microRNA Biogenesis, Mechanisms of Actions and Circulation

Thualfakar Hayder Hasan Abusaiba[1], Ali Abdul Hussein[1]

1 Jabir ibn Hayyan Medical University

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Abstract

The discovery of microRNAs (miRNAs) has revolutionized our understanding of gene regulation and its impact on cellular processes. miRNAs are small non-coding RNA molecules that play a crucial role in post-transcriptional gene regulation. They are involved in various physiological and pathological processes, including development, differentiation, and disease progression. Understanding the biogenesis, mechanisms of action, and circulation of miRNAs is essential for unraveling their functional significance and potential applications in diagnostics and therapeutics. This article provides a comprehensive overview of microRNA biogenesis, mechanisms of action, and their circulation, highlighting their role in cellular regulation and their diagnostic and therapeutic potential.

Thualfakar Hayder Hasan*, **Ali Abdul Hussein**, and **Worood Kadhim Abd**

Jabir Ibn Hayyan Medical University, Najaf, Iraq

*Correspondence: thualfakar.h.hasan@jmu.edu.iq

1. Introduction to microRNA Biogenesis

1.1. Definition and Discovery of microRNAs

MicroRNAs (miRNAs) are small non-coding RNA molecules that play a significant role in the regulation of gene expression. They were first discovered in the early 1990s and have since been found to be present in a wide range of organisms, from plants to animals. Despite their small size, miRNAs have been shown to have a profound impact on various biological processes.

1.2. Overview of microRNA Biogenesis Pathway

The biogenesis of miRNAs involves a series of well-coordinated steps. It begins with the transcription of miRNA genes by

RNA polymerase II, resulting in the production of primary miRNA transcripts (pri-miRNAs). These pri-miRNAs are then processed by the Drosha-DGCR8 complex in the nucleus, resulting in the formation of precursor miRNAs (pre-miRNAs).

The pre-miRNAs are subsequently transported from the nucleus to the cytoplasm, where they are further processed by the Dicer enzyme. Dicer cleaves the pre-miRNAs, generating a double-stranded RNA duplex. One strand of this duplex, known as the mature miRNA, is then loaded into the RNA-induced silencing complex (RISC), while the other strand, called the passenger strand, is typically degraded.

2. Key Mechanisms of microRNA Action

2.1. Target Recognition and Binding

Once loaded onto the RISC, mature miRNAs can recognize and bind to specific target messenger RNA (mRNA) molecules. This recognition is based on complementary base pairing between the miRNA and the target mRNA. The miRNA typically binds to the 3' untranslated region (UTR) of the target mRNA, although it can also interact with other regions.

2.2. mRNA Degradation and Translation Inhibition

The binding of a miRNA to its target mRNA can lead to the degradation of the mRNA molecule or the inhibition of its translation into protein. In the case of mRNA degradation, the miRNA-RISC complex recruits proteins that promote mRNA decay. In translation inhibition, the miRNA-RISC complex interferes with the assembly of the ribosomes, thereby preventing the synthesis of the protein encoded by the target mRNA.

2.3. Epigenetic Regulation by microRNAs

In addition to their role in mRNA degradation and translation inhibition, miRNAs can also exert epigenetic regulation. They can target specific genes involved in DNA methylation or histone modification, leading to changes in chromatin structure and gene expression. This epigenetic regulation mediated by miRNAs adds another layer of complexity to their functional repertoire.

3. Regulation and Functions of microRNAs

3.1. Transcriptional and Post-transcriptional Regulation of microRNAs

The expression of miRNAs can be regulated at both the transcriptional and post-transcriptional levels. Transcriptional regulation involves the control of miRNA gene expression by various transcription factors and signaling pathways. Post-transcriptional regulation, on the other hand, involves the modulation of miRNA stability and processing.

3.2. Influence of microRNAs on Cellular Processes

MiRNAs have been shown to influence a wide range of cellular processes, including cell proliferation, differentiation, apoptosis, and metabolism. They can act as key regulators of gene networks by targeting multiple genes within a pathway or interacting with other regulatory molecules. Their ability to fine-tune gene expression makes them critical for maintaining cellular homeostasis.

3.3. Role of microRNAs in Development and Disease

MiRNAs play crucial roles in both development and disease. During development, miRNAs help orchestrate complex processes such as embryogenesis and tissue differentiation. In terms of disease, dysregulation of miRNA expression has been implicated in various conditions, including cancer, cardiovascular disorders, and neurological diseases. Understanding the specific roles of miRNAs in these contexts holds great promise for the development of therapeutic interventions.

4. Processing and Maturation of microRNAs

4.1. Primary microRNA Transcription

The biogenesis of miRNAs begins with the transcription of miRNA genes by RNA polymerase II. These primary transcripts, known as pri-miRNAs, can range in length from a few hundred to several thousand nucleotides. Pri-miRNAs often contain one or more hairpin structures, which are essential for subsequent processing.

4.2. Drosha-DGCR8 Complex and Pre-microRNA Formation

The pri-miRNAs are processed in the nucleus by a complex of proteins called Drosha-DGCR8. This complex recognizes and cleaves the hairpin structures within the pri-miRNAs, generating shorter hairpin-shaped RNA molecules known as pre-miRNAs. Each pre-miRNA typically contains a ~22-nucleotide double-stranded RNA stem-loop structure.

4.3. Dicer Enzyme and Mature microRNA Production

The pre-miRNAs are exported from the nucleus to the cytoplasm, where they undergo further processing by an enzyme called Dicer. Dicer recognizes the double-stranded RNA structure of the pre-miRNA and cleaves it, producing a short RNA duplex. One strand of this duplex is the mature miRNA, which is then incorporated into the RISC complex for target binding and gene regulation. The other strand, known as the passenger strand, is typically degraded.

To put it briefly, understanding the biogenesis, mechanisms of action, and circulation of miRNAs provides crucial insights into their regulatory functions and potential therapeutic applications. These small RNA molecules continue to captivate researchers as they uncover the intricate ways in which miRNAs shape gene expression and influence cellular processes.

5. Intracellular Signaling Pathways of microRNA

5.1. microRNA-Mediated Gene Regulatory Networks

MicroRNAs play a crucial role in gene regulation within cells. These tiny molecules can target specific messenger RNA molecules and either degrade them or inhibit their translation into proteins. By doing so, microRNAs can fine-tune gene expression and influence various biological processes, including development, metabolism, and disease progression. Through complex networks of interactions, microRNAs create a delicate balance of gene expression, like conductors in a symphony orchestra.

5.2. Role of microRNAs in Signal Transduction

Signal transduction is the process by which cells respond to external stimuli and transmit signals to the nucleus to trigger specific gene expression changes. Remarkably, microRNAs are integral components of these signaling pathways. They can act as messengers, transmitting information from cell surface receptors to the nucleus by modulating the expression of key signaling molecules. In this way, microRNAs help orchestrate the cellular responses to a wide range of signals, from growth factors to stressors.

5.3. Crosstalk Between microRNAs and Other Cellular Pathways

MicroRNAs don't live in isolation; they love to mingle with other cellular pathways. They engage in intricate crosstalk with various regulatory mechanisms, such as transcription factors, epigenetic modifications, and RNA-binding proteins. This dynamic interaction allows microRNAs to integrate multiple layers of information and participate in sophisticated regulatory circuits. It's like a conversation between microRNAs and other cellular actors, each influencing and being influenced in a complex dance of molecular communications.

6. Extracellular Circulation of microRNAs

6.1. Packaging of microRNAs into Extracellular Vesicles

MicroRNAs don't just stay within the confines of cells; they venture out into the extracellular world. One way they do this is by hitching a ride within small membranous bubbles called extracellular vesicles. These vesicles protect microRNAs from degradation and enable their transport to other cells or body fluids. It's like microRNAs going on a vacation, tucked inside their own little travel capsules.

6.2. Secretion and Uptake of Circulating microRNAs

Once microRNAs are packaged into extracellular vesicles, they can be secreted from cells and enter the circulation. From

there, they can journey throughout the body and reach target cells in distant tissues. Remarkably, these circulating microRNAs can be taken up by recipient cells, where they can regulate gene expression and affect cellular functions. Think of it as a microscopic postal service, delivering important genetic messages across the body.

6.3. Stability and Function of Extracellular microRNAs

Despite being outside of cells, extracellular microRNAs are remarkably stable. They can withstand harsh conditions in body fluids, such as enzymes and extreme pH levels, allowing them to remain active and functional. Once taken up by recipient cells, extracellular microRNAs can influence gene expression and contribute to a wide range of biological processes, including cell proliferation, immune responses, and tissue repair. It's like having a secret agent that can operate both inside and outside cells.

7. Diagnostic and Therapeutic Potential of Circulating microRNAs

7.1. microRNAs as Biomarkers for Disease Detection

The presence and abundance of specific microRNAs in body fluids can serve as powerful indicators of various diseases. By analyzing the microRNA profiles in blood, urine, or other samples, clinicians can potentially detect diseases at early stages or monitor disease progression. These microRNA biomarkers provide valuable insights into disease mechanisms and can help guide personalized treatment strategies. They're like molecular detectives, revealing hidden clues about our health.

7.2. Therapeutic Applications of microRNA-based Strategies

MicroRNAs hold immense therapeutic potential. Their ability to fine-tune gene expression makes them attractive targets for developing novel treatments for various diseases, including cancers, cardiovascular disorders, and neurological conditions. Researchers are exploring different strategies, such as delivering synthetic microRNAs or blocking specific microRNAs, to restore or modulate their activity for therapeutic benefit. It's like tinkering with the molecular knobs and switches to bring the body back into balance.

7.3. Challenges and Future Directions in microRNA-based Therapeutics

While microRNA-based therapeutics show promise, several challenges need to be overcome. Delivery of microRNAs to specific target tissues, ensuring their stability and avoiding off-target effects, remains a significant hurdle. Additionally, further research is needed to unravel the complex web of microRNA interactions and their precise roles in different diseases. Nevertheless, the field of microRNA therapeutics is rapidly evolving, and future breakthroughs may revolutionize the way we treat diseases. It's like embarking on an exciting scientific journey, filled with twists, turns, and the promise of new discoveries.

8. Conclusion

the study of microRNA biogenesis, mechanisms of action, and circulation has revealed the intricate regulatory networks that control gene expression and contribute to various biological processes. The ability of microRNAs to modulate gene expression post-transcriptionally has significant implications for understanding disease mechanisms and developing novel diagnostic tools and therapeutic interventions. As research in this field continues to advance, further exploration of microRNA biology and their clinical applications holds great promise for improving human health and addressing a wide range of diseases.

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