Asymmetric post-translational modifications regulate the intracellular distribution of unstimulated STAT3 dimers

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Abstract

Signal Transducer and Activator of Transcription 3 (STAT3) is a ubiquitous and

pleiotropic transcription factor that plays essential roles in normal development,

immunity, response to tissue damage and cancer. We have developed a Venus-STAT3

bimolecular fluorescence complementation (BiFC) assay that allows the visualization

and study of STAT3 dimerization and protein-protein interactions in living cells.

Inactivating mutations on residues susceptible to post-translational modifications

(K49R, K140R, K685R, Y705F and S727A) did not alter the basal dimerization of

unstimulated STAT3, but changed significantly the intracellular distribution of STAT3

dimers. Surprisingly, the distribution of specific asymmetric STAT3 dimers (i.e. the

STAT3 molecules carry different mutations) was different from symmetric dimers. Our

results indicate that asymmetric post-translational modifications on STAT3 dimers

could constitute a new level of regulation of STAT3 signaling. This set of Venus-

STAT3 BiFC constructs provides yet unexplored means to advance our understanding

of STAT3 behavior and function in cancer and beyond.

Introduction

The Signal transducer and activator of transcription 3 (STAT3) is a conserved transcription factor that plays key roles in development, immunity, response to injury and cancer (1–3). STAT3 is canonically activated by phosphorylation at Y705 upon stimulation with a variety of cytokines and growth factors. However, unstimulated STAT3 also dimerizes, is found in the nucleus, binds to DNA and controls the transcription of a specific set of genes, different from phosphorylated STAT3 (1–6). Both phosphorylated and unphosphorylated STAT3 shuttle between cytoplasm and nucleus, although the mechanisms may be different (7,8). Unphosphorylated STAT3 accumulates in the nucleus in response to cytokines and regulates transcription by binding to NFkB (9). Furthermore, STAT3 can be also found in the mitochondria, where it is necessary for normal activity of the electron transport chain (1,10). This function is independent of its activity as a transcription factor and Y705 phosphorylation, but dependent on S727 phosphorylation (1,10,11). Other post-translational modifications (PTMs) can regulate the behavior and function of STAT3, such as acetylation at K49 or K685 (12,13) or dimethylation at K49 or K140 (14,15). Although dimethylation of the K49 or K140 residues is induced by stimulation with cytokines and is favored by STAT3 phosphorylation, there is basal K49 (but not K140) dimethylation in unstimulated STAT3 (14), and the same happens with STAT3 acetylation (12,13).

STAT3 homodimerization and intracellular location are key events in its biological functions. Three ingenious systems have been developed so far to visualize and study STAT3 dimerization in living cells, based on FRET (16), BRET (6) or the homoFluoppi tag (17). The FRET/BRET systems enable the visualization of both STAT3 homodimerization and its interaction with other proteins in real time and in a reversible manner. However, they are relatively complex and difficult to adapt for high-throughput experiments, and require very skilled users for sampling and analyses. The homoFluoppi system is simpler but it only allows to visualize STAT3 homodimerization (17). Furthermore, it only allows monitorization by microscopy, as there is no change in total fluorescence but in the distribution of the fluorescence within the cell, in the form of punctae (17). Bimolecular Fluorescence complementation (BiFC) assays also allow the analysis of protein-protein interactions in living cells (18), and their particular properties make them complementary to FRET/BRET or homoFluoppi systems (19). In BiFC assays, the proteins of interest are fused to two

non-fluorescent, complementary fragments of a fluorescent reporter (Fig. 1A). When

the proteins of interest dimerize, the fragments are brought together and reconstitute the

fluorophore, the fluorescence being proportional to the amount of dimers. Here, we

developed a suit of Venus-STAT3 BiFC constructs that are not only an important

addition to the existing STAT3 toolset, but were also successfully employed to further

our current understanding of the STAT3 pathway.

Materials and Methods

In order to make the Venus-STAT3 BiFC constructs, the cDNA sequence of

STAT3-alpha was fused to the sequence of two complementary, non-fluorescent

fragments of the Venus protein (Venus 1, amino acids 1-157; and Venus 2, amino acids

158-238)(Fig. 1A). The deletion mutants lacking the C-terminus (ΔCT) were produced

by PCR-mediated subcloning using full-length Venus-STAT3 BiFC constructs as

templates. The original lysine (K) residues on positions 49, 140 and 685 were replaced

by arginine (R) residues, the tyrosine (Y) residue on position 705 by phenylalanine (F)

and the serine (S) residue on position 727 by alanine (A)(Fig. 1A). These mutations

prevent the acetylation, methylation or phosphorylation of the corresponding residues

but preserve the basic structural function of the original amino acids. Suppl. Table I

shows the primers used for subcloning and mutagenesis. Detailed methods for site-

directed mutagenesis, cell culture and transfection, fluorescence microscopy, flow

cytometry and immunoblotting were described elsewhere (18). All BiFC constructs

were deposited in Addgene (https://www.addgene.org/). HeLa human cervix

adenocarcinoma cells and HEK293 human embryonic kidney cells were acquired from

ATCC (references CRM-CCL-2 and CRL-1573, respectively), Leukemia inhibitory

factor (LIF) from R&D systems (Minneapolis, USA), and Stattic from Selleckchem

(Houston, USA).

Results and Discussion

Optimization of the Venus-STAT3 BiFC system

Transfection of HEK293 or HeLa cells with the wild-type (WT) pair of Venus-

STAT3 BiFC constructs led to successful expression of the chimeric proteins V1-

STAT3 and V2-STAT3 (Suppl. Fig. 1), as determined by microscopy, flow cytometry

(Figs. 1B and 1C, Suppl. Fig. 1A-B) and immunoblotting (Suppl. Fig. 1C).

Fluorescence was primarily cytoplasmic in both cell lines, with low but visible nuclear
signal (Fig. 1C, Suppl. Fig. 1B). Incubation with Leukemia Inhibitory Factor (LIF)
induced STAT3 phosphorylation and translocation to the nucleus in HEK293 and HeLa
cells (Suppl. Fig. 1B-C), but it did not enhance STAT3 dimerization (Fig. 1B, Suppl.
Fig. 1D). Incubation with STAT3 inhibitor Stattic (5 μM) or removal of the C-terminus
containing the SH2 domain partially prevented STAT3 dimerization (Fig. 1B),
consistent with previous reports (16,20). On the other hand, single or double
Y705F/S727A phosphoresistant mutants did not decrease fluorescence (Fig. 1B). These
results support relevant evidence indicating that STAT3 dimerization is actually
independent of phosphorylation (1,2,5,8). The behavior of the Venus-STAT3 BiFC
system is therefore consistent with previous reports for tagged STAT3.

We then analyzed the intracellular location of unstimulated STAT3 homodimers
carrying the same inactivating mutation in both STAT3 molecules, hereafter named
"symmetric STAT3 dimers". We classified cells qualitatively in three categories that are
mutually exclusive (their sum is 100% of cells), according to the relative intensity and
location of the fluorescence signal (Fig. 1C-1D): 1) predominantly in the cytoplasm
(e.g. WT pair), 2) predominantly in the nucleus (e.g. upon LIF induction, Suppl. Fig.
1B), or 3) homogeneously distributed through nucleus and cytoplasm (e.g. Y705F pair).
We also determined the percentage of cells with mitochondrial signal, i.e. when
fluorescent foci co-localized with Mitotracker Red; or intracellular inclusions, i.e. when
fluorescent foci did not co-localize with the dye (Suppl. Fig. 2). Although changes in
patterns of STAT3 dimer distribution were observed in several symmetric BiFC pairs,
only Y705F and S727A pairs induced significant increases in the percentage of cells
with homogeneous nucleocytoplasmic fluorescence or inclusions, respectively (Fig.
1D).

Relative contribution of STAT3 residues on the intracellular location of unstimulated
STAT3

Literature on STAT3 generally assumes, explicitly or implicitly, that STAT3
homodimers are formed by two identical molecules. However, in a complex
intracellular context this is highly unlikely, as PTMs do not occur in all the pool of
STAT3 molecules at the same time or with the same efficiency. We made use of the
unique properties of our BiFC system to determine the relative contribution of residues

K49, K140, K685, Y705 and S727 to the dimerization and intracellular distribution of
STAT3 dimers.

We combined all possible inactivating PTM mutations with each other, but no
combination had a consistent effect on STAT3 dimerization as determined by flow
cytometry (Suppl. Fig. 3). However, the intracellular distribution of STAT3
homodimers was significantly altered by specific combinations of STAT3 molecules
(Fig. 2A). Unlike the K49R symmetric pair, K49R asymmetric combinations
dominantly induced an increase in cells with homogeneous nucleocytoplasmic
fluorescence at the expense of cytoplasmic location (Fig. 2A), similar to the Y705F
symmetric pair. K140R- or K685R-containing pairs showed some tendency to shift
cytoplasmic location towards nucleus, but only the K140R+S727A combination
achieved significance. This phenotype was almost identical to the Y705F+S727A
asymmetric pair (Fig. 2A).

We then pooled and analyzed all results according to the number and type of PTM
mutations present in the each BiFC pair. Combinations carrying any one (asymmetric)
or two K-R substitutions (symmetric or asymmetric) significantly increased
mitochondrial translocation, while decreasing the percentage of cells with STAT3
dimers predominantly in the cytoplasm (Fig. 2B). Asymmetric combinations of one K-R
substitution and one phosphoresistant mutant also increased nuclear translocation, but
only 2xK-R combinations increased homogeneous nucleocytoplasmic distribution.
Combinations carrying any two phosphoresistant mutations (symmetric or asymmetric)
had no significant effect on cellular distribution of STAT3 homodimers (Fig. 2B).
These results indicate that specific asymmetric PTMs on STAT3 dimers can prevent
their nuclear import/export. This was later confirmed by pooling the data according to
whether the STAT3 pair was symmetric or asymmetric in their PTM mutations (Fig.
2C). We found that asymmetric –but not symmetric– PTM mutant combinations clearly
increased nucleocytoplasmic or nuclear distribution at the expense of decreasing
cytoplasmic localization of STAT3 homodimers. Asymmetric combinations were also
sufficient to produce an increase in mitochondrial localization of STAT3 dimers (Fig.
1C).

BiFC is complementary to FRET/BRET and homoFluoppi approaches. It is simpler
than FRET/BRET and easier to adapt to high-throughput settings. Unlike homoFluoppi,
it allows monitorization by flow cytometry of both STAT3 homodimerization and
interactions with other proteins (19). On the other hand, BiFC has lower time resolution

and signal-to-noise ratio (6,16,17), and the reconstitution of the fluorophore is
irreversible, preventing the visualization of the dissociation of STAT3 dimer (19), but
we have practically demonstrated its potential in the present study. Our results indicate
that asymmetric PTMs could constitute a new level of regulation of STAT3 behavior
and function. Given the essential roles of STAT3 in development, immunity, tissue
stress and cancer, such finding could have highly relevant implications for the
diagnosis, treatment and understanding of a wide spectrum of human pathologies
beyond cancer.
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Figure Legends

Figure 1. A Venus-STAT3 BiFC system allows the visualization and study of
STAT3 homodimers in living cells. A, Venus BiFC fragments constituted by amino
acids 1-158 (Venus 1, V1) and 159-238 (Venus 2, V2) were fused to the N-terminus of
the STAT3 sequence in two independent constructs. When two STAT3 molecules
carrying complementary Venus fragments dimerize, the Venus protein becomes
functional and emits fluorescence, which is proportional to the amount of STAT3
homodimers. K49, K140, K685, Y705 and S727 residues can be post-translationally
modified, and were inactivated in both V1- and V2-STAT3 constructs by site-directed
mutagenesis. Additionally, the C-terminus was removed in a V2-STAT3 BiFC construct
in order to confirm that this region was involved in STAT3 homodimerization. B, Wild-
type Venus-STAT3 constructs produced fluorescence in HeLa cells, and it was
monitored by flow cytometry 24 hours after transfection with BiFC constructs.
Incubation with Leukemia Inhibitory Factor (100 ng/ml) for 2 hours in the absence of
serum or the presence of single or double phosphoresistant mutations in BiFC pairs did
not produced significant changes in the percentage of fluorescent cells. On the other
hand, incubation with the STAT3 inhibitor Stattic (5 µM) for 24 hours or removal of the
C-terminus, containing the SH2 region involved in STAT3 homodimerization,
significantly decreased the percentage of fluorescent cells (n=3, $p < 0.05$). Results were
normalized versus the Wild-type STAT3 pair (100%). C, microscopy pictures of
representative cell phenotypes in the different symmetric combinations of BiFC Venus-
STAT3 constructs (Incl, inclusions; Scale bar, 20µm). D, Percentage of cells displaying
fluorescence predominantly in the Nucleus (black bar), predominantly in the Cytosol
(white bar), homogeneously distributed in cytoplasm and nucleus (nucleocytoplasmic,
grey bar), in the mitochondria or in non-mitochondrial inclusions. Data are shown as the
average ± Standard Error (SEM) of n=12 (Wild-type, WT) or n=3 (rest of
combinations) independent experiments. Statistical analysis was carried out by means of
a One-way ANOVA followed by a Bonferroni test corrected for multiple comparisons.
*, significant vs the symmetric Wild-type STAT3 pair, $p < 0.05$.

Figure 2. Asymmetric STAT3 PTMs regulate intracellular distribution of STAT3 homodimers. A, Intracellular distribution of fluorescence in asymmetric combinations of Venus-STAT3 BiFC constructs (and the WT symmetric pair as reference). Data are shown as the average of n=12 (Wild-type, WT) or n=3 (rest of combinations) independent experiments. Errors represent the Standard Error. Statistical analysis was carried out by means of a One-way ANOVA followed by a Bonferroni test corrected for multiple comparisons. *, significant vs the symmetric Wild-type STAT3 pair, *, $p<0.05$, ** $p<0.01$. B-C, The same original data, but pooled according to the number and nature of substitutions (B) or the symmetry or asymmetry of substitutions (C) in the STAT3 homodimer, and represented as box plots. The limits of the boxes represent the smallest and largest values, the straight line represents the median, the dashed line represents the average, and the dotted line represents the average for wild-type STAT3 pair. Statistical analysis was carried out on the Average ± Standard Error of each pool of data by means of a One-way ANOVA followed by a Bonferroni test corrected for multiple comparisons. *, significant vs the symmetric Wild-type STAT3 pair, *, $p<0.05$, ** $p<0.01$; #, significant vs 2xYF/SA substitution (in B) or the symmetric mutant pairs (in C), #, $p<0.05$, ##, $p<0.01$.

A

Venus 1 (1-158)

Venus 2 (159-238)

STAT3 mutations

1 130 320 465 585 688 770

NTD CCD DBD LD SH2 TAD

ΔCT

K49R K140R K685R Y705F S727A

B

% Fluorescent cells vs WT-STAT3 pair

WT-STAT3 pair, +LIF, +Stattic, DelCT + WT, Y705F pair, S727A pair, Y705F/S727A pair

C

Symmetric BiFC pairs

WT K49R
K140R K685R
Y705F S727A incl

20 µm

D

Nucleus Cytoplasm Nucleocytoplasmic
Mitochondria Inclusions

% Cells

WT K49R K140R K685R Y705F S727A

Symmetric STAT3 dimer Combinations