



Functional inhibition of UQCRB suppresses angiogenesis in zebrafish

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ABSTRACT

As a subunit of mitochondrial complex III, UQCRB plays an important role in complex III stability, electron transport, and cellular oxygen sensing. Herein, we report UQCRB function regarding angiogenesis *in vivo* with the zebrafish (*Danio rerio*). UQCRB knockdown inhibited angiogenesis in zebrafish leading to the suppression of VEGF expression. Moreover, the UQCRB-targeting small molecule terpestacin also inhibited angiogenesis and VEGF levels in zebrafish, supporting the role of UQCRB in angiogenesis. Collectively, UQCRB loss of function by either genetic and pharmacological means inhibited angiogenesis, indicating that UQCRB plays a key role in this process and can be a prognostic marker of angiogenesis- and mitochondria-related diseases.

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1. Introduction

The mitochondrion is primary energy source of the cell, bearing five oxidative phosphorylation complexes that regulate in ATP synthesis [1]. Of the five complexes, complex III is responsible for electron transport, ubiquinone radical stabilization, and cellular oxygen sensing [2]. Notably, complex III deficiency is associated with lactic acidosis, hypoglycemia, encephalopathy and other human disorders [3]. Recent reports provide evidence that deletion of the gene encoding UQCRB (ubiquinol-cytochrome c reductase binding protein), a complex III subunit, causes a defect in complex III function, resulting in hypoglycemia and lactic acidosis [4]. Furthermore, two SNPs of UQCRB were found in colorectal cancer, implying its potential as a prognostic marker for cancer [5]. Also, UQCRB is overexpressed in liver cancer cells, and copy number variation was found in cervical cancer and may be used as a cellular marker for cervical cancer diagnosis [6]. Jung et al. demonstrated that UQCRB plays a key role in VEGF signaling and regulates angiogenesis, and that terpestacin is the small molecule that binds to UQCRB [7]. Given these interesting roles, the present paper focuses on mitochondria complex III subunit UQCRB, and its possible role in angiogenesis *in vivo*.

The zebrafish is an ideal animal model for studying vascular development because of its tissue transparency and short development time [8,9]. In addition, gene function is readily interrogated in this system using morpholino antisense oligonucleotides or

pharmacological agents [10–13]. Indeed, *Tg(fli1a:EGFP)^{y1}* transgenic zebrafish is widely used to visualize vasculogenesis and angiogenesis [14,15]. Vasculogenesis is the formation of new blood vessels, including those in the dorsal aorta and the posterior cardinal vein of the tail [16]. Vasculogenesis is followed by angiogenesis, which is the sprouting and extension of the intersegmental vessels (ISVs) from the dorsal aorta. Complete ISVs form the T-branch at the most dorsal side of the trunk, known as the dorsal longitudinal anastomotic vessel (DLAV). By evaluating the formation of complete ISVs in developing zebrafish, angiogenesis inhibition can be easily assessed for small-molecule or morpholino effects.

Herein, we report *in vivo* functional studies of UQCRB in respect with angiogenesis using the zebrafish system. *Tg(fli1a:EGFP)^{y1}* zebrafish embryos were used to visualize and analyze angiogenesis inhibition by downregulation of UQCRB function. UQCRB activity was reduced by knockdown with a *uqcrb*-MO or a UQCRB-targeting small molecule, terpestacin, treatment, leading to the inhibition of blood vessel growth. This is the first functional characterization of UQCRB *in vivo*, providing evidence that UQCRB plays an important role in angiogenesis.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Zebrafish husbandry

Zebrafish were maintained on 14 h light/dark cycle at 28 °C. All experiments involving zebrafish were performed according to the National Institute of Health guidelines. Embryos were collected

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and raised in E3 media or ringer's solution according to standard protocol [17].

2.2. Morpholino injection and small molecule treatment

Zebrafish were injected in E3 media or ringer's solution at the one-cell stage with 1 or 2 ng/embryo morpholino oligonucleotides (MO). MO was obtained from Gene Tools (Philomath, OR) with the following sequence to block 5' translation of UQCRB: 5'-GTGCCCTCGCCGCCATTTTGTCT-3'. DMSO and terpestacin stock solution (10 mg/mL in DMSO) were dissolved in ringer's solution to appropriate concentrations. Final volume of compounds did not exceed 1% of the total volume. Embryos were added to the solutions at one cell stage.

2.3. Microscopy imaging

Tricaine supplied in E3 media or ringer's solution (0.6%, w/v) was used to anesthetize the embryos for imaging. Anesthetized embryos were immobilized in 0.5% (w/v) low melting pointing agarose (Sigma–Aldrich, Saint Louis, MO) on slide glass. Microscopy images of zebrafish were taken with Leica S6E.

2.4. RNA isolation, RT-PCR analysis and primer construction

Zebrafish total RNA was isolated with RNeasy Mini kit (Qiagen) according to the manufacturer's protocol or with Trizol (Invitrogen, Carlsbad, CA) followed by precipitation with isopropanol, washing with 70% ethanol, and elution with DEPC treated water. Total RNA (5 µg) was reversibly transcribed by Molony murine leukemia virus reverse transcriptase (Invitrogen, Carlsbad, CA) using Oligo-d(T)15 primer in a final volume of 40 µL. cDNA mixture (2 µL) was used for PCR amplification of the specific gene with exTaq (Takara Bio Inc, Japan). SuperScript III One-Step RT-PCR System with Platinum Taq DNA Polymerase kit (Invitrogen, Carlsbad, CA) was applied according to the manufacturer's protocol for terpestacin treated embryos. Primers used for *vegfa* and β -actin are as follows: *vegfa* forward: CAGCTGTCAAGAGTGCTACATAC, *vegfa* reverse: CATCAGGGTACTCTGCTGAATTTC, β -actin forward: CGA

GCTGTCTTCCCATCCA, β -actin reverse: TCACCAACGTAGCTGTCTTCTG.

2.5. Statistical analysis

All statistical analyses were calculated with Graphpad Prism (ver. 5.00 for Windows, GraphPad Software, San Diego, CA, USA, www.graphpad.com). Results are expressed as mean \pm standard error (\pm SEM). Student's *t*-tests were used to determine statistical significance between control and test groups. ANOVA (Turkey test) was used to determine statistical significance between three test groups. A *p*-value less than 0.05 was considered statistically significant (* indicates *p* < 0.05, ** indicates *p* < 0.001, *** indicates *p* < 0.0001).

3. Results

3.1. Zebrafish angiogenesis is inhibited by UQCRB knockdown

To investigate the biological function of UQCRB in zebrafish, the translation blocker morpholino specific to *uqcrb* (*uqcrb*-MO) was applied. *Uqcrb*-MO was injected into Tg(*fli1a:EGFP*)^{y1} embryos at the one-cell stage to knockdown UQCRB. ISVs were detected at 30 h post fertilization (hpf). *Uqcrb*-MO dose dependently inhibited angiogenesis at 30 hpf starting from 1 ng. Two nanograms of *uqcrb*-MO completely inhibited angiogenic sprouting but vasculogenesis was not affected (Fig. 1A). The percentage of angiogenesis-inhibited embryos was 55.3% at 1 ng, which increased up to 78.0% at 2 ng (Fig. 1B). Angiogenic sprouts and ISVs were examined in UQCRB knockdown embryos starting from 24 to 36 hpf, the time-frame for angiogenesis in wildtype zebrafish. Normal dorsal aorta was detected in all embryos at all timeframes. At 24 hpf, the average number of angiogenic sprouts were 22 for control, 5.7 for *uqcrb*-MO 1 ng injected embryos and 1.8 for *uqcrb*-MO 2 ng injected embryos (Fig. 2A). Complete ISVs were not detected at 24 hpf in all embryos. At 30 hpf, an average of 19.5 complete ISVs that extended to form the DLAV were assessed in control embryos, but none in *uqcrb* morphants. The number of angiogenic sprouts decreased in a dose-dependent manner compared to control; an average of 15 and 4.8 sprouts were examined in 1 ng and 2 ng

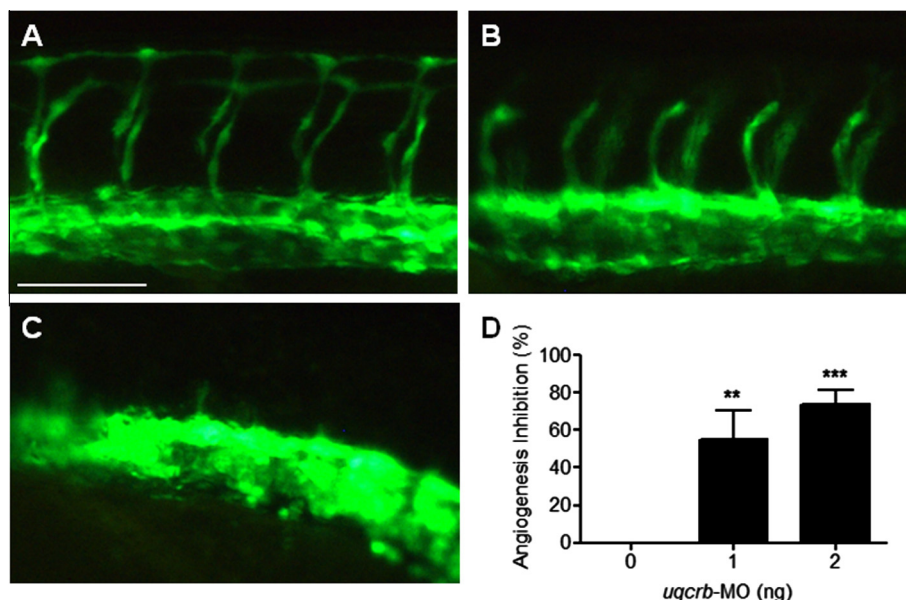


Fig. 1. Knockdown of UQCRB inhibits zebrafish angiogenesis. (A) Complete ISVs at 30 hpf in control embryos. (B) Inhibition of angiogenesis in 1 ng *uqcrb*-MO injected embryos (*n* = 30, representative image from three independent trials). (C) Inhibition of angiogenesis in 2 ng *uqcrb*-MO injected embryos (*n* = 30, representative image from three independent trials). (D) Dose-dependent inhibition of angiogenesis in *uqcrb*-MO injected embryos. Quantified data are presented as mean \pm SEM compared to control (** indicates *p* < 0.001, *** indicates *p* < 0.0001). Scale bar indicates 100 µm.

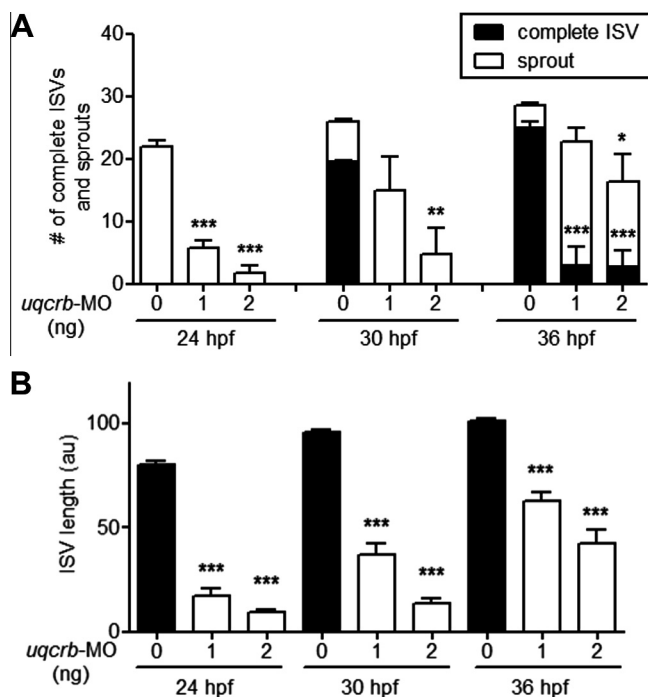


Fig. 2. (A) Angiogenic sprouts were detected starting from 24 hpf in control embryos. An average of 19.5 complete ISVs was detected in control embryos starting from 30 hpf. Complete ISVs were not detected in 1 and 2 ng *uqcrb*-MO injected embryos until 36 hpf. Only an average of three complete ISVs was examined in *uqcrb*-MO injected embryos ($n = 5$). (B) Angiogenic sprout length showed a great difference between control and dose-dependently decreased in *uqcrb*-MO injected embryos at all time frames. All quantified data are presented as mean \pm SEM (*indicates $p < 0.05$, **indicates $p < 0.001$, ***indicates $p < 0.0001$).

uqcrb-MO injected embryos respectively. At 36 hpf, the average number of angiogenic sprouts increased to 28.5, 22.7, and 16.3 in control, 1 ng and 2 ng *uqcrb*-MO injected embryos, respectively. However, only three complete ISVs were formed in *uqcrb*-MO injected groups, compared to 25 for control embryos. The lengths of angiogenic sprouts were measured at each time frame (Fig. 2B). The average length of angiogenic sprouts decreased dose-dependently at all time frames in *uqcrb* morphants. Taken together, UQCRB knockdown with *uqcrb*-MO inhibits angiogenesis in zebrafish, in accordance to previous report with human cell lines tested for angiogenesis *in vitro* [7].

3.2. Zebrafish *uqcrb* morphants exhibit defects in morphology

Notably, the morphology of *uqcrb*-MO injected embryos showed ventral body curvature (Fig. 3A) in 55% of the 1 ng injected embryos and 73.4% of 2 ng injected embryos, which correlates with angiogenesis inhibition (Fig. 3B). Even with this developmental defect, the overall survival rate decreased only 21.3%, from 90% in control to 68.7% in *uqcrb*-MO 2 ng injected embryos (Fig. 3C).

3.3. Zebrafish angiogenesis is inhibited by the UQCRB-targeting small molecule terpestacin

Terpestacin is a natural product that inhibits angiogenesis by binding to UQCRB, which was reported by Jung et al. [7]. To test the possibility that terpestacin could also inhibit angiogenesis in zebrafish, we first compared the amino acid sequence of zebrafish UQCRB was compared with that of human UQCRB. UQCRB is highly conserved in human and zebrafish, with 72.1% amino acid sequence similarity (Fig. 4A). To investigate the effects of terpestacin on zebrafish angiogenesis, Tg(*fli1a:EGFP*)^{y1} embryos were cultured

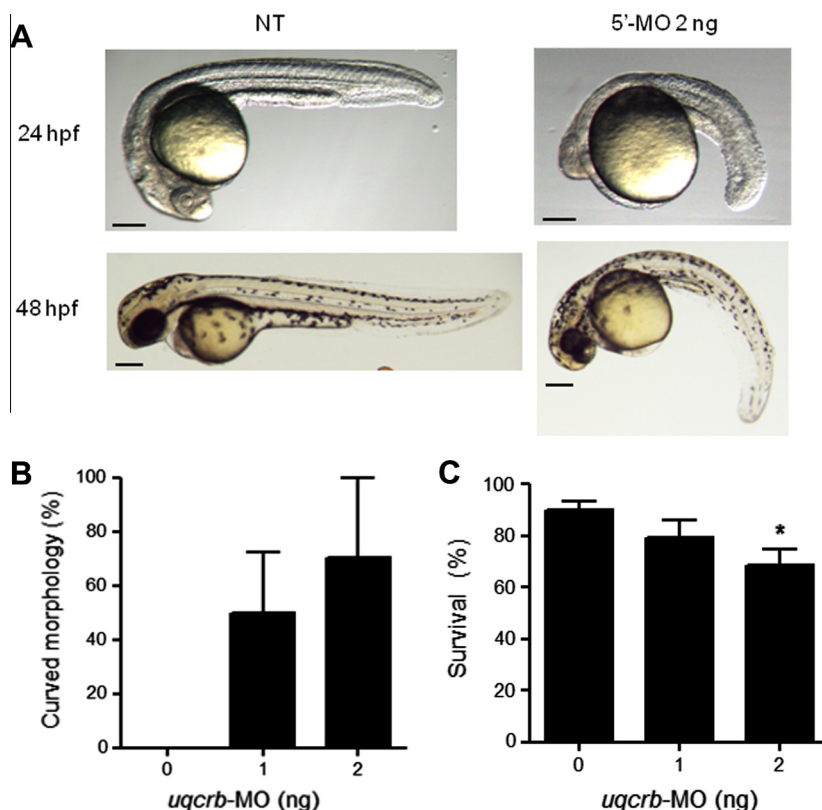
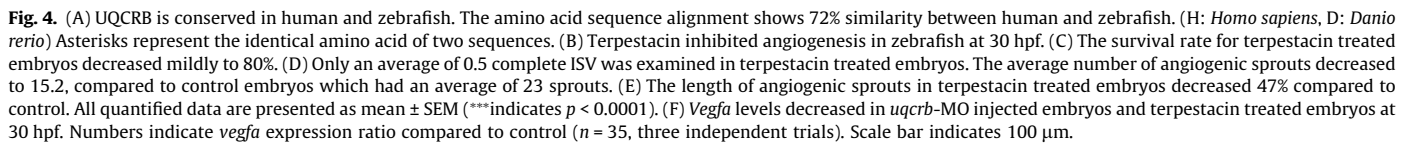


Fig. 3. (A) Body curvature morphology was detected in 2 ng *uqcrb*-MO injected embryos at 24 and 48 hpf ($n = 30$, three independent trials). (B) Number of curved embryos increased dose-dependently in *uqcrb*-MO injected groups. (C) Survival rates decreased only down to 68.7% in 2 ng *uqcrb*-MO injected embryos. All quantified data are presented as mean \pm SEM (*indicates $p < 0.05$). Scale bars indicate 200 μ m.



Of many angiogenic factors in angiogenesis signaling, VEGF is one of the important cytokine factors involved in UQCRB downstream signaling. Therefore, *vegfa* expression levels were examined in both UQCRB knocked-down and terpestacin-treated embryos. UQCRB knockdown with 2 ng of *uqcrb*-MO resulted in decrease of overall *vegfa* expression level down to 56% compared to control

Mitochondria complex III consists of 11 subunits including UQCRB, which acts in cooperation with angiogenic pathways. Loss of UQCRB function reduces angiogenic signaling *in vitro*, yet detailed functional characterization is needed to explain its role in biological systems. Therefore, we investigated the possible role of UQCRB in angiogenesis with the zebrafish system, resulting in a clearer understanding of UQCRB loss of function in relation to angiogenesis. Mitochondria complexes control the general level of oxidative phosphorylation, (OXPHOS), by affecting the mitochondrial electron transport chain. In the case of complex I inhibition by metformin, angiogenesis is decreased along with VEGF levels with metformin treatment [18–20]. However Phoenix et al. reported that metformin could also induce angiogenesis through AMPK activation in ER α negative MDA-MB-435 breast cancer model [21]. Furthermore, complex V inhibition with oligomycin is reported to inhibit HIF-1 α , the upstream effector of VEGF [22]. Although

there were no reports with direct angiogenesis inhibition by oligomycin, HIF-1 α inhibition in hypoxic tumor cells provides evidence to possible angiogenesis inhibition. Likewise, mitochondria complexes could affect angiogenesis through OXPHOS regulation [23,24].

Antisense and pharmacological disruption of UQCRB function inhibited angiogenesis in zebrafish, but did not affect vasculogenesis. Angiogenesis recovered in both *uqcrb* morphants and terpestacin-treated embryos after 48 hpf, possibly due to the transient or incomplete penetrance of these perturbations. Alternatively, there may be distinct temporal requirements for UQCRB during angiogenesis or UQCRB may play a supportive but not essential role in the sprouting and extension of blood vessels *in vivo*. We note that *uqcrb* morphants and terpestacin-treated embryos exhibit some phenotypic differences; *uqcrb* morpholinos can induce ventral body curvature while terpestacin causes a more significant loss of *vegfr* expression. These differences may be due to the fact that the *uqcrb* morpholino prevents UQCRB expression while terpestacin only inhibits the biological activity of this mitochondrial complex III subunit, functionally distinct perturbations that may have divergent phenotypic consequences. The antisense oligonucleotide and/or small-molecule treatments may also have unanticipated, non-overlapping off-target effects. Finally, UQCRB may promote angiogenesis through both VEGF-dependent and VEGF-independent mechanisms. Further studies will be necessary to resolve these questions.

To our best knowledge, this is the first report on the functional characterization of UQCRB *in vivo*. UQCRB is involved in diseases related to mitochondria complex III, and in the present study UQCRB involvement in angiogenesis was revealed. These results implicate that UQCRB could be used in etiologic studies, especially regarding angiogenesis-related diseases. Furthermore, UQCRB could be used as a marker for angiogenesis, and drugs that specifically target UQCRB could be developed to introduce new therapeutic treatments. UQCRB transgenic studies would also provide in-depth evidence for its diverse potential in disease and facilitate mechanistic studies of mitochondria and UQCRB.

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