

Immunostaining infiltrating spheroids as preparation for quantitative light-sheet imaging

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ABSTRACT

Although various in vivo and in vitro models for studying glioblastoma cell invasion has progressed the field, there is still a need for optimized procedures. In particular to reveal key features of glioblastoma biology and infiltrating growth. In this protocol, we present an approach using indirect immunofluorescence in a 3D human xenograft glioblastoma spheroid model embedded in a naturally derived extracellular matrix.

Introduction

With this protocol we hope for future studies into the gene expression profiles during different stages of cancer invasion. For this reason, parameters were chosen to maintain the structural integrity of the spheroid and extra-cellular matrix as well as to increase immunofluorescence signal intensity, depth, specificity, and homogeneity to allow for quantitative microscopy.

The protocol is optimized for a human xenograft glioblastoma model. However, the methodological approach is adaptable to other spheroid systems, as long as the experimenter consider the following tests prior to experimentation. First of all, to follow the procedure with/without both primary and secondary antibody as well as with/without the permeabilization step. Secondly, to investigate the possibility of co-staining of several antibodies by doing the full immunostaining procedure mixing primary and secondary antibodies from different systems. In this way, cross-reactions or leakage between the antibodies is revealed.

Reagents and equipment

Cell culture of human xenograft glioblastoma

Glioblastoma tissue samples (T115) were obtained from patients undergoing resection for newly diagnosed or recurrent tumors in accordance with a protocol approved by the Central Scientific Ethics Committee of the Copenhagen University Hospital.

For cell culture of this human xenograft glioblastoma cell lines we used the following media containing the supplemental nutrients – as well as the basic nutrients – to support fastidious or mutant growth requirements.

Null medium 500 ml Neurobasal®-A Medium (Minus Phenol Red) (Invitrogen 12349-015)

Complete medium 500 ml null medium with the following supplements

10 ml 50× B27 supplement minus vitamin A (50X) (Invitrogen 12587010)

5 ml 100× Glutamax (Invitrogen 35050-038)

20 ng/ml EGF recombinant, 1 mg (R&D systems 236-EG-01M)

20 ng/ml FGF recombinant, 1 mg (R&D systems 4114-TC-01M)

5 mL Penicillin-Streptomycin (100 units/mL penicillin and 100 µg/mL streptomycin)

Cell culture of primary specimen

In parallel we used the primary glioblastoma cell line (U-87).

Null medium 500 ml Phosphate Buffered Saline (PBS) (?????????????)

Complete medium 500 ml Dulbecco's Modified Eagle's Medium (DMEM) (?????????)

50 mL Fetal Bovine Serum (FBS) (?????????????)

5 mL Penicillin-Streptomycin (100 units/mL penicillin and 100 µg/mL streptomycin)

Surface-attachment reagents and equipment

35 mm culture dishes, high precision 1.5 coverslip, 14 mm glass (Mattek, P35G-0.170-14-C)
2-well culture insert (Ibidi) with a sticky underside (Ibidi 81176)
Countess® II FL Automated Cell Counter (Thermo Fisher)

Spheroid formation reagents and equipment

Corning® Matrigel® GFR Membrane Matrix (Merck 356231)
Corning® Costar® Ultra-Low Attachment Multiple Well Plate (Merck CLS7007-24EA)
Countess® II FL Automated Cell Counter (Thermo Fisher)
–20°C cold sterile P100 filter tips
Fluorinated Ethylene Propylene (FEB) tube with an inner/outer diameter of 0.8/1.6 mm

Immunostaining

For the immunostaining procedure we used the following reagents.

Washing buffer Gibco® Phosphate Buffered Saline (PBS) or PBS-Glycine

Fixation agent 4% Para-formaldehyde in PBS + 0.25% Gluteraldehyde in PBS. Because Para-formaldehyde liquifies Matrigel, aspiration is not feasible right away. Therefore, the first step is to add 125 μ L of PBS to wells, and aspirate 175 μ L containing diluted Paraformaldehyde. Continue by washing with 175 μ L of PBS for 10 min - Choose PBS-glycine/ NaBH_4 if available as it quenches unreacted aldehyde (fixation agent) and thus reduces background fluorescence

Blocking agent Freshly mixed 5% Gibco® Fetal Bovine Serum (FBS) in PBS. Secondary Antibody host serum can be preferable to avoid unspecific interactions between secondary antibody and serum. We tried both and did not see any difference, so we decided to keep with FBS for simplicity

Permabilization agent 0.5% Triton X-100 (TX-100) in PBS

Vimentin primary antibody solution Vimentin Antibody (280618) [Unconjugated] (Novus Biologicals MAB2105) diluted 1:50 in blocking agent (5% FBS in PBS)

Vimentin secondary antibody solution NorthernLights 557-conjugated Goat Anti-Rat IgG Seconday Antibody (NL013) diluted 1:100 in blocking agent (5% FBS in PBS)

Nuclear-staining reagent SYTO™13 Green Fluorescent Nucleic Acid Stain (5 mM Solution in DMSO) (Thermo Fisher Scientific S7575)

Procedure

To prepare human xenograft glioblastoma spheroids infiltrating their local environment for imaging, we first need to culture cells, form spheroids, enable invasive growth before immunostaining.

Cell culture

1. Thaw stock cell by in heat bath at 37°
2. Add cells in 5 mL medium and spin for 4 min at 300 g
3. Remove supernatant
4. Resuspend the pelet in 5 mL medium (37 °C) in a small culture plate
5. Incubate for 24 hours (37°C, 5% CO₂, and 100% humidity)
6. Transfer cells to a small T-flask (T25) and add 3 mL extra medium
7. Incubate for 2-3 days (37°C, 5% CO₂, and 100% humidity) before experimentation

Gravitation-assisted spheroid formation

To promote spheroid formation the cells are seeded in ultra-low attachment plastic U-bottomed 96-well plates.

1. Move cells from T-flask to 15 mL conical tube
2. Wash the T-flask with null medium and add this to the tube; as to collect all cells.
3. Spin for 4 min at 300 g
4. Aspirate supernatant and re-suspend the pellet in 1 mL medium
5. Split cells by gently pipetting up and down through a 200 μ L pipette tip
6. Use the cell counter to prepare a solution with density of 2,500 cells/mL
7. In a 96-well plate, add the cells solution to a final volume of 200 μ L per well; corresponding to 500 cells/well (or more dependent on cell line)
8. Incubate for 3 days (37°C, 5% CO₂, and 100% humidity)

The spheroids can be immunofluorescence stained directly using the procedure in section *Immunostaining surface-attached cells*.

Invasion assay

This protocol is based on a protocol by Maria Vinci and co-workers¹. We used a concentration of 50% Matrigel (v/v) in medium but this protocol can easily be changed for a higher or lower percentage of hydrogels. To examine the migration of spheroid cells through a hydrogel matrix, spheroids are embedded and incubated for an appropriate amount of time (7 hours - 24 hours).

1. Thaw Matrigel overnight by placing it in an ice bucket in the fridge (4°C)
2. Prior to use, remove the ice but keep the Matrigel in the fridge for another 30 min.
3. Place the 96-well plate on ice
4. Gently remove 150 μ L of medium from each well. NB: Minimize disturbance of the spheroid
5. Add 50 μ L Matrigel to each well using ice-cold pipette tips. NB: Upright pipetting on top of the spheroids, while not touching the medium or the well.
6. Take care not to create any bubbles. If bubbles appear, remove bubbles with sterile needles (or by inflation)
7. Repeat for all wells
8. Incubate the 96-well plate for 1 hour (37°C, 5% CO₂, and 100% humidity) for solidification
9. Add another 100 μ L medium on top of the gel
10. Repeat for all wells
11. Incubate up to 72 hours (37°C, 5% CO₂, and 100% humidity)

Immunostaining spheroids through hydrogel

The cells are stained with sets of primary (attaching to the protein in question) and a secondary antibody (carrying the dye). This protocol is based on a protocols provided by the antibody manufacturer, Novus Biologicals, where all incubation times has been extended to allow diffusion through the hydrogel. The permeabilization step (2) should only be included for antibodies known to tag intra-cellular proteins as, e.g., the intermediate filament vimentin.

1. Fixation
 - (a) Aspirate excess media and wash 3 \times with 200 μ L ice-cold PBS. Allow the PBS to diffuse through the hydrogel for 5 minutes between each wash. Remove all excess buffer after the final wash.
 - (b) Add 100 μ L (1 \times volume-equivalent) 4% Paraformaldehyde-PBS + 0.25% glyteraldehyde and incubate (room temperature) for 20 min.

- (c) Wash $2\times$ with washing buffer. NB: Plate can henceforth be stored (leaving 100 μL PBS on gel) at 4°C for up to 4 days
- (d) Aspirate washing buffer

2. Permeabilization

- (a) Add 100 μL of permeabilization agent and incubate at room temperature for 10 min.
- (b) Aspirate permeabilization agent and wash $3\times$ with 200 μL ($2\times$ volume equivalents) washing buffer ($2\times$ 10 min followed by $1\times$ 30 min). Remove excess washing buffer before continuing.

3. Blocking

- (a) Add 200 μL blocking solution and incubate for 1.5 hours (room temperature) cover 96-well with Parafilm® to avoid excessive evaporation.
- (b) Aspirate blocking solution

4. Primary antibody incubation

- (a) Add 200 μL of the primary antibody solution and incubate for 2 hours (room temperature) or overnight at 4°C .
- (b) Aspirate primary antibody solution
- (c) Wash $3\times$ with 200 μL ($2\times$ volume equivalents) of washing buffer ($3\times$ 20 min)

5. Secondary antibody incubation

- (a) Add 100 μL of the secondary antibody solution and incubate for 1.5 hours (room temperature). NB: To avoid photobleaching cover with tinfoil
- (b) Wash $3\times$ with washing buffer ($1\times$ 20 min followed by $2\times$ 10 min)

Nuclear staining through hydrogel

After immunostaining we complemented with nuclear stains. As the vimentin-associated secondary antibody had maximum (absorption/emission) of (557/574) nm wavelengths we chose a green SYTO™ stain, which stains DNA and also some RNA with (absorption/emission) peaks of (488/509) nm and (491/514) nm, respectively. Hence, primarily the nucleus will light up, but also the cytosol will be stained. To minimize bleaching, all incubation should be under tinfoil.

1. Thaw dye from freezer and mix 2:10,000 in PBS
2. Add 100 μL and incubate for 3 hours (room temperature)
3. Aspirate and wash $1\times$ with washing buffer

We had less success with nuclear stain complementing the E-cadherin-associated secondary antibody with maximum (absorption/emission) of (488/518) nm. However, we sampled the SYTO™ kit (Thermo Fisher S11340) but found too much unspecific labelling for our requirements. Therefore, more work must be done to find the optimal set of antibodies and nuclear stains.

Imaging spheroids in hydrogel

Spheroids in Matrigel that has invaded the local environment, can be moved after fixation and staining by following these simple steps:

1. Place the 96-well on ice to liquefy the hydrogel matrix
2. Gently aspirate the spheroid and hydrogel into the FEB tube by attaching the tube to a syringe.
3. Then spheroid in the tube is ready for, e.g., light-sheet microscopy as described in²

We used an Aurora Airy Beam Light Sheet Imaging System³⁻⁶, which is a selective/single plane illumination microscope equipped with two lasers for excitation of green (488 nm) and orange/red (561 nm) fluorescent molecule. The two objectives are placed very close together to match focus of detection (UMPlanFL N 20x/0.50 W) and illumination (UMPlanFL N 10x/0.30 W) objectives. For full imaging of spheroids (200 μm), stacks of 500 images with step size of 0.4 μm was collected with exposure times <150 ms and laser intensities $<1.5\%$ to avoid over-saturation.

Surface growth experiment

To test the antibody-staining and perform various checks, we used this more straight-forward procedure immunostaining for combination with wide-field fluorescence imaging.

1. Move cells from T-flask to 15 mL conical tube
2. Wash the T-flask with null medium and add this to the tube; as to collect all cells.
3. Spin for 4 min at 300 g
4. Aspirate supernatant and re-suspend the pelet in 1 mL medium
5. Split cells by gently pipetting up and down through a 200 μ l pipette tip
6. Use the cell counter to prepare a solution with density of $5 - 7 \times 10^5$ cells/mL
7. In a 35 mm culture dish, add the cells solution in a final volume of 2 mL
8. Incubate for 24 hours (37°C, 5% CO₂, and 100% humidity)

Wound healing experiment

Alternatively, we performed a classical *wound* healing (or scratch) assay, followed by immunostaining and combined with wide-field fluorescence imaging.

1. Wash the T-flask with null medium and add this to the tube; as to collect all cells.
2. Spin for 4 min at 300 g
3. Aspirate supernatant and re-suspend the pelet in 1 mL medium
4. Split cells by gently pipetting up and down through a 200 μ l pipette tip
5. Use the cell counter to prepare a solution with density of $5 - 7 \times 10^5$ cells/mL
6. In a 35 mm culture dish, place the 2-well culture insert.
7. Add cell solution to a final volume of 70 μ L in each well
8. Incubate for 24 hours (37°C, 5% CO₂, and 100% humidity) to allow cells to settle and create a confluent layer
9. Remove culture insert to create a gap (i.e. *wound*) of 500 μ m
10. Wash briefly with PBS or null medium
11. Add 2 mL fresh medium
12. Incubate for another 24 hours (37°C, 5% CO₂, and 100% humidity)

Immunostaining surface-attached cells

The cells are stained with sets of primary (attaching to the protein in question) and a secondary antibody (carrying the dye). This protocol is based on a protocols provided by the antibody manufacturer, Novus Biologicals. The permabilization step (2) should only be included for antibodies known to tag intra-cellular proteins as, e.g., the intermediate filament vimentin. This procedure can also be used for immunofluorescence-staining of spheroids in liquid culture.

1. Fixation
 - (a) Aspirate excess media and wash with 200 μ L ice-cold PBS.
 - (b) Add 100 μ L (1 \times volume-equivalent) 4% Paraformaldehyde-PBS + 0.25% glytetaldehyde and incubate (room temperature) for 10 min.
 - (c) Wash with washing buffer. NB: Plate can henceforth be stored (leaving 100 μ L PBS on gel) at 4°C for up to 4 days
 - (d) Aspirate washing buffer

2. Permeabilization

- (a) Add 100 μL of permeabilization agent and incubate at room temperature for 5 min.
- (b) Aspirate permeabilization agent and wash with 200 μL ($2\times$ volume equivalents) washing buffer. Leave for 5 min. Remove excess washing buffer before continuing.

3. Blocking

- (a) Add 200 μL blocking solution and incubate for 1 hour (room temperature) cover 96-well with Parafilm® to avoid excessive evaporation.
- (b) Aspirate blocking solution

4. Primary antibody incubation

- (a) Add 200 μL the primary antibody solution and incubate for 1 hours (room temperature) or overnight at 4°C .
- (b) Aspirate primary antibody solution
- (c) Wash $3\times$ with 200 μL ($2\times$ volume equivalents) of washing buffer (3×5 min)

5. Secondary antibody incubation

- (a) Add 100 μL of the secondary antibody solution and incubate for 1 hour (room temperature). NB: To avoid photobleaching cover with tinfoil
- (b) Wash $3\times$ with washing buffer (3×5 min)

This was combined with the procedure of nuclear-staining exactly as described in the section *Nuclear staining through hydrogel*.

Nuclear staining of surface-attached cells

After immunostaining we complemented with nuclear stains. As the vimentin-associated secondary antibody had maximum (absorption/emission) of (557/574) nm wavelengths we chose a green SYTO™ stain, which stains DNA and also some RNA with (absorption/emission) peaks of (488/509) nm and (491/514) nm, respectively. Hence, primarily the nucleus will light up, but also the cytosol will be stained. To minimize bleaching, all incubation should be under tinfoil.

1. Thaw dye from freezer and mix 2:10,000 in PBS
2. Add 100 μL and incubate for 2 hours (room temperature)
3. Aspirate and wash $1\times$ with washing buffer

Imaging of surface-attached cells

We used a Nikon Eclipse Ti-E microscope system provided with a Lumencor SOLA Light Engine, to control the fluorescent intensity (20%) and a 40x oil objective. For vim (575/641 nm) detection we used a Texas red filter, for Hoechst 33258 (378/432 nm) a DAPI filter, and for E-cad and SYTO 13 (474/525 nm) detection a FITC filter. The exposure was 500 ms and the build-in image stitching algorithms of the Nikon software was applied. To minimize gradients over stitched images, the region of interest was restricted to 800×800 pixels.

Troubleshooting

Matrigel handling It is important that the Matrigel do not exceed 10°C , since this is when it start solidify.

Combining fixation and permeabilization A protocol with a combined fixation (4% Para-formaldehyde) and permeabilization (1% Triton-X100) step has been suggested⁷ to maximize antibody penetration depth in spheroids.

Co-staining with multiple antibodies For co-staining the antibodies should be immunostained sub-sequentially with blocking stains in between. Please notice that after the first staining, the following procedures should be performed in the dark (or under tinfoil). For the pairs of antibodies given here, there was some cross-reactivity due to mouse and rat being to closely related species. This was revealed by doing the full immunostaining procedure mixing primary and secondary antibodies from the two different systems.

Background fluorescence Choose PBS-glycine/NaBH₄ if available as it quenches unreacted aldehyde (fixation agent) and thus reduces background fluorescence. It is also important to ensure adequate washing after antibody incubation to ensure specific binding of the antibodies to the target proteins. Adding more or longer washing steps could be beneficial in counteracting unspecific antibody binding.

Time taken

Immunostaining spheroids through hydrogel is estimated to take 8 hours and 40 minutes. Incubation overnight is recommended during the primary antibody staining thus splitting the procedure into a 5 hours and 30 minutes segment for day 1 and a 3 hours and 10 minutes segment for day 2. Fixation and permeabilization are both around 1 hour each. Blocking is 90 minutes. Primary antibody staining is either 2 hours or overnight followed by 1 hour of washing and secondary antibody staining is 2 hours and 10 minutes.

Anticipated results

3D fluorescent images of spheroids with finger-like protrusion for precise mapping of gene-expression differences between multiple cell types manipulated by different mechanisms. These mechanisms could be the effects of anticancer drugs, knockouts/knockdowns of specific proteins and so forth. Thus, the implications of adaptable immunofluorescence invasion protocol can enable the investigation of the proteins introduced here as well as other proteins and signalling pathways.

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