

Short Communication

Immunization with a Nontoxic/Nonfibrillar Amyloid- β Homologous Peptide Reduces Alzheimer's Disease-Associated Pathology in Transgenic Mice

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Transgenic mice with brain amyloid- β (A β) plaques immunized with aggregated A β 1-42 have reduced cerebral amyloid burden. However, the use of A β 1-42 in humans may not be appropriate because it crosses the blood brain barrier, forms toxic fibrils, and can seed fibril formation. We report that immunization in transgenic APP mice (Tg2576) for 7 months with a soluble nonamyloidogenic, nontoxic A β homologous peptide reduced cortical and hippocampal brain amyloid burden by 89% ($P = 0.0002$) and 81% ($P = 0.0001$), respectively. Concurrently, brain levels of soluble A β 1-42 were reduced by 57% ($P = 0.0019$). Ramified microglia expressing interleukin-1 β associated with the A β plaques were absent in the immunized mice indicating reduced inflammation in these animals. These promising findings suggest that immunization with nonamyloidogenic A β derivatives represents a potentially safer therapeutic approach to reduce amyloid burden in Alzheimer's disease, instead of using toxic A β fibrils. (*Am J Pathol* 2001, 159:439-447)

Evidence that amyloid plays an important role in the early pathogenesis of Alzheimer's disease (AD) comes from various studies.¹⁻³ Genetic analyses of families with early-onset AD have revealed mutations in chromosome 21, near or within the A β sequence, in addition to mutations within the presenilin 1 and 2 genes. Most of these mutations lead to an increased production of A β 1-42 and/or total A β . Also, Down's syndrome patients have three copies of the amyloid precursor protein (APP) gene and develop AD neuropathology at an early age. In addition,

A β fibrils are toxic in neuronal culture⁴ and to some extent when injected into animal brains.^{5,6}

To date there is no cure or effective therapy for reducing a patient's amyloid burden or preventing amyloid deposition in AD. Amyloid-related therapeutic strategies include the use of compounds that affect processing of the amyloid- β precursor protein (APP),⁷ interfere with fibril formation, or that promote fibril disassembly.⁸⁻¹⁰ *In vitro* studies have shown that monoclonal antibodies raised against the N-terminal region of A β can disaggregate A β fibrils, maintain A β solubility, and prevent A β toxicity in cell culture.^{11,12} Schenk and colleagues¹³ extended these studies to an *in vivo* situation by vaccinating transgenic (Tg) APP mice (PDAPP) with aged, fibrillar A β 1-42 in which the treatment resulted in a reduction of amyloid burden and associated pathology. This effect is thought to be mediated by antibodies, because peripherally administered antibodies against A β have been shown to reduce brain parenchymal amyloid burden.¹⁴ In addition, intranasal immunization with freshly solubilized A β 1-40 reduces cerebral amyloid burden.¹⁵ Recently, two studies demonstrated that a vaccination-induced reduction in brain amyloid deposits resulted in cognitive improvements.^{16,17} Both groups used the same protocol as Schenk and colleagues,¹³ which is injection of fibrillar A β 1-42 peptide mixed with Freund's adjuvant. Although these results provide promise for using immunomodulation as a general approach to treat AD, immunization with intact A β may not be feasible for humans because of potential toxicity. First, A β crosses the blood brain barrier in experimental animals,¹⁸ forms toxic fibrils,⁴ and further it can seed fibril formation.¹⁹ Therefore, in humans, it is possible that A β 1-42 can co-deposit on existing amyloid plaques leading to increased toxicity, and may actually promote plaque formation. Secondly, although autoim-

Supported by MetLife Award (to B. F.) and National Institutes of Health grants AG15408, AR02594, AG17617, and AG05891.

Accepted for publication May 4, 2001.

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munity has not been observed in the mice vaccinated with human A β , it is more likely to occur in humans vaccinated with the human form of A β . Overall, the use of peptides that are not fibrillogenic/toxic and not identical to endogenous A β should reduce the likelihood of these serious side effects.

We have in earlier reports demonstrated that LPFFD, a nonamyloidogenic peptide with sequence homology to A β , blocks fibril formation,⁸ and induces *in vivo* disassembly of fibrillar A β deposits.⁹ Extension of peptides with these properties to include the major immunogenic sites of A β takes advantage of their lack of amyloidogenicity/toxicity while resulting in antibody generation against A β , that leads to clearance of A β plaques.

We have now designed a highly soluble nonamyloidogenic peptide homologous to A β that has a reduced ability to adopt a β -sheet conformation and, therefore, a much lower risk of toxicity in humans. This peptide was designed to have reduced fibrillogenic potential and enhanced immunogenicity while maintaining the major immunogenic sites of A β peptides. Accordingly, the peptide contains the first 30 amino acid residues of A β with six lysine residues at the N-terminus. Poly-L-lysine enhances immunogenicity,²⁰ and the coupling of lysine residues to the C-terminus of short A β sequences within the 15 to 25 domain of A β has recently been proposed by Pallitto and colleagues²¹ in the design of anti- β -sheet peptides or A β fibrillogenesis inhibitors. The use of potential peptide inhibitors of fibril formation as immunogens has never been previously proposed.

Materials and Methods

Peptides and Other Chemicals

The peptides used (A β 1-40, A β 1-42, A β 1-30-NH₂, and K6A β 1-30-NH₂) were synthesized at the Keck Foundation (Yale University, New Haven, CT), as described previously.⁹ The peptide used for the immunizations, K6A β 1-30-NH₂, maintains the two major immunogenic sites of A β peptides, which are residues 1 to 11 and 22 to 28 of A β 1-42 based on the antigenic index of Jameson and Wolf,²² and on preliminary results obtained in our laboratory. All other chemicals were from Sigma, St. Louis, MO, unless otherwise stated.

Secondary Structure Studies

Secondary structure (α -helix, β -sheet, and random coil) of the peptides was evaluated by circular dichroism as described previously.^{8,23} Results are expressed as molar ellipticity in units of degree cm² dmol⁻¹, and the data were analyzed by the Lincomb and convex constraint algorithms²⁴ to obtain the percentages of different types of secondary structure.

Study of Amyloid Fibril Formation in Vitro

Aliquots of the peptides prepared in 0.1 mol/L Tris, pH 7.4, were incubated for different times, and their fibril

formation compared to that of A β 1-30-NH₂ and A β 1-42. *In vitro* fibrillogenesis was evaluated by a fluorometric assay based on the fluorescence emission by thioflavin T, as we have previously described.^{8,25} Thioflavin T binds specifically to amyloid and this binding produces a shift in its emission spectrum and a fluorescent enhancement proportional to the amount of amyloid formed.²⁶

Neurotoxicity

The potential neurotoxicity of K6A β 1-30-NH₂ (1 to 100 μ mol/L) was evaluated at 2 and 6 days in a human neuroblastoma cell line (SK-N-SH) using the standard MTT assay as described by the manufacturer (Roche Molecular Biochemicals, Indianapolis, IN). A β 1-30-NH₂, A β 1-40, and A β 1-42 were used as control peptides. Briefly, cells were plated at 10,000 cells/100 μ l culture medium per well in flat-bottom, 96-well microtiter plates. The cells were allowed to attach to the plate overnight in an incubator (37°C, 5.0% CO₂), and then 10 μ l of freshly prepared peptide solution (in nanopure H₂O) was added. A β 1-42 was only partially soluble at 100 μ mol/L and was, therefore, added as a suspension at that concentration. Subsequent steps were as described in the assay protocol.

Animals

The vaccination was performed in the Tg2576 APP mouse model developed by Karen Hsiao and colleagues.²⁷ These mice develop A β plaques as early as at 11 to 13 months of age. We chose this model over the double Tg APP/PS1 model,²⁸ because the age of onset and progression of A β deposition in the single Tg APP mice more closely resembles that of AD. Age-matched vehicle-treated Tg mice and non-Tg littermates receiving K6A β 1-30-NH₂ were used as controls, and the animals received their first injection at 11 to 13 months, at which time few plaques should already be present. Four mice were in each group. The animals were maintained on a 12-hour light-dark cycle, and had access to food and water *ad libitum*. The animal care was in accordance with institutional guidelines.

Vaccine Administration

K6A β 1-30-NH₂ was supplied as trifluoroacetic acid salt. The immunization procedure was performed as previously described by Schenk and colleagues¹³ except that the peptide was not incubated overnight at 37°C before injection. Briefly, the peptide was dissolved in phosphate-buffered saline (PBS) at a concentration of 2 mg/ml and then mixed 1:1 (v/v) with the adjuvant or PBS. Complete Freund's adjuvant was used for the first injection, incomplete Freund's adjuvant for the next three injections, and PBS from the fifth injection forward. The mice received a subcutaneous injection of 100 μ l of the mixture (ie, 100 μ g/100 μ l) followed by a second injection 2 weeks later, and then monthly thereafter.

Antibody Titers

Antibody titers were determined by serial dilutions of sera using an enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA) as described previously,²⁹ in which A β or its derivative is coated onto microtiter wells. The titer, defined as the dilution yielding 50% of the maximum signal, was detected by a goat anti-mouse IgG linked to a horseradish peroxidase (Amersham Pharmacia Biotech, Piscataway, NJ), and tetramethyl benzidine (Pierce, Rockford, IL) was the substrate.

Histology

Mice were anesthetized with sodium pentobarbital (150 mg/kg, intraperitoneally), perfused transaortically with phosphate buffer and the brains processed as previously described.⁵ The right hemisphere was immersion-fixed in periodate-lysine-paraformaldehyde, whereas the left hemisphere was snap-frozen for measurements of A β levels using established ELISA methods.^{30,31} Serial coronal sections (40 μ m) were cut and five series of sections at 0.2-mm intervals were saved for histological analysis of 1) 6E10-, 2) Congo Red-, 3) interleukin-1 β (IL-1 β -OX42/tomato lectin-, 4) GFAP-, and 5) cresyl violet-stained sections. 6E10 recognizes A β and stains both pre-amyloid and A β plaques.³² Congo Red staining was performed to identify amyloid lesions in these animals. GFAP is a component of the glial intermediate filaments that form part of the cytoskeleton and is found predominantly in astrocytes. Microglia seem to be the major source of IL-1 within the central nervous system,³³ and OX-42 recognizes CD11b on microglia, a rat equivalent of the human C3bi receptor.³⁴ Tomato lectin binds to poly-*N*-acetyl lactosamine residues and has in neural tissue specific affinity for microglial cells.³⁵ Both astrocytes and microglia are associated with A β deposits. Staining with cresyl violet was performed to determine whether the immunization was causing neuronal shrinkage and/or cell loss in these animals. After sectioning, the series were placed in ethylene glycol cryoprotectant and stored at -20°C until used.

Cresyl Violet and Congo Red: Mounted sections were defatted in xylene and hydrated in a gradient of ethyl alcohol and water series. Staining was performed as previously described.^{5,6,8}

6E10, GFAP, IL-1 β , and OX-42: Staining was performed as previously described.^{5,8} Briefly, sections were incubated in 6E10 (kindly provided by Richard Kascsak, Institute for Basic Research) primary antibody that selectively binds to human A β at a 1:1000 dilution. A mouse-on-mouse immunodetection kit (Vector Laboratories, Burlingame, CA) was used in which the anti-mouse IgG secondary antibody was used at a 1:2000 dilution. GFAP (1:500; DAKO, Glostrup, Denmark), IL-1 β (1:250; Endogen, Rockford, IL), and OX-42 (1:250; Biosource Int., Camarillo, CA) staining was performed the same way as the 6E10 staining, except the secondary antibody was diluted 1:1300. The sections were reacted in 3,3'-diaminobenzidine tetrahydrochloride (DAB) with or without nickel ammonium sulfate (Ni; Mallinckrodt, Paris, KY) in-

tenification. For double-labeling of IL-1 β and A β plaques, sections were first stained for IL-1 β (DAB/Ni; black) in which peroxidase was the enzyme. The plaques (6E10) were then stained using the Vector Red alkaline-phosphatase substrate kit I (Vector).

Tomato Lectin: Sections removed from the cryoprotectant were washed in PBS, 0.3% Triton-X-100 in PBS (PBS-Tx), and then incubated for 30 minutes in 0.3% hydrogen peroxide in PBS to quench endogenous peroxidase activity. After 2 hours of incubation with tomato lectin (10 μ g/ml PBS; Vector), sections were washed in PBS-Tx and then reacted with avidin-horseradish peroxidase (Vector) for 1 hour. Subsequent steps were as those used for the antibody staining.

Image Analysis

Immunohistochemistry of tissue sections was quantified with a Bioquant image analysis system, and unbiased sampling was used.³⁶ All procedures were performed by an individual blind to the experimental condition of the study. Cortical area analyzed was dorsomedially from the cingulate cortex and extended ventrolaterally to the rhinal fissure within the right hemisphere. The area of the grid was $800 \times 800 \mu\text{m}^2$ and amyloid load was measured in 10 frames per mouse (each: $640 \times 480 \mu\text{m}^2$), chosen randomly. Hippocampal measurements were performed on the entire hippocampus in a similar manner as the cortical analysis. The A β burden is defined as the percentage of area in the measurement field occupied by reaction product.

Sandwich ELISA Assay for Soluble A β Levels

Before extraction of A β from brain tissue, 10% (w/v) homogenates were prepared in tissue homogenization buffer (20 mmol/L Tris, pH 7.4, 250 mmol/L sucrose, 1 mmol/L ethylenediaminetetraacetic acid, 1 mmol/L EGTA). Immediately before use, 1/100 volume of 100 mmol/L phenylmethylsulfonyl fluoride stock solution (in ethanol) and 1/1000 volume of LAP (5 mg each of leupeptin, antipain, and pepstatin A per ml of *N-N*-dimethylformamide) were added to the homogenization buffer. The homogenate was then thoroughly mixed with an equal volume of 0.4% diethylamine/100 mmol/L NaCl, then spun at $135,000 \times g$ for 1 hour at 4°C , and subsequently neutralized with 1/10 volume 0.5 mol/L Tris, pH 6.8. The samples were then aliquoted, flash-frozen on dry ice, and stored at -80°C until loaded onto plates. Soluble A β levels were measured in the left hemisphere using monoclonal antibody 6E10 (specific to an epitope present on 1 to 16 amino acid residues of A β), rabbit antiserum R162 (specific for A β 40), and rabbit antiserum 165 (specific for A β 42) in a double-antibody sandwich ELISA as described previously.^{30,31} The optical density (OD) was measured at 450 nm in a micro-ELISA reader. The relationship between OD and A β 40 or A β 42 concentrations was determined by a four-parameter logistic log function. Nonlinear curve fitting was performed with KlicnetiCalc program (Biotek Instruments, Inc., Winooski, VT)

Table 1. Circular Dichroism Assay at Different Time Points Shows the Percentages of α -Helix, β -Sheet, and Random Coil as Calculated by the Lincomb and Convex Constraint Algorithms

Time (h)	A β 1-42			A β 1-30-NH ₂			K6A β 1-30-NH ₂		
	α -Helix	β -Sheet	Random coil	α -Helix	β -Sheet	Random coil	α -Helix	β -Sheet	Random coil
0	9	36	55	5	37	58	2	18	79
24	9	40	51	8	36	56	5	16	78
96	5	55	40	7	49	44	34	16	50

Both A β 1-42 and A β 1-30 had a high β -sheet content that increased throughout time. The peptide with the polylysine at the N-terminus (K6A β 1-30-NH₂) had a much lower β -sheet content that did not increase with incubation.

to convert OD of plasma to estimated concentrations. All samples were coded, and the investigators were blinded to group assignment until levels were measured and recorded. The detection limit of the assay is 10 pg/ml for A β 40 and A β 42. The percent coefficient of variation normally ranges from 8 to 14% (interassay) and 10 to 18% (intraassay).

Data Analysis

The cell culture data were analyzed by one-way analysis of variance, followed by a Dunnett's test for post hoc analysis (GraphPad Prism 3.0). An unbiased stereological image analysis system (Bioquant; R&M Biometrics Inc., Nashville, TN) was used to determine the amyloid burden in 6E10-stained brain sections. The data for the amyloid burden and the levels of soluble A β within the brain were analyzed by a Student's *t*-test, two-tailed.

Results

Before conducting the vaccination study it was necessary to confirm that the prototype peptide, KKKKKK-A β 1-30-NH₂, had indeed less β -sheet structure, reduced fibrillogenicity compared to A β 1-42, and that it was nontoxic in neuronal culture. The secondary structure of these peptides was determined by circular dichroism, and their ability to form amyloid fibrils by a thioflavin-T fluorometric assay. An additional control peptide was A β 1-30-NH₂.

Circular Dichroism Assay

Compounds with high β -sheet content are more toxic and more likely to form fibrils than compounds with low β -sheet content.³⁷ The peptide with the polylysine at the N-terminus had much less β -sheet content than the amidated A β 1-30 or A β 1-42 (Table 1).

Thioflavin T Assay

A β 1-42 was already fibrillar at *t* = 0, whereas A β 1-30-NH₂ gradually formed fibrils throughout time (Figure 1A). The relatively high degree of thioflavin T staining of the A β 1-30-NH₂ versus A β 1-42 after 6 days reflects the known batch-to-batch variability of A β peptide fibril formation,³⁸ as well as some degree of pellet formation by

the A β 1-42 with prolonged incubation. K6A β 1-30-NH₂ did not form fibrils after incubation at 37°C for at least 15 days.

Neurotoxicity

To further assess the safety of this vaccination approach the neurotoxicity of K6A β 1-30-NH₂ was determined. K6A β 1-30-NH₂ had no effect on cell viability at 2 days and was slightly trophic at 6 days (*P* < 0.05), whereas A β 1-40 and A β 1-42 were toxic (*P* < 0.05 to 0.001) to the human neuroblastoma cells (SK-N-SH), compared to vehicle group, as determined by the MTT assay (Figure 1, B and C). A β 1-30-NH₂ had no effect. During the incubation period, aggregates were visible under the microscope only in culture wells containing A β 1-42 (10 to 100 μ mol/L).

Antibody Titer

Tg2576 and their non-Tg littermates were vaccinated with K6A β 1-30-NH₂ or vehicle. Almost all of the mice developed antibodies against the immunogen (K6A β 1-30-NH₂), that cross-reacted with A β 1-40 and A β 1-42. The titer, defined as the dilution yielding 50% of the maximum signal, ranged from a few hundreds to several thousands (data not shown). Vehicle-treated animals injected with the adjuvant and PBS did not develop antibodies against these three peptides (data not shown). Nontransgenic mice had generally higher titer against all three peptides, and the polyclonal antibodies had higher avidity for the immunogen compared to A β 1-40 and A β 1-42. These findings are as expected because the immunogen is based on the human sequence of A β that differs in three amino acids from the mouse A β ,³⁹ and K6A β 1-30-NH₂ that elicited the immune response should have more binding motifs for antibodies than the intact A β peptides.

Amyloid Burden and Associated Histopathology

The mice were killed at 18 to 20 months of age after 7 months of treatment, and their right hemisphere was processed for histology as described.⁵ The brain sections were stained with cresyl violet, Congo Red, tomato lectin, and with antibodies against: 1) human A β (6E10), microglia (OX-42, IL-1 β), and GFAP (anti-GFAP). After K6A β 1-30-NH₂ vaccination, cortical and hippocampal amyloid burden in the Tg mice was reduced by 89 and 81%,

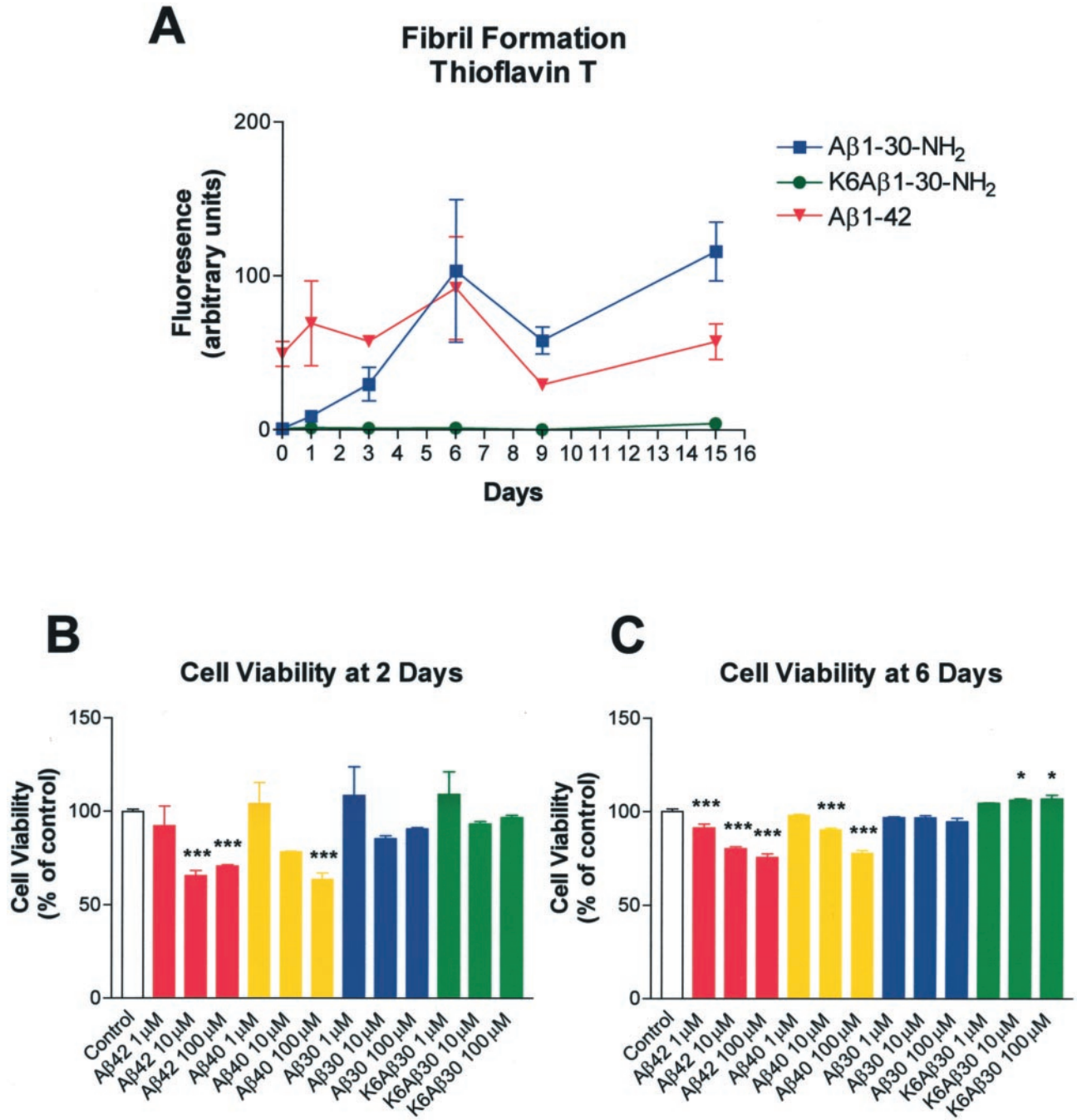


Figure 1. A: Thioflavin T fluorometric assay. Fibril formation of A β 1-42, A β 1-30-NH₂, and K6A β 1-30-NH₂ (KKKKKKDAEF... etc) was measured *in vitro* after incubation at 37°C. K6A β 1-30-NH₂ was the only peptide that did not form fibrils at any of the time points. **B** and **C:** A β 40 and 42 were toxic to human neuroblastoma cells (SK-N-SH) in culture as determined by the MTT assay, whereas K6A β 30-NH₂ had no effect at 2 days (**B**) and was slightly trophic at 6 days (**C**). A β 1-30-NH₂ had no effect. *, $P < 0.05$; **, $P < 0.01$; ***, $P < 0.001$ compared to VEH group (one-way analysis of variance).

respectively (Figure 2, A and B, and Figure 3, A and B), as determined by stereological techniques. The total number of Congo Red-positive amyloid deposits was reduced in the immunized animals; however, the percentage of A β -immunoreactive lesions that were Congo Red-positive appeared to remain the same as in the nonimmunized Tg mice. The clearance of the amyloid deposits seemed to be similar in other brain regions. Selected brain sections from a control mouse with high amyloid burden and an immunized mouse with reduced amyloid

burden were stained with sera from several immunized and control mice, whose antibody titer ranged from 0 to 3000. As expected, with increasing titer more plaques were stained and the pattern was similar in both mice (data not shown). There was no obvious difference between the Tg treatment groups in cresyl violet staining. Reactive astrocytes were observed associated with all amyloid plaques. Because the vehicle-treated Tg mice had a higher plaque burden, they had more clusters of astrocytes than immunized Tg mice. OX-42 staining of

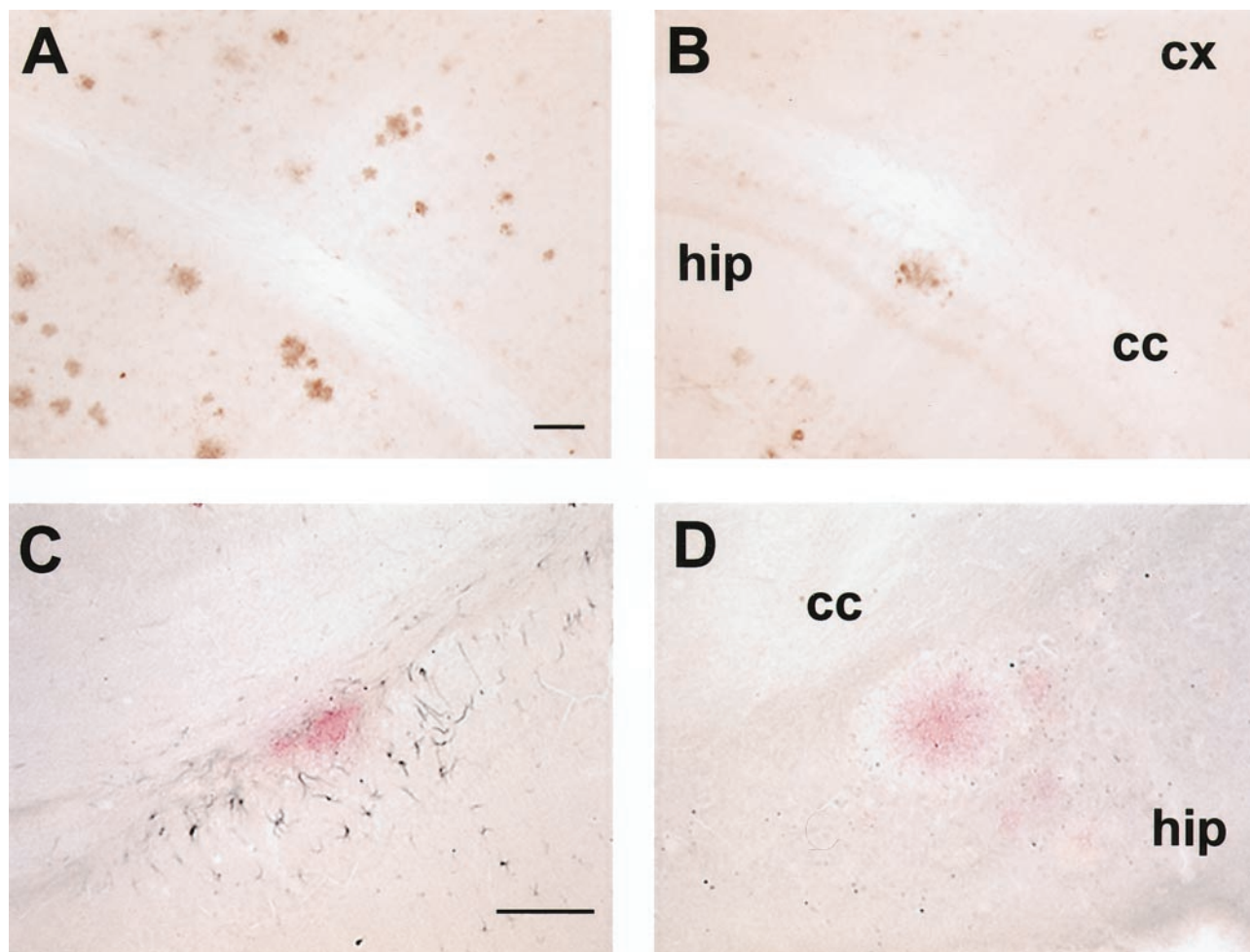


Figure 2. Coronal sections (original magnification, $\times 50$) stained with 6E10 against $A\beta$ (brown), through the hippocampus and cortex in a Tg control (A) and K6A β 1-30-treated (B) Tg mouse. C and D are adjacent sections (original magnifications, $\times 100$) double-stained for interleukin-1 β (black) that recognizes microglia, and $A\beta$ (red). Note the reduction of amyloid burden in the immunized mouse (B), and the lack of ramified microglia (D) surrounding $A\beta$ plaque in the same mouse, compared to a control mouse (A and C). Scale bars, 100 μ m (A and C). Abbreviations: hip, hippocampus; cx, cortex; ml, corpus callosum.

ramified rather than phagocytic (ameboid) microglia was predominantly observed associated with plaques. To verify that this lack of microglial phagocytes was not because of down-regulation of the CD11b receptor, the binding motif of OX-42,³⁴ sections from all treatment groups were stained with tomato lectin. This particular lectin binds to poly-*N*-acetyl lactosamine residues found predominantly in ramified and phagocytic microglial cells, in addition to endothelial and ependymal cells.³⁵ These two latter cell types were stained in all of the mice. The microglial lectin staining resembled the OX-42 staining. In other words, in both immunized and control Tg groups, the microglia did not have phagocytic morphology and number of ramified microglial processes per plaque seemed to be similar between immunized and nonimmunized mice (data not shown). On the other hand, IL-1 β staining of ramified microglial cells was prominent surrounding the $A\beta$ plaques in the control Tg mice (Figure 2C), whereas virtually no IL-1 β staining was observed in the immunized mice (Figure 2D). Significantly, there was no indication of glomerulonephritis in hematoxylin

and eosin-stained kidney sections from the K6A β 1-30-NH₂-treated mice, suggesting that the mice had not developed an autoimmune disorder at the time of sacrifice.

Soluble A β by ELISA

Measurements of soluble $A\beta$ levels were performed on the left hemisphere of the mice whose right hemisphere was used for histology. Soluble $A\beta$ 1-42 was reduced by 57% after vaccination with K6A β 1-30-NH₂ for 7 months ($P = 0.0019$), compared to control group (Figure 3C). Although there was a trend for reduced levels of soluble total $A\beta$ and $A\beta$ 1-40 in the K6A β 1-30-treated group, the values were not significantly different from the vehicle group.

Overall, immunization in Tg APP mice with nonamyloidogenic/non toxic (low β -sheet content) $A\beta$ homologous peptide results in a similar reduction of amyloid burden as observed by Schenk and colleagues¹³ in which they used a fibrillar/toxic (high β -sheet content) $A\beta$ 1-42.

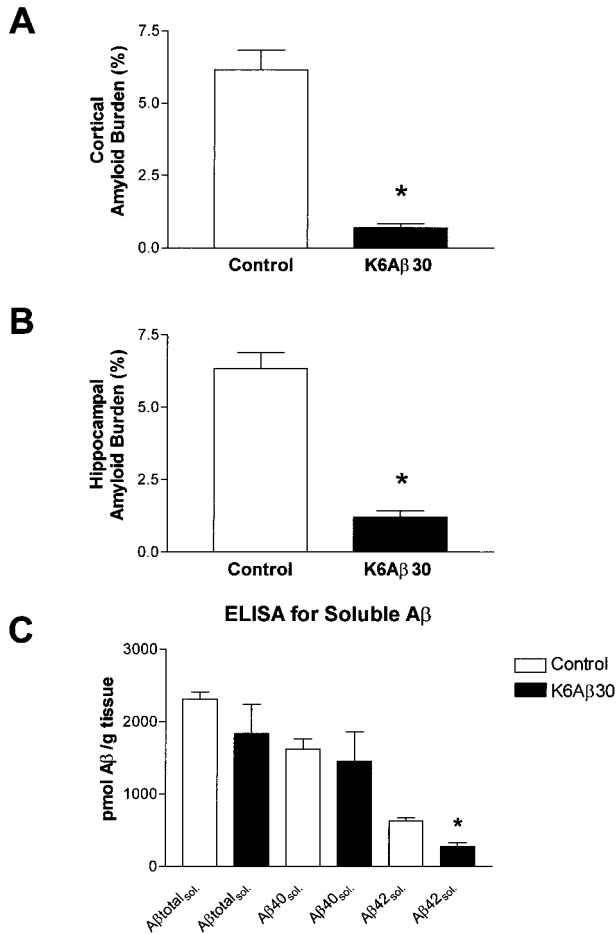


Figure 3. Reduction in cortical (A) and hippocampal (B) amyloid burden (6E10) after 7 months of treatment with K6A β 1-30-NH₂. There was an 89% reduction in cortical amyloid burden (*, $P = 0.0002$; t -test; $n = 4$ per group) and an 81% reduction in hippocampal amyloid burden (*, $P = 0.0001$). Soluble A β 1-42 levels (C) were reduced by 57% within the brains of the vaccinated mice (*, $P = 0.0019$).

Discussion

These findings demonstrate that A β aggregates/fibrils are not necessary to elicit a sufficient immune response that results in clearance of A β plaques. The use of soluble nonfibrillar/nontoxic A β homologous peptides, such as K6A β 1-30-NH₂, is likely to be a safer vaccination approach for humans.

The mechanism of the vaccination-induced reduction in cerebral amyloid burden is not fully understood. However, based on the passive vaccination study by Bard and colleagues¹⁴ it is likely that antibodies have a pivotal role. Interestingly, they demonstrated that there was no correlation between antibody efficacy and affinity for soluble A β or binding to aggregated synthetic A β peptide. Effective antibodies were, however, able to bind to plaques in unfixed brain sections. Janus and colleagues,¹⁷ using the same protocol as Schenk and colleagues¹³ observed that the sera from A β -immunized mice preferentially stained dense core plaques rather than diffuse A β deposits suggesting that the antibodies may have a higher affinity for β -sheet A β . Based on these somewhat contradictory findings more studies are

needed on A β -antibody interactions that may give insight into the mechanism of antibody-mediated A β clearance. It is unlikely that these antibodies are affecting the production of A β because they do not recognize APP.¹⁵ It is more probable that the antibodies enhance clearance of A β through microglial activation after antibody binding to A β plaques.^{13,14} Their effect may also in part be because of binding to soluble A β within the brain, that alters the equilibrium between deposited A β versus soluble A β . Given the numerous reports that show that A β can bi-directionally cross the blood brain barrier,⁴⁰⁻⁴⁷ the vaccination effect may be in part mediated through binding of the antibodies to soluble A β in peripheral fluids. Subsequent reduction in peripheral A β levels may alter the equilibrium between A β found within and outside the central nervous system that may result in efflux of A β out of this compartment. This is particularly likely since most of the antibodies are circulating in peripheral tissues and the tg mice have high levels of A β not only within the central nervous system but also in the periphery. A recent report shows that in the Tg2576 mice, plasma levels of A β decrease as cerebral plaque burden increases.⁴⁸ This suggests an interaction between these two compartments that can be manipulated.

Interestingly, in the behavioral vaccination study by Morgan and colleagues,¹⁶ they observed a partial reversal in cognitive deficits in APP/PS1 mice although cerebral amyloid burden as measured by immunohistochemistry was not significantly reduced. As pointed out by Morgan and colleagues,¹⁶ soluble A β has been proposed to cause synapse loss in APP Tg mice, as some Tg lines have reduced synaptophysin staining in the dentate gyrus without A β deposits.⁴⁹ Therefore, a possible explanation for the cognitive improvement in the immunized mice in the absence of reduced plaque burden, was a decrease in soluble A β , although this potential connection was not measured in their study.¹⁶ Our results show that after 7 months of treatment, the 81 to 89% reduction in amyloid plaque burden is associated with a 57% reduction in soluble A β 1-42 within the brain, whereas the reduction in soluble total A β and A β 1-40 was not significantly different from the control group. In other words, soluble A β is reduced less than plaque A β . However, detailed time course studies must be performed to determine further any changes in the equilibrium between plaque A β and soluble A β both within and outside the brain. Our findings indirectly demonstrate the importance of A β 1-42 for plaque maintenance. Overall, it is likely that several different mechanisms may result in reduction of cerebral amyloid burden, depending on the animal model and the properties of the peptide used for immunization.

Numerous studies have suggested that amyloid deposition can activate inflammatory cascades in the brain, such as increased IL-1 β production associated with neuronal injury and death.^{6,50} It is possible that our immunization with A β homologous peptides could also stimulate such negative inflammatory pathways, along with amyloid reduction. However, we observed few phagocytic microglia in our immunized animals, as identified by OX-42 immunoreactivity or tomato lectin binding. This is

not surprising because after 7 months of treatment most of the plaques have been cleared. Furthermore, in the immunized group of mice microglial IL-1 β staining was virtually absent, whereas numerous ramified IL-1 β -positive microglia were associated with the plaques in the control Tg group. We have previously reported a similar lack of IL-1 β staining in a rat model of cerebral amyloidosis after treatment with a β -sheet breaker peptide.⁹ However, in that acute study (16 days) this effect was associated with an extensive increase in phagocytic OX-42 staining, indicating that phagocytes do not express IL-1 β . Our current observations may suggest that an important effect of the immunization is reduced inflammation within the brain.

We are currently further exploring the therapeutic potential of K6A β 1-30-NH₂ and related peptides by using aluminum-based adjuvants that are approved for use in humans, and by assessing the behavioral status of the mice before and during the treatment period. Overall, our approach has a much lower risk of leading to toxic effects in humans, than the use of A β 1-40/42, while maintaining the therapeutic potential of immunization for AD.

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