Conformationally restricted short peptides inhibit human islet amyloid polypeptide (hIAPP) fibrillation†

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hIAPP fibrillation implicated in Type 2 diabetes pathology involves formation of oligomers toxic to insulin producing pancreatic β-cells. We report design, synthesis, 3D structure and functional characterization of dehydrophenylalanine (ΔF) containing peptides which inhibit hIAPP fibrillation. The inhibitor protects β-cells from hIAPP induced toxicity.

Type 2 Diabetes Mellitus (T2DM) is one of the most prevalent endocrine disorders underlining the importance of developing molecular therapies to mitigate T2DM.4 It is characterized by a significant decrease in β-cell mass, insulin resistance and presence of amyloid plaques5 in which human islet amyloid polypeptide (hIAPP) is the major protein component.3 hIAPP is a 37-residue polypeptide co-secreted with insulin in β-cells of islets of Langerhans. A large amount of evidence favors its wide role in glucose metabolism.4 hIAPP is known to form amyloid fibrils with cross-beta structure,5 and amyloid deposits as the product of aggregation, but the process proceeds through oligomerization.6,7 It has been suggested that hIAPP oligomers of pore-like morphology are formed by association of helical monomers which then perform membrane fragmentation by pore formation.8 Thus, these prefibrillar oligomers are considered to be toxic and are implicated in β-cell dysfunction and death.8,9 Hence, the impairment of oligomerization of helices by using designed small molecule inhibitors such as short peptides is a therapeutically relevant strategy for the prevention of T2DM. In this report, we show that two pentapeptides related to one of the core fibrillation regions of hIAPP inhibit fibril formation of hIAPP. Crystal structure analysis revealed an anion receptor ‘nest’ motif in these inhibitors, which based on computational studies was shown to interact with helical monomers of hIAPP. We also propose a model for fibrillation inhibition by these peptides.

Among the core fibrillation motifs/fragments of hIAPP,10 hIAPP(22–27), i.e. NFGAIL, has been shown to form amyloid fibrils similar to those formed by the full-length polypeptide.11 Based on the motif hIAPP(22–27), we designed several peptides as possible inhibitors of hIAPP fibrillation by strategically incorporating a non-natural amino acid (3,3-dehydrophenylalanine (ΔF)). ΔF is an analogue of phenylalanine with a double bond between Cα and Cβ atoms and its presence induces β-turn in short peptides and helical secondary structures in longer peptides.12 Also, peptides containing ΔF resist enzymatic proteolysis,13 an added advantage for inhibitor design.

NFGAIL contains two β-favoring residues, F23 and I26, and their replacement with the helicogenic residue ΔF, individually or together, was a preferred choice for inhibitor design. I26 is an important residue; F26 → P mutation in full length hIAPP resulted in a hIAPP fibrillation inhibitor.14 Designed peptides (Table S1, ESI†) were synthesized using solid phase methods, purified on reverse phase HPLC and their identity confirmed by mass spectroscopy (ESI†). Fibrillation was quantified by the enhancement of thioflavin T (ThT) fluorescence upon its binding to fibrils. The % fibrillation inhibition activities are presented in Table S1 (ESI†).

I26 → ΔF mutation in the fibrillizing motif resulted in pentapeptides, FGAFL and NFGAFL, respectively. Neither of the two peptides showed β-sheet conformation and fibrillization property. ThT assay revealed (Table S1, ESI†) that FGAFL inhibited hIAPP fibrillation much more efficiently (75 ± 8%) than NFGAFL (7 ± 5%). Therefore, we focussed further studies on FGAFL. The fibrillation kinetics of hIAPP in the presence of the pentapeptide was studied. The exponential increase in ThT intensity, considered as a hallmark of fibril formation, was suppressed greatly when hIAPP was incubated with FGAFL in 1:5 molar ratio (Fig. 1a) suggesting that the peptide probably curtailed fibrillation at the stage of pre-fibrillar intermediates. Transmission electron microscopy (TEM) studies also confirmed that FGAFL significantly decreased hIAPP fibril formation (Fig. 1b and c).

To explore the structure–function relationship, we determined the 3D structure of F1–G2–A3–ΔF4–L5 through X-ray crystallography...
The peptide also serves as the binding site of an ‘egg’ which is an atom or a group carboxyl oxygen from a symmetry related molecule. The ‘nest’ is an anion receptor, which interacted with terminal side chain carboxyl hydroxyl oxygens from hIAPP to satisfy the hydrogen bond accepting potential of the motif. ΔΔH in FGAFL was involved in aromatic π–π stacking interaction with the hIAPP-F23 ring and two clusters of hydrophobic interactions were formed, F1L5 (peptide) & L16V17 (hIAPP) and ΔΔH (peptide) & F23L27 (hIAPP).

Circular dichroism (CD) spectra of hIAPP in the presence and absence of inhibitors at two different stages of the hIAPP fibrillization process i.e. when the hIAPP was in prefibrillar form (3 h old hIAPP) (Fig. S5, ESI†) and when it reached its fibrillar stage (96 h old hIAPP) (Fig. S6, ESI†) were recorded and plotted as additive and complex spectra. CD spectra remained unchanged when FGAFL was added to hIAPP when it had already attained β-form. In contrast, the addition of inhibitors at the prefibrillar stage of hIAPP demonstrated noticeable differences in the spectra that may be because of inhibitor’s binding at the prefibrillar stage.

hIAPP is known to be highly cytotoxic to pancreatic cells.4 In order to test whether the FGAFL would reduce the cytoxicity of hIAPP we carried out cell viability assay. Results of the MTT (3-[4,5-dimethylthiazol-2-yl]-2,5-diphenyltetrazolium bromide) assay revealed that cytotoxic effects of hIAPP on cultured pancreatic rat insulinoma cells (RIN 5fm) showed a noticeable reduction in the presence of FGAFL. The inhibitor on its own did not show any cytotoxic effects on the cell line.

To further probe structural requirements involved in binding of the inhibitor with hIAPP, we also synthesized FGAFL, an analogue of the pentapeptide in which L18 was replaced with a β branched amino acid, I, and determined its 3D structure through X-ray crystallography (Fig. S1 and Table S2, ESI†). ThT binding assay showed that FGAFL was as effective as FGAFL in fibrillation inhibition (~70% inhibition) (Table S1, ESI†). TEM of hIAPP incubated with FGAFL showed numerous vesicular structures without any significant amyloid fibers (Fig. 1d). It was gratifying to note that although FGAFL crystallized in a different space group P21 from that of FGAFL (i.e. P21_21_21) (Table S2, ESI†), it also had an anion receptor nest-motif and superposed with a backbone RMSD of 0.123 Å with FGAFL (Fig. S2, ESI†). Our in silico studies showed that both the peptides were able to dock to the monomeric helical state of hIAPP (ESI†). Perhaps, the interactions involving the anion receptor together with hydrophobic interactions play a role in the inhibitory activity of the pentapeptides. However, additional modes of interactions may also occur since hIAPP is a flexible molecule.

Based on our in silico studies, we propose a possible model to explain the inhibition of hIAPP fibrillization by the peptides (Fig. 4). The inhibitors seem to act by binding to the monomeric...
helical state of hIAPP at the hIAPP20–27 region which is one of the core fibrillation regions of hIAPP implicated in the nucleation dependent mechanism for oligomerization and initiation of beta-sheet formation during the fibrilization event. Binding of the inhibitor would stabilize the monomeric helical form of hIAPP and would decrease contact between helices coming in the way of helix–helix association. This would reduce the possibility of oligomer formation and fibrillation.

hIAPP fibrillation inhibitors include organic molecules,20 fragments of hIAPP21,22 as well as variants of native protein14,23–25 and its fragments.26–28 An approach in these studies was to disrupt amyloid formation by hIAPP and include peptides containing beta-breaker residues like Aib, Pro and N-methylated residues.14,23,28 In many cases, attention has been focused on targeting fibril formation by reducing beta-sheet extension and assembly. Targeting amyloid fibrils may not be a useful strategy due to an adverse effect of rapidly increasing oligomers.29 Since FGAAFL binds to hIAPP in the monomeric state, it could, in principle, shift the equilibrium away from the formation of oligomers/intermediates toxic to beta cells. Therefore, targeting the transient monomeric helical state and discouraging helix–helix association leading to the formation of oligomeric nuclei in the early events of self assembly, as outlined here, may be an attractive strategy for inhibitor design.

To conclude, though it was not anticipated, crystal structure analysis revealed that FGAAFL and its analogue FGAAFI harbour the anion receptor ‘nest’ motif. Both peptides dock with the helical form of hIAPP which may contribute to the inhibitory function of the peptides through their interaction with hIAPP in the core fibrillation region. These peptides effectively inhibit hIAPP fibrilization in vitro and it seems that these are unique examples of nest-motif containing peptides that inhibit fibrillation. In general, the approach described here may be applicable to targeting helices or helical intermediates and could be utilized in developing inhibitors useful, apart from T2DM, in other amyloid diseases including Alzheimer’s disease and Parkinson’s disease.30

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Notes and references