Influence of Membrane Anchoring and Cytoplasmic Domains on the Fusogenic Activity of Vesicular Stomatitis Virus Glycoprotein G

DEREK ODELL, ESSAM WANAS, JESI YAN, AND HARA P. GHOSH*

Department of Biochemistry, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario L8N 3Z5, Canada

Received 18 February 1997/Accepted 12 June 1997

Chimeric proteins in which the transmembrane anchoring sequence (TM) or both the TM and the cytoplasmic tail (CT) of vesicular stomatitis virus glycoprotein G were replaced with corresponding domains of viral or cellular integral membrane proteins were used to examine the influence of these domains on acidic-pH-induced membrane fusion by G protein. The TM and CT of G were also replaced with the lipid anchor glycosylphosphatidylinositol. Hybrids containing foreign TM or TM and CT sequences were fusogenic at acidic pH but glycosylphosphatidylinositol-anchored G was nonfusogenic at acidic pH. The results suggest that the fusogenicity of G protein requires membrane anchoring by a hydrophobic peptide sequence and the specific amino acid sequence of the TM has no influence on fusogenic activity.

The spike glycoprotein G of vesicular stomatitis virus (VSV) is a transmembrane (TM) glycoprotein which can induce membrane fusion at acidic pH in the absence of other viral gene products (3, 7, 26). Studies from our (18, 39) and other laboratories (6, 8, 37) have identified within the ectodomain an internal peptide (amino acids 117 to 137) as the fusion peptide. Unlike the other fusion peptides, the fusion domain of VSV G protein is not hydrophobic and contains neutral amino acids (8, 22, 39). Studies with influenza virus HA2 (35, 38), VSV G (7), and Semliki Forest virus E1 (17) proteins lacking the membrane anchor showed that the ectodomain alone cannot induce fusion, suggesting the requirement of membrane anchoring for fusogenic activity of the proteins.

Studies with the fusogenic TM glycoproteins of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) (10, 12, 23) and Moloney murine leukemia virus (25) suggested that a specific amino acid sequence within the transmembrane domain plays a crucial role in membrane fusion. Studies with a glycosylphosphatidylinositol (GPI)-linked form of influenza virus hemagglutinin protein (HA) which lacks the membrane anchoring and cytoplasmic domains have shown that GPI-linked HA anchored to the membrane via GPI can induce hemifusion but not full fusion (16). It was proposed that the ectodomain of HA can induce hemifusion when anchored to the membrane via GPI but complete fusion of the membrane requires the transmembrane domain and possibly the cytoplasmic domain to induce the formation of fusion pores (13, 21). Studies with HIV or simian immunodeficiency virus TM fusion proteins (10) and fusion protein F of Newcastle disease virus (30) suggested that the cytoplasmic tail can affect fusion in a positive or a negative fashion. To understand the roles of the different domains of the envelope glycoprotein G of VSV in membrane fusion as well as to examine the requirement of sequence specificity within these regions for fusogenic activity, we have constructed a number of chimeric proteins in which the membrane anchoring region, singly or in conjunction with the cytoplasmic tail of VSV G protein, was replaced with corresponding domains from a number of integral membrane glycoproteins and their fusogenic activities were determined. The results show that replacement of the transmembrane domain alone or both the transmembrane and cytoplasmic domains permitted membrane fusion at acidic pH by the chimeric proteins. However, the GPI-anchored ectodomain of VSV G protein failed to show low-pH-induced membrane fusion. Our results suggest that membrane fusion by VSV G protein requires not only the fusion peptide in the ectodomain but also membrane anchoring of the G protein by a hydrophobic peptide sequence and that the specific amino acid sequence of the membrane anchoring domain has no influence on fusion.

Construction and expression of chimeric G proteins. Chimeric proteins consisting of the ectodomain of VSV G protein joined to the membrane anchoring domain alone or to the membrane anchoring and cytoplasmic domains from foreign integral membrane glycoproteins such as herpes simplex virus type 1 (HSV-1) glycoproteins gB (1, 31) or gD (32), nonenveloped adenovirus type 5 glycoprotein E3-11.6 K (29), and the cellular receptor glycoprotein CD4 (20, 34) were constructed by using PCR mutagenesis (Fig. 1). To examine the effect of membrane anchoring via a lipid moiety, we constructed the GPI-anchored form of VSV G (G-GPI) by substituting the transmembrane and cytoplasmic domains of VSV G protein with the carboxy-terminal 37 amino acids of the GPI-anchored decay-accelerating factor (2, 15, 25, 28, 33) (Fig. 1). The amino acid sequences of the membrane-spanning and cytoplasmic domains of the G protein and of the chimeras are shown in Table 1. All of the chimeras contain the wild-type VSV G ectodomain (amino acids 1 to 462).

COS-1 cells transfected with the high-efficiency vector pXM (39) encoding the chimeras expressed all of the hybrids. The chimeras GAdG, GgDG, GCD4G, GgB3G, GgDgD, GCD4CD4, and G-GPI all show cell surface labeling as analyzed by indirect immunofluorescence. The distribution of the chimeric glycoproteins was quantitated by cell surface iodination of proteins labeled by lactoperoxidase (39). The chimeras were present on the cell surface in amounts of 110 to 190% relative to the wild-type G protein (Table 1). Acquisition of endo H resistance of the glycoproteins (39) showed that the rate of transport from the endoplasmic reticulum to the Golgi apparatus for the hybrids was similar to that of the wild-type G protein.
protein except for GgDgD and G-GPI, which moved at a slower rate. Proper folding and acquisition of correct tertiary and quaternary structure of the chimeras were examined by determining their oligomeric structure at acidic pH (4, 5). All of the hybrids formed trimers at acidic pH.

**Cell-cell fusion activity of chimeric G proteins.** To determine the low-pH-induced fusogenic activity of the chimeric G proteins a syncytium-forming assay was used (39). COS cells transfected with wild-type and chimeric G genes were exposed twice at 37°C for 1 min with the fusion medium at pH 5.6, and the polykaryons that were formed were fixed and viewed under a phase-contrast microscope. We have previously observed that the pH optimum for membrane fusion by VSV G mutants can be shifted to a more acidic pH (39). We, therefore, also determined the fusogenic activity of the hybrid G proteins at pH 5.2 (Fig. 2). The results show that cells expressing GAdG, GgB3G, GCD4G, and GgDG showed polykaryon formation that was comparable to that of wild-type G. Hybrids GCD4 CD4 and GgDgD were fusion competent although at reduced levels compared to wild-type G protein. In contrast, the chimera G-GPI, which lacks the transmembrane and cytoplasmic domains and is anchored to the cell surface via a GPI linkage, showed no polykaryon formation at pH 5.6 or 5.2. Comparison of the relative cell surface expression of hybrid G proteins with their fusogenic activities showed that the reduced fusogenic activity of GCD4CD4 and GgDGd as well as the lack of fusogenic activity for G-GPI was not due to reduced cell surface expression of the hybrids (Table 1). Earlier studies indicated that mutations in the fusion domain of VSV G protein can shift the pH threshold as well as the pH optimum for fusion to more acidic regions (9, 39). The pH dependence for fusion of the mutants GCD4CD4, GgDgD, and G-GPI was therefore examined over a wider range of pH conditions. Results presented in Fig. 3 show that both GCD4CD4 and GgDgD mutants have an altered pH threshold for fusion. Wild-type G protein shows initial fusion activity at about pH 6.3. In contrast, initial fusion for the chimeras GCD4CD4 and GgDgD occurred at the more acidic pH of 5.6. Maximum fusogenic activity for these two mutants was observed at pH 5.0, in comparison to pH 5.6 for the wild-type G as well as chimeras containing only the foreign transmembrane regions. Mutant G-GPI did not show any fusogenic activity over the entire range of pH conditions tested. Treatment of the cells expressing GCD4CD4, GgDgD, or G-GPI at low pH for longer periods of time, or at a higher temperature of 39°C, did not increase the fusogenic activity. It appears, therefore, that the cytoplasmic tail can influence the fusogenic activity. The fact that both the threshold pH as well as the pH optimum for fusion by mutants containing foreign cytoplasmic tails are shifted to more acidic-pH conditions suggests that kinetic components of fusion may be modulated by this region.

The hybrid G-GPI was anchored to membranes via a lipid moiety. Studies with a cell line expressing GPI-linked HA glycoprotein of influenza virus showed that the lipid-linked HA failed to induce cell fusion but could induce hemifusion of the outer membranes resulting in mixing of the lipids but not of the contents of the cells (16). We tested for lipid mixing by cells expressing G-GPI by using the octadecylrhodamine (R18) flu-

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**TABLE 1.** Amino acid sequences of the membrane-spanning and the cytoplasmic domains of VSV G protein and the chimeras constructed, and quantitation of the cell surface expression and fusion activity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>Amino acid sequence</th>
<th>Surface expression (%)</th>
<th>Fusion activity (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ec</td>
<td>Transmembrane anchor</td>
<td>Cytoplasmic tail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G-wt</td>
<td>FSSWK</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G(AXB)</td>
<td>FSSWK</td>
<td>SSSSIASFFIFIIGLIGHFLVLD</td>
<td>RVGIHLC...RLGK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GgB3G</td>
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<td>FGALAVGLVILGAVALLLPILGLIGFFAPA</td>
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<td>SSSALIVLGGVAGLLLFIGLGIFFCVR</td>
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</tr>
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<tr>
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<td>FSSWKSSSPPNKSSTTS</td>
<td>GTRLSLGGSCFFTTLGLGGLTVMLLTT</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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*Compared to the wild-type VSV G protein (G-wt) the construct G(AXB) contained an ApaI restriction enzyme site at nucleotide 299 (39), a XhoI site at nucleotide 1416 (37), and a BsrHI site at nucleotide 1473, all of which were created by site-directed mutagenesis. G(AXB) also contained two additional serines inserted between amino acids 463 and 464 and the leucine at residue 482 was replaced by alanine. The G protein coded by the G(AXB) gene showed wild-type properties with respect to transport to cell surface, oligomerization at low pH and low-pH-induced polykaryon formation. The construct GgB3G contained amino acids 775 to 795 of HSV-1 gB (1) between residues 462 and 482 of VSV G protein (27). Construct GCD4G was made by inserting amino acids 375 to 395 of CD4 (20) between residues 462 and 484 of G(AXB), while GCD4CD4 was made by joining residues 375 to 435 of CD4 after amino acid 485 of G(AXB). GAdG were made by insertion residues 32 to 55 of adenovirus type 5 E3-11.6 K protein (29) between amino acids 464 and 483 of VSV G protein. GgDG was made by insertion residues 339 to 365 of HSV-1 gD (32) between amino acids 462 and 483 of VSV G protein. G-GPI was made by joining residues 339 to 394 of HSV-1 gD and residues 311 to 347 of decay-accelerating factor (2, 15, 16), respectively, after amino acid 465 of G(AXB).

*Surface expression was quantitated as previously described (39). Values obtained for mutants are expressed as percentages of the wild-type value set at 100%.

* Fusion activity was determined as previously described (39). Values obtained for mutants are expressed as percentages of wild-type value set at 100%.

* Sequence for GPI lipid anchor begins with indicated peptide of attachment (2, 5).
orescence-dequenching assay developed by Puri et al. (24). Results shown in Fig. 4 indicate that cells expressing wild-type G protein mediated lipid mixing at pH 5.5 as shown by dequenching of fluorescence. Cells expressing G-GPI, however, showed a small amount of dequenching of fluorescence at pH 5.5. Lowering the pH to 5.2 did not increase the level of fluorescence dequenching. The results suggest that G protein anchored to membranes via lipid may not induce hemifusion as observed for GPI-linked HA. It may be possible that the nine amino acids of the decay-accelerating factor present in the G-GPI hybrid (Table 1) may affect conformational changes involving hemifusion. GPI-linked viral fusion proteins, such as envelope TM proteins of HIV (28, 33) and Moloney murine leukemia virus (25), and bovine herpes virus type 1 glycoprotein gB (19) also failed to show fusion. However, the hemifusion activity of these GPI-linked proteins was not tested (19, 25, 28, 33).

**pH-dependent trypsin sensitivity of chimeric G proteins.** Viral fusion proteins that are activated at low pH show a fusion-inducing conformational change at acid pH (11, 13, 14, 36, 38). The sensitivity of influenza virus HA (11, 38) or rabies virus G (11) proteins to trypsin digestion at acid pH has been used to monitor the low-pH-induced conformational change. Recently, it was shown that incubation of VSV G protein at low pH renders them more resistant to trypsin digestion, pre-
sumably due to conformational changes induced by acid pH (9). We have therefore used the pH-dependent resistance to trypsin digestion of VSV G protein to examine acidic-pH-induced conformational change of wild-type and chimeric G proteins. Results presented in Fig. 5 show that the wild-type as well as the chimeric G proteins were completely digested by trypsin at neutral pH but showed increased resistance to digestion by trypsin at more acidic pH. All of the chimeric G proteins except G-GPI showed a digestion profile fairly similar to that of the wild type. The hybrid G-GPI was, however, more sensitive to trypsin digestion than wild-type G at pH 6.5.

Taken together, our results indicate that substitution of the transmembrane domain of VSV G with the membrane anchoring domain of a foreign glycoprotein does not affect the fusogenic ability of the hybrid protein. However, replacement of both the transmembrane and cytoplasmic domains of VSV G with the corresponding domains of a foreign protein reduces the fusogenic activity of the hybrid. In contrast, the anchoring of the ectodomain of VSV G to the cell surface via a glycolipid anchor abolished membrane fusion. Thus, our results suggest that the low-pH-induced fusogenic activity of VSV G protein requires membrane anchoring by a hydrophobic peptide sequence but the specific amino acid sequence of the transmembrane domain has no influence on membrane fusion and the cytoplasmic tail may have a modulating role. The membrane anchor and the cytoplasmic tail together may form an entity which can regulate the fusogenic behavior of a protein.

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REFERENCES
