Fibronectins: Multifunctional Modular Glycoproteins

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Fibronectins are large glycoproteins that have been implicated in a wide variety of cellular properties, particularly those involving the interactions of cells with extracellular materials. These properties include cell adhesion, morphology, cytoskeletal organization, migration, differentiation, oncogenic transformation, phagocytosis, and hemostasis. During the past several years, investigations in many laboratories have analyzed the expression, functions, and structure of fibronectins. These studies have revealed that fibronectins have a complex molecular structure consisting of multiple specific binding sites, and the complex biological phenomena in which fibronectins participate can now be considered in terms of this structure.

In this brief article we will review the current understanding of the structure and properties of fibronectins. Because a number of comprehensive reviews on various aspects of fibronectins have been published (1-13), we shall focus on overall concepts, recent developments and promising future research directions in this rapidly expanding field.

Sources of Fibronectins

In vivo, fibronectins are found in body fluids (300 μg/ml in plasma, lesser amounts in other fluids), soft connective tissue matrices, and most basement membranes. Fibronectins are synthesized by a wide variety of cells in vitro (Table I). Fibroblasts and endothelial cells are major producers, but many other cell types, including some epithelial cells, synthesize fibronectin at lower levels. There are at least two types of fibronectin, termed plasma and cellular fibronectins, although there may well be multiple forms of cellular fibronectin. Cellular and plasma fibronectins, although distinguishable, are very similar in structure and properties (see below). One major source of plasma fibronectin appears to be hepatocytes (14, 15) although endothelial cells (16-18) and macrophages (19-22) could also contribute, given their close association with the bloodstream.

Properties of Fibronectins

The basic properties of fibronectins are listed in Table II. The molecule is asymmetric and consists of two similar or identical subunits of molecular weight 220,000 ± 20,000 daltons held together by disulfide-bonding near their carboxyl termini. Biophysical measurements indicate that, although the molecule as a whole is flexible, it contains compact globular domains (23, 24). Electron microscopic results confirm the idea that the molecule is extended and flexible (25-27), although the globular domains have not yet been observed by this technique.

One important characteristic of fibronectins is that they are capable of interacting specifically with a wide variety of other macromolecules. Table III lists the various interactions, some of which have been studied in more detail than others. The best-established interactions, for which evidence exists both for their occurrence in vivo and for their specificity in vitro, are the interactions with gelatin and collagens, fibrin, factor XIIIa transglutaminase, heparin, and proteoglycans. In addition, it is possible that interactions between fibronectin and other matrix molecules are important in the formation of these fibrils. The detailed molecular interactions involved in the formation of extracellular matrices and basement membranes are another area of active research.

FUNCTIONS OF FIBRONECTINS

Table IV summarizes the cellular properties in which fibronectins have been implicated. The most thoroughly studied, and perhaps most basic, function of fibronectins is in the adhesion to solid substrates. Numerous studies have reported that fibronectins promote the adhesion and/or spreading of cells on a variety of materials including plastic, collagen, gelatin, and fibrin (33-36). Cells that synthesize their own fibronectin do
These results, and others, suggest that there may be some form of physical connection between the extracellular matrix and the intracellular cytoskeleton. The molecular basis for this interaction is not understood as yet. However, the idea that the cytoskeleton and the extracellular matrix are part of a continuous super-
Figure 1 Codistribution of fibronectin fibrils and actin microfilament bundles. (A and B) Double label immunofluorescence of NIL8 hamster cells arrested in low serum (cf. reference 40). A shows fibronectin stain, B shows actin staining of the same cells. Arrows mark some of the coincidences. (C and D) Immunoperoxidase staining of fibronectin in Xenopus mesentery cell cultures. C shows peroxidase staining of fibronectin. D shows a phase photograph of the same field. Actin microfilament bundles are colinear with the fibronectin (reprinted from reference 71). (E) Immunogold staining of fibronectin in tsSV40 hamster embryo fibroblasts at nonpermissive temperature. Figure shows an oblique section through the base of the cell with fibronectin fibril outside cell at left colinear with actin microfilament bundle inside cell at right (reprinted from reference 42). (F) Similar section of NIL8 hamster cells not stained with antibody. Figure again shows extracellular fibrils colinear with intracellular microfilament bundles (picture courtesy of Irwin Singer).
presence of fibronectin in areas of cell migration does not prove that it is functionally involved, even less that it is the only relevant matrix component.

A functional role for fibronectin in phagocytosis was originally suggested on the basis of in vivo results that showed that levels of plasma fibronectin correlated with the ability of an organism to clear particulate debris, especially gelatin-coated particles, from the circulation (5). It was suggested that fibronectin was acting as a "non-specific opsonin" for the reticulo-endothelial system. This suggestion became even more interesting with the observation that fibronectin binds to certain bacteria (75, 76). The recently reported binding of C1q by fibronectin (77-79) might also be important in phagocytosis of antibody aggregates or fragments of cells lysed by complement.

In vitro studies have shown that fibronectin will indeed promote phagocytosis of gelatin-coated beads by certain macrophages although heparin is required as a cofactor (21, 80-82). No detailed studies have yet shown fibronectin to act as an opsonin for bacteria. Thus, the in vivo relevance of the "opsonic" activity of fibronectin remains unclear and is under active investigation. One interpretation of fibronectin-stimulated endocytosis is that it is simply a specialized form of cell spreading on a substrate with a small rather than an infinite radius of curvature.

Another possible role of plasma fibronectin is in hemostasis and thrombosis. During coagulation, fibronectin is crosslinked to fibrin by factor XIIIa transglutaminase (83, 84). Furthermore, platelets contain intracellular fibronectin (85, 86), possibly in their α-granules, and release it on activation (86-88). Activated platelets will also bind exogenous plasma fibronectin (50, 88, 89). Consequently, at the site of interaction of platelets with endothelial cell basement membrane, there are three possible sources of fibronectin: plasma, basement membrane, and the platelets themselves. Because other adhesive proteins such as von Willebrand's factor and thrombospondin are also present in the platelets, the basement membrane and the plasma (88, 90-94), the adhesion of platelets is likely to be complex. The exact role of fibronectin in this process remains unclear but, under certain artificial in vitro conditions, fibronectin can promote the adhesion and/or spreading of platelets (50, 95, 97). Crosslinking experiments suggest that an interaction between fibronectin and thrombospondin occurs when platelets spread on solid substrata (97). Thrombospondin has also been implicated in platelet aggregation (98, 99).

Finally, fibronectin has been implicated in the regulation of several differentiation pathways. Fibronectin has been reported both to stimulate myogenesis and to inhibit myoblast fusion (100, 101) and to inhibit chondrogenesis (102-104). The precursor cells of both the myogenic and chondrogenic lineage are fibronectin-positive, and there appears to be a loss of fibronectin during progression along these two differentiation pathways (103-108). Fibronectin has also been reported to inhibit melanogenesis and to promote adrenergic differentiation in explanted neural crest cells (109, 110). Extracellular matrices have long been thought to play important roles in development. Fibronectin has now joined collagens and proteoglycans as a candidate for a role in these processes, as have even more recently discovered glycoproteins such as laminin and chondronectin. Clearly the role of the various matrix constituents, singly and in combination, in various differentiative events will be an active area of research in the next few years.

Fibronectins therefore appear to be involved in an almost embarrassingly large array of cellular functions. How can an individual molecule perform so many functions? The following sections review our current understanding of the structure-function relationships of fibronectins.

**STRUCTURE AND FUNCTIONAL DOMAINS OF FIBRONECTINS**

As mentioned above, spectrophotometric and ultracentrifugation experiments indicate that cellular and plasma fibronectins are elongated molecules composed of structured domains separated by flexible, extendable regions of polypeptide chain (23, 24, 111). By electron microscopy, fibronectins are usually visualized as slender, elongated molecules with regions of apparently increased flexibility (25, 26), although they can appear more globular under certain conditions (27). Variability also exists in the hydrodynamic radius, which is known to increase or decrease, depending upon ionic strength (23). A unifying interpretation of these studies is that fibronectins are highly flexible molecules that can expand or contract depending upon the local environment.

Flexible polypeptide regions of proteins such as fibronectin tend to be particularly susceptible to attack by a variety of proteases. Proteases will cleave such regions to generate separate, structured domains of the molecule containing specific binding sites for ligands (e.g., collagen and heparin, see Table III).

There are two approaches to purifying such structural domains from fibronectin or any molecule with binding sites. In the first, specific ligands are coupled covalently to agarose beads and are poured into affinity columns. The fibronectin is allowed to bind to the column and then incubated with various proteases. Under appropriate conditions, the enzymes cleave the molecule into protease-resistant domains. After extensive washing of the column, the only regions that remain bound to the column are domains specific for binding to the specific ligand. An alternative approach is to pretreat the fibronectin with proteases, to inhibit the proteases with protease inhibitors, and to pour the entire digest over affinity columns. Specific protease-resistant domains then bind to the column, and other fragments are discarded. These two approaches have been surprisingly successful in identifying and purifying a series of protease-resistant, functional domains of fibronectin and locating these domains and other structural features on the molecule (112-132). Fig. 2 shows the current model based on these results.

**Collagen-binding Domain**

The first domain of fibronectin to be isolated was the collagen-binding domain. This region of the molecule is ~30-40,000 daltons in size, and can be produced after digestion of the intact molecule with chymotrypsin, subtilisin, thromolysin, or even the broad spectrum protease pronase (112, 114, 116, 117, 119, 120, 124, 125). This region binds to collagen or to gelatin affinity columns, yet cannot mediate cell interactions. Larger fragments are produced by different proteolytic conditions and allow mapping of the collagen-binding domain near to but not at the amino-terminus (112, 113, 115, 116, 118, 119, 120, 122-125, 128-131).

**Cell-binding Domain**

The cell-binding activity appears to require a separate region, the "cell-binding" region of fibronectin, that can be purified...
from among the fragments of the molecule that do not bind to collagen affinity columns (112, 116, 120, 125, 128, 129, 132). The cell-binding region of fibronectin can mediate the attachment and spreading of cells on simple plastic substrates, even though it is inactive in mediating the attachment of cells to collagen. A fragment of 15,000 daltons still retains a significant amount of the cell binding activity of the intact molecule, but does not bind to either collagen or heparin (132). This fragment has been isolated using a monoclonal antibody that blocks cell binding activity (132). Analyses of partial digests show that this 15-kdalton fragment and the cell-binding site lie in the central part of the molecule (116, 120, 125, 128, 129, 132).

**Fibrin and Transglutaminase Interaction Sites**

The binding of fibronectin to fibrin from blood may be important in the initial stages of wound healing (133). Fibroblasts involved in the healing process adhere particularly well to fibronectin cross-linked to fibrin by factor XIIIa transglutaminase (35). Fibronectin binds to fibrin or to fibrinogen both via its amino-terminal domain and through site(s) near the carboxyl terminus of the molecule (128, 134, 135). However, the transglutaminase-mediated cross-linking appears to occur only at the amino-terminal domain to a glutamine residue of fibronectin (119, 120, 128, 130, 136). Collagen can also be cross-linked to fibronectin by transglutaminase (84). Although the primary noncovalent binding of collagen occurs at the adjacent collagen-binding domain, the covalent cross-linking occurs only to the adjacent amino-terminal domain (119).

Several other interesting interactions are also mediated by the amino-terminal domain of fibronectin. This region also binds to the bacterium *Staphylococcus aureus* and to actin (76, 127, 131). Although the physiological consequences of these latter interactions are not yet known, binding to fibronectin might promote phagocytosis of these materials by the reticuloendothelial system as discussed earlier. DNA is also bound at multiple sites on fibronectin, but this interaction appears to be weak and is inhibited by physiological concentrations of calcium (137, 138).

### Glycosaminoglycan-binding Domains

As described previously, interactions of fibronectin with heparin and heparan sulfate may play important roles in the uptake of material by macrophages or in the structural organization of the extracellular matrix (21, 30–32, 80–82, 138–143). When examined in vitro, the interactions of fibronectin and heparin appear to be complex, with at least two components of moderately high binding affinity (121).

The results of proteolytic dissection of the fibronectin molecule to identify the regions that bind to heparin affinity columns are also complex. There are two or three distinct regions of the molecule that bind to heparin (125, 126, 128–131). One binding site is located in the amino-terminal domain of the molecule (125, 128, 130, 131). Interaction of this domain with heparin can be modulated by physiological concentrations of calcium (138) and is inhibited by 0.25 M salt (130).

A second binding site is located close to the carboxyl terminus of the molecule (125, 128–131), and its binding is less sensitive to salt (130) and is insensitive to divalent cations (138). The existence of these multiple heparin-binding domains on fibronectin, and their differing sensitivities to divalent cations and salt concentrations, suggest that the interactions of fibronectin with even one ligand can be surprisingly complex and may be modulated by the local microenvironment.

Fibronectin can also bind to the glycosaminoglycan hyaluronic acid, which could affect the interactions of hyaluronic acid with cells or other extracellular matrix molecules (121, 140, 141). The binding by cellular fibronectin is kinetically complex and of moderately high affinity (121). Recent data suggest that fibronectin must exist as an aggregate in order to mediate efficient binding, because nonaggregated cellular or plasma fibronectins coupled to affinity columns bind poorly to hyaluronic acid (144). Because of this latter property, the binding region for hyaluronic acid has not yet been identified.

### Disulfides and Sulfhydryls

Similar analyses of fragments of fibronectin have shown that the interchain disulfides connecting the subunits of the fibronectin dimer are very close to the carboxyl terminus (115, 118, 120, 122, 145–147). Both the amino-terminal and the collagen-binding domains are extremely rich in intrachain disulfides (113, 115, 117, 118). The amino-terminal domain contains almost 10% half cystine and probably contains 10 intrachain disulfides. These may be responsible for the compact protease-resistant structure of this domain. The intrachain disulfides of the collagen-binding domain are essential for binding to collagen (113, 115). Each subunit of fibronectin contains at least one sulfhydryl group (115, 120) located ~170,000 daltons from the amino-terminus (122) and probably a second one further towards the carboxyl terminus (122, 148).

If these sulfhydryl groups are alkylated, the binding of fibronectin into the cell surface matrix is inhibited (115, 122). It is possible that these sulfhydryls are involved in the intermolecular disulfide bonding of fibronectin either to other fibronectin molecules or to other cell surface constituents such as proteoglycans.

### Structure–Function Model of Fibronectin

The current model for the structure of fibronectin based on these results postulates a series of protease-resistant structural...
domains, each of which contains specific ligand-binding activities (Fig. 2). The existence of these multiple, specific domains on fibronectin can begin to explain how this molecule may act in a variety of molecular interactions. Fibronectin can be viewed as a molecule that interconnects a series of cell and matrix components to form macromolecular complexes at the cell surface and in the extracellular matrix (Fig. 3).

In addition, this model makes predictions about the requirements for certain combinations of domains for specific functions. For example, cell-cell interactions would be expected to require a multivalent molecule to enable fibronectin molecules to bind to more than one cell. Monomeric fibronectin fragments do have greatly diminished activity in such an assay (114). On the other hand, the attachment of cells to collagen would be expected to occur with even simple monomers but would require two different binding domains. As predicted, monomeric fragments of 205,000 daltons containing one cell- and one collagen-binding site are high active (114).

It will be of interest to examine the requirements for the different heparin-binding domains in the nonimmune opsonic activity of fibronectin with macrophages, in terms of which domain is required and whether the interaction can be mediated by a monomeric fragment. More complex activities of fibronectin can also be examined with these fragments. For example, the ability of fibronectin to promote migration of fibroblasts has been attributed to only the cell-binding region of the molecule (149, 150).

Role of Fibronectin’s Carbohydrates

Fibronectin contains ~5% carbohydrate, consisting solely of “complex” oligosaccharides linked to asparaginyl residues. The synthesis of these oligosaccharides residues of fibronectin can be inhibited by 95-98% with tunicamycin, a relatively specific inhibitor of glycosylation (151, 153). The resultant nonglycosylated fibronectin is secreted in virtually normal quantities, suggesting that the carbohydrate moieties play no role in the secretion of this glycoprotein (152). However, the rate of turnover of carbohydrate-free fibronectin is accelerated by two- to threefold, and this increased rate results in a threefold decrease in total quantities of fibronectin on the cell surface of tunicamycin-treated chick fibroblasts (152).

Isolated nonglycosylated fibronectin is unusually susceptible to various proteases (152, 154). The region of fibronectin that becomes the most susceptible to proteolysis is the collagen-binding region, which normally contains most of the carbohydrate residues of glycosylated fibronectin (154). A heparin-binding region of fibronectin that normally lacks carbohydrate has the same protease susceptibility in glycosylated or nonglycosylated fibronectin (154).

Interestingly, there is no evidence that the carbohydrate on fibronectin has any role in its known biological activities. For example, the additional branching of oligosaccharides on fibronectin that accompanies neoplastic transformation has no effect on its morphological activities (53), and even the total absence of carbohydrates after tunicamycin treatment does not alter four other biological activities of fibronectin (153). It therefore appears that the carbohydrates on this molecule function primarily to stabilize specific regions against proteolytic attack and abnormal rates of turnover; this stabilization may also be one of the major functions of carbohydrates on other glycoproteins (155).

**Cellular Versus Plasma Fibronectins**

Recent studies indicate that the cellular and plasma forms of fibronectin are structurally and functionally very similar, but not identical. The model shown in Fig. 2 apparently applies for both forms. Table V compares the biological activities of purified cellular and plasma fibronectins in a number of in vitro assays. The two forms of fibronectin are indistinguishable in their biological activities in assays involving cell interactions with substrates (156, 157), or in opsonic activity for macrophages (82). In contrast, the effects of these molecules on cell morphology and alignment of transformed cells and on hemagglutination are sometimes substantially different; in these assays, cellular fibronectin can be more active than plasma fibronectin (50, 157).

Biochemical studies have also revealed both similarities and differences between the two molecules. The molecules have very similar amino acid compositions, carbohydrate structures, and secondary and tertiary structures. In addition, the types and the organization of specific structural domains are indistinguishable. Nevertheless, plasma and fibroblast fibronectins have differences in pi (15), solubility (23, 24, 111), numbers of...
yses will also provide further insight into the nature of the data will be greatly aided by nucleic acid cloning studies now in progress. Detailed protein structural and nucleic acid analyses of fibronectin in the various cellular properties discussed earlier (Table IV). The combination of a detailed analysis of the structure of fibronectins with the development of antibodies able to interfere with specific functions should provide a clear picture of the structure-function relationships of these complex proteins.

Two important properties of fibronectin that remain enigmatic are its ability to form fibrils and its interaction with cells. Analysis by chemical cross-linking, antibodies, and other techniques should allow identification of the cell surface binding site(s) and of the arrangement of fibronectin and other molecules in the fibrils.

The suggested roles of fibronectins in complex biological phenomena such as cell migration, cellular differentiation, hemostasis and thrombosis, reticuloendothelial clearance, and cancer all require much more extensive investigation. Studies of these phenomena in vivo will be contingent upon progress on the biochemical, immunological, and cellular biological analyses of fibronectins. Furthermore, because fibronectins undoubtedly interact in vivo with other molecules (collagens, proteoglycans), these other constituents will have to be studied in parallel. It also seems clear that several other proteins of a type similar to fibronectins also function as cell-matrix ligands (e.g., laminin, chondronectin, von Willebrand's factor, thrombospondin) and this list is likely to grow rapidly. The complex interaction among these various molecules are likely to provide a fertile field for research in the next few years, as they have in the last several.

REFERENCES

15. Reference deleted in proof.


