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Natural spleen cell ligandome in transporter antigen processing (TAP)-deficient mice

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Equal contribution

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ABSTRACT

Peptides generated by proteases in the cytosol must be translocated to endoplasmic reticulum lumen by the transporter associated with antigen processing (TAP) prior to their assembly with major histocompatibility complex (MHC) class I molecules. Non-functional TAP complexes produce a drastic decrease of the MHC class I/peptide complexes presented on the cell surface. Previously, the cellular MHC class I ligandome from TAP-deficient cell lines was determined, but similar analysis from normal tissues remains open. Using high-throughput mass spectrometry to analyze the MHC-bound peptide pools isolated from ex vivo spleen cells of TAP-deficient mice, we identified 210 TAP-independent ligands naturally presented by murine MHC class I molecules. This ligandome showed increased peptide lengths, presence of multiple nested set peptides, and low theoretical MHC binding affinity. The gene ontology enrichment analysis of parental proteins of this TAP-independent sub-ligandome showed almost exclusively enrichment in tissue-specific biological processes related with the immune system as would be expected. Also, cellular components of the extracellular space (namely proteins outside the cell, but still within the organism excluding the extracellular matrix) were specifically associated with TAP-independent antigen processing from these ex vivo mice cells. In addition, functional protein association network analysis revealed low protein-protein interactions between parental proteins from TAP-independent ligandome. Finally, predominant endoproteolytic peptidase specificity for Leu/Phe residues in the P₁ position of the scissile bond at both ligand termini was found for the ex vivo TAP-independent ligands. These data indicate that the TAP-independent ligandome from ex vivo cells derives from a more diverse collection both of endoprotease activities and parental proteins, and where the cell origin and the contribution of extracellular environment are more relevant than in its equivalent cell lines.

Keywords: antigen presentation, immunodeficiency, mass spectrometry, MHC,

TAP.

INTRODUCTION

The cytosolic proteases, among which stands out the proteasome, continuously degrade misfolded or prematurely terminated proteins, also named defective ribosomal products, as well as mature proteins with normal turnover kinetics. This proteolysis generates short peptides, some of which are transported into the endoplasmic reticulum (ER) lumen by the transporter associated with antigen processing (TAP) ¹. These peptides are assembled with de novo β 2-microglobulin and MHC class I heavy chain to generate trimolecular stable MHC-I/peptide complexes that are exported to the cell membrane and exposed to cytotoxic CD8⁺ T lymphocyte recognition (reviewed in ² ³). This classical antigen presentation pathway is the key element in the adaptive immune response against viruses and tumors ^{4, 5}.

The TAP deficiency syndrome, a rare condition caused by mutations in TAP genes that impair the transport of cytosolic peptides to the ER, has been described both in mice ⁶ and humans ⁷. This MHC class I immunodeficiency impairs the normal positive and negative selection in thymus and thus, a very limited functional CD8⁺ T cell population is detected in both animals and patients. Strikingly, these individuals have no special predisposition to suffer viral infections or neoplasms, and only have a limited susceptibility to chronic respiratory bacterial infections. As cytolytic CD8⁺ T lymphocytes are fundamental to control and eliminate both virus-infected and malignant cells, their ability to recognize TAP-independent ligands seems to help protect against viral infections and tumors in these immunocompromised individuals and animals.

Although TAP-independent viral epitopes were identified decades ago (reviewed in ^{3, 8, 9}, very few studies have analyzed the cellular TAP-independent MHC class I peptidome ¹⁰⁻¹⁴. In these studies, the cellular TAP-independent ligandome from immortalized cell lines has been defined using high-throughput immunopeptidomics

analyses. However, these tumor cell lines derived from immune cells have a dysregulated metabolism very different to the normal tissues. Therefore, using a similar high-throughput mass spectrometry analysis to that carried out with cell lines, we analyzed the TAP-independent MHC peptidome isolated from ex vivo spleen cells of TAP-deficient mice. In the current report, we identified 210 TAP-independent ligands bound to the H-2 K^b and D^b MHC class I molecules from spleens of TAP-deficient mice.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Mice

TAP1-deficient B6.129S2-Tap1^{tm1A^{arp}}/J mice ⁶ (stock no. 002944; The Jackson Laboratory, Bar Harbor, MN) were bred in our animal facilities in strict accordance with the recommendations of the Guide for the Care and Use of Laboratory Animals of the Spanish Comisión Nacional de Bioseguridad of the Ministerio de Medio Ambiente y Medio Rural y Marino (accreditation number 28079-34A). The protocol was approved by the Committee on Animal Experiment Ethics of the Institute of Health Carlos III (Permit Number: PI-283). Eight mice were analyzed as four biological replicates.

MHC class I-bound peptide isolation

The spleens from TAP-deficient mice were placed into a 40 µm cell strainer (Corning Inc., Corning, NY) and mashed using the plunger end of a syringe. After rinse with 5mL serum-free RPMI the stromal cells remain in the cell strainer. Supernatant was treated with Red Blood Cell Lysis Buffer Cocktail (Merck KGaA, Darmstadt, Germany) and splenocytes were recollected. The spleen cells were lysed in 1% CHAPS (Merck KGaA, Darmstadt, Germany), 20 mM Tris/HCl buffer, and 150 mM NaCl, pH 7.5 in the presence of the cOmplete™, Mini Protease Inhibitor Cocktail (Merck KGaA, Darmstadt, Germany). After centrifugation, the supernatant was passed first through a control precolumn containing CNBr-activated Sepharose 4B (GE Healthcare, Buckinghamshire, UK) to remove non-specific peptides and proteins. Next, the H-2 K^b/peptide or D^b/peptide complexes were isolated sequentially via affinity chromatography from the soluble cell extract fraction with Y3 ¹⁵ or 28-14-8s ¹⁶ monoclonal antibodies (mAbs), which are specific for monomorphic H-2 K^b or D^b determinants included in the alpha 1 and alpha 3 domains, respectively. A schematic representation of experimental design is shown in Figure 1. The MHC-bound peptides were eluted at 4°C with 0.1% aqueous trifluoroacetic acid (TFA), separated from the

MHC molecules, and concentrated by ultra-filtration with a Vivaspin 2 filter, 5,000 MWCO HY (Sartorius Stedim Biotech, Goettingen, Germany), as previously described¹⁷.

Electrospray-ion trap mass spectrometry analysis

Peptide mixtures recovered after the ultra-filtration step were desalted using OMIX Tips reversed-phase columns (C₁₈, 100 µl, Agilent Technologies, Santa Clara, CA)¹⁷. Each C₁₈ tip was equilibrated with 50% acetonitrile in 0.1% TFA, washed with 0.1% TFA, and then loaded with the peptide mixture. The tip was then washed with an additional volume of 0.1% TFA, and the peptides were subsequently eluted with 50% acetonitrile in 0.1% TFA. Lastly, the peptide samples were concentrated to approximately 20 µl using vacuum centrifugation^{17, 18 19}.

The MHC class I peptides recovered from immunoprecipitated H-2 K^b or D^b-specific mAbs were analyzed by nanoLC-MS/MS using a Q-Exactive-Plus mass spectrometer fitted with an Ultimate 3000 RSLC nanocapillary UHPLC (Thermo Fisher Scientific, Waltham, MA), using the same parameters previously described²⁰. The peptides were resolved on homemade Reprosil C18-Aqua capillary columns (75 micron ID, Dr. Maisch GmbH, Ammerbuch-Entringen, Germany)²¹ with a 5-28% acetonitrile linear gradient for 2 h in the presence of 0.1% formic acid at a flow rate of 0.15 µL/min. The dynamic exclusion was set to 20 sec and the automatic gain control value for the full MS was set to 3×10^6 . The selected masses were fragmented from the survey scan of mass-to-charge ratio (m/z) 300-1,800 AMU at resolution 70,000. The 10 most intense masses were selected for fragmentation by higher-energy collisional dissociation (HCD) from each full mass spectrum. No fragmentation was performed for peptides with unassigned precursor ion charge states. MS/MS spectra were acquired with a resolution of 17,500 at m/z 200. The target value of the MS/MS was set to 1×10^5 and the isolation window to 1.8 m/z. The maximum injection time was set to 100 ms

and normalized collision energy to 25 eV. The peptide match option was set to Preferred. Fragmented masses were dynamically excluded from further selection for fragmentation for 20 sec.

Database searches

Peptides were identified using the MaxQuant software tool ²² version 1.6.0.16 with the Andromeda search engine ²³ using the mouse section of the UniProt/Swiss-Prot database (release 14.2.19, containing 54188 entries). Peptides were identified in the database assuming no specific enzyme proteolysis. Methionine oxidation and N-acetylation were accepted as variable modifications. The peptide precursors and fragment mass tolerances were set at 6 and 20 ppm, respectively. The identified peptides were selected when their score was > 40. The minimal peptide length was set to eight amino acid residues. The false discovery rate (FDR) was 0.01 for the peptide-spectrum matching. The LC-MS/MS data files of separate sets of immunoaffinity purified peptidomes and analyzed separately by LC-MS-MS were analyzed independently by the MaxQuant software to reduce misidentifications by the “match between runs” subroutine. The mass spectrometry data have been deposited to the MassIVE repository (<https://massive.ucsd.edu>) with the data set identifier MSV000083936.

In silico binding prediction of MHC class I ligands

The predicted binding of each peptide to MHC class I molecules was calculated using the artificial neural network-based alignment method NetMHCpan (version 4.0) (available in <http://www.cbs.dtu.dk/services/NetMHCpan/>).

Functional bioinformatics procedures

Functional annotation and biological term enrichment was performed using the Database for Annotation, Visualization and Integrated Discovery (DAVID;

<https://david.ncifcrf.gov/>). The protein-protein interaction network was visualized using the Search Tool for the Retrieval of Interacting Genes (STRING; <https://string-db.org/>).

Statistics

To analyze the statistical significance of the functional annotation and biological term enrichment analyses by DAVID the Benjamini-corrected modified Fisher Exact Test was utilized. To analyze the statistical significance of the protein-protein network analyses by STRING the protein-protein interaction enrichment p-value was considered.

RESULTS

Physiological processing generates multiple cellular ligands bound to murine MHC alleles in ex vivo spleen cells.

The H-2 K^b and D^b-bound peptide pools were isolated *ex vivo* from mouse primary spleen cells. These peptide mixtures were subsequently separated by capillary reversed-phase HPLC and were analyzed on-line using tandem mass spectrometry (Fig. 1). By means of bioinformatics tools over a mouse proteome database, different fragmentation spectra were resolved as peptidic sequences, derived from different mouse cellular proteins and bound to H-2 K^b or D^b (Table S1) class I molecules, respectively. None of the 210 fragmentation spectra from H-2 K^b and D^b-bound peptide pools were detected in the precolumn analysis confirming that the identified sequences were true MHC class I ligands.

Structural features of TAP-independent MHC class I ligands.

In TAP-sufficient cells H-2 K^b and D^b class I molecules usually bind peptides approximately 8-11 residues long (SYFPEITHI database: <http://www.syfpeithi.de>²⁴). The size analysis indicated that 83% of the TAP-independent H-2 K^b ligands and 76% of the H-2 D^b ligands (Table S1) from TAP-deficient spleen cells are longer than those identified in TAP-sufficient cells. This increased peptide length was also described in TAP-independent ligands from mouse and human cell lines^{11 12 25}. In addition, 18% of peptides derived from leader sequences and 14% from C-terminal end of parental proteins, similarly to TAP-independent ligandome from cell lines^{11 12 25}. Also, nested set peptides with an identical core but with N- and/or C-extended residues from the same protein were identified among both H-2 K^b ligands and H-2 D^b ligands (Table S1), similarly as in the previously described TAP-independent ligandome from cell lines^{11 12}

²⁵.

Next, prediction of the peptide binding of the TAP-independent ligands to each H-2 K^b and D^b class I molecule was analyzed. The theoretical affinity of the peptides from ex vivo spleen cells (Fig. 2) ranged in a similar way, and was not statistically significant, versus TAP-independent ligands from mouse and human cell lines ^{11 12 25}.

Preferential biological processes of parental proteins from TAP-independent MHC class I ligands.

An assay comparing protein functions between the two different datasets (spleen and cell lines) from TAP-independent MHC class I ligands was conducted using gene ontology enrichment. Also, one study analyzing MHC class I ligands from TAP-sufficient spleen cells was included as control ²⁶. No biological processes were statistically significant associated with spleen ligandome from TAP-sufficient cells, consistent with the fact that the proteasome processes the whole proteome. In contrast, the source of TAP-independent ligands from ex vivo spleen cells was enriched mainly in genes involved in functions related with the immune system as expected from an organ with a high proportion of immune cells as B and T lymphocytes, macrophages and dendritic cells (Fig. 3). In contrast, several central biological processes associated with mRNA production, translation and expression, viral processes and other biological processes related with protein synthesis were linked to the ligandome from cell lines (Fig. 3), data that correlate with the immortal continuous origin of the virus-transformed cell lines utilized in previous studies ²⁵.

Preferential location of parental proteins from TAP-independent MHC class I ligands.

Next, an assay comparing protein locations between the two different TAP-independent ligandomes (spleen and cell lines) and the control TAP-sufficient spleen peptidome was conducted using gene ontology enrichment. Newly, no specific cellular components were associated with the control peptidome, which correlates with the universal protein degradation activity previously described for the proteasome.

Moreover, multiple intracellular components as nuclear, nucleolus, cytoplasm, endoplasmic reticulum, Golgi apparatus or intracellular organelle were specifically associated with the TAP-independent ligandome from cell lines but not with the spleen cells (Fig. 4). In contrast, only two cellular components of the extracellular space were specifically associated with the TAP-independent ligandome from ex vivo spleen cells: “blood microparticle” and “extracellular space”, and not with their equivalent from cell lines (Fig. 4).

Functional protein association networks of parental proteins from TAP-independent MHC class I ligands.

In addition, an analysis of protein-protein interaction networks between both types of TAP-independent parental proteins (spleen and cell lines) was conducted using the STRING biological database. 392 protein-protein interactions were detected between the 174 parental proteins from TAP-independent spleen ligandome (Fig. 5). A significant proportion of these proteins had only one (16%) or no (33%) interactions with other TAP-deficient parental proteins (Fig. 5). In contrast, similar analysis with the 169 parental proteins from TAP-deficient cell lines ligandome showed 892 protein-protein interactions (Fig. 6), with an average node degree of 11.1 versus only 4.5 in the case of spleen ligandome. In addition, most of TAP-deficient parental proteins from cell lines were included in complex protein-protein networks, and only 25% of these proteins had only one or no interaction (Fig. 6).

Cleavage specificity of cellular proteases over TAP-independent MHC class I ligands.

To study the specificity of proteases involved in the generation of ligands in TAP-defective spleen cells, an analysis of residues on both sides of the hydrolyzed bonds of TAP-independent MHC class I ligands was carried out. No correlation was found when analyses of P₃, P₂, P'₁, P'₂, and P'₃ positions of scissile bonds were

performed. In contrast, two amino acids (Leu, and Phe) were increased in the P₁ positions of scissile bonds, which accounted for up to 10% of the total cleavages detected (Fig. 7, panel B). Both amino acids represent 32% of the total of cleaved residues, a very close number to 27% previously described for these two amino acids in the TAP-independent ligandome derived from cell lines¹². In contrast the other two amino acids (Arg and Lys) also increased in the P₁ positions of scissile bonds in the TAP-independent ligandome from human cell lines, which accounted for other 30% of cleaved residues¹², were not significantly increased in the P₁ position of scissile bonds from TAP-independent spleen ligands.

DISCUSSION

The use of mass spectrometry analysis for identification of self-derived MHC ligands contributes to understand the mechanisms of antigen presentation that are associated with the cellular immune response. In these immunopeptidomics analyses immortalized cell lines were more commonly utilized. These tumor-derived cell lines have two main characteristics that condition the mass spectrometry analyses: a dysregulated metabolism, and a high expression of MHC class I molecules. Using a few billion cells, several thousand peptides bound to each individual MHC class I allele are identified in any immunopeptidomics analysis from TAP-sufficient cells. In contrast, only few tens or hundreds of MHC class I ligands have been described in the still very limited number of immunopeptidomics studies examining the TAP-independent ligandome of similar amounts of TAP-deficient cell lines ^{11 12}. The MHC class I expression of mouse primary cells obtained from *ex vivo* tissues is one or two orders of magnitude lower than the cell lines. Thus, considering that the expression of H-2 D^b and K^b class I molecules from TAP-deficient mice spleen cells is about 20 and 200-fold lower than the respective spleen cells from TAP-sufficient cells, respectively ⁶, it is reasonable to assume an almost total absence of TAP-independent ligands in TAP-deficient spleen cells. Currently, using a sequential immunoprecipitation of MHC class I molecules, we identified 210 TAP-independent ligands that were processed and presented by the two class I molecules expressed in the spleen cells from TAP-deficient mice, a similar amount to HLA-A2 or -B27 TAP-independent ligandome previously described in human cell lines ¹²). This *ex vivo* TAP-independent ligandome showed similar increased peptide lengths, presence of nested sets and low theoretical MHC binding affinity as the self-peptides obtained from TAP-deficient cell lines previously analyzed ^{11 12}. These similar structural features of ligands from *in vitro* cultured cell lines and *ex vivo* physiological primary cells demonstrate that even in the complex and highly regulated physiological environment, where free peptides are

rapidly degraded to amino acids, peptides with low affinity can stabilize MHC class I molecules and be presented by these proteins. In the presence of TAP molecules, a high diversity of peptides is generated in the cytosol, a very degradative compartment for proteins with presence of multiple endopeptidases and exoproteases, and especially the proteasome. In these cells, the high affinity ligands are selected in their interaction with the MHC class I molecules ¹. In contrast, the lack of TAP severely decreases the contribution of the cytosol and thus, the few peptides generated by the more limited proteolytic activities from other less degradative compartments can bind to the high amounts of empty MHC class I molecules, although these are non-canonical peptides with a low affinity by the MHC class I molecule expressed in these TAP-deficient cells ^{11, 14 12}.

In contrast, four main differences were found at level of parental proteins from both TAP-independent MHC class I ligandomes. First, the proteins to yield TAP-independent antigen presentation from cell lines were associated with different central biological process of the dysregulated metabolism of these tumor-derived cells as mRNA and protein synthesis and regulation. Also viral processes were associated to these parental proteins, which could be related to the viral infection utilized to transform ex vivo immune cells into immortalized cell lines ²⁷. In contrast, the TAP-independent ligandome of ex vivo spleen cells was enriched almost exclusively in tissue-specific biological processes as those related with the immune system. It is striking that, although the immortalized cell lines previously utilized in these immunopeptidomics experiments also have an immune origin, nevertheless just one of 45 biological processes associated to parental proteins from these cell lines was related with the immune system. This indicates that the results with cell lines should be cautiously interpreted.

Second, although multiple cellular components were enriched in parental proteins of both TAP-independent ligandomes versus whole proteome a clear pattern

emerged when exclusive cellular components of each TAP-independent ligandome were analyzed. While different intracellular components were exclusively enriched in the TAP-independent ligandome from cell lines, only two components of the extracellular space were specifically enriched in the TAP-independent ligandome from ex vivo spleen cells: “blood microparticle” and “extracellular space”. Blood microparticles are microvesicles that circulate in the blood of healthy donors, but increased in different pathologies. These particles are produced by immune system cells, platelets or endothelial cells, and contain multiple proteins characteristic of the parental cell ²⁸. Of note, “extracellular space” component refers to everything outside the cell, but still within the organism excluding the extracellular matrix. Thus, our results indicate that the extracellular contribution is greater in ex vivo cells than in cultured cell lines and then, suggests that TAP-independent antigen presentation can be very dependent of the analyzed tissue.

Third, the analysis of protein-protein interaction networks between both types of TAP-independent parental proteins showed a higher functional association in cell lines than in ex vivo cells, indicating that the diversity of protein sources is increased in these spleen cells. These data correlate with the more physiological regulation in ex vivo cells, when no specific biological or functional processes are permanently activated.

And finally, a previous study showed that endoproteases, exhibiting specificity for Arg/Lys or Phe/Leu in the P₁ position of the scissile bond, were the main peptidases involved in the generation of ligandome from TAP-deficient cell lines ¹². However, in the ex vivo cells only the Phe/Leu cleavage specificity was detected with similar contribution as described in cell lines. Thus, in spleen cells a broad diversity of uncharacterized proteolytic activities would be involved in the MHC class I antigen processing of *in vivo* TAP-independent ligandome.

The global picture emerging from the current report shows that the low affinity TAP-independent ligandome from ex vivo spleen cells derives from a more diverse collection of endoprotease activities processing parental proteins with a lower functional interaction, and where the cell origin and the contribution of extracellular environment are more relevant than in cell lines. This indicates that future studies with different tissues and organs are needed to elucidate the diversity of MHC class I antigen presentation in TAP-deficient mice and humans.

FIGURES

Figure 1. Diagram of the scheme of sequential immunoprecipitation.

Spleen cells from TAP-deficient mice were lysed. MHC-peptide complexes were isolated via affinity chromatography of the soluble fraction of cell extracts with two mAbs, sequentially used as indicated in the Figure: Y3 (anti-H-2 K^b), and 28-14-8s (anti-H-2 D^b) after a precolumn used to remove non-specific binding proteins and peptides. The MHC class I molecules allotypes expressed in the TAP-deficient mice are indicated in a box.

Figure 2. Theoretical affinity of TAP-independent ligands from ex vivo spleen cells and mouse and human cell lines.

Box plots show the theoretical affinity of H-2 K^b and D^b class I ligands from TAP-deficient mouse spleen cells versus TAP-independent ligands from mouse H-2K^d ¹¹ and human HLA-A2, -B27, -B51 and -C1 cell lines ¹². The theoretical affinities were calculated as percentile rank from the NetMHCpan server.

Figure 3. Functional annotation clustering of biological process of parental proteins from TAP-deficient splenocytes and cell lines.

Distribution of GO Biological Process categories exhibiting statistically significant differences between parental proteins from splenocytes and from cell lines with the whole proteome analyzed by DAVID bioinformatics tool. The statistical differences were calculated with Benjamini-corrected modified Fisher Exact Test.

Figure 4. Functional annotation clustering of cellular component of parental proteins from TAP-deficient splenocytes and cell lines.

Distribution of GO Cellular Component terms exhibiting statistically significant differences between parental proteins from splenocytes and from cell lines with the whole proteome calculated as in Figure 3.

Figure 5. Protein-protein network analysis of parental proteins from TAP-deficient splenocytes ligandome.

STRING analysis of parental proteins from TAP-deficient spleen cells ligands including predictions of protein interaction and association with experimentally determined interactions as follows: red line (indicates the presence of fusion evidence), green line (neighborhood evidence), blue line (co-occurrence evidence), purple line (experimental evidence), yellow line (text mining evidence), light blue line (database evidence, and black line (co-expression evidence). The protein-protein interaction enrichment p-value was $< 1 \times 10^{-16}$.

Figure 6. Protein-protein network analysis of parental proteins from TAP-deficient cell lines ligandome.

STRING analysis of parental proteins from TAP-deficient cell lines ligands as in Figure 5. The protein-protein interaction enrichment p-value was $< 1 \times 10^{-16}$.

Figure 7. Analysis of N- and C-end cleavage specificity in TAP-independent MHC class I ligands.

A diagram of residues involved in the generation of naturally processed MHC class I ligands by peptidase cleavages is shown in the upper panel. The distribution of P₁ amino acid residues of the scissile bonds created by peptidase cleavage is shown in the lower panel.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION:

The following supporting information is available free of charge at ACS website

<http://pubs.acs.org>

Table S1. List of peptides identified using the MaxQuant software tool with the Andromeda search engine.

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TAP-deficient mice: H-2 K^b, H-2 D^b

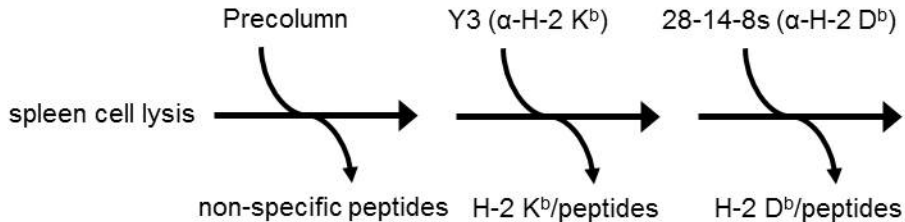


Figure 1

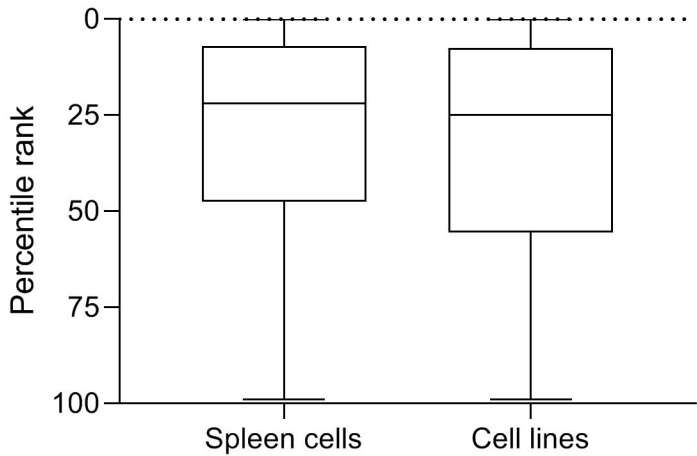


Figure 2

Biological processes

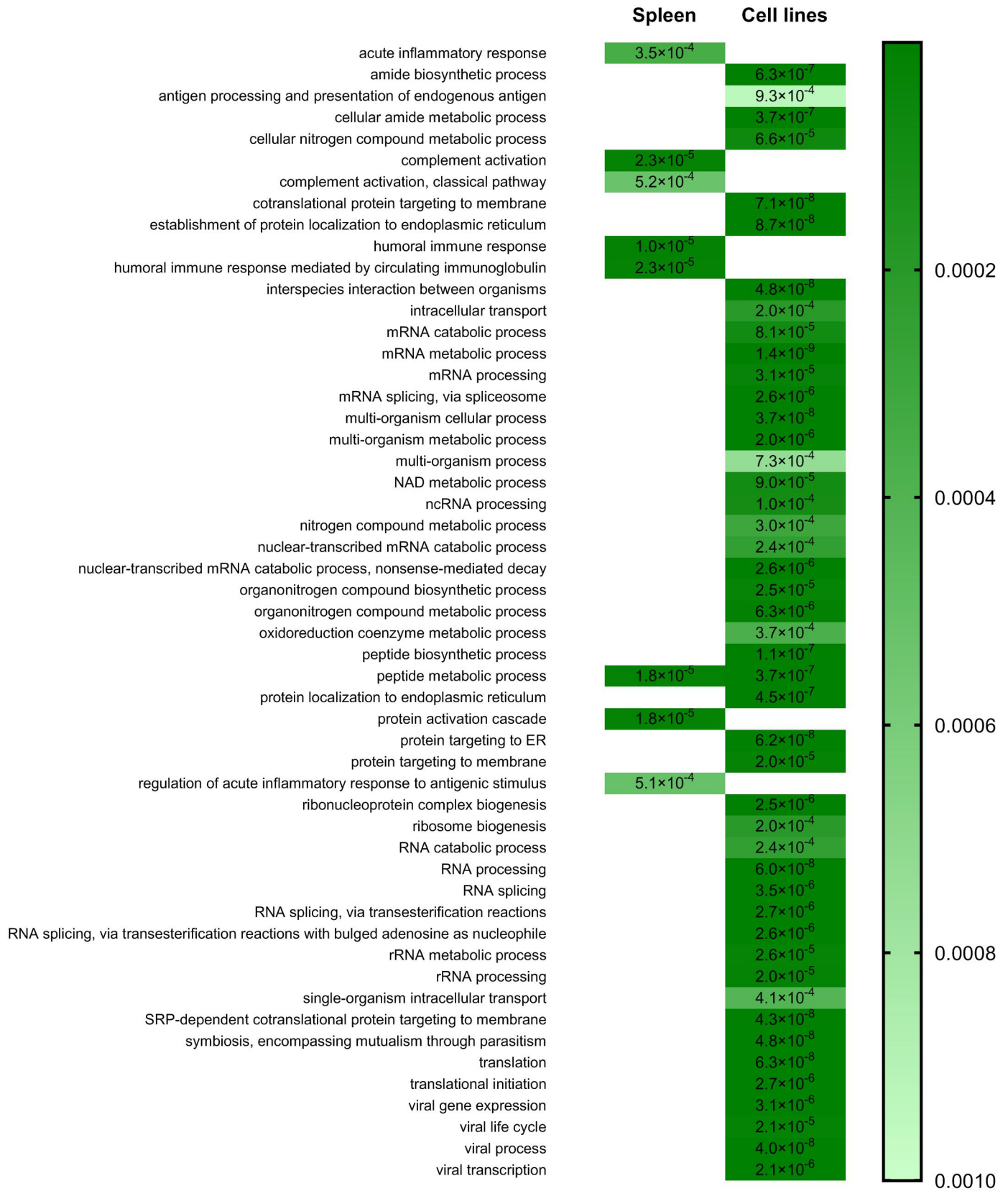


Figure 3

Cellular components

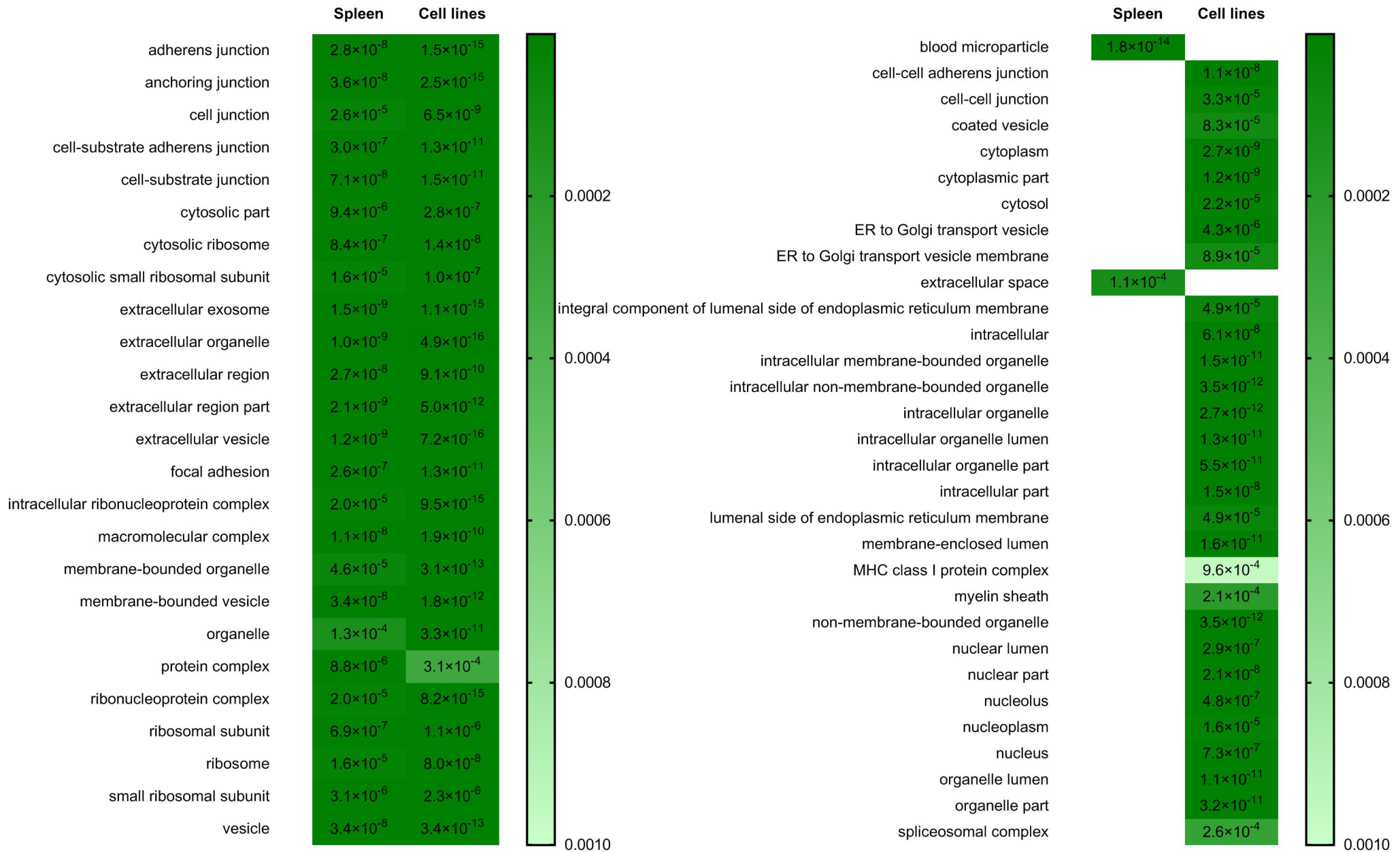


Figure 4

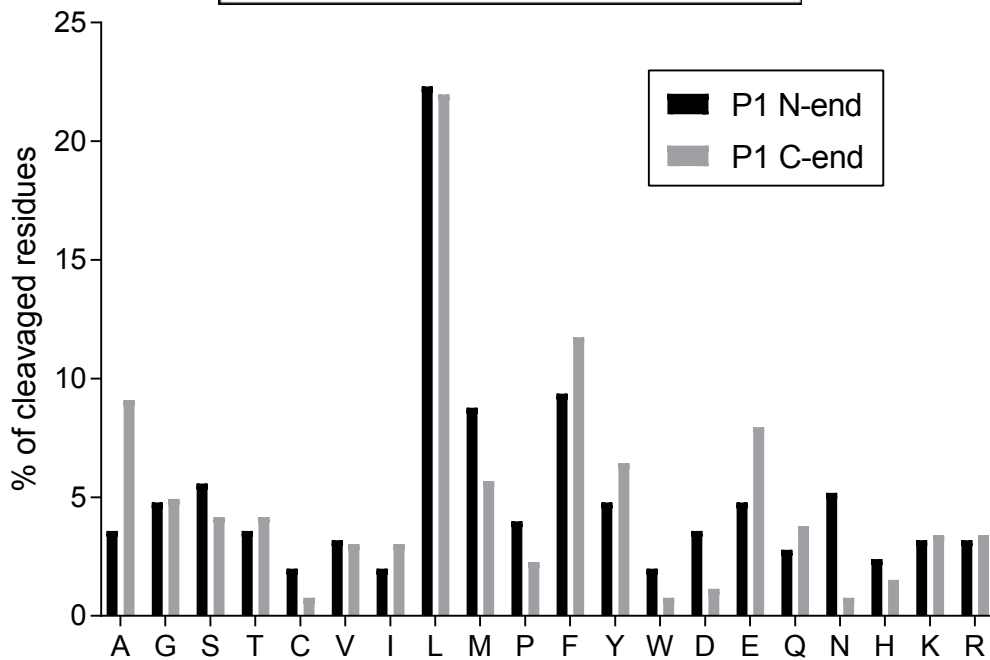
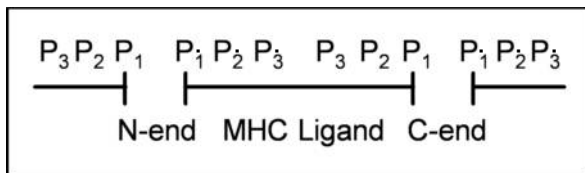


Figure 7