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Absent B cells, agammaglobulinemia, and hypertrophic cardiomyopathy in Folliculin Interacting Protein 1 deficiency

Tracking no: BLD-2020-006441R2

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Abstract:

Agammaglobulinemia is the most profound primary antibody deficiency that can occur due to an early termination of B-cell development. We here investigated three novel patients, including the first known adult, from unrelated families with agammaglobulinemia, recurrent infections, and hypertrophic cardiomyopathy (HCM). Two of them also presented with intermittent or severe chronic neutropenia. We identified homozygous or compound heterozygous variants in the gene for Folliculin interacting protein 1 (*FNIP1*), leading to loss of the FNIP1 protein. B-cell metabolism, including mitochondrial numbers and activity and PI3K/AKT pathway, was impaired. These defects recapitulated the *Fnip1*^{-/-} animal model. Moreover, we identified either uniparental disomy or copy number variants [CNV] in two patients, expanding the variant spectrum of this novel inborn error of immunity. The results indicate that FNIP1 deficiency can be caused by complex genetic mechanisms and support the clinical utility of exome sequencing and CNV analysis in patients with broad phenotypes, including agammaglobulinemia and HCM.

FNIP1 deficiency is a novel inborn error of immunity characterized by early and severe B-cell development defect, agammaglobulinemia, variable neutropenia, and HCM. Our findings elucidate a functional and relevant role of FNIP1 in B-cell development and metabolism and potentially neutrophil activity.

Conflict of interest: No COI declared

COI notes:

Preprint server: No;

Author contributions and disclosures: Contributions: F.S., M.C.P., L.D., C.B., M.I. designed and analyzed experiments; L.P.N., V.J.C., A.B., G.F., M.Q., C.B., M.V., W.K., M.O performed experiments; J.C.O., S.B., S.G. provided samples and interpreted clinical and/or imaging data; J.R.L., S.V.D.M., F.B., R.P., A.B., R.B., G.C. were involved in study design, gave intellectual input and critically revised the manuscript; D.M. conducted immunophenotyping on BM and PBMC; F.S., M.C.P., I.C., J.V., F.R., and M.S. wrote the manuscript which was approved by all authors. The authors declare no competing financial interests.

Non-author contributions and disclosures: No;

Agreement to Share Publication-Related Data and Data Sharing Statement: Data will be shared if requested to the corresponding author by email

Clinical trial registration information (if any):

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Agammaglobulinemia and HCM in FNIP1 deficiency

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Key Points

FNIP1 deficiency causes agammaglobulinemia, variable neutropenia, and hypertrophic cardiomyopathy.

FNIP1 deficiency alters B-cell development and metabolism.

Key words

Agammaglobulinemia; neutropenia; FNIP1, inborn error of immunity; primary immunodeficiency; hypertrophic cardiomyopathy.

Abstract

Agammaglobulinemia is the most profound primary antibody deficiency that can occur due to an early termination of B-cell development. We here investigated three novel patients, including the first known adult, from unrelated families with agammaglobulinemia, recurrent infections, and hypertrophic cardiomyopathy (HCM). Two of them also presented with intermittent or severe chronic neutropenia. We identified homozygous or compound heterozygous variants in the gene for Folliculin interacting protein 1 (*FNIP1*), leading to loss of the FNIP1 protein. B-cell metabolism, including mitochondrial numbers and activity and PI3K/AKT pathway, was impaired. These defects recapitulated the *Fnip1*^{-/-} animal model. Moreover, we identified either uniparental disomy or copy number variants [CNV] in two patients, expanding the variant spectrum of this novel inborn error of immunity. The results indicate that FNIP1 deficiency can be caused by complex genetic mechanisms and support the clinical utility of exome sequencing and CNV analysis in patients with broad phenotypes, including agammaglobulinemia and HCM.

FNIP1 deficiency is a novel inborn error of immunity characterized by early and severe B-cell development defect, agammaglobulinemia, variable neutropenia, and HCM. Our findings elucidate a functional and relevant role of FNIP1 in B-cell development and metabolism and potentially neutrophil activity.

Introduction

Agammaglobulinemia is the most profound primary antibody deficiency that results from early termination of B-cell development, which leads to the absence of mature circulating B-cells and very low or absent serum immunoglobulin levels. To date, defects in *BTK*, *IGHM*, *IGLL1*, *CD79A*, *CD79B*, *BLNK*, and *PIK3R1* have been reported to cause agammaglobulinemia¹.

Disruption of Folliculin Interacting Protein 1 (FNIP1) alters the essential metabolic regulators AMPK and mTOR (Figure 1A), resulting in profound B-cell deficiency and decreased NKT cells, hypertrophic cardiomyopathy (HCM), and pre-excitation syndrome²⁻⁸. Contemporarily, another group⁹ clinically described two families with inborn FNIP1 deficiency with hypogammaglobulinemia, intermittent neutropenia, and HCM. Here, we present functional validation of FNIP1 deficiency in three novel families including the first adult case. FNIP1 deficiency results in HCM, absent circulating B-cells, agammaglobulinemia, and either severe or intermittent neutropenia.

Methods

This study was approved by the institutional review boards/ethic committee of Comitato Etico Brianza (Monza, Italy; PID-GENMET), and Baylor College of Medicine (Houston, Texas). All study participants provided written informed consent.

Full methods are detailed in the supplementary data.

Results and discussion

Clinical phenotype

P1 was born to consanguineous parents. The parents of P2 and P3 denied consanguinity (Figure 1B). Clinical manifestations started in infancy (< 1 year) including severe and/or recurrent infections (detailed clinical histories in the supplementary data). Sinopulmonary infections led to bronchial wall thickening (P1), extensive bronchiectasis requiring lobectomy (P2), or calcifications (P3; supplemental Figure 1). All patients had left ventricular HCM (supplemental Figure 2 and supplemental Table 1). P2 also had an interatrial communication requiring surgical correction, and P3 had severe tricuspid valve regurgitation, severe right ventricle dilatation, and pre-excitation syndrome. All patients had no imaging or laboratory signs of renal disease. For P1, neurological examination showed developmental delay associated with MRI abnormalities (supplemental Figure 3). P3 had Crohn disease that required multiple bowel surgeries. All patients had absent circulating B-cells and agammaglobulinemia (Table 1) requiring immunoglobulin replacement therapy. Two out of three patients had neutropenia, either severe (P1; neutrophil count consistently below $0.5 \times 10^9/l$) or intermittent (P3), which was confirmed outside the infectious episodes and may have contributed to recurrent and severe infections.

FNIP1 variants in patients with agammaglobulinemia

Trio whole-exome sequencing (WES) was performed in all families. No candidates were identified within recognized PID-associated genes¹⁰⁻¹³. We identified distinct biallelic variants in *FNIP1*, which were not present in public databases (gnomAD, ESP, and 1000 Genomes) and exclusive to these families in our internal databases. For P1, the homozygous NM_133372.2:c.868C>T nonsense variant in *FNIP1* is located in exon 9 and predicted to result in a premature stop codon (p.R290*). The variant was confirmed by Sanger sequencing and each parent was a heterozygous carrier (Figure 1B; supplemental figure 4A). A homozygous splicing donor variant (c.3306+1G>A; supplemental Figure 5) was identified in P2. Sanger sequencing confirmed the father to be a heterozygous carrier of the variant whilst it was not present in the mother. Exome data were consistent with paternal uniparental disomy (UPD) of chromosome 5 leading to homozygosity of this variant in P2 (supplemental methods and supplemental Figure 6). For P3, WES showed a maternally inherited deletion of *FNIP1* exons 9-18 and a paternally inherited single nucleotide variant (SNV; c.3218delT;p.L1073Wfs*32; Figure 1B).

We evaluated functional consequences of the *FNIP1* variants in the blood samples. *FNIP1* mRNA levels were significantly decreased in P1 but not absent, most likely due to incomplete nonsense-mediated decay

(Figure 1C). Because FNIP1 is expressed in activated peripheral lymphocytes^{3,5}, to determine whether the variants altered protein stability, we examined the presence of FNIP1 protein in stimulated cultured T-cells. Immunoblotting demonstrated the complete absence of FNIP1 in all the patients (Figure 1D).

Immune-cell phenotype in FNIP1 deficiency

Analysis of the T-cell subsets showed mildly and intermittently increased CD3⁺ in P1 and P3. Standard lymphocyte proliferative response to specific antigens and mitogens was normal in P1 and P3 and decreased in P2 (Table 1). Using IL-2 and anti-CD28/CD3, P1 T-cells showed increased apoptosis between days 7 to 11. Apoptosis was more prominent for CD8⁺ compared to CD4⁺ T-cells (supplemental Figure 7). NKT cells were decreased in P1 (Table 1).

Peripheral B-lymphocytes were undetectable or markedly decreased in all patients (Table 1). For P1, bone marrow examination displayed delayed granulocyte maturation, with no overt arrest. B-cell precursors did not show evidence of a maturation block, unlike classical agammaglobulinemia¹⁴, although a relative increase of earlier maturation stages (pro-B and pre-B1) and a significant reduction of immature B-cells was observed (Figure 1E and supplemental Figure 8).

FNIP1 deficiency is associated with altered cell metabolism

We hypothesized that human FNIP1 deficiency may hamper B-cell metabolism similar to *Fnip1*-deficient mice²⁻⁸. Indeed, circulating P1 B-cells exhibited increased numbers of mitochondria and mitochondrial activity relative to healthy control (HC) B-cells (Figure 1F and supplemental Figure 9). Next, we examined the activation of the PI3K/Akt pathway. We observed constitutive hyperactivation of PI3K downstream targets in P1 B-cell progenitors relative to HC B-cell precursors (Figure 1G). Specifically, p4EBP1 and pAkt473 were significantly activated (12.46±1.86 vs 4.00±0.53, $p = 0.0002$; 3.82±1.78 vs 0.97±0.09, $p = 0.029$). As opposite, no difference could be found in S6 phosphorylation (1.46±0.14 vs 2.70±0.51, $p = 0.14$). To assess the accuracy of our approach¹⁵, we tested NPV-BEZ 235 as a specific inhibitor of the PI3K pathway and observed that it was able to significantly decrease p4EBP1 (mean 12.46±1.86 vs 2.58±0.32, $p = 0.006$). These results suggest that the sensitivity to PI3K inhibition is determined by the activation of the PI3K/Akt pathway in FNIP1-deficient patients.

Mouse *Fnip1* consists of 1,165 amino acids and shares 91% amino acid identity with human FNIP1⁵. *Fnip1* plays a nonredundant role in early B-cell development and metabolism, skeletal muscle fiber type specification, and cardiac function²⁻⁸. Our report confirms that the clinical and immunological phenotypes are strikingly overlapping (i.e., HCM, pre-excitation syndrome, and early and severe B-cell defect with agammaglobulinemia). FNIP1 deficiency can be detected even in young adults. Moreover, we identified unconventional heterogeneous genetic etiologies for FNIP1 deficiency in two patients, expanding the variant spectrum of this novel inborn error of immunity (IEI; supplemental Figure 10A). In fact, only a limited number of cases of chromosome 5 UPD have been reported¹⁶. Our findings argue for the clinical use of exome sequencing with copy number variants analysis in patients with complex phenotypes. Importantly, in one patient we have provided for the first time some of the functional studies (increased number of mitochondria and mitochondrial activity and 4EBP1 activation) that recapitulate the alterations described in *Fnip1* deficient mice.

Some aspects nonetheless remain controversial. Contradictory results concerning the activation of the PI3K/Akt pathway have been described in *Fnip1*^{-/-} mice^{7,17} (supplemental Table 2). Unlike *Fnip1*-deficient mice¹⁷, no FNIP1 patients have had overt clinical symptoms of renal disease⁹, but the presence of renal cysts has not been investigated by renal biopsies. Only one proband has had myopathy⁹ (supplemental

Figure 10B). Here we report the coexistence of heart defects other than HCM and pre-excitation syndrome in FNIP1 deficiency. Elsewhere⁹, patients carrying biallelic missense variants showed milder B-cell lymphopenia, and one individual had only decreased IgM with normal IgG and elevated IgA levels. These elements suggest that FNIP1 deficiency could be a protean disorder resembling also common variable immunodeficiency phenotype. The T-cell compartment was unaffected in *Fnip1*^{-/-} mice^{5,7}. Although patients have not shown any clinical signs of defective T-cell function, lymphocytosis and/or defective T-cell proliferation with increased apoptosis have been found in some patients (Figure 10B). Granulocytes are not affected in the *Fnip1*^{-/-} mouse⁷, yet four patients have displayed severe or intermittent neutropenia, and two have monocytosis. This finding is reminiscent of the neutrophil survival defect seen in BTK-associated agammaglobulinemia¹⁸. As in other IEI^{19,20}, FNIP1 deficiency may be associated with severe or intermittent neutropenia, or even episodic normal neutrophil counts. Central nervous system involvement is present in four out of six patients. These manifestations only occurred in consanguineous pedigrees and may result either from other genetic changes not yet discovered or from FNIP1 phenotypic heterogeneity.

Collectively, we identified novel inherited *FNIP1* variants causing FNIP1 deficiency, which affects B-cell survival and metabolism recapitulating the *Fnip1*^{-/-} animal model. FNIP1 deficiency should be considered in patients with hypo- or agammaglobulinemia, congenital heart defects, particularly HCM, and neutropenia.

Acknowledgements

The authors thank the patients and their families for participating in the study; Donna M. Muzny, Shalini N. Jhangiani, Richard A. Gibbs, and Haowei Du from the Baylor College of Medicine Human Genome Sequencing Center and Baylor-Hopkins Center for Mendelian Genomics for whole exome sequencing and bioinformatics support; Nicholas L. Rider and Gina Cahill from the Texas Children's Hospital William T. Shearer Center for Human Immunobiology and Jeffrey Modell Foundation at Texas Children's Hospital for validation studies; Francesco Canonico from Department of Neuroradiology, University of Milan-Bicocca, San Gerardo Hospital, ASST di Monza, Monza for brain CT study; Francesca Pluchinotta and Antonella Camporeale from IRCCS Policlinico San Donato, Milan, for cardiac MRI study; Giuseppe Limoli from USS Patologia Neonatale e Nido e Servizio di Cardiologia Pediatrica, ASST Lodi for cardiac ultrasound study; and GeneDx and GeneMatcher for facilitating collaboration.

This work was supported by NIH-NHGRI/NHLBI UM1 HG006542 (to the Baylor-Hopkins Center for Mendelian Genomics), Fondecyt #11181222 (to MCP), AIRC-IG Grant 22082 (to RP), "PG23/FROM 2017 Call for Independent Research" as part of the RARE project—Rapid Analysis for Rapid care (to Papa Giovanni XXIII), GOSH NIHR BRC, and Wellcome Trust Research grants (201250/Z/16/Z and 104807/Z14/Z to ER and AB, respectively).

Authorship contributions

Contributions: F.S., M.C.P., L.D., C.B., M.I. designed and analyzed experiments; L.P.N, V.J.C, A.B., G.F., M.Q., C.B., M.V., W.K., M.O performed experiments; J.C.O., S.B., S.G. provided samples and interpreted clinical and/or imaging data; J.R.L., S.V.D.M, F.B., R.P., A.B., R.B., G.C. were involved in study design, gave intellectual input and critically revised the manuscript; D.M. conducted immunophenotyping on BM and PBMC; F.S, M.C.P, I.C., J.V., F.R., and M.S. wrote the manuscript which was approved by all authors.

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The authors declare no competing financial interests.

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Figure 1. Functional studies on patients with FNIP1 deficiency. (A) Schematic illustration displaying the interaction of FNIP1 in B-cells. Positive and negative regulators of mTORC1 signaling are depicted in green and in blue, respectively. Folliculin and Fnip1/2 have been described as both positive and negative regulators of mTORC1. (B) Pedigrees showing three families with affected individuals harboring *FNIP1* variants. Solid symbols indicate affected persons who were homozygous or compound heterozygous for the mutant alleles; half solid symbols, heterozygous persons; circles, female family members; square, male family members; double lines, consanguinity. (C) Expression of *FNIP1* mRNA in P1 (RT-qPCR analysis). Data are expressed as mean \pm standard deviation (SD) (2 independent experiments, each one performed in triplicates). Statistical test analysis was performed using 1-way ANOVA. (D) *FNIP1* protein expression in T-cells. (E) Bone marrow B-cell immunophenotyping in P1 compared with a healthy control and one BTK patient (representative experiment). (F) Quantification of total mitochondrial abundance and mitochondrial activity in circulating CD19⁺ cells isolated from an healthy control and P1 (representative experiment). (G) Evaluation of pAKT, pS6, and p4EBP1 levels in B-cell bone marrow progenitors from P1 and a healthy control (2 experiments). In all graphs ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001. Means \pm SD.

HC = healthy control.

Table 1. Immunological characteristics of patients with FNIP1 deficiency.

^Before G-CSF treatment. §Before or without Ig replacement therapy. N/A = not available.

	P1		P2		P3	
Age at the time of evaluation, years	3		9		25	
Coordinates (hg19) Chr5	Homozygous 131042150_G>A		Homozygous 130987494_C>T		Compound heterozygous 130766131_131044371 (min interval) ex9-ex18del	
Variant(s) [NM_133372.2]	c.C868T		c.3306+1G>A		c.3218delT	
Protein change	p.290*		N/A		p.L1073Wfs*32	
CADD score	36		34		36	
		Age-matched normal values		Age-matched normal values		Age-matched normal values
Hemoglobin (g/dl)	9.7	11.5-13.5	12.3	11.5-14.5	11.8	12.0-16.0
WBC (10 ³ cells/L)	9.04	5.2-11.0	20.14	5.2-11.0	3.8	4.4-8.1
Neutrophils (10 ³ cells/L)	0.28^	>1.5	13.29	>1.5	0.76	>1.5
Lymphocytes (10 ³ cells/L)	4.7	2.3-5.4	3.63	2.3-5.4	2.51	1.4-3.3
Monocytes (10 ³ cells/L)	1.8^	<1.0	2.62	<1.0	0.53	<1.0
Platelets (10 ³ cells/L)	423	>100	440	>100	253	>100
Lymphocyte subsets						
CD3 ⁺ (10 ³ cells/L)	4.23	1.4-3.7	3.35	1.4-3.7	3.03	0.6-2.2
CD3 ⁺ CD4 ⁺ (10 ³ cells/L)	3.09	0.7-2.2	1.80	0.7-2.2	1.42	0.4-1.4
CD45RA ⁺ CCR7 ⁺ CD31 ⁺ %	62.1	36.2-71.8	N/A	20.3-68.9	N/A	N/A
Naïve %	81.0	49.2-85.8	62.8	37.8-80.3	31.0	2.0-58.0
Effector memory %	3.9	2.8-16.9	5.25	4.0-25.5	10.0	0.7-12.0
Central memory %	14.9	9.6-31.9	31.69	9.9-41.1	39.0	6.0-47.0
Term.Diff. %	0.2	0.6-4.8	0.26	0.4-7.7	N/A	N/A
CD3 ⁺ CD8 ⁺ (10 ³ cells/L)	1.0	0.49-1.3	1.48	0.49-1.3	1.39	0.2-0.86
Naïve %	79.3	22.8-79.9	59.6	20.3-78.2	39.0	6.0-84.0
Central %	4.6	0.9-11.3	29.82	1.7-13.3	15.0	1.0-18.0
Effector memory %	6.7	4.3-31.4	4.99	8.6-34.5	5.0	0.0-6.0
Term.Diff %	9.4	6.8-52.7	5.58	7.0-53.8	N/A	N/A
CD19 ⁺ (10 ³ cells/L)	0.05	0.39-1.4	0.0	0.39-1.4	0.0	0.09-0.4
Recent B emigrants %	20.6	10.6-42.6	0.0	7.1-35.3	N/A	N/A
Naïve %	8.6	34.2-65.5	0.0	37.1-70.2	N/A	N/A
CD19 ^{hi} CD21 ^{lo}	68.2	1.5-9.8	0.0	1.9-9.0	N/A	N/A
Unswitched %	1.4	2.9-15.3	0.0	3.1-18.3	N/A	N/A
Switched %	0.0	1.5-14.2	0.0	2.4-19.8	N/A	N/A
Term.Diff	0.0	0.37-15.3	0.0	0.3-11.8	N/A	N/A
Plasma cells	0.0	0.06-4.1	0.0	0.1-2.7	N/A	N/A
NKT (10 ³ cells/L)	0.005	0.015-0.25	0.057	0.012-0.34	0.5	0.015-0.34
NK (10 ³ cells/L)	0.44	0.13-0.72	0.26	0.13-0.72	0.17	0.1-0.5
DC, plasmacytoid %	0.16	0.16-0.76	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
DC, myeloid %	0.23	0.18-0.92	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Immunoglobulins (g/l)[§]						
IgG	0.13	4.9-16.1	0.33	5.4-16.1	3.83	6.0-16.0
IgA	<0.01	0.4-2.0	<0.01	0.7-2.5	<0.02	0.8-2.8
IgM	0.08	0.5-2.0	0.14	0.5-1.8	<0.1	0.5-1.9
IgE kU/l	<1	<33	<1	<48	<1	<48
Tetanus vaccine titer	Absent [§]		N/A		N/A	

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T-cell proliferation				
CD3	Normal		N/A	N/A
CD3 + IL2	Normal		N/A	N/A
PHA	Normal		N/A	Normal
Tetanus	N/A		N/A	Normal
Candida	N/A		N/A	Normal
Con A	N/A		N/A	Normal
CD3 + CD2 + CD8 + IL-2	N/A		Reduced	N/A

