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Polyplex Micelles with Cyclic RGD Peptide Ligands and Disulfide Cross-Links Directing to the Enhanced Transfection via Controlled Intracellular Trafficking

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Abstract: Thiolated c(RGDfK)-poly(ethylene glycol)-*block*-poly(lysine) (PEG-PLys), a novel block polymer that has a cyclic RGD peptide in the PEG terminus and thiol groups in the PLys side chain, was prepared and applied to the preparation of targetable disulfide cross-linked polyplex micelles through ion complexation with plasmid DNA (pDNA). The obtained polyplex micelles achieved remarkably enhanced transfection efficiency against cultured HeLa cells possessing $\alpha_v\beta_3$ integrin receptors, which are selectively recognized by cyclic RGD peptides, demonstrating the synergistic effect of cyclic RGD peptide ligands on the micelle surface and disulfide cross-links in the core to exert the smooth release of pDNA in the intracellular environment via reductive cleavage. This enhancement was not due to an increase in the uptake amount of polyplex micelles but to a change in their intracellular trafficking route. Detailed confocal laser scanning microscopic observation revealed that polyplex micelles with cyclic RGD peptide ligands were distributed in the perinuclear region in the early stages preferentially through caveolae-mediated endocytosis, which may be a desirable pathway for avoiding the lysosomal degradation of delivered genes. Hence, this approach to introducing ligands and cross-links into the polyplex micelles is promising for the construction of nonviral gene vectors that enhance transfection by controlling intracellular distribution.

Keywords: Polymeric micelle; cyclic RGD peptide; disulfide cross-links; caveolae-mediated endocytosis

Introduction

As an alternative to viral gene vectors with intrinsic safety issues, there is a growing demand for nonviral gene vectors.[1,2] Despite this demand, nonviral gene vectors based on cationic lipids (lipoplexes) and cationic polymers (polyplexes) are still insufficiently for *in vivo* applications, particularly those administered systemically. To achieve

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sufficient *in vivo* systemic transfection, nonviral vectors need to satisfy several properties, such as high stability in the bloodstream, accumulation in target tissues, and controlled intracellular trafficking directing to the nucleus.

Polyplex micelles, composed of poly(ethylene glycol) (PEG)-polycation block copolymers and plasmid DNA (pDNA), are nonviral gene vectors with the potential for systemic application,[3−5] because of the suitable size of approximately 100 nm for systemic administration, and the formation of the biocompatible PEG shell layer to avoid the nonspecific interaction with blood components.[6−8] To further improve the stability and transfection efficiency of polyplex micelles, disulfide cross-links were introduced into the micelle core, revealing the improved transfection to cultured cells as well as the successful reporter gene expression in mouse liver by systemic administration.[9,10] Furthermore, we recently established a procedure to install cyclic RGD peptide ligands (c(RGDfK)), which can selectively recognize $\alpha_v\beta_3$ and $\alpha_v\beta_5$ integrin receptors, on the surface of a polyplex micelle. Eventually, c(RGDfK) installed polyplex micelles exhibited enhanced transfection efficiency against specific cells possessing $\alpha_v\beta_3$ and $\alpha_v\beta_5$ integrin receptors, such as HeLa cells.[11] $\alpha_v\beta_3$ integrin receptors are known to be overexpressed in endothelial cells of tumor capillaries and neointimal tissues. It should be noted that the use of vectors with cyclic RGD peptide ligands has been investigated as an active targeting strategy in antiangiogenic gene therapy for cancer.[12−14] Nevertheless, those studies focused primarily on therapeutic through the facilitation of cellular uptake of the vectors through receptor-mediated routes, and less attention has been paid to the intracellular trafficking of the vectors possibly modulated by the installed ligands. Worth mentioning in this regard is our previous finding that installation of cyclic RGD ligands on the polyplex micelle surface facilitated their localization in the perinuclear region, suggesting the modulated trafficking induced by cyclic RGD ligands.[11]

The study reported here is devoted to get further insights into the modulated cellular uptake and subsequent trafficking of c(RGDfK) installed polyplex micelles in order to enhance transfection efficiency. For this purpose, new polyplex micelles with integrated functions were developed by installing cyclic RGD ligands on the surface and disulfide cross-links in the core. Indeed, the PEG-*block*-poly(lysine) (PEG-PLys) block copolymer as a platform polymer was modified by introducing a cyclic RGD peptide into the PEG terminus as well as thiol groups into the side chain of the PLys segment. The functions of prepared polyplex micelles were tested against HeLa cells possessing $\alpha_v\beta_3$ and $\alpha_v\beta_5$ integrin receptors; the transfection efficiency, the amount of cellular uptake, and the intracellular distribution were thus determined. In particular, the intracellular trafficking of the polyplex micelles loaded with Cy3- or Cy5-labeled pDNA was evaluated thoroughly by confocal laser scanning microscope (CLSM) observation, which clarified the uptake route and the final intracellular localization. The results demonstrated that cyclic RGD ligands facilitated the caveolae-mediated endocytosis of the polyplex micelles and thus improved transfection efficiency, which is apparently important for the design of nonviral gene vectors that can avoid lysosomal degradation. Moreover, cyclic RGD ligands should

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eventually achieve appreciable transfection efficiency even for systems without high endosomal-disrupting properties, including PLys-based polyplex systems.

Experimental Section

Materials. *N*,*N*-Diisopropylethylamine (DIEA), dithiothreitol (DTT), aphidicolin, and D-luciferin were purchased from Wako Pure Chemical Industries (Osaka, Japan). *N*-Methyl-2-pyrrolidone (NMP) was purchased from Aldrich Chemical (Milwaukee, WI). *N*-Succinimidyl 3-(2-pyridyldithio)-propionate (SPDP) was purchased from Dojindo Laboratories (Kumamoto, Japan). Cyclo[RGDfK(CX-)] (c(RGDfK)) peptides (X = 6-aminocaproic acid: ε-Acp) was purchased from Peptide Institute (Osaka, Japan). Acetal-poly(ethylene glycol)-*block*-poly(lysine) (acetal-PEG-PLys) and c(RGDfK)-PEG-PLys block copolymers (PEG, 12 000 g/mol; polymerization degree of PLys segment, 72; introduction rate of c(RGDfK) peptide, 66%) were synthesized as previously reported.[11] A micro-BCA protein assay reagent kit was purchased from Pierce Chemical (Rockford, IL). The luciferase assay kit was a product of Promega (Madison, WI). Plasmid pCAcc+Luc coding for firefly luciferase under the control of the CAG promoter was provided by RIKEN Gene Bank (Tsukuba, Japan), amplified in competent DH5α *Escherichia coli*, and then purified using a HiSpeed Plasmid MaxiKit purchased from Qiagen Sciences (Germantown, MD).

Synthesis of Block Copolymers: (a) Acetal-poly(ethylene glycol)-block-poly[ε-3-(2-pyridyldithio)propionyl lysine] (Acetal-PEG-P(Lys-PDP)). Pyridyldithiopropionyl (PDP) groups were introduced to the PLys side chain by the use of a heterobifunctional reagent, SPDP. The typical synthesis procedure is described as follows for the acetal-PEG-P(Lys-PDP) (5 mol % PDP): Acetal-PEG-PLys (200 mg, 8.38 μmol) and SPDP (11.7 mg, 37.7 μmol) were separately dissolved in NMP containing 5 wt % LiCl (10 mL for acetal-PEG-PLys, 1 mL for SPDP). A solution containing SPDP and DIEA (1.05 mL, 377 μmol) was added to acetal-PEG-PLys solution and stirred at room temperature for 3 h. The mixture was then precipitated into an approximately 20-times-excess volume of diethyl ether. The polymer was dissolved in 10 mM phosphate buffer (pH 7.0) with 150 mM NaCl, dialyzed against the same buffer solution and distilled water, and lyophilized to obtain acetal-PEG-P(Lys-PDP) (166 mg, 80%).

(b) c(RGDfK)-poly(ethylene glycol)-block-poly[ε-(3-mercaptopropinonyl) lysine] (c(RGDfK)-PEG-P(Lys-MP)). The typical synthesis procedure is described as follows for the c(RGDfK)-PEG-P(Lys-MP) (5 mol % MP): Acetal-PEG-P(Lys-PDP) (30 mg, 1.21 μmol) was dissolved in 10 mM Tris-HCl buffer solution (pH 7.4) (3 mL) with DTT (6.76 mg, 43.9 μmol). After 30 min incubation at room temperature, the polymer solution was dialyzed against 0.2 M AcOH buffer (pH 4.0). c[RGDfK(CX-)] (10.4 mg, 12.8 mmol) in AcOH buffer (3 mL) was then added to the polymer solution. After stirring for 5 days, DTT (6.67 mg, 43.9 μmol) was added and stirred at room temperature for 3 h. The reacted polymer was purified by dialysis sequentially against 10 mM phosphate buffer (pH 7.0) with 150 mM NaCl and distilled water, and lyophilized to obtain c(RGDfK)-PEG-P(Lys-MP) (20.5 mg, 71%).

The ^{1}H NMR spectrum of each polymer was obtained with an EX300 spectrometer (JEOL, Tokyo, Japan). Chemical shifts were reported in ppm relative to the residual protonated solvent resonance. Block copolymer with X% of thiolation degree was abbreviated as B-SHX%.

Preparation of Polyplex Micelles. Each thiolated block copolymer was dissolved in 10 mM Tris-HCl buffer (pH 7.4), followed by the addition of 3-times-excess mol of DTT against the PDP or MP group. After 30 min incubation at room temperature, the polymer solution in varying concentrations was added to a twice-excess volume of 50 μg/mL pDNA/10 mM Tris-HCl (pH 7.4) solution to form polyplex micelles with different compositions. The final pDNA concentration was adjusted to 33.3 μg/mL. The N/P ratio was defined as the residual molar ratio of amino groups of PLys to the phosphate groups of pDNA. After overnight incubation at room temperature, the polyplex micelle solution was dialyzed against 10 mM Tris-HCl (pH 7.4) containing 0.5 vol% DMSO at 37 °C for 24 h to remove the impurities, followed by 2 days of additional dialysis to remove DMSO. During the dialysis, the thiol groups of thiolated block copolymers were oxidized to form disulfide cross-links. To follow the oxidation process, the remaining thiol groups in disulfide cross-linked micelles were determined by Ellman's method.[15] Polyplex micelles with and without cyclic RGD peptide ligands were abbreviated as RGD (+) and RGD (−) micelles, respectively.

Dynamic Light Scattering Measurement. The sizes of the polyplex micelles were evaluated by dynamic light scattering (DLS) using the Nano ZS zetasizer (ZEN3600, Malvern Instruments, Worcestershire, U.K.). A He−Ne ion laser (633 nm) was used for the incident beam. Polyplex micelle solutions (33.3 μg pDNA/mL) with an N/P = 2 in 10 mM Tris-HCl (pH 7.4) were used for the measurements. The data obtained at a detection angle of 173 ° and a temperature of 25 °C were analyzed by a cumulant method to obtain the hydrodynamic diameters and polydispersity indices (μ/Γ^2) of the micelles. The results reported were expressed as mean values (± SEM) of four experiments.

ζ-Potential Measurement. The ζ-potentials of the polyplex micelles were evaluated by the laser-doppler electrophoresis method using Nano ZS with a He−Ne ion laser (633 nm). Polyplex micelle solution with an N/P = 2 was adjusted to a concentration of 20 μg pDNA/mL. The ζ-potential was measured at 25 °C. A scattering angle of 173 ° was used in these measurements. The results were expressed as the mean values (± SEM) of four experiments.

Atomic Force Microscopy (AFM) Imaging. Five microliters of each sample was deposited on a freshly cleaved

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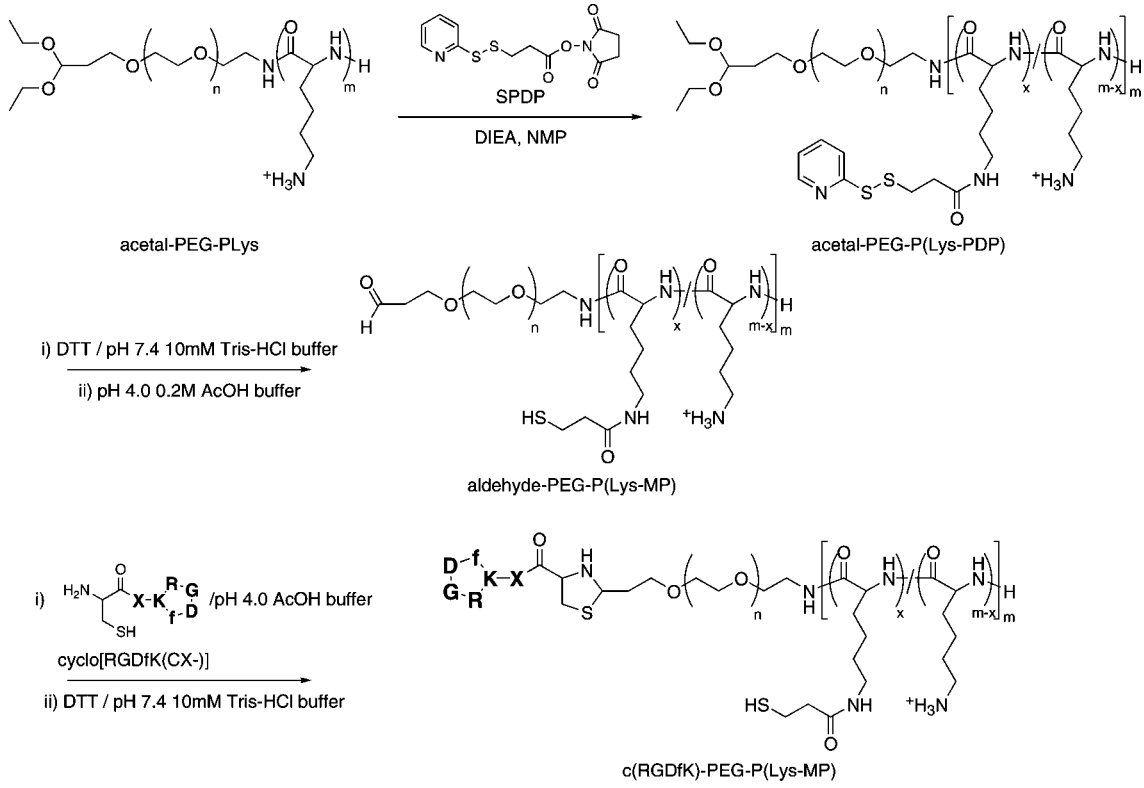
Scheme 1. Synthesis Route of c(RGDfK)-PEG-P(Lys-MP) Block Copolymer



mica substrate for 30 s and then adequately dried under a gentle flow of nitrogen gas. AFM imaging was performed in a tapping mode with MPP-11100 (Vecco Instruments, Woodbury, NY) on a Nano Scope (Vecco Instruments) operated by Nanoscope IIIa software (Digital Instruments, Santa Barbara, CA). The cantilever oscillation frequency was

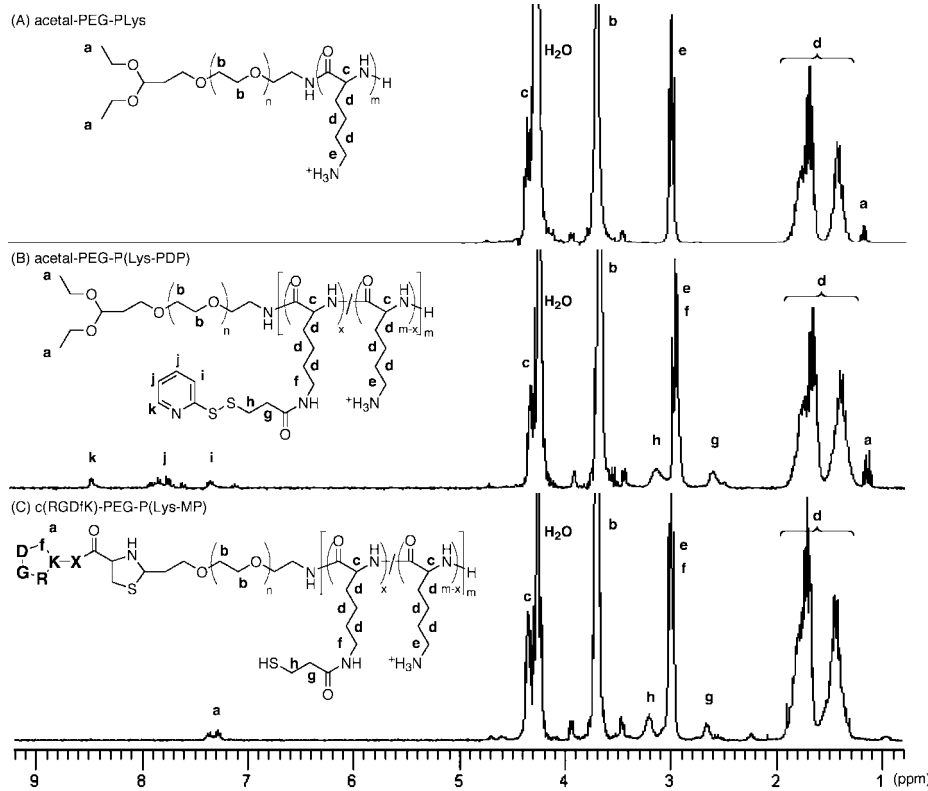


Figure 1. ^{1}H NMR spectra of acetal-PEG-PLys (A), acetal-PEG-P(Lys-PDP) (B-SH5%) (B), and c(RGDfK)-PEG-P(Lys-MP) (B-SH5%) (C) in D_2O at 80 °C.

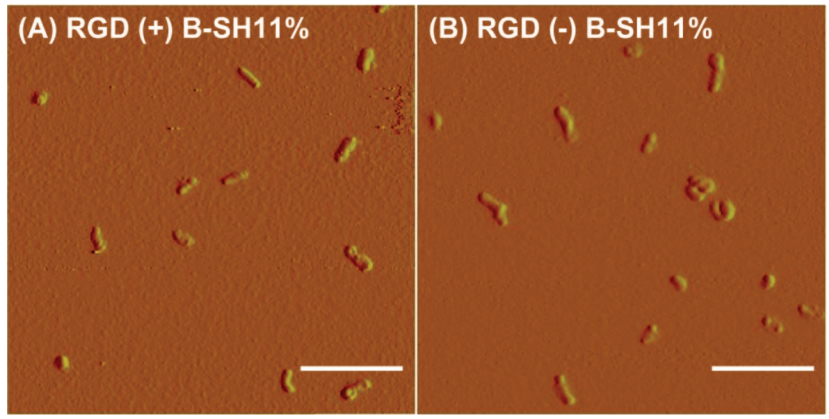


Figure 2. AFM images of cross-linked micelles (B-SH11%, N/P = 2) with (A) or without (B) cyclic RGD peptide ligands. The scale bars represent 500 nm.

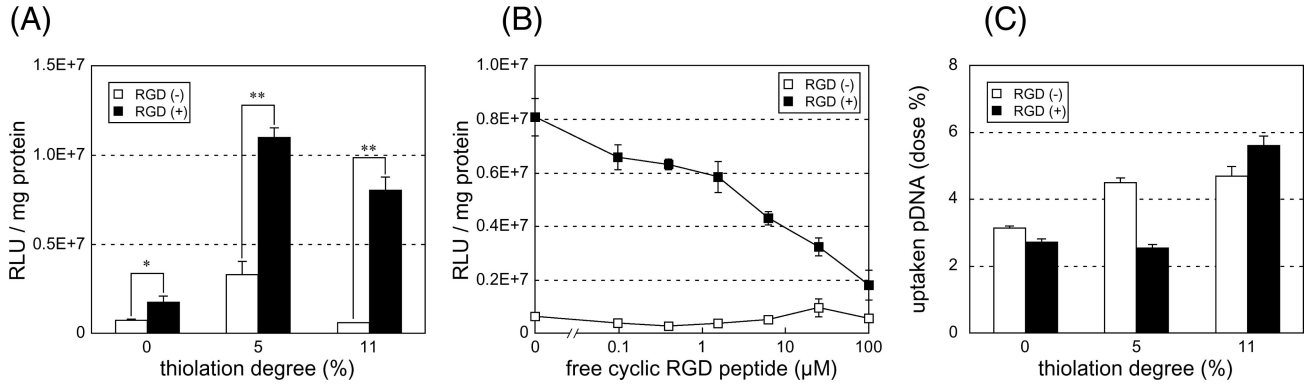


Figure 3. *In vitro* transfection efficiency and cellular uptake of polyplex micelles against HeLa cells. (A) Effects of cyclic RGD peptide ligands on transfection efficiency for micelles with varying thiolation degrees (N/P = 2). (B) Inhibitory effect of free cyclic RGD peptide on the transfection with B-SH11% polyplex micelles (N/P = 2) with or without cyclic RGD peptide ligands. (C) Cellular uptake of RGD (+) and RGD (−) polyplex micelles (N/P = 2) loading ^{32}P-labeled pDNA. Error bars in the graphs represent SEM, $n = 4$. $P^{*} < 0.05$ and $P^{**} < 0.01$.

tuned to the resonance frequency of the cantilever, 260−340 kHz. The images were recorded at a 2 μm/s linear scanning speed and with a sampling density of 61 nm^2 per pixel. Raw AFM images were processed only by background removal (flattening) using a microscope manufacturer's image-processing software.

Transfection. HeLa cells were seeded on 24-well culture plates (10 000 cells/well) and incubated overnight in 500 μL of Dulbecco's modified Eagle's medium (DMEM) containing 10% fetal bovine serum (FBS). The medium was replaced with fresh medium, after which polyplex solution (N/P = 2) was applied to each well (1 μg of pDNA/well). After 24 h incubation, the medium was replaced with 500 μL of fresh medium, followed by 24 h reincubation. The luciferase gene expression was then evaluated based on the intensity of photoluminescence intensity using the Luciferase assay kit and a Lumat LB9507 luminometer (Berthold Technologies, Bad Wildbad, Germany). The amount of protein in each well was concomitantly determined using a Micro BCA protein assay reagent kit.

Inhibitory Effect of Free Cyclic RGD Peptides. HeLa cells were seeded on 24-well culture plates (10 000 cells/well) and incubated overnight in 500 μL of DMEM containing 10% FBS. The medium was replaced with fresh medium containing various concentrations of cyclo[RGDfK(CX-)], followed by 3 h incubation. The polyplex micelle solution (B-SH11%, N/P = 2) was applied to each well (1 μg pDNA/well). After 24 h incubation, the medium was replaced with 500 μL of fresh medium, followed by 24 h reincubation. The luciferase gene expression was then evaluated in the same way as described in the Transfection section.

Analysis of Cellular Uptake of Polyplex Micelles. pDNA was radioactively labeled by incorporation of ^{32}P-dCTP (GE Healthcare U.K., Buckinghamshire, U.K.) using a nick translation system (Invitrogen, Carlsbad, CA) according to the manufacturer's protocol. Unincorporated nucleotides were carefully removed using the High Pure PCR Product Purification Kit (Roche, Basel, Switzerland). HeLa cells were seeded on 24-well culture plates (10 000 cells/well) and incubated overnight in 500 μL of DMEM containing 10% FBS. The medium was replaced with fresh medium, after which the polyplex micelle incorporating the mixture of nonlabeled and ^{32}P-labeled pDNA (N/P = 2) was applied to each well (1 μg pDNA/well). After 24 h incubation, the medium was removed and the cells were washed 3 times with PBS. The cells were lysed with 400 μL of cell culture lysis reagent (Promega) for 30 min at room temperature, after which the lysate was mixed with 5 mL of Ultima Gold

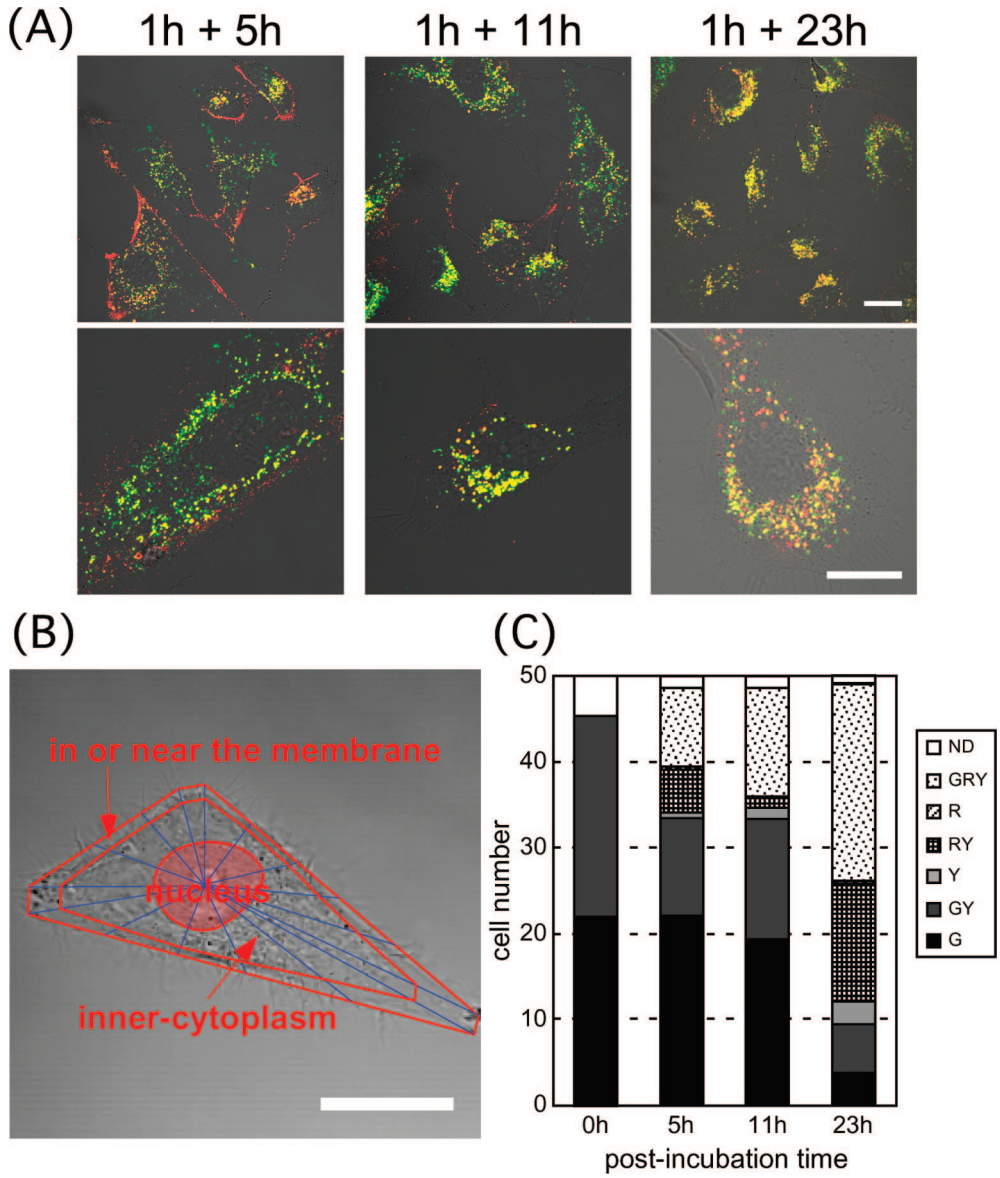


Figure 4. Intracellular distribution B-SH11% polyplex micelles (N/P = 2). RGD (−) micelles loading Cy5-labeled pDNA (red) and RGD (+) micelles loading Cy3-labeled pDNA (green) were simultaneously added and incubated with HeLa cells for 1 h. After replacement with fresh medium, cells were reincubated for the indicated reincubation times (5 h, 11 h, 23 h). (A) CLSM images. Scale bars represent 20 μm. (B) Definitions of "nucleus", "inner-cytoplasm", and "in or near the membrane" regions. "Inner-cytoplasm" was defined as three-quarters of the area from the nucleus to the cell membrane, and "in or near the membrane" was defined as the remaining quarter on the side of the cell membrane. (C) Quantitative analysis of the inner-cytoplasmic distribution of pDNA transfected by polyplex micelles with or without RGD ligands. Fifty different cells were observed and evaluated for each time point. G: green (Cy3-labeled pDNA loaded in RGD (+) micelles). R: red (Cy5-labeled pDNA loaded in RGD (−) micelles). Y: yellow (colocalized Cy3-labeled and Cy5-labeled pDNAs). ND: not detectable (no colors detectable from pDNA).

(Perkin-Elmer, Waltham, MA). Measurements were performed using the Tricarb 2200CA liquid scintillation analyzer (Packard, Meriden, CT) with a counting time of 1 min. The amounts of uptaken pDNA were calculated using a standard curve calibrated with naked ^{32}P-labeled pDNA.

CLSM Observation. pDNA was labeled with Cy3 or Cy5 according to the manufacturer's protocol. Briefly, pDNA was labeled using the Label IT Nucleic Acid Labeling Kit (Mirus, Madison, WI). HeLa cells (30 000 cells) were seeded on a 35 mm glass base dish (Iwaki, Tokyo, Japan) and incubated overnight in 1 mL of DMEM containing 10% FBS, followed by replacement with fresh medium. In the simultaneous observation of RGD (−) and RGD (+) micelles (Figure 4), RGD (−) B-SH11% polyplex micelle solution containing 3 μg Cy5-labeled pDNA (N/P = 2) and RGD (+) B-SH11% polyplex micelle solution containing 3 μg Cy3-labeled pDNA (N/P = 2) were simultaneously applied to a glass dish with cultured HeLa cells. The measurement condition was adjusted so as to obtain almost the same fluorescence intensities between RGD (+) B-SH11% micelles containing Cy3-

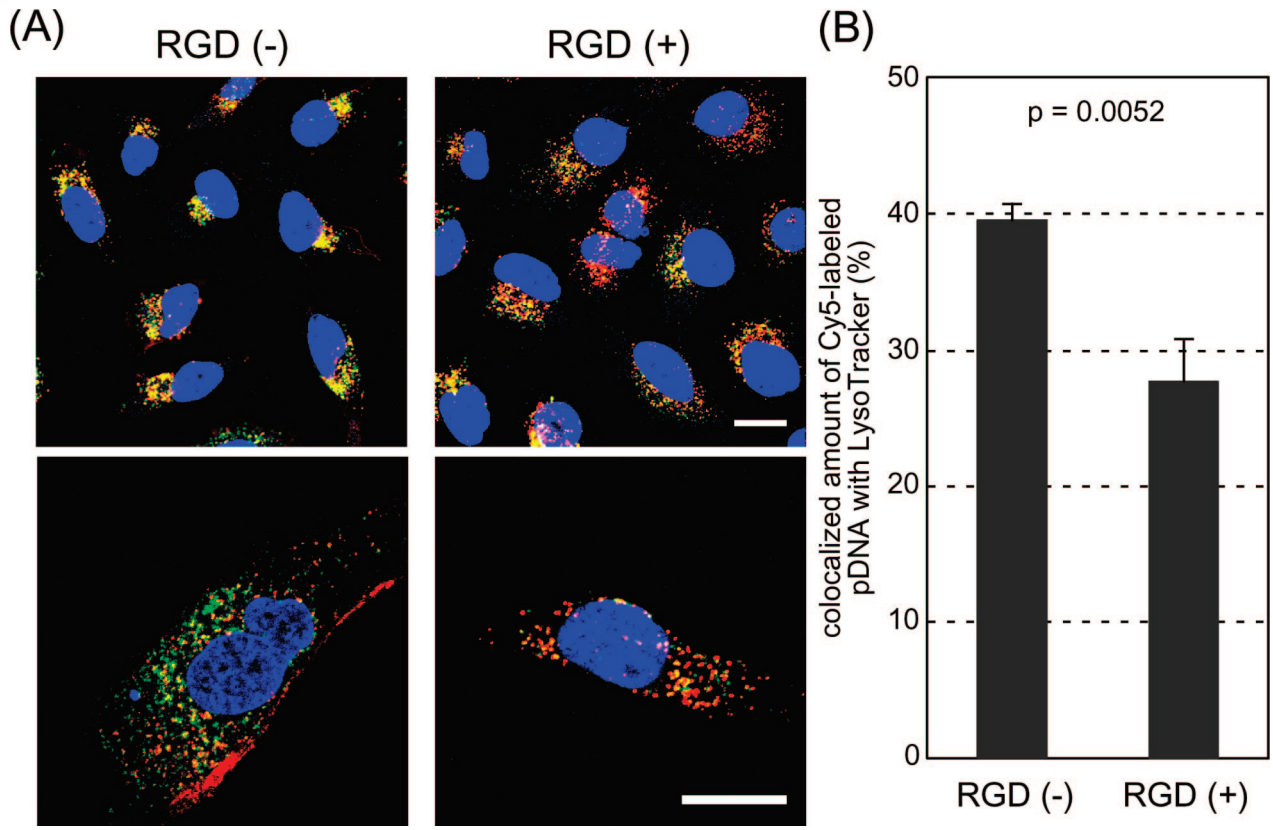


Figure 5. Distribution of RGD (+) and RGD (−) B-SH11% polyplex micelles (N/P = 2) in late endosomes and lysosomes. Polyplex micelles loading Cy5-labeled pDNA (red) were incubated with HeLa cells for 1 h. After replacement with fresh medium, the cells were reincubated for 11 h. The cell nuclei were stained with Hoechst 33342 (blue), and the acidic late endosomes and lysosomes were stained with LysoTracker Green (green). (A) CLSM images of the cells transfected with RGD (−) micelles (left) and RGD (+) micelles (right). The scale bars represent 20 μm. (B) Quantification of Cy5-labeled pDNA colocalized with LysoTracker Green in the inner-cytoplasm. Error bars in the graph represent SEM (n = 10).

labeled pDNA and RGD (+) B-SH11% micelles containing Cy5-labeled pDNA. In the observation with organelle staining (Figures 5 and 6), either RGD (−) or RGD (+) B-SH11% polyplex micelle solution containing Cy5-labeled pDNA (N/P = 2) was applied to a dish with cultured HeLa cells. After various incubation periods, the medium was removed and the cells were washed 3 times with PBS. The intracellular distribution of the polyplex micelles was observed by CLSM after staining acidic late endosomes and lysosomes with LysoTracker Green (Molecular Probes, Eugene, OR), lipid rafts and caveosomes with cholera toxin subunit B (CT-B) Alexa Fluor 488 conjugate (Molecular Probes), and the nuclei with Hoechst 33342 (Dojindo Laboratories, Kumamoto, Japan). The CLSM observation was performed using an LSM 510 (Carl Zeiss, Oberlochen, Germany) with a C-Apochromat 63X objective (Carl Zeiss) at the excitation wavelength of 488 nm (Ar laser) for LysoTracker Green and CT-B Alexa Fluor 488, 543 nm (He−Ne laser) for Cy3, 633 nm (He−Ne laser) for Cy5, and 710 nm (MaiTai laser, two photon excitation; Spectra-Physics, Mountain View, CA) for Hoechst 33342, respectively.

Evaluation of Intracellular Distribution of Polyplex Micelles. To evaluate the amounts of polyplex micelles in cytoplasm, polyplex micelles internalized into the inner region of the cytoplasm were distinguished from polyplex micelles adsorbing onto the cell membrane by reference to a previous paper,[16] in which the cytoplasm was divided into four quadrants to study the intracellular spatial variation of polyplexes (Figure 4B). First, an intracellular region was divided into three areas: “nucleus”, “inner-cytoplasm”, and “in or near the membrane”. “Inner-cytoplasm” was defined as a three-quarters of the area from the nucleus to the cell membrane, and “in or near the membrane” was defined as remaining quarter area on the side of the cell membrane, as illustrated in Figure 4B. From the observation of 50 different cells, the relative amounts of RGD (−) micelles (red) and RGD (+) micelles (green) in the “inner-cytoplasm” were determined based on the number of cells. The following abbreviations are used in Figure 4C: G, green (Cy3-labeled pDNA); R, red (Cy5-labeled pDNA); Y, yellow (Cy3-labeled pDNA colocalized with Cy5-labeled pDNA); and ND, not detectable (no colors (pDNA) detectable). In brief, GRY represents cells with green, red, and yellow spots indepen-

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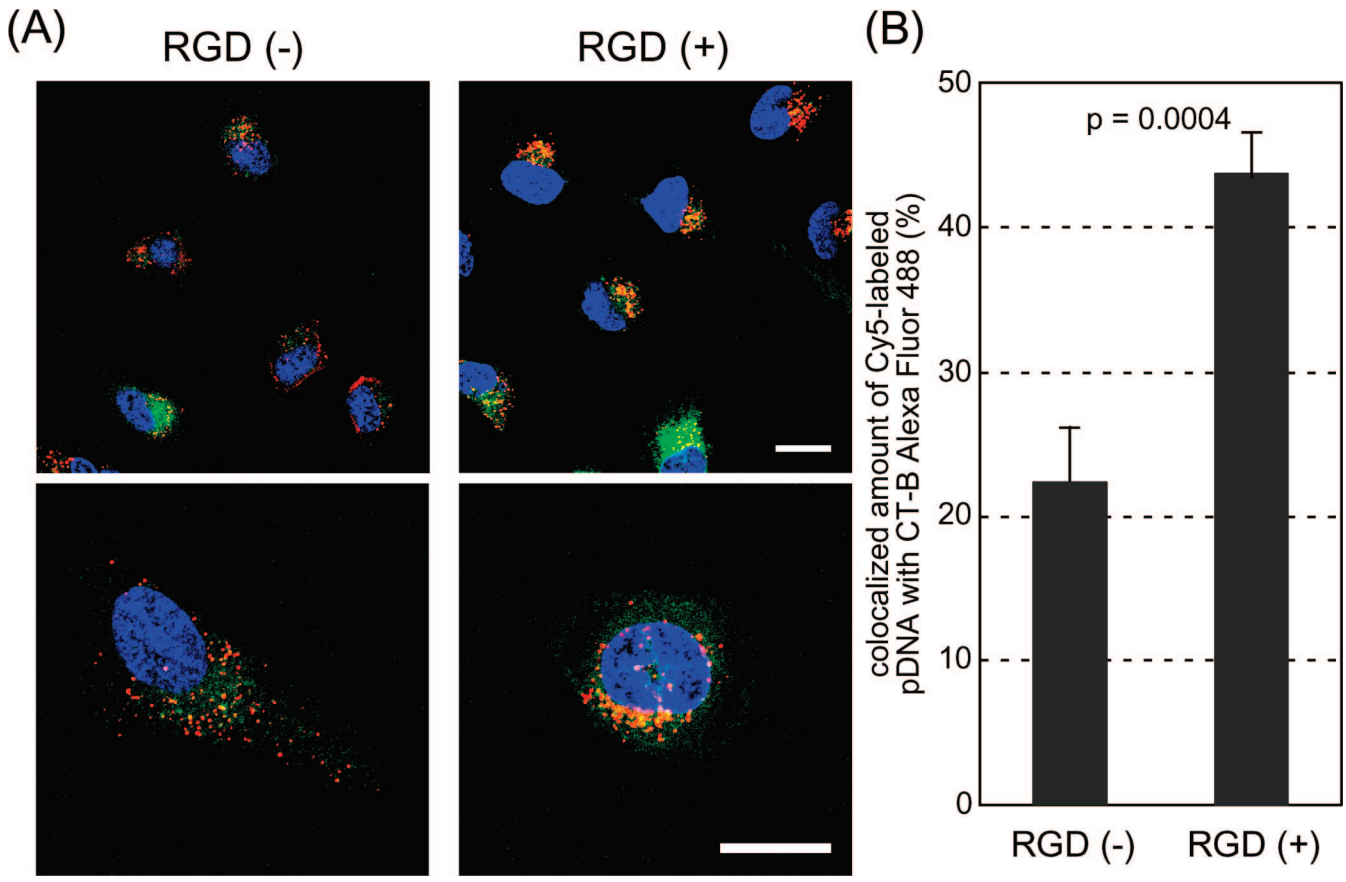

Figure 6. Distribution of RGD (+) and RGD (−) B-SH11% polyplex micelles (N/P = 2) in lipid rafts and caveosomes. Polyplex micelles loading Cy5-labeled pDNA (red) and CT-B Alexa Fluor 488 conjugate (green) were incubated with HeLa cells for 1 h. After replacement with fresh medium, the cells were reincubated for 11 h. The cell nuclei were stained with Hoechst 33342 (blue). (A) CLSM images of RGD (−) micelles (left) and RGD (+) micelles (right). The scale bars represent 20 μm. (B) Quantification of Cy5-labeled pDNA colocalized with CT-B in the inner-cytoplasm. Error bars in the graph represent SEM (n = 10).

dently existing in the "inner-cytoplasm", and GY represents cells with green and yellow spots but without red spots.

To evaluate the final destinations of polyplex micelles, the rate of colocalization of Cy5-labeled pDNA with LysoTracker Green or CT-B Alexa Fluor 488 was quantified (Figures 5B and 6B). LysoTracker Green was used as a marker for the late endosomes and the lysosomes, and CT-B Alexa Fluor 488 was used as a marker for the lipid rafts and the caveosomes. Colocalization was quantified as follows:

$$\text{amount of colocalization (\%)} = \text{Cy5 pixels}_{\text{colocalization}}/\text{Cy5 pixels}_{\text{total}} \times 100$$

where Cy5 $\text{pixels}_{\text{colocalization}}$ represents the number of Cy5 pixels colocalizing with LysoTracker Green or CT-B Alexa Fluor 488 in the inner-cytoplasm, and Cy5 $\text{pixels}_{\text{total}}$ represents the number of all Cy5 pixels in the inner-cytoplasm.

Real-Time Luciferase Gene Expression. HeLa cells (40 000 cells) were seeded on a 35 mm dish (Becton Dickinson, Franklin Lakes, NJ) and incubated overnight in 2 mL of DMEM containing 10% FBS, with or without 10 μg/mL aphidicolin for synchronization of cells. The HeLa cell cycle was arrested in a phase between G1 and S by over 16 h incubation with aphidicolin.[17] The subsequent replacement with fresh medium let cells start to divide at 13 h later. In this assay, three experimental conditions were used to regulate the lag between the time the polyplex micelles were added and the beginning of mitosis. First was the "normal" condition, meaning without any treatments for synchronization. Second was the "3 h mitosis" condition, where each polyplex micelle was added 10 h after the replacement of medium containing aphidicolin with fresh medium, thus setting the start of cell mitosis 3 h after the addition of polyplex micelles. Third was the "13 h mitosis" condition, where each polyplex micelle was added just after the medium replacement, thus commencing cell mitosis 13 h after the addition of the micelles. In the case of the "normal" and "13 h mitosis" conditions, after replacement with fresh medium containing 0.1 mM D-luciferin, RGD (−) or RGD (+) B-SH11% polyplex micelles (N/P = 2) containing 3 μg of pDNA were immediately added. In the case of the "3 h

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mitosis" condition, polyplex micelles were added 10 h after the replacement with fresh medium containing 0.1 mM D-luciferin. The dishes were set in a luminometer incorporated in a CO_2 incubator (AB-2550 Kronos Dio, ATTO, Tokyo, Japan), and the bioluminescence was monitored every 20 min with an exposure time of 2 min.

Results

Synthesis of c(RGDfK)-PEG-P(Lys-MP). (Scheme 1). Thiolation of acetal-PEG-PLys block copolymer was carried out using a previously described method.[9] Briefly, SPDP was used as a thiolating reagent and reacted with ε-amino group of Lys unit; consequently, a 3-(2-pyridyldithio)propionyl (PDP) group was introduced via an amide bond. Note that the introduction of the thiol group by SPDP decreased the cationic charge density of the PLys segment as the introduction rate increased. Thiolated acetal-PEG-P(Lys-PDP) block copolymers with two types of thiolation degree, 5.04% (B-SH5%) and 10.5% (B-SH11%), were prepared. The PDP introduction rates were calculated from the peak intensity ratio of the methylene protons of PEG (OCH_2CH_2, $\delta = 3.7$ ppm) to the pyridyl protons of the PDP group (C_5H_4N, $\delta = 7.0-8.5$ ppm) measured by ^1H NMR as typically seen in Figure 1B (B-SH5%).

Conjugation of c(RGDfK) peptide ligands into the PEG terminus of acetal-PEG-P(Lys-PDP) was achieved through the formation of a thiazolidine ring between an N-terminal cysteine and an aldehyde group converted from the acetal group.[11] The acetal group was deprotected under moderate acidic conditions to the aldehyde group. To avoid an exchange reaction between the thiol group of cysteine residue in the c(RGDfK) peptide and the pyridylthio group in the acetal-PEG-P(Lys-PDP), the pyridylthio group was deprotected with DTT prior to the installation of the ligand. After the dialysis against the AcOH buffer to remove excessive DTT as well as to convert the acetal group to an aldehyde group, the c(RGDfK) peptide was added to react with the aldehyde-PEG-P(Lys-MP) in AcOH buffer, resulting in the introduction of the peptide ligand. This type of conjugation between the N-terminal cysteine and the aldehyde group occurs selectively even in the presence of primary amines, since the conjugation through a Schiff base between a primary amine and the aldehyde group is reversible, whereas the conjugation through a thiazolidine ring between the N-terminal cysteine and the aldehyde group is irreversible. The methyl protons of the acetal group ($\delta = 1.2$ ppm) and the aromatic protons of the pyridylthio group ($\delta = 7.0-8.5$ ppm) completely disappeared with the appearance of protons assigned to the aromatic ring of D-phenylalanine (f: D-Phe) ($\delta = 7.3$ and 7.4 ppm) in the c(RGDfK) (Figure 1C). Based on the peak intensity ratios of the aromatic protons of the peptide ligands to the methylene protons of PEG ($\delta = 3.7$ ppm), the introduction rates of the peptide ligands in the c(RGDfK)-PEG-P(Lys-MP) were determined to be 73% and 87% for the B-SH5% and the B-SH11%, respectively.

Formation of Polyplex Micelles. Agarose gel electrophoresis showed that free pDNA was not detected in the polyplex micelles at N/P = 2 (data not shown), confirming that all of the pDNA were entrapped in polyplex micelles. Ellman's test revealed that less than 2% of the thiol groups in the polyplex micelles were free (data not shown), suggesting that almost all of the thiol groups seem to be involved in the formation of disulfide bonds. These results are consistent with our previous report.[9] The sizes, shapes, and ζ-potentials of the cross-linked polyplex micelles were evaluated by DLS, AFM, and laser-doppler electrophoresis, respectively. Table 1 summarizes the cumulant diameters and ζ-potentials of the polyplex micelles at N/P = 2. The cumulant diameters of all the micelles were approximately 110 nm with a moderate polydispersity index between 0.14 and 0.18, regardless of the composition of the thiolated polymers or the introduction of RGD ligands. Also, the ζ-potentials of all the micelles were kept at slightly positive values between +1.1 and +3.6, which is consistent with the formation of the PEG palisade surrounding the polyplex core.[6,18] Figure 2 shows AFM images of B-SH11% cross-linked micelles with or without RGD ligands, where a toroidal structure in the size range of 60−100 nm and a rodlike structure with a long axis of 160−200 nm were observed, corresponding to the sizes from DLS. These results suggest that the physicochemical characteristics of the polyplex micelles are quite similar regardless of the thiolation degree or the introduction of RGD ligands.

Table 1. Size and ζ-Potential of Polyplex Micelles (N/P = 2) with or without Cyclic RGD Peptide Ligands

thiolation degree (%)	cyclic RGD peptide ligand	cumulant diameter (nm)/ polydispersity index (μ/Γ^2)	ζ-potential (mV)
0	(−)	109 ± 0.75/0.169 ± 0.002	1.47 ± 0.312
	(+)	113 ± 1.11/0.156 ± 0.004	2.27 ± 0.148
5	(−)	115 ± 0.71/0.141 ± 0.007	1.62 ± 0.348
	(+)	106 ± 0.48/0.144 ± 0.009	3.57 ± 0.230
11	(−)	111 ± 0.25/0.145 ± 0.011	1.15 ± 0.788
	(+)	114 ± 1.08/0.172 ± 0.005	1.52 ± 0.213

Transfection. The *in vitro* transfection efficiencies of B-SH0%, B-SH5%, and B-SH11% polyplex micelles with or without RGD ligands were evaluated for HeLa cells possessing $\alpha_v\beta_3$ and $\alpha_v\beta_5$ integrin receptors (Figure 3A). A cyclic RGD peptide is well-known to selectively recognize $\alpha_v\beta_3$ and $\alpha_v\beta_5$ integrins among several integrins.[19] In the transfection experiments with non-cross-linked micelles (B-SH0% micelle), the introduction of RGD ligands led to approximately doubled transfection efficiency. Notably, RGD (+) B-SH5% and RGD (+) B-SH11% micelles with cross-

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linked cores and RGD ligands showed 10-fold higher efficiency than the ligand-less system without cross-linking (RGD (−) B-SH0% micelle). It is obvious that the effect of ligand installation was drastically enhanced by introducing disulfide cross-linking in the core. RGD (+) B-SH5% polyplex micelles achieved the highest transfection efficiency. Consequently, the combination of core cross-linking and ligand installation enhanced efficiency 20 times more than the polyplex micelles without ligands and cross-links.

Then, to further confirm that the increased transfection efficiency by RGD (+) micelles involves the receptor-mediated mechanism, a competitive assay using free cyclic RGD peptides was carried out for B-SH11% cross-linked micelles (Figure 3B). RGD (+) micelles showed a remarkably high transfection efficiency compared with RGD (−) micelles in the absence of free cyclic RGD peptides ($P < 0.01$). As the concentration of free cyclic RGD peptides increased, the transfection efficiency of RGD (+) micelles accordingly decreased, approaching the transfection level of RGD (−) micelles under the condition of 100 μM cyclic RGD peptides ($P = 0.104$). Thus, the results of the competitive assay indicate that $\alpha_v\beta_3$ and/or $\alpha_v\beta_5$ integrin receptor-mediated endocytosis is involved in the transfection of the RGD (+) micelles against HeLa cells.

Analysis of Cellular Uptake of Polyplex Micelles. In general, the enhanced transfection by ligands has been attributed to an increased uptake of vectors.[14,20,21] Thus, the cellular uptake of the RGD (−) and RGD (+) micelles into the HeLa cells was evaluated using a system loaded with ^{32}P-labeled pDNA (Figure 3C). Regardless of ligand installation, cross-linked micelles tend to be taken up more efficiently than noncrosslinked micelles. The introduction of disulfide cross-links into the micelle core appreciably contributes to an increase in the stability of micelles under physiological conditions.[9] This implies that disulfide cross-links might prevent the micelles from dissociation in the extracellular medium, and consequently facilitate their internalization into the cellular compartment. Interestingly, there is no significant increase in micelle uptake even by installing RGD ligands, suggesting that other factors, including modulation of intracellular trafficking, may be involved in the enhancement of transfection efficiency by cyclic RGD peptide ligands.

Intracellular Distribution of Polyplex Micelles. Our previous report showed that RGD (+) polyplex micelles preferentially localize in the perinuclear region, unlike RGD (−) polyplex micelles,[11] suggesting that RGD ligands likely modulate intracellular trafficking of polyplex micelles. Therefore, detailed observation of the intracellular distribution was carried out using CLSM (Figure 4). The medium was replaced with fresh medium after 1 h incubation of polyplex micelles with cultured HeLa cells. Then CLSM observation was carried out after each reincubation without polyplex micelles in the medium. The CLSM images are shown in Figure 4A. The micelles localized in the inner-cytoplasm were quantitatively evaluated using the procedure described in the Experimental Section and shown in Figure 4B; the data are summarized in Figure 4C. After the 5 h reincubation (total 6 h incubation), the spots observed in the inner region of the cytoplasm were mainly the green spots of RGD (+) micelles (Figure 4A, left). On the other hand, the RGD (−) micelles, shown in red stayed mainly near the cell membrane (Figure 4A, left), but some fraction was observed in the inner-cytoplasm as red spots (RGD (−) micelle alone) or yellow spots (colocalizing with RGD (+) micelles). In the early stages, almost half of the cell population with fluorescence had only green spots, corresponding to the internalization of RGD (+) micelles (Figure 4C); this indicated that RGD (+) micelles were internalized into the inner-cytoplasm much faster than RGD (−) micelles. However, further reincubation resulted in the decrease in the cell fraction that showed only green spots and lead to an increase in the fraction that included yellow spots, corresponding to the colocalization of RGD (−) and RGD (+) micelles, as well as to an increase in red spots, corresponding to the presence of RGD (−) micelles alone. Note that there are two possibilities for the appearance of yellow spots. The first is that RGD (−) and RGD (+) micelles adsorbing to the cell membrane were simultaneously endocytosed by the cell. The second is that RGD (−) and RGD (+) micelles that were separately internalized into the cells subsequently colocalized through the possible fusion of the compartments in the inner-cytoplasm. On the other hand, the green spots still existed in a definite fraction of cells (G + GY + GRY) even after long-term reincubation, while the fraction of the cells including red spots (R + RY + GRY) continued to increase (Figure 4C). Thus, it is reasonable to assume that there may be distinct routes of internalization for RGD (−) and RGD (+) micelles, and eventually their final destinations may be different.

To examine whether or not RGD ligand installation in the micelles alters their intracellular trafficking, organelles were selectively stained using LysoTracker for the late endosomes and the lysosomes, and CT-B for the lipid rafts and the caveosomes (Figures 5 and 6).[22,23] In this experiment, the medium was replaced 1 h after the addition of polyplex micelles, followed by 11 h of reincubation. The rate of colocalization was quantified by the formula shown in the Experimental Section. The experiment with LysoTracker revealed that 39% of RGD (−) micelles and 28% of RGD (+) micelles in the inner-cytoplasm were localized in the late endosomes and lysosomes, indicating that the colocalization ratio of RGD (−) micelles with the late endosomes and lysosomes was significantly higher than that of RGD (+) micelles ($P = 0.0052$) (Figure 5B). On the other hand, the observation with CT-B revealed that 22% of RGD (−)

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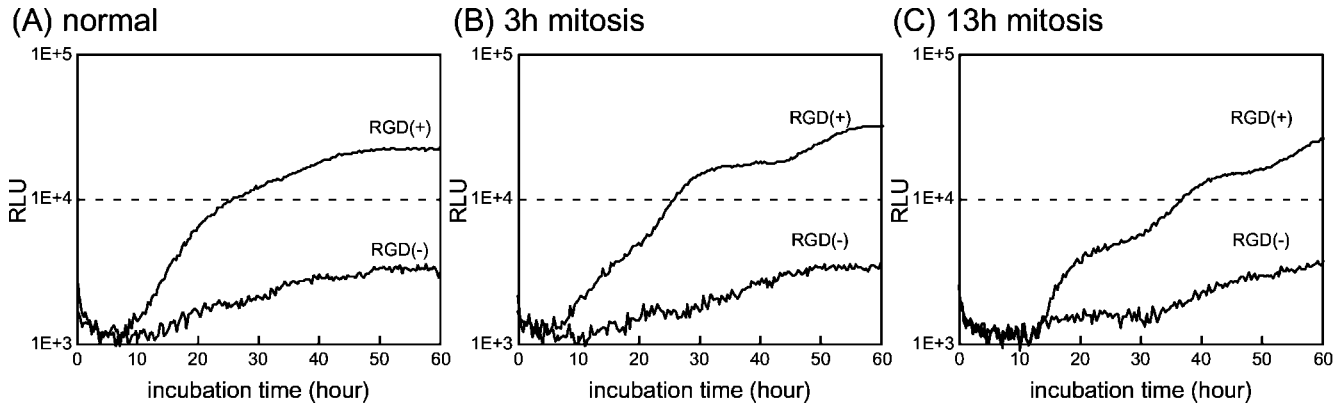

Figure 7. Real-time luciferase gene expression of B-SH11% polyplex micelles (N/P = 2) with or without cyclic RGD peptide ligands under the "normal" condition (A), the "3 h mitosis" condition (B), and the "13 h mitosis" condition (C).

micelles and 44% of RGD (+) micelles in the inner-cytoplasm were localized in the lipid rafts and caveosomes, respectively, indicating that the RGD (+) micelles had significantly higher localization ratios to the lipid rafts and caveosomes than the RGD (−) micelles ($P = 0.0004$) (Figure 6B). These results indicate that the polyplex micelles with cyclic RGD ligands were internalized preferentially through caveolae-mediated endocytosis by HeLa cells.

Real Time Luciferase Gene Expression. In the conventional luciferase assay, transfected cells need to be lysed before measurement, and this restricts the evaluation of luciferase expression in real time. Alternatively, as explained in the Experimental Section, Kronos Dio allows us to measure real-time luciferase expression while maintaining the cell culture for a prolonged period.[24] Figure 7 shows the results of time-dependent gene expression with RGD (−) and RGD (+) B-SH11% micelles. Under the "normal" condition without any control over the cell cycle (Figure 7A), the luciferase expression with RGD (−) and RGD (+) micelles started almost simultaneously around 8 h after the micelles were added. The expression of genes reached a plateau after around 50 h of incubation regardless of the presence of RGD ligands. Considering that the half-life of luciferase is about 2−3 h in living cells,[25] the rate of luciferase production is expected to be equal to that of luciferase degradation in regions over 50 h. RGD (+) micelles showed higher transfection rates than RGD (−) micelles at all time points. Real-time gene expression was assessed for cells after aphidicolin, a DNA synthesis inhibitor, was used to synchronize the cell cycle (Figures 7B and 7C). HeLa cells incubated with aphidicolin for more than 16 h are arrested between the G1 and S phases,[17] and a change to a medium that dose not contain aphidicolin allows HeLa cells to progress into the S phase to divide 13 h later. We confirmed that almost all HeLa cells were in the S phase immediately after the medium replacement and were in the G2 phase 10 h after the replacement (data not shown). Under the "3 h mitosis" condition, where cell division started 3 h after polyplex micelles were added (Figure 7B), gene expression by RGD (+) micelles was detected 5 h after incubation, while that of RGD (−) micelles was below the Kronos Dio detection limit even after about 12 h of incubation. This implies that RGD (+) micelles can migrate into the nucleus during the first mitosis due to their early accumulation in the perinuclear region, whereas this is not the case for RGD (−) micelles because of their slow accumulation in that region. Under the "13 h mitosis" condition, where cell division started 13 h after polyplex micelles were added (Figure 7C), luciferase expression with RGD (−) and RGD (+) micelles was detected simultaneously at 13 h after incubation, which corresponds to the initiation of cell division. This result suggests that RGD (+) micelles move early to the perinuclear region but may not be actively transported into the nucleus in the nonmitotic condition. As shown in Figure 4, most of the RGD (−) micelles were internalized into the cell to accumulate in the perinuclear region at a level comparable to that of RGD (+) micelles after 24 h of incubation. Nevertheless, RGD (−) micelles under the "13 h mitosis" condition exhibited remarkably lower increases in luciferase expression at more than 30 h of incubation compared to RGD (+) micelles. Apparently, this cannot be explained by the difference in the migration rate between RGD (−) and RGD (+) micelles because of their similar levels of accumulation in the perinuclear region in this time period. Presumably, this might be explained by the difference in the final destinations of the polyplex micelles with and without cyclic RGD ligands due to the modulation of intracellular trafficking as shown in Figures 5 and 6.

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Discussion

In the present study, two distinctive implementations, that of environment-sensitive cross-links in the core and that of cyclic RGD peptide ligands on the surface, were integrated into the polyplex micelles formed by PEG-PLys block copolymers and pDNA. The physicochemical characteristics of these micelles were quite similar regardless of the thiolation degree or the introduction of RGD ligands (Table 1). The PEG palisade surrounding the polyplex core shielded the charges of the micelles to maintain very small absolute values in the ζ-potentials. The cumulant diameter of polyplex micelles was around 100 nm. This indicates that all of the polyplex micelles possess favorable characteristics relevant to future *in vivo* application. In transfection experiments using cultured cells, polyplex micelles with cyclic RGD ligands achieved higher transfection efficiency than polyplex micelles without cyclic RGD ligands against HeLa cells appreciably expressing $\alpha_v\beta_3$ integrin receptors (Figure 3A). Interestingly, RGD ligands' effect on transfection was further enhanced by the introduction of disulfide cross-linking in the micelle core. Disulfide cross-links have been reported to stabilize polyplex micelles against the counter polyanion exchange reaction under nonreductive conditions.[9] Therefore, cross-linked micelles might acquire greater stability in the medium compared to noncrosslinked micelles, indicating the enhanced effect of cyclic RGD ligands. Note that RGD (+) B-SH5% micelles achieved the highest transfection efficiency among all micelles. Excessive cross-linking into the cores of polyplex micelles has been reported to overstabilize the micelles and impede the release of pDNA,[9] which is considered to be a cause of the lower transfection efficiency of B-SH11% micelles compared to that of B-SH5% micelles. The inhibitory experiment using free cyclic RGD peptides (Figure 3B) certainly confirmed that receptor-mediated uptake by RGD ligands contributed to the enhancement of gene expression. It is worth noting that the enhancement was not due to an increase in the cellular uptake of polyplex micelles (Figure 3C), suggesting that cyclic RGD peptide ligands may modulate the intracellular trafficking of the polyplex micelles, leading to increased transfection efficiency. In this regard it should be noted that, in our previous study, cyclic RGD ligands facilitated the transport of the polyplex micelles to the perinuclear region.[11] Other studies found that some ligands, such as b-FGF[26] and lactose,[27] contribute to the change in the intracellular trafficking of gene vectors. Time-dependent CLSM observation revealed that RGD (+) micelles were internalized into the cytoplasm and moved to the perinuclear region much earlier than RGD (−) micelles (Figure 4). This is consistent with the results of real-time luciferase expression under the "3 h mitosis" condition, where RGD (+) micelles exhibited earlier onset of gene expression with high efficiency (Figure 7B). The CLSM observation also clarified the variation in final localization in the cytoplasm between the two micelles (Figure 4). CLSM observation with the staining of acidic endosomes and lysosomes (Figure 5) or lipid rafts and caveosomes (Figure 6) revealed that RGD (+) micelles were distributed in the acidic organelles at lower levels than RGD (−) micelles, and were preferentially internalized via caveolae-mediated endocytosis. Considering that pDNA degradation occurs in late endosomes and lysosomes by enzymatic hydrolysis, RGD (+) micelles are more likely than RGD (−) micelles to protect entrapped pDNA from enzymatic degradation. It is known that cells uptake particles of different sizes through different routes: macropinocytosis (>200 nm), clathrin-mediated endocytosis (100−200 nm), and caveolae-mediated endocytosis (<100 nm).[28] The average particle size of RGD (−) and RGD (+) micelles was around 110 nm, with a moderate size distribution (polydispersity index = 0.14−0.18). Thus, these micelles are likely to be internalized by both clathrin- and caveolae-mediated endocytosis. Also, cyclic RGD peptides selectively recognize both $\alpha_v\beta_3$ and $\alpha_v\beta_5$ integrin receptors. $\alpha_v\beta_5$ integrins, which adenoviruses use for their internalization into target cells, are known to facilitate clathrin-mediated endocytosis,[29] while $\alpha_v\beta_3$ integrin-mediated internalization occurs via caveolae-mediated endosytosis.[30,31] Since $\alpha_v\beta_3$ integrins have 10-times higher binding affinity to cyclic RGD peptides than $\alpha_v\beta_5$ integrins,[32] it is reasonable to assume that RGD (+) micelles might preferably recognize $\alpha_v\beta_3$ integrins and thus to induce the caveolae-mediated endocytosis as the internalization route into HeLa cells. Alternatively, RGD (−) micelles, based on their size, might be primarily internalized by clathrin-mediated endocytosis and subsequently delivered to the acidic compartment of a lysosome. Caveolae-mediated endocytosis is not associated with a pH decrease, and is

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known to be a nondigestive route of external substances into the cellular compartment.[33] Some nonenveloped viruses, such as simian virus 40, utilize this route for transfection to host cells and accumulate in a smooth endoplasmic reticulum compartment.[34,35] Thus, RGD (+) micelles internalized by caveolae-mediated endocytosis may be able to avoid pDNA degradation in acidic organelles, leading to high transfection efficiency. Moreover, as seen in the real-time luciferase assay under the "13 h mitosis" condition (Figure 7C), the luciferase expression of RGD (+) micelles detected at 30 h was remarkably higher than that of RGD (−) micelles, despite the comparable levels of cellular uptake between the two (Figures 3C and 4). Obviously, this result cannot be explained by the difference in the migration rate, because there was sufficient time for both RGD (+) and RGD (−) micelles to accumulate in the perinuclear region before mitosis. The higher gene expression of RGD (+) micelles is consistent with their preferential localization in caveosomes due to distinctive intracellular trafficking through the nonacidic and nondegradable route of caveolae-mediated endocytosis.

It should be noted that the results in Figures 5 and 6 indicate that not all of the RGD (+) micelles were internalized by caveolae-mediated endocytosis. Clathrin-mediated endocytosis, a relatively slow uptake pathway, could also contribute to the internalization of a portion of RGD (+) micelles, possibly due to the nonspecific interaction between the micelle and the cell membrane, even though polyplex micelles are covered with PEG to minimize nonspecific interaction. Nevertheless, the ζ-potentials of the polyplex micelles still take small positive values, suggesting that PEG charge shielding is incomplete. This slight positive charge might induce the nonspecific interaction of polyplex micelles with the negatively charged cell membrane. If this is the case, an increase in the PEG density of polyplex micelles may reduce the interaction, increasing the ligand's effects on the uptake and gene expression of polyplex micelles. An alternative explanation on the nonspecific uptake of polyplex micelles is available by considering the amphiphilic character of the PEG molecule. A PEG chain under concentrated conditions, as found in the shell layer in the micelle system, might have the ability to interact with the plasma membrane components through hydrophobic interaction or indirectly through a bridge of hydrated water molecules.[36] Research to clarify the underlying mechanism is now under way in our laboratory, and the results will be reported elsewhere in the near future.

Conclusions

In conclusion, polyplex micelles with integrated implementations of cyclic RGD peptide ligands on the micelle surface and disulfide cross-linking in the core achieved remarkably enhanced transfection efficiency against HeLa cells expressing $\alpha_v\beta_3$ integrins on the surface. The RGD ligands were effective not for increasing uptake but for modulating intracellular trafficking of polyplex micelles. RGD (+) micelles were distributed in the perinuclear region at an early period and were preferentially internalized by caveolae-mediated endocytosis via nonacidic and nondegradable intracellular compartments. These results indicate that polyplex micelles with cyclic RGD ligands and disulfide cross-links are promising approaches to facilitate cell-specific transfection by controlling intracellular trafficking as well as by the environment-sensitive release of encapsulated pDNA in the target cells.

Cyclic RGD peptide is well-known to selectively recognize $\alpha_v\beta_3$ integrin receptors identified as a marker of angiogenic vascular tissue,[37] and thus is a good candidate as a ligand for gene vectors used for diseases including tumor characterized by neovascularization. Indeed, nonviral gene vectors, in which cyclic RGD peptide ligands are installed have been applied to delivery pDNA and siRNA to tumor vasculature, effectively suppressing tumor growth.[13,14] Thus, polyplex micelle with cyclic RGD ligands and disulfide cross-links may be a useful system for cancer gene therapy through a systemic administration.

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