Targeted expression of Cre recombinase to adipose tissue of transgenic mice directs adipose-specific excision of loxP-flanked gene segments

Carrolee Barlow1,*, Mona Schroeder1,2, Julie Lekstrom-Himes2, Helen Kylefjord2, Chu-Xia Deng3, Anthony Wynshaw-Boris1, Bruce M. Spiegelman4 and Kleanthis G. Xanthopoulos2

1Laboratory of Genetic Disease Research, 2Clinical Gene Therapy Branch, National Human Genome Research Institute, 3Laboratory of Biochemistry and Metabolism, National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, MD 20892, USA and 4Dana-Farber Cancer Institute and Department of Biological Sciences and Molecular Pharmacology, Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA 02115, USA

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ABSTRACT

Functional analysis of mammalian genes relies, in part, on targeted mutations generated by homologous recombination in mice. We have developed a strategy for adipose-specific inactivation of loxP-floxed gene segments. Transgenic mice have been established that express Cre recombinase under the control of the adipose-specific aP2 enhancer/promoter. Crossing of the aP2/Cre mice with any loxP-floxed gene will facilitate its functional analysis in adipose tissue.

A variety of strategies are being developed to gain insight into the function of mammalian genes. Many of these methods rely on the ability to successfully manipulate the mouse genome by introducing loss or gain of function mutations (1). Transgenic mouse lines are generated by either direct pronuclear injection of a recombinant DNA molecule or by injection of embryonal stem (ES) cells, which carry an engineered alteration in a gene of interest, into mouse blastocysts (2). The effect of the mutation can be studied once gene inactivation has been established in the germline and the mutated allele is universally established in all cells. Because many targeted inactivations of genes result in a pleiotropic phenotype that is sometimes difficult to analyze, it may be desirable to direct tissue-specific excision of the gene of interest to study the effects of the deletion in a tissue-specific manner. Therefore, tissue-specific inactivation of genes is a desirable feature for functional analysis of the role of a given gene in a distinct tissue.

Manipulation of transgenes can be accomplished in vivo by the use of the site-specific Cre/loxP recombination system of bacteriophage P1 (3,4). The Cre recombinase faithfully and efficiently directs both excision and insertion of DNA segments flanked by loxP sites in both bacterial and eukaryotic cells (4). Recombination occurs when two directly oriented loxP sites on a DNA substrate interact with the Cre recombinase. This interaction results in the excision of the intervening DNA molecule between the two loxP sites leaving a single loxP site in the genome. Transient transfection of a Cre-expressing plasmid in ES cells targeted for segments of the IgH locus has demonstrated that this approach is feasible in ES cells (5). However, the additional ex vivo manipulation required for the screening of the desired deletion may compromise the ability of the ES cells to maintain their pluripotent phenotype. Recently, two strategies for the ubiquitous

* To whom correspondence should be addressed. Tel: +1 301 496 7574; Fax: +1 301 402 2170; Email: cbarlow@nhgri.nih.gov
deletion of loxP-flanked DNA segments were described that use either a Cre transgenic mouse strain expressing the recombinase under the control of human cytomegalovirus promoter (6) or under the control of the adenovirus EIIa promoter (7). In addition, reported in, for example, mouse lenses (8), thymocytes (9) and were injected with the aP2/loxP-flanked gene segment reporter transgenic mice. Template DNA from animals doubly transgenic for aP2/loxP-flanked DNA segments were described that use loxP-mediated recombination in ES cells (Fig. 2A). The presence of a correctly amplified product (Fig. 2B, lanes 10 and 11) was only detectable following excision of the loxP-flanked test gene segment by homologous recombination in ES cells (Fig. 2A). Tissue-specific deletion of the reporter gene segment was demonstrated by PCR analysis using genomic DNA isolated from a variety of tissues in the offspring of these crossings. As shown in Figure 2B, a 550 bp fragment was successfully amplified in adipose tissue of loxP/wt heterozygote animals that were crossed with an aP2/Cre transgenic line (Fig. 2B, lanes 10 and 11). This fragment is only detectable following excision of the loxP-flanked test gene segment by Cre (Fig. 2A). The presence of a correctly amplified product in heart and muscle is a result of adipose cells present in these two tissues (Fig. 2, lanes 3–5). Thus, transmission of the Cre transgene and targeted expression in adipose tissue correlated with the deletion of the reporter loxP-flanked gene segment in adipose cells only. A combination of primers Pa and Pb was used as a DNA control reaction to amplify a 594 bp fragment from the wt gene segment (Fig. 2A and B). Furthermore, aP2/Cre transgenics were crossed with reporter loxP-βgal mice (14). Successful Cre/loxP-mediated recombination in the offspring of these crosses results in excision that is demonstrated by lacZ activation and visualization of the targeted cells by X-Gal blue cyto staining.

Transgenic mice were produced and identified by PCR and Southern blot analysis. Eight Cre transgenic founders were characterized and transgene copy numbers varied between 1 and 50. Once established, several animals from each line were sacrificed for RNA analysis. RNA from liver, kidney, brown adipose and white adipose tissue was isolated by guanidine thiocyanate using the Ultraspec RNA extraction kit (Biotex, Houston, TX). RT–PCR analysis to determine the levels of Cre expression in all lines was performed (Fig. 1B). A correctly amplified 411 bp Cre segment was detected in white and brown adipose tissue and only in the presence of reverse transcriptase (+RT; Fig. 1B). Similar results, that confirmed the presence of a Cre transgene transcript in white and brown adipose tissue, were obtained by Northern blot analysis using a Cre-specific probe (data not shown). These experiments demonstrate that the Cre transgene was properly expressed and was restricted to white and brown adipose tissue in all eight lines. To test for proper function of the Cre recombinase in vivo, three aP2/Cre transgenic lines that expressed the highest levels of Cre recombinase were crossed to mice with a loxP-flanked allele of a reporter test gene generated by homologous recombination in ES cells (Fig. 2A). Tissue-specific deletion of the reporter gene segment was demonstrated by PCR analysis using genomic DNA isolated from a variety of tissues in mice doubly transgenic for aP2/loxP-flanked test gene and loxP-βgal. The targeted cells were visualized by X-Gal blue cyto staining.

The position of the primers and the expected fragments to detect (Fig. 2A) Schematic representation of the loxP-flanked gene segment used to detect Cre activity. The position of the primers and the expected fragments before and after site-specific recombination are indicated. The hemizygous aP2/Cre transgenic line was crossed with a test strain carrying a loxP-flanked test gene. Progeny were examined that are either doubly transgenic for aP2/Cre and the loxP-flanked test gene or are singly transgenic for the aP2/loxP-flanked test gene segment. (B) PCR assays using genomic DNA extracted from a variety of mouse tissues derived from crossings between aP2/Cre and a loxP-flanked gene segment reporter transgenic mice. Template DNA from animals doubly transgenic for aP2/Cre and a loxP-flanked test gene (lanes 1–11) or heterozygous for a loxP-flanked test gene only (lanes 12–22). MW, molecular weight markers. Brain (lanes 1 and 12); liver (lanes 2 and 13); heart (lanes 3 and 14); lung (lanes 4 and 15); muscle (lanes 5 and 16); kidney (lanes 6 and 17); spleen (lanes 7 and 18); thymus (lanes 8 and 19); testes (lanes 9 and 20); white adipose tissue (lanes 10 and 21); brown adipose tissue (lanes 11 and 22).
Figure 3 shows specific staining of adipose tissue in animals doubly transgenic for aP2/Cre and loxP-βgal. In contrast, no X-Gal staining was detected in heart, skeletal muscle, kidney or brain cells (data not shown).

As reported earlier, Cre expression is stably transmitted in transgenic mice and high levels of Cre do not appear to be toxic to the mice (8). Thus, a colony of adipose-expressing Cre mice can be easily maintained. The targeted expression of the Cre recombinase in adipose tissue will facilitate the analysis of the function of a variety of genes in adipocytes. Mice with deletion of loxP-flanked genes in an adipose-specific manner can be generated by crossing the aP2/Cre transgenic line to mice with any loxP-flanked locus of interest. These animals will be helpful in the analysis of the function of a variety of genes in the adipose tissue.

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