of the 102 genes (80%) with single switches

exhibited AMR changes at the switch regions, indicating a possible link between methylation

changes and the poly(A) site switch.

3. Differential enrichment of poly(A) signal motifs at the proximal and terminal exon's

poly(A) sites

We then investigated whether the two poly(A) sites in the 102 genes exhibit distinct

poly(A) signal sequences. To this end, we analyzed the consensus poly(A) signal motifs at

these sites using MEME motif analysis. This analysis was based on 200 nucleotides flanking

the endpoint of read counts as visualized in the IGV, focusing on the proximal and GTE sites

of these genes (Fig. 3A). Our findings revealed that the consensus motif at the proximal site

was suboptimal compared to that at the GTE site. Additionally, we noted the presence of

slightly varied G-rich motifs enriched at both sites.

Furthermore, we manually inspected in IGV the RNA-Seq read ends at the GTE of 300

genes randomly chosen from the list of 1875 identified GTEs. Our analysis showed that for

these genes, 52% had their ending reads align with the annotated gene end, 38% extended

beyond this end, and only 10% stopped before the annotated end. This pattern indicates that 5-

azaC may lead to an extension of transcript lengths. It does this predominantly by shifting from

the proximal to the poly(A) sites located at the annotated transcript ends, or even to novel sites

beyond the known GTEs.

4. 5-azaC regulates the expression of genes that promote distal poly(A) usage

To assess whether the poly(A) site switch induced by 5-azaC is accompanied by

simultaneous changes in relevant genes, we conducted a DAVID functional clustering analysis.

This analysis focused on genes that were significantly upregulated (fold change > 2) or

downregulated (fold change < 0.5) by 5-azaC, as determined by edgeR analysis of the same

RNA-Seq data. Notably, genes involved in transcription regulation emerged as a major

functional cluster among those upregulated by 5-azaC (Fig. S3), while genes associated with

oxidative phosphorylation were prominent in the downregulated cluster.

Significantly, 5-azaC treatment was observed to increase the expression levels of RNA

polymerase II regulation factors (Fig. 3B and Table S2), such as Scaf4 and Scaf8, which are

known to promote the usage of distal poly(A) sites[4]. Conversely, the expression of E2f2,

known to promote proximal poly(A) site usage[5], was reduced. Additionally, we observed

that 5-azaC modulates the expression of several factors involved in alternative polyadenylation

and splicing. For instance, factors like Pcf11, Ssu72, Cpeb3, and Hnrnph1/h3 that show a

preference for G-rich sequences, were upregulated. In contrast, Esrp2, Srsf9, Rbms2, and the

A-rich sequence- preferring Pabpc1 were downregulated (Fig. 3C and Table S3).

This pattern of gene regulation suggests a consistent influence of 5-azaC on a group of

transcription and pre-mRNA processing factors, which aligns with the observed shift from

proximal to distal poly(A) sites. However, an interesting anomaly in this pattern is the

upregulation of Pcf11 by 5-azaC. Pcf11 is typically associated with promoting transcript

shortening and the downregulation of distal polyadenylation sites.

5. Similar promoting effects on terminal pol(A) sites and full length transcripts by 5-azaC

are also observed in leukaemia cells upon 5-azaC treatment

To explore whether the effect of 5-azaC in promoting full-length transcripts is specific to

GH3 cells or also observable in other cell types, particularly cancer cells, we analyzed raw

RNA-Seq data from a study on MOLM-13 human leukemia cells treated with 5-azaC. Focusing

on genes with at least 10 exons/bins as indicated in the DEXSeq output, we examined the

relative exon usage changes of the first, middle, and last exons. The results revealed similar

patterns of fold changes in these cells (Fig. 4A), although the effects were somewhat less

pronounced, likely due to the lower concentration of 5-azaC used in this experiment (7 µM)

compared to our GH3 cell study (50 µM). Notably, the fold changes in the first and the genomic

last exons were again in opposite directions, with a significant shift towards a higher percentage

of exons having fold changes greater than 1 (p = 7.62E-123, 6.05E-53, and 0 for the

comparisons between the first and last, first and middle, and middle and last exons, respectively,

as per the hypergeometric density test).

For instance (Fig. 4B-C), in the MOLM-13 cells, the tumor suppressor gene GADD45B

was predominantly expressed as a truncated isoform, evidenced by the high read peaks for only

the first two exons. This shorter isoform lacks the p38-interacting domain necessary for

mediating TGF-beta-induced apoptosis [6, 7]. However, following treatment with 5-azaC, the

GADD45B transcript showed nearly equal levels of exons 3 and 4 compared to the first two,

resulting in the full-length transcript necessary for apoptosis mediation [7].

6. Common and cell-type specific changes of polyA factors by 5-azaC

To determine if the 5-azaC effects on the transcript levels of transcription,

polyadenylation or splicing factors are consistent across different cell types, we also analyzed

the RNA-Seq data from leukemia cells, using a similar approach as with the GH3 cell samples.

Our analysis revealed that several transcription, polyadenylation, and splicing factors exhibited

similar regulatory patterns in both cell lines, with some being upregulated (e.g., PCF11 and

CSTF3) and others downregulated (e.g., CPSF1) (Table I).

However, our study also identified factors with divergent regulation or whose regulations

were specific to certain cell lines. For instance, CLP1, a gene with a mouse homologue (Clp1)

known to promote proximal polyadenylation site usage [8], was upregulated in GH3 cells but

downregulated in MOLM-13 cells. These findings suggest that while 5-azaC exerts common

effects on certain factors influencing transcript lengths, its impact on other factors can vary

depending on the cell type.

Discussion

In this study, we analyzed RNA-Seq and whole-genome bisulfite sequencing (WGBS)

data to investigate the effect of 5-azaC on exon usage and methylation. Our findings reveal a

novel impact of 5-azaC: it extends transcript lengths by selectively switching poly(A) sites

from proximal to GTE sites, enhancing the use of multiple 3´ exons.

While the influence of 5-azaC on alternative splicing is known [9], the mechanism behind

this effect remains elusive. Our data suggest an exon rank-dependent impact linked to

alternative polyadenylation and a string of 3´ exons: a decrease in the relative usage of the first

exons and an increase in 3´ and terminal exons (Fig. 1A). The relationship between this 5-azaC

effect on exon usage and differential methylation of exons is not straightforward, except at

extreme levels (Fig. 1B). However, methylation changes around most switch sites (Fig. S2B)

hint at a potential role of exon methylation in poly(A) site switching, meriting further

exploration.

The control of alternative polyadenylation involves cis-acting pre-mRNA motifs and

trans-acting factors [10]. Besides exon methylation changes (Fig. S2B), the distinct G-rich and

consensus motifs at proximal and GTE sites (Fig. 3A), and the alterations in poly(A) site

selection factors in the transcription machinery are noteworthy. The upregulation of Scaf4 and

Scaf8 and downregulation of E2f2 by 5-azaC (Fig. 3B and Table S2) align with their roles in

promoting distal poly(A) usage [4]. Interestingly, Pcf11, typically associated with transcript

shortening, is upregulated by 5-azaC in both GH3 and MOLM-13 cells (Figure 3C, Table I and

Table S3) [11]. One explanation could be that the Pcf11 is involved in additional pathways

beyond APA. For example, lower Pcf11 levels in oral squamous cell carcinoma are linked to

increased oxidative phosphorylation and ribosomal pathways [12], whose clusters of genes are

also downregulated by 5-azaC (Fig. S3). More interestingly, it could also be a homeostatic

effort of the tumor/cancer cells to keep their shortened transcripts in the presence of 5-azaC.

The unidirectional effect of 5-azaC on APA, shifting from proximal to terminal sites in

the GTE, contrasts with transcript shortening observed in cancer cells [13] [14] [15]. This

difference could be a crucial aspect of 5-azaC's therapeutic action, potentially restoring

regulatory targets or protein functions in cancer cells. Moreover, this novel effect offers a

method to directionally extend transcript lengths for both basic and therapeutic research.

Materials and Methods

Cell culture: The rat GH3 pituitary cells were cultured as described in [16].

5-azaC treatment and DNA/RNA extraction: Cell cultures were treated with 5-azaCytidine

(50μm) or DMSO for 18hrs before cell collection. The cytoplasmic RNA was extracted for

RNA sequencing and the corresponding nuclear DNA was extracted for Whole Genome

Bisulfite Sequencing (WGBS) analysis as described in [16]. The RNA-Seq reads of 5-azaC

(7μM)-treated MOLM-13 cells analysed here were obtained from PRJEB61289 deposited in

the SRA database by the Pina group[17].

RT-PCR: RT-PCR was based on our previous procedure [16]. Briefly, for reverse transcription

in a 10μl reaction, 300ng of cytoplasmic RNA was added, incubated at 45°C for 50mins and

90°C for 5mins. For PCR, 1.5μl of RT product was amplified in a 24μl reaction for 30 cycles.

For Zmym3, proximal poly(A) site, we used upstream primer 5'-

GATTCAGTTGTGGTACAGACTGGTTCAG-3' and downstream primer 5'-

CTCGACCCTTCAGGCACCTTTATTTATC-3', while for the GTE Poly(A) site, we used

upstream primer 5'-GGTCCTGGGAAACGAAAGAGAGAAGATG-3' and downstream

primer 5'-GCTACCTGGTTCACGTCCATCACTGG-3'. The PCR products were resolved in

agarose gels and photographed under UV lights using a digital camera.

Bioinformatics analysis: We used IGV to visualize mapped reads [18], DAVID for functional

annotation and clustering analysis of genes [19], Interpro protein family database for protein

domain search [20], and MEME for motif analysis [21]. DEXSeq and edgeR analysis were

carried out as in the previous studies[16, 22-24].

Statistical tests: All samples were in triplicate. Two-tailed Student's t-test was used for the

RT-PCR products.

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Figure Legend

Fig. 1. Exon usage of the first, middle and terminal exons after 5-azaC treatment. Scatter plots of the log2 fold change of exon usage (**A**), and relative to the log2 fold change of average methylation ratio (**B**).

Fig. 2. The exon rank-dependent effect of 5-azaC on exon usage across a gene, representative of 102 exons. **A**. IGV view and corresponding bar plot of the 5-azaC effect on exon usage of the *Zmym3* gene. The bar graph was obtained from DEXSeq analysis data. **B**. RT-PCR validation of the reduced relative usage of the proximal poly(A) site and increased GTE poly(A) sites of the *Zmym3* gene after 5-azaC treatment (n = 3), with the PCR primers (arrowheads) diagrammed above the gel. **C**. Protein domains of the resulting short (496 amino acids, transcript ID - ENSRNOT00000076008.3) and long isoform (1371 amino acid, transcript ID - ENSRNOT00000076004.3) from the Interpro protein family database.

Fig. 3. Consensus motifs of different reads termination sites and mRNA transcripts changed by 5-azaC. A. Flow chart showing the selection of 200 nucleotides around the reads′ termination sites of 102 genes with single switches for MEME motif analysis (n - sequence sites contributing to the motif construction). Bar plot of average normalized counts of transcription regulation factors (*Scaf4, Scaf8 and E2f2,* **B**) and in **C**, mRNA polyadenylation and splicing factors (*Pcf11* and *Hnrnph, and Pabpc1*) that were significantly (FDR<0.01, 0.5<FC>2, ARC > 200) changed by 5-azaC treatment, from edgeR analysis of RNA-Seq data

Fig. 4. Similar 5-azaC effect promoting usage of the terminal polyadenylation sites for full length transcript production in a leukaemia cell line. A. Scatter plots of exon usage fold changes of the first, middle and GTE terminal exons, from DEXSeq analysis of the RNA-Seq

data of human MOLM-13 cells treated with 5-azaC (7μM) (Zeka, et al., 2023). The percentages of exons with fold changes above or below 1.0 are shown in each group. ****: $p < 1E\text{-}50$, by hypergeometric density test between any two groups. **B**. An example of the poly(A) site switch to the GTE of the *GADD45B* tumour suppressor gene. Shown in the IGV view of the reads peaks of each exon before and after 5-azaC treatment, with a bar graph of the fold changes of each exon below the view. Note that here the exons ranks are for each full exon instead of the bins in DEXSeq (e.g. E001). **C**. GADD45B protein domains added upon 5-azaC-enhanced terminal poly(A) site usage and full length transcript. The p38 MAP kinase interaction domain added is essential for TGF-beta-induced apoptosis through GADD45B.

Fig. 2

A

B

C

A

B

C

A

First exons (n= 1066)

Middle exons (n= 2571)

Terminal exons (n= 2335)

Log2 Fold change of Relative Exon Usage by 5-azaC (7 µM)

34%

52%

60%

66%****

48%****

40%****

B

Switch Site

GTE

5'-

-3'

-5-azaC

+5-azaC

GADD45B

C

- 5-azaC   1

GADD45B P-pA Protein

Truncated protein, lost the p38-interacting domain necessary for mediating TGF-beta-induced apoptosis

+ 5-azaC   1

GADD45B GTE-pA Protein

p38

Mediating Growth Arrest or Apoptosis

Table 1. Common and cell type-specific changes of factors in transcription, polyadenylation and alternative splicing by 5-azaC in GH3 and/or MOLM-13 cells. Showing are lists genes from edgeR analysis of RNA-Seq data (FDR<0.1, 0.75>FC>1.25) upon 5-azaC treatment. FC: fold change, FDR: false discovery rate.

Transcription Factors						Polyadenylation Factors						Splicing Factors				
	GH3		MOLM-13				GH3		MOLM-13				GH3		MOLM-13	
Genes	FDR	FC	FDR	FC		Genes	FDR	FC	FDR	FC		Genes	FDR	FC	FDR	FC
Ell	2.39E-184	3.53	4.99E-05	2.37		*PCF11*	0.00E+00	8.80	2.87E-02	1.45		Prpf39	2.89E-202	4.81	1.37E-02	0.67
Atf5	3.27E-39	3.05	9.81E-09	0.39		SSU72	6.59E-213	3.83	1.80E-02	0.69		Prpf3	3.48E-180	3.25	9.84E-02	0.74
Arid5a	3.43E-25	2.58	8.69E-05	2.20		*CSTF3*	8.50E-149	3.65	1.93E-02	1.52		Sf3b3	2.16E-43	1.78	9.07E-03	0.66
Arid4a	6.93E-92	2.43	3.38E-07	3.09		CLP1	2.75E-144	3.23	2.62E-04	0.32		Tfip11	4.42E-26	1.59	7.08E-02	0.73
Atf3	1.52E-22	2.36	1.18E-06	0.12		CPSF7	5.20E-44	1.83	9.40E-06	0.48		*Prpf6*	1.11E-25	1.45	1.17E-02	1.48
Scaf8	3.53E-87	2.32	5.65E-02	0.73		*WDR33*	3.50E-39	1.67	7.78E-02	1.33		*Hnrnpll*	1.05E-19	1.44	2.32E-04	1.77
Scaf4	4.84E-59	2.16	8.02E-02	0.75		TFIP11	4.42E-26	1.59	7.08E-02	0.73		U2af1	7.56E-04	1.19	8.08E-03	0.64
E2f4	3.42E-145	0.84	1.08E-13	0.29								U2af2	5.13E-03	1.11	4.66E-04	0.58
Atf6b	2.67E-59	0.45	5.10E-02	1.35		*CPSF4*	5.46E-02	0.91	1.57E-03	0.5		Ptbp3	4.00E-15	0.70	3.95E-04	1.68
Crebzf	3.45E-98	0.45	2.12E-05	0.51		*CPSF1*	2.91E-25	0.58	7.94E-02	0.74		*Prpf31*	2.49E-30	0.55	1.77E-06	0.47
Rbl2	1.41E-69	0.45	1.71E-02	1.45								Pabpc1	7.76E-166	0.38	1.27E-05	1.74
Cdk2	1.03E-41	0.42	3.09E-02	0.59												