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Role of the Bloom’s syndrome helicase in maintenance of genome stability

Imperial Cancer Research Fund Laboratories, Institute of Molecular Medicine, University of Oxford, John Radcliffe Hospital, Oxford OX3 9DS, U.K.

Abstract

The RecQ family of DNA helicases has members in all organisms analysed. In humans, defects in three family members are associated with disease conditions: BLM is defective in Bloom’s syndrome, WRN in Werner’s syndrome and RTS in Rothmund-Thomson syndrome. In each case, cells from affected individuals show inherent genomic instability. The focus of our work is the Bloom’s syndrome gene and its product, BLM. Here, we review the latest information concerning the roles of BLM in the maintenance of genome integrity.

Background

The maintenance of chromosome stability is essential for viability in all organisms. In mammals, a breakdown in genome maintenance is associated with both tumorigenesis and cancer progression (reviewed in [1]). Cells have, therefore, evolved a variety of different mechanisms for ensuring that the integrity of the genome is maintained as far as is possible, given the many and varied ‘insults’ to which the genome is subjected. One group of proteins that plays a crucial role in the maintenance of genome stability is the RecQ family, named after the Escherichia coli RecQ protein, which has multiple members in human cells (reviewed in [2]). One of these human RecQ family proteins, BLM [3], is defective in the rare disorder Bloom’s syndrome (BS), which is associated with excessive genomic instability and an enormously elevated incidence of cancers (reviewed in [4]). The biochemical properties and putative cellular roles of BLM will be the subject of this paper.

BLM and other RecQ family proteins

The RecQ family is represented in all organisms that have been analysed. In the commonly used laboratory organisms Escherichia coli, Saccharomyces cere-
Schematic representation of the domain structure of the BLM protein

The central helicase domain, containing seven conserved motifs, is labelled and shown in grey. The N-terminal domain contains two regions with blocks of acidic residues, shown as stippled boxes. The C-terminal domain contains a region shown with cross-hatching, adjacent to the helicase domain, which shows limited identity with a domain in the other RecQ helicases. Adjacent to this is the HRDC (helicase and RNase D C-terminal) domain, shown with light stippling, which is a putative nucleic acid binding motif. The nuclear localization signal (NLS) sequence in the C-terminal domain is shown by a black vertical bar. The N-terminal 431 amino acids have been shown by Beresten et al. [29] to oligomerize in vitro. This domain is indicated by the upper horizontal bar marked 'oligomerization'. The two regions near the N- and C-termini of BLM that mediate interactions with topoisomerase IIIα are indicated by lower horizontal lines.

All RecQ family proteins include a domain of approx. 450 amino acids that contains seven highly conserved motifs, including a ‘Walker A-box’ ATP-binding motif and a DExH box which is a characteristic of this family (Figure 1). These motifs are found in several DNA and RNA helicases. As discussed below, RecQ family proteins are 3'–5' DNA helicases. In some cases, such as with RecQ and RECQL, the protein comprises little more than this ‘helicase’ domain. For other family members, including Sgs1p, Rqh1p, BLM, WRN and RECQ4, long N- and C-terminal domains are also present [2]. The possible functional roles of these domains are discussed below.

Phenotype of BS cells

BS cells show several manifestations of genetic instability. The hallmark feature, which is used in the diagnosis of the disorder, is an approx. 10-fold elevation in the frequency of sister chromatid exchanges [4]. These apparently reciprocal exchanges between sister chromatids have been shown to represent homologous recombination events [11]. BS cells also show a mutator phenotype and an increased accumulation of quadriradial chromosomes and other chromosomal aberrations, which appear to signify a failure to
plex DNA is an unusual form of DNA that can
for other RecQ helicases, is G-quadruplex DNA
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function during replication, see [2,6].

Biochemical properties of BLM
BLM has been purified in recombinant form from
budding yeast and shown to be a DNA helicase
that translocates along DNA in the 3′→5′ di-
rection [13]. The active form of BLM is oligo-
meric, with a molecular mass of approx. 850 kDa.
Consistent with this, BLM appears to form oligo-
meric rings, most of which are hexameric [14].
The BLM helicase can unwind a wide variety of
structurally diverse DNA substrates. However,
the substrate specificity of BLM is rather atypical
for a DNA helicase, which may provide clues as to
the cellular function of the enzyme. BLM does not
unwind or even bind to blunt-ended, fully duplex
DNA molecules [15]. It can unwind partial
duplex molecules if these either contain a single-
stranded 3′ tail or form a forked structure. Never-
theless, BLM can unwind certain blunt-ended
duplexes. In particular, it has been shown that the
insertion of a 12 bp ‘bubble’ in the centre of an
otherwise duplex molecule creates a good sub-
strate for unwinding by BLM (P. Mohaghegh and
I. D. Hickson, unpublished work). Moreover,
BLM can unwind a synthetic X-structure, com-
prising four blunt-ended arms which are a model
for the Holliday junction recombination inter-
mediate (see below). Given that these X-structures
are not thought to contain any single-stranded
DNA under the conditions used for unwinding (in
the presence of Mg2+), it may be that BLM effects
DNA substrate recognition through the recog-
nition of particular DNA structures and not the
mere presence of single-stranded DNA. Consis-
tent with an ability to disrupt X-structures, recent
data indicate that BLM can promote the ATP-
dependent branch migration of Holliday junctions
in vitro [15]. It has been proposed that this activity,
which is conserved in WRN [16], is involved in the
suppression of hyper-recombination at sites of
blocked replication forks. For models of BLM
function during replication, see [2,6].

Another good substrate for BLM, and indeed
for other RecQ helicases, is G-quadruplex DNA
[17]. It may be significant that other classes of
helicase cannot unwind this structure. G-quadrup-
plex DNA is an unusual form of DNA that can
form (at least in vitro) within G-rich stretches of
DNA, and comprises a square planer structure
stabilized by Hoogsteen base pairing. G-DNA is
significantly more thermostable than a corres-
ponding B-DNA structure of the same sequence.
Sequences that can form G-DNA in vitro are
present in the G-rich strand of human telomeric
DNA, within ribosomal DNA, and at certain other
genetic loci (reviewed in [18]). One potential role
for BLM and/or other RecQ family helicases is,
therefore, to disrupt G-DNA structures as and
when they form in cellular DNA, to permit DNA
metabolism to occur. For example, during
DNA replication, G-DNA might form in the
single-stranded DNA at the fork, and need
to be disrupted to prevent fork blockage or chromosomal breakage/deletion.

Interactions between BLM and other
cellular proteins
BLM has extended N- and C-terminal domains
that are not obviously conserved in other RecQ
family helicases [2,3]. It is likely, therefore, that
these domains impart properties that distinguish
the functions of BLM from those of other family
members. One probable role of these extended
domains is to direct interactions with other nuclear
proteins. We have studied in detail two protein
partners for BLM, both of which are likely to be
relevant to the functions of the enzyme in vivo.
One partner, replication protein A (RPA), is the
major binding protein for single-stranded DNA in
human cells, with roles in DNA replication, repair
and recombination. The interaction between
BLM and RPA is a direct one, as indicated by the
fact that purified BLM and RPA form a complex
in vitro [19]. The interaction with BLM is
mediated by the 70 kDa subunit of the hetero-
trimeric RPA protein. The interaction has been
shown to be a functional one, with RPA increasing
the processivity of the BLM helicase reaction,
permitting BLM to unwind longer substrates
(≥ 259 bp) than it is capable of doing alone. This
stimulation of BLM helicase activity is not a
consequence solely of binding of single-stranded
DNA by RPA, since heterologous single-
stranded-DNA-binding proteins do not stimulate
BLM.

A second binding partner for BLM is topo-
isomerase IIIz, a so-called type IA topoisomerase.
This interaction is conserved in evolution; for
example, Sgs1p and Top3p form a complex in
budding yeast [20]. Moreover, the genes encoding
Sgs1p and Top3p in budding yeast, and Rqh1p
and Top3p in fission yeast, show a similar genetic interaction, in that the defects seen in top3Δ mutants are in each case suppressed by mutation of the corresponding RecQ helicase gene [20–22]. Yet another connection between RecQ helicases and topoisomerase III comes from the finding that RECQ5 interacts with both topoisomerase IIIα and IIIβ, the two known isoforms of topoisomerase III in human cells [23]. The interaction between BLM and topoisomerase IIIα is direct and is mediated by residues present in both the N- and C-terminal domains of BLM [24]. In the absence of BLM, in BS cells, topoisomerase IIIα is mis-localized in the nucleus, opening up the possibility that defects in topoisomerase IIIα function might underlie at least some of the phenotypes of BS cells [24]. The precise role of the BLM–topoisomerase IIIα complex is not clear at this stage, but Harmon et al. [25] have shown that, together, E. coli RecQ and topoisomerase IIIα can catalyse the catenation of plasmid DNA. It has been suggested that such an activity may be involved in resolving aberrant recombination intermediates. For a more detailed discussion of this and other roles of this helicase–topoisomerase complex, see Wu et al. [26].

**Subcellular localization of BLM**

Using antibodies that are specific for BLM, several groups have analysed the subcellular distribution of BLM in human cells. There is general agreement that the bulk of BLM protein is found in specific nucleoplasmic foci, where it co-localizes with topoisomerase IIIα [24]. These foci correspond to one class of previously characterized nuclear structure, termed PML nuclear bodies, certain [27]. BLM is also found at sites of ongoing DNA replication, at least under certain circumstances, and in nucleoli [6,28]. Whether BLM translocates from site to site to effect its functions is not yet clear.

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**References**


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