Foxa2 and Cdx2 cooperate with Nkx2-1 to inhibit lung adenocarcinoma metastasis

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Despite the fact that the majority of lung cancer deaths are due to metastasis, the molecular mechanisms driving metastatic progression are poorly understood. Here, we present evidence that loss of Foxa2 and Cdx2 synergizes with loss of Nkx2-1 to fully activate the metastatic program. These three lineage-specific transcription factors are consistently down-regulated in metastatic cells compared with nonmetastatic cells. Knockdown of these three factors acts synergistically and is sufficient to promote the metastatic potential of nonmetastatic cells to that of naturally arising metastatic cells in vivo. Furthermore, silencing of these three transcription factors is sufficient to account for a significant fraction of the gene expression differences between the nonmetastatic and metastatic states in lung adenocarcinoma, including up-regulated expression of the invadopodia component Tks5long, the embryonal proto-oncogene Hmga2, and the epithelial-to-mesenchymal mediator Snail. Finally, analyses of tumors from a genetically engineered mouse model and patients show that low expression of Nkx2-1, Foxa2, and Cdx2 strongly correlates with more advanced tumors and worse survival. Our findings reveal that a large part of the complex transcriptional network in metastasis can be controlled by a small number of regulatory nodes that function redundantly, and loss of multiple nodes is required to fully activate the metastatic program.

[Keywords: lung adenocarcinoma; metastasis; Nkx2-1; Foxa2; Cdx2; genetically engineered mouse model of cancer]

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During tumor progression, cancer cells undergo global gene expression alterations through which they acquire the traits that allow them to successfully advance through the multiple steps of the metastatic cascade. These steps include the ability to invade and migrate through surrounding tissues, intravasate into blood vessels, survive in circulation, extravasate at secondary sites, and colonize distant organs [Steeg 2006]. A comprehensive understanding of the upstream regulators that orchestrate this metastasis program is lacking.

To understand more fully the molecular mechanisms of tumor progression and metastasis in a well-defined genetic context, our laboratory developed a genetically engineered mouse model of lung adenocarcinoma, a major subtype of lung cancer that is a leading cause of cancer death worldwide. Conditional activation of oncogenic Kras and inactivation of p53 in KrasLSL-G12D/+; p53lo/l (KP) mice by viral delivery of Cre recombinase to lung epithelial cells initiates the development of lung adenocarcinomas that closely resemble the pathophysiological features of the human disease, including the capability to metastasize to distant organs [Jackson et al. 2001, 2005]. Previously, we found that progression to metastasis in this model was closely associated with decreased expression of the lung lineage transcription factor Nkx2-1, and knockdown of Nkx2-1 in nonmetastatic tumor cells was sufficient to increase their tumor-seeding ability in transplantation experiments [Winslow et al. 2011]. Nonetheless, two major lines of evidence indicate that loss of Nkx2-1 alone may not be sufficient for full progression to metastasis. First, knockdown of Nkx2-1 in nonmetastatic lung adenocarcinoma cells does not recapitulate all of the gene expression changes that occur during the transition from a nonmetastatic to a metastatic state [Winslow et al. 2011]. Moreover, Nkx2-1 deletion in KP lung adenocarcinomas was not sufficient to induce the
metastasis program but instead unmasked a latent gastric differentiation state of the tumor cells [Snyder et al. 2013].

These observations indicate that, in addition to Nkx2-1, additional regulatory factors likely exist that govern the program necessary for full acquisition of metastatic potential.

To investigate additional regulators of metastasis, we elected to examine the transcription factors that control the expression of the metastasis mediator Tks5long. A critical component of the proteolytic cellular protrusions, invadopodia, Tks5long promotes metastasis in a wide variety of cancer types, including lung adenocarcinoma, and its expression is consistently up-regulated in metastatic cells compared with nonmetastatic cells in the KP model [Murphy and Courtneidge 2011; Li et al. 2013]. We previously showed that Tks5long is critical for promoting invadopodia formation and metastatic progression in transplanted and autochthonous mice. Moreover, Tks5long expression correlates with a more advanced disease stage and poor survival of lung adenocarcinoma patients. Importantly, Tks5long is distinct from an invadopodia-inhibiting isoform, Tks5short, by the presence of the membrane-binding Phox homology domain and the use of an independent promoter for transcription [Li et al. 2013]. A previous study has demonstrated that the protein level of Tks5long can be regulated by Src (Cejudo-Martin et al. 2014). However, the transcriptional regulation of Tks5long is not well understood.

Here, we explored the transcriptional regulation of Tks5long to uncover key regulators of metastasis in lung adenocarcinoma. We identified three transcriptional repressors of Tks5long—Nkx2-1, Foxa2, and Cdx2—and subsequently showed that they function collectively as important regulators of a metastasis program in lung adenocarcinoma. While Nkx2-1 and Foxa2 are known for lineage specification and maintenance of the lungs [among other organs], Cdx2 expression is limited to the intestines in normal adult tissues, and its role in lung adenocarcinoma has not been previously explored. Here, we provide evidence that these three transcription factors function cooperatively as critical regulators in suppressing lung adenocarcinoma metastasis.

Results

Nkx2-1, Foxa2, and Cdx2 synergistically suppress the expression of Tks5long in nonmetastatic lung adenocarcinoma cells

To identify novel mediators of the metastatic program in lung adenocarcinoma, we focused on the transcriptional regulation of Tks5long. Tks5long has a mechanistically characterized function in promoting metastasis across a wide variety of cancer types, as it mediates the formation of invadopodia, which are proteolytic membrane protrusions that facilitate cellular invasion [Paz et al. 2014]. In lung adenocarcinoma, Tks5long is critical for promoting metastasis, and increased Tks5long expression correlates with poor patient outcomes [Li et al. 2013]. Furthermore, Tks5long is dramatically and consistently up-regulated in our collection of metastatic lung adenocarcinoma cells compared with the nonmetastatic cells derived from the KP model [Li et al. 2013], suggesting that its expression is under tight regulation. Importantly, H3K4me3 chromatin immunoprecipitation (ChiP) sequencing (ChiP-seq) analysis showed that Tks5long is transcribed from its own promoter independently of the other Tks5 isoform, Tks5short [data not shown], suggesting that its increased expression is likely a result of transcriptional regulation and not alternative splicing. Given these data, we hypothesized that the transcriptional regulatory mechanism for Tks5long functions as a key switch in regulating a broader metastasis program, which includes many more metastasis-related genes.

To identify potential transcriptional regulators of Tks5long, we used an existing gene expression profile of a panel of cell lines derived from nonmetastatic and metastatic primary lung adenocarcinomas as well as metastases in the KP model [termed TnonMet and TMet, and Met cells, respectively] [Winslow et al. 2011]. From this data set, we generated a list of transcription factors that [1] were differentially expressed between the collection of TnonMet and TMet/Met cells and [2] had predicted binding sites in the Tks5long locus based on genomics sequence analysis.

This approach neglects potential nontranscriptional regulatory mechanisms of Tks5long expression, but we wanted to start by first focusing strictly on transcription. Among the transcription factors that are differentially expressed between TnonMet and TMet/Met cells, we identified three that meet these criteria: Nkx2-1, Foxa2, and Cdx2. Microarray gene expression profiling and quantitative RT–PCR (qRT–PCR) validation confirmed that Nkx2-1, Foxa2, and Cdx2 are highly expressed in TnonMet cells but are partially or completely lost in TMet/Met cells [Fig. 1A, Supplemental Fig. S1A,B]. The expression pattern of each transcription factor is inversely proportional to Tks5long, suggesting that these three factors may suppress Tks5long expression [Fig. 1A].

In order to determine whether Nkx2-1, Foxa2, and Cdx2 inhibit Tks5long expression, we knocked down the three transcription factors in TnonMet cells using shRNAs (referred to here as TnonMet-shNPC cells) either singly or in combination and examined the effect on Tks5long expression compared with control knockdown using shRNAs against firefly and renilla luciferases. Interestingly, while single or double knockdown of these transcription factors in TnonMet cells only moderately affected Tks5long expression, triple knockdown of all three transcription factors in TnonMet-shNPC cells led to a dramatic increase in Tks5long mRNA and protein levels such that the levels were comparable with that of TMet cells with the highest Tks5long expression [Fig. 1B,C]. The effect of the triple knockdown on Tks5long expression was synergistic, as the expression levels of Tks5long far exceeded that predicted by the additive effects of single knockdown. Importantly, the effect of Nkx2-1, Foxa2, and Cdx2 knockdown was specific to Tks5long and did not affect expression of the other Tks5 isoform, Tks5short [Fig. 1B,C]. We validated these results in an independent TnonMet cell line using different shRNAs [Supplemental Fig. S1C]. These data suggest
that Nkx2-1, Foxa2, and Cdx2 may suppress Tks5_long expression in a synergistic manner.

To examine whether these transcription factors are sufficient to suppress Tks_5_long expression in metastatic cells, we overexpressed each transcription factor in a doxycycline-inducible manner in TMet cells. Increasing the levels of each transcription factor inhibited Tks5_long expression in a dosage-dependent manner without affecting Tks5_short mRNA levels (Fig. 1D–F). Furthermore, this suppressive effect on Tks5_long expression was additive, as combined overexpression of Nkx2-1 and Foxa2 (or of Nkx2-1 and Cdx2) reduced the mRNA levels of Tks5_long more significantly than one transcription factor alone (Supplemental Fig. S1D).

To determine whether these transcription factors suppress Tks5_long expression by directly binding to its genetic locus, we performed ChIP-qPCR analysis on potential enhancer regions in the Tks5_long locus. We observed binding of Nkx2-1, Foxa2, and Cdx2 to multiple enhancers in the Tks5_long genomic locus (Fig. 1G), consistent with a direct role in down-regulating gene expression at the genetic locus.

Nkx2-1, Foxa2, and Cdx2 cooperate to inhibit metastasis in vivo

To test whether Nkx2-1, Foxa2, and Cdx2 suppress metastasis, we transplanted T_nonMet-shNFC cells subcutaneously into nude mice and examined their ability to metastasize from the subcutaneous tumor to the lungs over a period of 6 wk. This assay tests a full range of metastatic properties, as it requires that tumor cells invade and intravasate into circulation at the primary site and then extravasate and colonize a distant organ at the metastatic site. Notably, while T_nonMet cells with Nkx2-1 knockdown [T_nonMet-shN cells] formed more lung nodules than control T_nonMet cells, T_nonMet-shNFC cells were
strikingly more metastatic (Fig. 2A,B). The increase in metastatic potential in TnonMet-shNFC cells was more than the additive effect induced by single or double knockdown. Importantly, the knockdown of these transcription factors did not significantly affect the size of the primary tumors in the subcutaneous site (Supplemental Fig. S2). These data suggest that loss of Nkx2-1, Foxa2, and Cdx2 functions cooperatively to promote metastasis in lung adenocarcinoma.

The increased number of lung metastases seen with TnonMet-shNFC cells could be explained by changes in their ability to complete different steps along the metastatic cascade. We first examined how knockdown of Foxa2, Cdx2, and Nkx2-1 affected cell morphology and motility in vivo. We observed that TnonMet-shNFC subcutaneous tumors adopted a mesenchymal morphology similar to that of TMet tumors, in contrast to the predominantly epithelial morphology in tumors formed by TnonMet cells and the epithelial/slight mesenchymal morphology in TnonMet-shN tumors (Fig. 3A,B). This change to mesenchymal morphology for TnonMet-shNFC cells occurred only in vivo but not in vitro [Supplemental Fig. S3A], suggesting that it is at least in part induced by non-cell-autonomous factors present in the tumor microenvironment. Consistent with this change to a mesenchymal morphology, qRT–PCR analysis of TnonMet-shNFC tumors showed loss of the epithelial marker Krt19 and a small increase in expression of mesenchymal markers Twist, Snail, Zeb1, and N-cadherin compared with TnonMet tumors but no change in Slug, Vimentin, and E-cadherin [Supplemental Fig. S3B; data not shown]. These data suggest a partial epithelial-to-mesenchymal transition (EMT), an important step in the metastatic process (Sato et al. 2012; Tsai and Yang 2013), of TnonMet-shNFC cells in vivo.

Because mesenchymal morphology is associated with increased motility [Thiery et al. 2009; Tsai and Yang 2013], we performed intravital imaging to monitor migration of GFP-positive cancer cells within subcutaneous tumors. TnonMet-shNFC tumors contained significantly more migratory cells than TnonMet and TnonMet-shN cells [Fig. 3C; Supplemental Movies S1–S6]. Furthermore, when we measured the chemotactic ability of the tumor cells by performing in vivo fine-needle collection assay using 10% fetal bovine serum (FBS) as a chemoattractant [Wycuff et al. 2000], we collected a higher number of GFP-positive cancer cells from TnonMet-shNFC subcutaneous tumors than from TnonMet and TnonMet-shN tumors [Fig. 3D]. Taken together, these data suggest that TnonMet-shNFC cells are more motile in vivo than TnonMet and TnonMet-shN cells.

To test whether the enhanced metastatic ability of TnonMet-shNFC cells can also be explained by differences in the colonization of secondary sites during the metastatic cascade, we injected tumor cells intravenously into immunocompromised mice to test their ability to establish tumor nodules upon arriving at the lung capillaries. We observed that TnonMet-shNFC cells and TnonMet-shN cells had equally high colonization capacities compared with TnonMet control [Fig. 3E,F], suggesting that while knockdown of Nkx2-1 enhances metastatic colonization, additional inhibition of Foxa2 and Cdx2 does not further contribute to this property.

Taken together, our data support a model in which Foxa2 and Cdx2 synergize with Nkx2-1 in inhibiting metastasis in vivo. [A] Triple knockdown of Nkx2-1, Foxa2, and Cdx2 in a subcutaneous transplantation assay increases the metastatic potential of TnonMet cells [394T4]—in comparison with control TnonMet Cells and TnonMet cells with single/double knockdown—to a level similar to that of TMet cells [375T1]. Representative images of lung metastases are shown. Lines (—) indicate control hairpins against firefly or renilla luciferase. [B] Quantification of metastasis frequencies as determined by numbers of tumor nodules visible on the lung surface. Each circle represents an individual mouse. Data are represented as mean ± SEM. The P-values were calculated by Student’s t-test. [*] P < 0.05; [**] P < 0.01; [***] P < 0.0001.

Figure 2. Foxa2 and Cdx2 synergize with Nkx2-1 in inhibiting metastasis in vivo. [A] Triple knockdown of Nkx2-1, Foxa2, and Cdx2 in a subcutaneous transplantation assay increases the metastatic potential of TnonMet cells [394T4]—in comparison with control TnonMet Cells and TnonMet cells with single/double knockdown—to a level similar to that of TMet cells [375T1]. Representative images of lung metastases are shown. Lines (—) indicate control hairpins against firefly or renilla luciferase. [B] Quantification of metastasis frequencies as determined by numbers of tumor nodules visible on the lung surface. Each circle represents an individual mouse. Data are represented as mean ± SEM. The P-values were calculated by Student’s t-test. [*] P < 0.05; [**] P < 0.01; [***] P < 0.0001.

Nkx2-1, Foxa2, and Cdx2 collectively repress a program of metastasis genes

Given the increased metastatic ability of TnonMet-shNFC cells compared with TnonMet and TnonMet-shN cells, we...
next investigated whether a network of metastasis-related genes might be differentially regulated upon knockdown of Nkx2-1, Foxa2, and Cdx2. Transcription factors generally regulate a broad network of target genes, often genes with similar functions. Therefore, we hypothesized that, in addition to suppressing the expression of Tks5long [a critical mediator of metastasis], Nkx2-1, Foxa2, and Cdx2 may also regulate the expression of other metastasis-related genes. Thus, we performed RNA sequencing (RNA-seq) on TnonMet, TnonMet-shN, TnonMet-shNFC, and TMet cells and used an unsupervised blind source separation strategy using independent component analysis [ICA] (see the Supplemental Material; data not shown) to elucidate statistically independent gene expression signatures that characterize the transcriptomes of these cells. This high-resolution approach allowed us to identify two statistically significant and biologically relevant signatures that are separate from a signature that embodies the background identity of TMet-v cells (Fig. 4A,C). Interestingly, GSEA analyses using publicly available gene sets in the Molecular Signatures Database [Subramanian et al. 2005] revealed that the shNFC signature is significantly enriched for gene sets that represent poor patient prognosis, metastasis/EMT, and TGFβ targets [Fig. 4E]. Furthermore, the shNFC signature is significantly depleted for gene sets related to gastrointestinal/
Foxa2, Cdx2, and Nkx2-1 jointly inhibit metastasis

liver-related genes, reflecting the gene expression changes induced upon knockdown of Foxa2 and Cdx2 [Fig. 4E]. Many of the gene expression changes identified in the shNFC signature that were relevant for metastasis or gastrointestinal differentiation were validated by qRT–PCR and immunoblotting (Fig. 4F; G; Supplemental Fig. S4B; data not shown).

To directly answer the question of what fraction of the gene expression differences between our collection of TnonMet and TMet/Met cells was recapitulated by combined knockdown of Nkx2-1, Foxa2, and Cdx2 in TnonMet 394T4 cells, we performed targeted pairwise differential analysis. We found that a large fraction (32%) of the genes that were differentially expressed between TnonMet and TMet/Met cells also showed significant gene expression alterations by twofold or more in comparing 394T4 TnonMet versus TnonMet-shNFC cells \( (P = 2.22 \times 10^{-16}, \text{hypergeometric test}) \), suggesting that reduced expression of the three transcription factors can explain about one-third of the gene expression changes in metastatic progression. In contrast, only 9% of the genes that were differentially expressed between TnonMet and TMet/Met cells were found to be altered when comparing 394T4 TnonMet versus TnonMet-shN cells \( (P = 2.22 \times 10^{-16}, \text{hypergeometric test}) \).
The inhibitory effect of Nkx2-1, Foxa2, and Cdx2 on metastasis depends on the activation of Tks5_{long}, Hmga2, and Snail expression

Given the large number of genes activated in the shNFC signature, we then examined whether some of these genes might be functionally required for promoting the metastatic capacity of T_{nonMet}-shNFC cells. In addition to Tks5_{long}, we elected to examine the embryonal proto-oncogene Hmga2 and the EMT transcription factor Snail, as these metastasis-promoting genes are also significantly up-regulated in T_{Met}/Met cells compared with T_{nonMet} cells in microarray-based gene expression analysis (Supplemental Fig. SS5A, Winslow et al. 2011). T_{nonMet}-shNFC cells exhibited a significant increase in Hmga2 and Snail expression at the levels of both mRNA and protein, exceeding the levels in T_{nonMet} and T_{nonMet} single/double-knockdown cells (Fig. 5A,B). The activation effect was synergistic, as the expression levels of Hmga2 and Snail were much higher than predicted by the additive effects of single knockdown. To test whether increased expression of Tks5_{long}, Hmga2, and Snail are required for increased metastatic ability of T_{nonMet}-shNFC cells, we knocked down these three genes by shRNAs or CRISPR/Cas sgRNAs (Fig. 5C). Decreased expression of Tks5_{long}, Hmga2, and Snail individually impaired the metastatic ability of T_{nonMet}-shNFC cells without affecting the size of the primary subcutaneous tumors (Fig. 5D,E; Supplemental Fig. SS5E). Importantly, Hmga2 and Snail knockdown did not affect the expression of Tks5_{long} or of each other (Supplemental Fig. SS5C,D), suggesting that they each contributed individually to metastatic potential. These data support our hypothesis that Nkx2-1, Foxa2, and Cdx2 may function as key regulators for a network of metastasis-related genes that include Tks5_{long}, Hmga2, and Snail.

The endogenous expression pattern of Nkx2-1, Foxa2, and Cdx2 correlates with tumor progression in vivo

To further characterize the suppressive roles of Nkx2-1, Foxa2, and Cdx2 during tumor progression, we examined their endogenous expression in the KP model of lung adenocarcinoma. This animal model provides a well-defined genetic context and a stereotypic temporal pattern of histologic progression, which facilitate the identification of patterns of gene expression alterations that accompany tumor progression. We analyzed 195 tumor regions from mice ranging from 17 to 33 wk post-initiation and scored them as low grade (grades 1–3) or high grade (grade 4, poorly differentiated) based on nucleo-cytoplasmic morphology, tumor architecture, and the presence of stromal invasion. Consistent with previous findings (Winslow et al. 2011), expression of Nkx2-1 and Hmga2 anti-correlated with each other in these tumors (Fig. 6A), and Nkx2-1_{low} and Hmga2_{high} tumors were mostly high grade (Fig. 6D,E). The pattern of Foxa2 expression was highly similar to that of Nkx2-1 and was anti-correlated with Hmga2 (Fig. 6B,C). The inverse correlation of Foxa2 expression to tumor grade was more striking than Nkx2-1: Foxa2_{high} expression was invariably associated with low-grade tumors (117 of 117, 100%), while Foxa2_{low} tumors were consistently high grade (21 of 21, 100%) (Fig. 6F). These data suggest that Foxa2, similar to Nkx2-1, marks an early state of tumor progression, and loss of Foxa2 expression is a stringent diagnostic marker of high-grade tumors.

**Figure 5.** The inhibitory effect of Nkx2-1, Foxa2, and Cdx2 on metastasis depends on the activation of Tks5_{long}, Hmga2, and Snail expression. (A,B) Combined knockdown of Nkx2-1, Foxa2, and Cdx2 in T_{nonMet} cells (394T4) derepresses the expression of Hmga2 and Snail, as analyzed by qRT–PCR (A) and immunoblotting (B). Lines [—] indicate control hairpins against firefly or renilla luciferase. Data are represented as mean ± SD. The P-values were calculated by Student’s t-test. (C–E) Knockdown of Tks5_{long}, Hmga2, or Snail dampens the metastatic ability of 394T4 T_{nonMet}-shNFC cells after subcutaneous transplantation. (C) Validation of knockdown by immunoblotting. (D) Representative images of lungs with tumor nodules. (E) Quantification of lung tumor nodules. Each circle represents an individual mouse. Control includes T_{nonMet}-shNFC cells [n = 10 mice] and T_{nonMet}-shNFC-sgRosa cells [n = 4 mice]; Tks5_{long} knockdown was generated by hairpins shTks5_{long}#1 [n = 5 mice] and shTks5_{long}#2 [n = 4 mice]. Hmga2 knockdown was generated by hairpin shHmga2#1 [n = 5 mice] and sgRNA sgHmga2#1 [n = 4 mice], and Snail knockdown was generated by sgRNAs sgSnail#1 [n = 5 mice] and sgSnail#2 [n = 4 mice]. Data are represented as mean ± SEM. The P-values were calculated by Student’s t-test. (*) P < 0.05; (**) P < 0.01.
Interestingly, loss of Foxa2 expression in high-grade tumors often lagged behind loss of Nkx2-1 (see examples in Fig. 6H, third column; Supplemental Fig. S6A). These observations indicate that loss of Foxa2 expression in tumor progression does not occur concurrently with loss of Nkx2-1 but happens after Nkx2-1 expression is lost (Fig. 6I).

Cdx2 staining was detected in a significant fraction of these lung adenocarcinomas (35 of 195; ∼20%), albeit at a lower frequency than the staining of Nkx2-1 (139 of 195; ∼70%) and Foxa2 (174 of 195; ∼90%). This lower frequency of Cdx2 staining suggests that Cdx2 expression may represent a transient state during tumor progression that is only detectable when a large number of tumors are analyzed. Importantly, the Cdx2high tumors showed a consistent pattern that argues that Cdx2 marks an intermediate state of tumor progression that is temporally situated after loss of Nkx2-1 but before loss of Foxa2 and full activation of Hmga2 (Fig. 6G). First, the vast majority of Cdx2high tumor areas were Nkx2-1low (eight of nine, 89%), indicating a strong anti-correlation between Cdx2 and Nkx2-1 expression. Second, tumor sections with high Cdx2 levels were typically Foxa2high (seven of nine, 87%). In fact, all of the Nkx2-1low Foxa2high tumor regions were invariably Cdx2high (six of six, 100%), and we did not observe any Nkx2-1low, Foxa2low, and Cdx2high regions. Finally, the majority of Cdx2high tumor regions were Hmga2mixed [five of nine, 56%], whereas only a small fraction was Hmga2high [two of nine, 22%] or Hmga2low [two of nine, 22%]. Even though some of these Cdx2high regions were found adjacent to Hmga2high, high-grade, and poorly differentiated areas, Cdx2high regions themselves were invariably well/moderately differentiated and never part of the poorly differentiated regions (Fig. 6H, third column; Figure 6.

The endogenous expression pattern of Nkx2-1, Foxa2, Cdx2, and Hmga2 correlates with tumor progression in an autochthonous model of lung adenocarcinoma. (A–C) Pairwise correlation of Nkx2-1, Foxa2, and Hmga2 expression in KP lung adenocarcinomas. (D–F) Correlation of Nkx2-1, Foxa2, and Hmga2 expression in KP lung adenocarcinomas with tumor grades. Tumor regions were scored as low grade (grades 1–3) or high grade (grade 4, poorly differentiated) based on nucleo–cytoplasmic morphology, tumor architecture, and the presence of stromal invasion. (G) High expression of Cdx2 in KP lung adenocarcinomas is frequently associated with low expression of Nkx2-1, high expression of Foxa2, low–medium expression of Hmga2, and low-grade histology. (H) Representative H&E and immunohistochemical stainings of KP lung adenocarcinomas. Bar, 150 μm. The insets show the nucleo–cytoplasmic morphology of the tumor cells. (I) Model summarizing expression changes of Nkx2-1, Foxa2, Cdx2, and Hmga2 in lung adenocarcinomas.

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Supplemental Fig. S6A). Collectively, these data strongly suggest that Cdx2 marks an intermediate state of tumor progression [Fig. 6I].

An alternative model that could explain these observations is that Cdx2-expressing tumors represent a “dead end” differentiation state that will never progress to advanced metastatic tumors. However, multiple lines of evidence argue against this model. First, within a single tumor, well/moderately differentiated tumor regions with strong Cdx2 expression and weak Hmga2 expression were frequently associated with adjacent poorly differentiated regions that exhibit a reciprocal expression pattern of low Cdx2 staining and intense Hmga2 staining [Fig. 6H, third column; Supplemental Fig. S6A]. Second, cell line-based experiments showed that knockdown of Nkx2-1 in TnonMet cells derepressed Cdx2 mRNA and protein levels, while knockdown of Foxa2 in TnonMet-shN cells reduced Cdx2 levels [Supplemental Fig. S6B,C], suggesting that Cdx2 expression in these tumor cells is plastic and can be regulated by changes in expression of Nkx2-1 and Foxa2. Furthermore, ChIP-qPCR analysis detected binding of Nkx2-1 and Foxa2 to an enhancer downstream from the genomic locus of Cdx2 (Supplemental Fig. S6D). Based on these findings, we propose a model for the regulation of Cdx2 expression in lung adenocarcinoma in which transcription of Cdx2 is inhibited by binding of Nkx2-1 to a nearby enhancer region. Upon loss of Nkx2-1, expression of Cdx2 is derepressed in a manner dependent on Foxa2 binding to the same enhancer (Supplemental Fig. S6E).

Taken together, these observations suggest that lung adenocarcinoma progress from early tumors that express Nkx2-1 and Foxa2 [Fig. 6I]. Over time, Nkx2-1 is silenced, leading to activation of Cdx2 and partial activation of metastasis-promoting genes such as Hmga2 in at least a subset of tumors. Finally, suppression of Foxa2 leads to reduced Cdx2 expression, and the combined loss of Nkx2-1, Foxa2, and Cdx2 leads to complete derepression of Hmga2 and other metastasis-promoting genes, resulting in full acquisition of metastatic potential.

Nkx2-1, Foxa2, and Cdx2 gene expression signatures predict clinical outcomes of lung adenocarcinoma patients

We next asked whether our observations could provide prognostic information relevant to human lung adenocarcinomas. To this end, we analyzed RNA-seq expression data for 488 lung adenocarcinoma primary tumors from patients with stage I–IV disease from The Cancer Genome Atlas (TCGA, http://cancergenome.nih.gov). Unsupervised signature analysis (see the Supplemental Material) of the expression patterns of Nkx2-1, Foxa2, Cdx2, and Hmga2 in these tumors revealed three gene expression signatures [Fig. 7A,B]. Interestingly, these signatures closely correlated with the expression patterns of Nkx2-1, Foxa2, Cdx2, and Hmga2 in the KP mouse model of lung adenocarcinoma. The first signature is driven by high expression of Nkx2-1 and Foxa2 as well as low expression of Hmga2, similar to the early tumors in mice. The second signature is characterized by high expression of Cdx2, similar to tumors in the intermediate state. Finally, the third signature is characterized by high expression of Hmga2, similar to advanced tumors in our mouse model. While the gene expression patterns in these signatures are consistent with our observations in the KP model, we note that there is a small increase of Foxa2 levels in the third signature compared with the second signature. This difference from our KP model is not surprising given the larger heterogeneity and complexity that exist in human lung adenocarcinomas compared with the genetically engineered model.

Importantly, these signatures also strongly correlated with clinical outcomes [Fig. 7C,D]. The Nkx2-1/
FOX2, Cdx2, and Nkx2-1 jointly inhibit metastasis

FOXA2-driven signature and the CDX2-driven signature were associated with favorable and intermediate disease stage and patient survival, respectively. In contrast, the HMGA2-driven signature was associated with the worst stage and survival. Furthermore, the prognostic values of these four gene pattern-derived signatures were more powerful than analysis using a single gene alone (data not shown). Finally, a multivariate Cox proportional hazard regression analysis showed that these signatures of gene expression pattern were significant prognostic factors independent of gender, age, and disease stage [Fig. 7E, Supplementary Fig. S7A]. These results provide further support to our proposed model that early-stage tumors are marked by Nkx2-1 and FOXA2 expression, while intermediate tumors acquire expression of CDX2, and most advanced tumors acquire expression of HMGA2. Interestingly, these signatures are prognostic for survival outcome even for patients with early-stage disease [i.e., stages I and II], suggesting that the signatures could be informative for identifying high-risk patients with micro-metastatic disease who may benefit from adjuvant treatment after surgical tumor resection [Supplementary Fig. S7B]. Taken together, these data argue that our proposed model for lung adenocarcinoma progression is highly relevant for human cancer. Our findings provide important information for the prognosis of lung adenocarcinoma patients and may inform the future development of therapeutic strategies for this highly metastatic disease.

Discussion

In this study, we present evidence from the autochthonous KP model of lung adenocarcinoma, derivative cell lines, and human patients that together demonstrate that Nkx2-1, Foxa2, and Cdx2 function collectively to suppress metastatic progression of lung adenocarcinoma. We found that loss of Nkx2-1, Foxa2, and Cdx2 profoundly enhanced metastasis in a subcutaneous transplantation model compared with loss of a single factor alone. In particular, these three factors regulated metastasis by acting on multiple steps of the metastatic cascade: Loss of Nkx2-1 alone promoted colonization at distant sites, whereas combined loss of Nkx2-1, Foxa2, and Cdx2 cooperated to promote tumor cell migration. The observed increase in metastatic ability upon loss of Nkx2-1, Foxa2, and Cdx2 can be explained by activation of a network of transcriptional targets that account for a large and significant fraction of the gene expression alterations between TnonMet and TMet/Met cells. These target genes include the invadopodia component Tks5long, the embryonal proto- oncogene Hmg2a, and the EMT mediator Snail, all of which functionally contribute to metastasis. Furthermore, analysis of autochthonous lung tumors in the KP model revealed a strong correlation between loss of expression of these three factors and tumor progression to an advanced, poorly differentiated, and metastatic state. Finally, in human lung adenocarcinoma, the expression patterns of Nkx2-1, FOXA2, CDX2, and HMGA2 predicted tumor differentiation states that significantly correlated with disease stage and survival outcome. Thus, our results are highly relevant for the human disease and provide prognostic information for lung adenocarcinoma patients.

Combining these data, we propose a model for lung adenocarcinoma progression [Fig. 6I]. This model starts with high Nkx2-1 and Foxa2 expression that restrains tumors in a well-differentiated, nonmetastatic state. Subsequent loss of Nkx2-1 expression, presumably as a result of extracellular stimulatory signals or intracellular stochastic alterations in gene expression, leads to activation of Cdx2, shifting the cells to an aberrant, albeit still differentiated, state. Finally, suppression of Foxa2 leads to loss of Cdx2, and these alterations synergize with silencing of Nkx2-1 to induce a dedifferentiated stem-like state in the tumor cells, leading to activation of a metastasis program.

Our findings provide two important conclusions. First, Nkx2-1, Foxa2, and Cdx2 can function as key regulatory nodes in transcriptional regulation of the metastasis program. Our data strongly suggest that a relatively small number of factors could be responsible for the vast amount of gene expression alterations in metastasis. It is very likely that only a subset of the gene expression changes induced by loss of Nkx2-1, Foxa2, and Cdx2 is a direct target of these three factors, while other targets may be indirectly controlled via secondary transcription factors downstream from Nkx2-1, Foxa2, and Cdx2. The fact that suppression of Nkx2-1, Foxa2, and Cdx2 is sufficient to derepress this network of metastasis-related genes also suggests that the transcriptional activators for a subset of these target genes may be expressed in tumors and therefore available to act upon loss of these three transcriptional suppressors. As such, while there are multiple pathways regulating the metastasis program, Nkx2-1, Foxa2, and Cdx2 function as three central regulatory nodes in governing transcriptional programs that together restrain tumor metastasis.

Second, the roles of Nkx2-1, Foxa2, and Cdx2 in regulating metastasis underscore the intricate links between dysregulated differentiation and metastasis progression. Striking overlaps exist between genes involved in development and cancer [Kho et al. 2004; Liu et al. 2006; Ben-Forth et al. 2008; Kopantzev et al. 2008]. All three transcription factors in this study are well-established developmental regulators. Nkx2-1 and Foxa2 are important developmental regulators of the lungs as well as other endoderm-derived organs [Kimura et al. 1996; Zhou et al. 1997; Minoo et al. 1999; Wan et al. 2005]. Nkx2-1 is a homeodomain-containing transcription factor essential for differentiation of the lungs during early embryogenesis [Kimura et al. 1996]. In the lungs, Nkx2-1 is expressed in all epithelial cells in early pulmonary development but becomes progressively restricted to alveolar type II and Club cells in adults [Minoo et al. 1999], where Nkx2-1 activates expression of pulmonary-specific genes, including SftpA, SftpB, SftpC, and CCSP [Minoo et al. 1999]. Foxa1 is a forkhead transcription factor that is expressed in the endoderm and cooperates with its paralog, Foxa1, in mediating organogenesis of the lungs as well as the stomach, intestine, liver, pancreas, and other organs [Kaestner...
Foxa2 is important for alveolarization of the lungs during development [Wan et al. 2004]. Adult lungs express Foxa2 in the bronchiolar epithelium and alveolar type II cells [Besnard et al. 2004]. Interestingly, while Foxa2 expression and function overlap largely with Foxa1, we did not see differential expression of Foxa1 between TnonMet and TMet/Met cells [Supplemental Fig. S6]. In contrast to Nkx2-1 and Foxa2, the expression of Cdx2 is not appreciably expressed in normal embryonic or adult lungs. Instead, as a member of the Caudal-type homeobox protein, Cdx2 is required for intestine morphogenesis during embryonic development and is expressed in the small and large intestines in adults [Beck and Stringer 2010]. Cdx2 also functions in an earlier stage in development for trophoblast formation and axial patterning [Beck and Stringer 2010]. While detection of Cdx2 expression in the KP lung adenocarcinoma is perhaps surprising, it is unlikely to be an artifact of the mouse model, as other studies on human lung adenocarcinomas have reported expression of Cdx2 in a subset of patients, although the role of Cdx2 in this context was not previously understood [Yatabe et al. 2004; Grimminger et al. 2009].

Our findings reflect the redundant nature of the cellular differentiation program in impeding tumor progression. The lungs and the intestines are developmentally related, as they are both derived from the developing gut tube. We showed that, during progression of lung adenocarcinoma, partial loss of the lung differentiation program by silencing of Nkx2-1 can lead to aberrant activation of an alternative differentiation program of the intestine that is driven by Cdx2 in at least a subset of these tumors. The activation of the latent intestinal program may serve as a redundant mechanism in the cells to restrain tumor dedifferentiation and metastatic progression. Subsequent loss of both the pulmonary and intestinal differentiation programs upon silencing of Nkx2-1, Foxa2, and Cdx2 expression is required for full progression to a cellular state of more primitive differentiation and higher metastatic potential. This hypothesis about redundancy is further corroborated by the results from a previous study in our laboratory, which showed that deletion of Nkx2-1 alone in the KP model of lung adenocarcinoma was not sufficient to promote metastasis [Snyder et al. 2013]. In fact, loss of Nkx2-1 expression early at tumor initiation led to activation of a gastric differentiation program driven by Hnf4α, Foxa1, and Foxa2 in these cancer cells. In this study, loss of Nkx2-1 at a later stage of tumor progression, as opposed to at tumor initiation, activated the expression of Cdx2 instead of Hnf4α. This difference may reflect the different cellular states of early and late tumors and the existence of multiple possible alternative differentiation states in the progression of the same tumor type. Interestingly, the aberrant activation of Cdx2 has also been identified to induce intestinal differentiation in other tumor types, including gastric cancer, esophageal cancer, nasal adenocarcinoma, pancreatic cancer, and ovarian cancer, and in some cases has been shown to associate with favorable prognosis [Mizoshita et al. 2003; Yuasa 2003; Guo et al. 2004; Matsumoto et al. 2004]. These studies, together with our findings, strongly suggest that the activation of a Cdx2-driven alternative differentiation program in tumors may be a common phenomenon in the evolution of cancer development and may serve as a mechanism to restrain malignant progression.

Our study has shown that the developmental transcription factors Foxa2 and Cdx2 function cooperatively with Nkx2-1 as important regulators in inhibiting metastasis of lung adenocarcinoma. These data provide strong evidence for the important roles of active and latent developmental regulators in restraining the programs of tumor dedifferentiation and metastatic progression. Our findings also demonstrate that while the pathways in the metastasis program are diverse and complex, they can be controlled by a small number of transcription factors that together govern a network of downstream targets to regulate metastasis.

Materials and methods

Autochthonous K-rasG12D/WT, p53−/− lung tumors and derivative cell lines

Lung tumors were initiated via intratracheal delivery of Lenti-Cre or Adeno-Cre in K-rasf2f1-LG2D/WT, p530/0+ mice as described previously [DuPage et al. 2009]. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee approved all animal studies and procedures. TnonMet, TMet, and Met cell lines were generated previously using Lenti-Cre-initiated primary tumors and metastases harvested at 6–14 mo post-infection [Winslow et al. 2011]. All cell lines were cultured in complete medium (DMEM with 10% FBS, 50 U/mL penicillin, 50 mg/mL streptomycin). Five TnonMet cell lines (368T1, 393T1, 394T4, 802T4, and 2557T1), six TMet cell lines (373T1, 373T2, 389T2, 393T3, 393T5, and 482T1) and five Met cell lines (373N1, 393N1, 393M1, 482N1, and 482M1) were used for subsequent gene expression analysis and/or functional experiments in this study.

Transplantation assays for metastasis

For subcutaneous transplantation, 5 × 10⁴ cells resuspended in 100 µL of PBS were injected under the skin on the hind flank of nude mice. Mice were analyzed 6.5 wk after injection. For intravenous transplantation, 5 × 10⁴ cells resuspended in 100 µL of PBS were injected into the lateral tail vein. Animals were analyzed 2.5 wk after injection.

Intravital imaging

Multiphoton imaging of GFP-labeled tumors was performed as described previously [Wyckoff et al. 2011]. Briefly, subcutaneous tumors at 5–6 wk after injection were exposed by skin flap surgery performed on anesthetized animals. Tumors were imaged with an Olympus FV1000 multiphoton microscope using a 25×, 1.05 NA water immersion objective with correction lens. Thirty-minute time-lapse movies were analyzed for numbers of migratory GFP-positive tumor cells using ImageJ. Three mice were used per condition, with four to seven fields imaged per mouse.

In vivo fine-needle collection assay

The in vivo invasion assay was performed as previously described [Wyckoff et al. 2000]. In brief, four to six catheterized...
microneedles held in place by micromanipulators were inserted into the primary tumor of an anesthetized mouse. Needles contained a mixture of 10% Matrigel and 0.01 mM EDTA with 15 medium ± 10% FBS. After 4 h, the contents of the needle were extruded, and the total number of tumor cells that migrated into each needle was quantified using DAPI. Three mice were used per condition.

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Li et al.

Foxa2 and Cdx2 cooperate with Nkx2-1 to inhibit lung adenocarcinoma metastasis

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