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The Role of Telomeres and Telomerase in Cellular Aging and Disease: Mechanisms, Implications, and Therapeutic Interventions

Grace Christopher & Lazarus Joseph Goje
Gombe State University, Nigeria
jlgoje@gsu.edu.ng; lacz1980@gmail.com

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Abstract

Telomeres, the protective caps at the ends of chromosomes, play a crucial role in maintaining genomic stability. This review explores the structure and function of telomeres, the mechanisms of telomere shortening, and the role of telomerase in counteracting this process. Telomere shortening is a natural consequence of cell division and is associated with cellular aging, senescence, and apoptosis. The review delves into the molecular biology of telomeres, highlighting the significance of the shelterin complex in protecting telomeres from degradation and fusion. It also discusses the genetic and epigenetic factors influencing telomere length, the impact of oxidative stress and inflammation on telomere attrition, and potential interventions to preserve telomere length. The review concludes with recommendations for lifestyle changes and therapeutic strategies to mitigate telomere shortening and promote healthy aging.

Keywords: Telomere, Telomerase, Aging, Senescence, Apoptosis, Oxidative stress, Inflammation, Antioxidants

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Introduction

Telomere length naturally erodes with cell division and aging, leading to critically shortened telomeres. This erosion compromises their ability to protect chromosome ends and prevent DNA damage responses, resulting in permanent cell cycle arrest known as replicative senescence (Harley *et al.*, 1990).

The end-replication problem, first envisioned by Olovnikov and later by Watson, highlights the inability of DNA polymerase to completely replicate chromosome ends (de Lange, 2005). Telomeres, nucleoprotein complexes that cap linear chromosomes, consist of highly conserved, tandem arrays of G-rich repetitive sequences (5'-TTAGGG-3' in humans and vertebrates). These sequences terminate in a G-rich 3' single-stranded overhang, with both double-stranded and single-stranded regions bound by proteins collectively termed shelterin, which protect chromosomal termini from degradation and fusion (de Lange, 2005).

Telomeres also prevent the natural ends of chromosomes from being mistakenly recognized as broken DNA, triggering deleterious DNA damage responses (Chang *et al.*,2020). In cells with defective checkpoint machinery, such as most cancer cells, DNA damage responses that mis-repair dysfunctional telomeres can result in telomere fusions, chromosome rearrangements, and rampant genome instability, known drivers of tumorigenesis. Loss of telomere function can result from alterations that promote the gradual or sudden loss of sufficient repeat sequences necessary to maintain proper telomere structure, or from deficiencies in telomere-associated proteins required for end-capping function (de Lange, 2018).

This review describes the role of telomere shortening and telomerase in aging, the causes of telomere shortening, and potential solutions to mitigate this process.

Telomeres

Telomeres, derived from the Greek words "telos" (end) and "meros" (part), are long, noncoding sequences of DNA composed of repetitive hexameric sequences of TTAGGG. These sequences provide genomic stability to the ends of linear chromosomes.

Telomeres protect genetic data from being lost during cell division. With telomeres capping the ends of chromosomes, cells can divide without the risk of losing genes (Levy *et al.*,

1992). Without telomeres, the double-stranded chromosomes would fray and fuse together, disrupting the genetic blueprints of cells. However, as cells divide, telomeres shorten. This shortening happens because for a cell to divide and replicate, its DNA double helix must first unwind. As the strands begin to separate, an enzyme called DNA polymerase "reads" the existing parent strands to construct new daughter strands.

DNA is replicated only in the 5' to 3' orientation, so the daughter strand is built piece-by-piece with short segments called Okazaki fragments. Consequently, RNA primers cannot fill in the ends of chromosome strands, causing telomeres to shorten with each cell division. Telomeres act as a cellular timekeeper, limiting a cell's proliferative ability. Continuous telomere shortening may lead to senescence, mutations, and apoptosis—termination of cell divisions, alteration of DNA sequences, and programmed cell death, respectively.

Telomere shortening can be counterbalanced by telomerase, a ribonucleoprotein polymerase that adds a telomere repeat sequence TTAGGG to the 3' end of telomeres. Telomerase, also known as terminal transferase, is abundant and active in normal stem cells but exists at very low levels in most somatic cells. When telomeres shorten to a critical point, they cause genomic instability, which hinders further replication, leading to senescence and eventually cell death (Blackburn, 2001). The structure of Telomere is depicted in Fig 2.1 below.

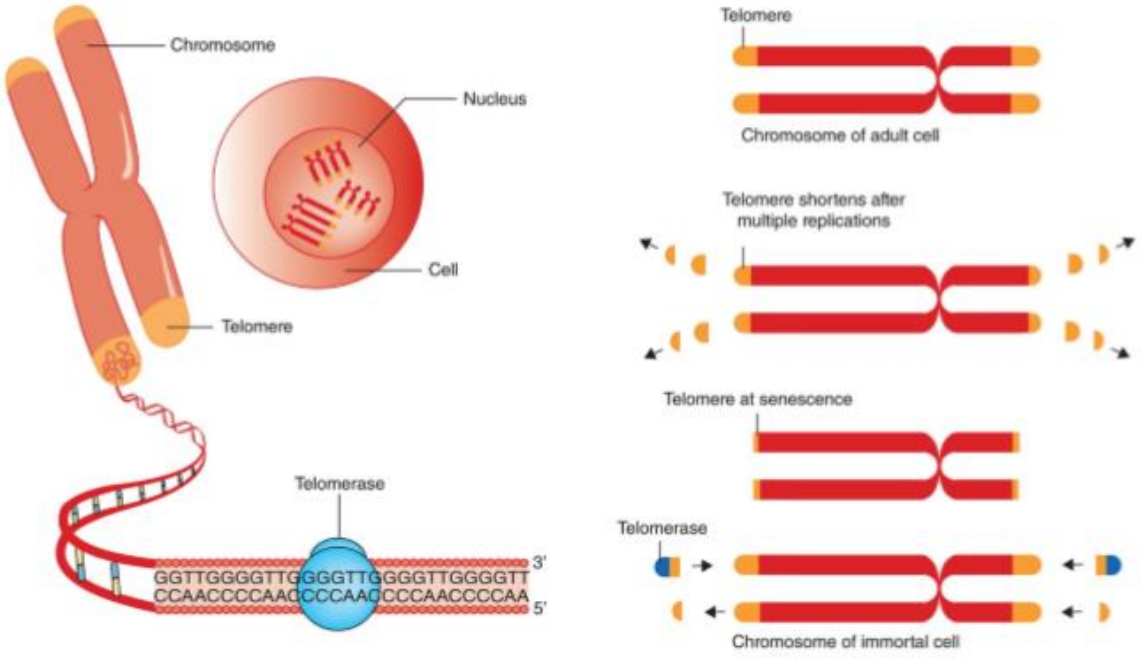


Figure 1. Telomere attrition, telomere length and telomerase (Aunan et al., 2016)

The Telomeres/Shelterin Complex

In the orchestration of telomere dynamics, the shelterin complex stands out as a crucial player. It is composed of several proteins that bind specifically to telomeric DNA, ensuring telomeres are not erroneously identified as DNA breaks, thereby preventing an inappropriate DNA damage response (de Lange, 2018).

Any dysfunction in shelterin components can lead to telomere uncapping, exposing telomeres to degradation, recombination, and chromosomal end-to-end fusions, causing genomic instability potentially resulting in cellular senescence.

The interplay between telomerase activity, telomere length, and shelterin function is essential for cellular stability. Imbalances can result in conditions ranging from premature aging to the onset of cancer.

A large number of proteins have been found to directly or indirectly associate with telomeric DNA. Some of these proteins, such as TRF1, TRF2, TIN2, TPP1, Rap1, and POT1 can be found at telomeres at any time, although the dynamic exchange between telomere-bound and unbound proteins can be high. POT1 (Protection of Telomeres 1) binds directly to the single-stranded telomeric DNA and interacts directly with TPP1 (Tripeptidyl Peptidase 1) Rap1 (Repressor Activator Protein 1) binds TRF2 and TIN2 (TRF1-Interacting Nuclear Factor 2) is a central component of the complex interacting with TRF1, TRF2, and TPP1 (Wang *et al.,* 2007). The telomere complex plays a critical role by protecting the chromosomes from recognition by the DNA damage-repair system as DNA 'breaks and activation of the p53 or p16INK4a pathway, eventually leading to cellular senescence or apoptosis (d'Adda *et al.,* 2003).

TRF1 and TRF2, both essential components of the shelterin complex, help to maintain telomere integrity. Particularly, TRF2 is essential for inhibiting the ATM kinase signaling pathway, a primary responder to DNA double-strand breaks (Karlseder *et al*., 1999).

Further, POT1, another crucial component, attaches to the single-stranded overhang of the telomere, preventing the ATR kinase-mediated DNA damage response.

Aging

Cellular aging, or senescence, is the process by which a cell becomes old and dies due to the shortening of chromosomal telomeres to a critical length.

These alterations result from both genetic and epigenetic factors. However, the aging process is influenced by its complex nature and the wide array of genetic diversity among individuals, making the comprehensive understanding of age-related factors highly limited.

The Impact of Telomeres on Aging

Telomeres, the protective caps at the ends of chromosomes, naturally shorten with each cell division. This phenomenon, known as the "end replication problem," occurs because DNA polymerases cannot fully replicate the terminal portions of linear chromosomes, leading to gradual telomere attrition (Levy et al., 1992). The average telomere length at birth is approximately 10,000 base pairs, which decreases to around 7,000 base pairs by age 50, and further diminishes to about 4,000 base pairs by age 100 (http://www.arclab.org/).

Telomere shortening has significant implications for cellular functionality. When telomeres reach a critically short length, cells can no longer divide effectively, entering a state known as replicative senescence. This state is characterized by increased cellular dysfunction and is often linked to various age-related diseases (Rodríguez et al., 2011).

Telomere Length as a Biomarker of Aging

Telomere length (TL) serves as a potential biomarker for biological aging. Studies indicate that shorter telomeres correlate with increased incidence of age-related diseases, including cardiovascular diseases and certain forms of cancer (Cawthon et al., 2003; Farzaneh-Far et al., 2008). Notably, individuals with significant telomere shortening have been shown to have an elevated risk of mortality from these diseases (Cawthon et al., 2003).

Interestingly, TL can vary considerably among individuals, influenced by factors such as genetics, lifestyle, and environmental stressors (Wu et al., 2009). Understanding the factors that contribute to telomere attrition is crucial for developing strategies to mitigate its impact on aging and associated diseases.

Telomerase

The Function of Telomerase

Telomerase is an enzyme that counteracts telomere shortening by adding specific nucleotide repeats to the ends of chromosomes. Its primary components include telomerase reverse transcriptase (TERT) and a telomerase RNA component (TERC), which serves as a template for the addition of telomeric repeats (Greider and Blackburn,

1985). Telomerase reverse transcriptase (TERT) employs the RNA template of TERC, a telomerase RNA component, to add telomeric repeats to the ends of chromosomes

In most somatic cells, telomerase activity is low, which contributes to the gradual shortening of telomeres. However, in stem cells and certain cancer cells, telomerase is upregulated, allowing these cells to maintain their telomere length and proliferative capacity (Blackburn et al., 2015). This property of telomerase has made it a target of interest in cancer research, as its activation may lead to uncontrolled cellular proliferation.

Telomerase and Disease Implications

The dysregulation of telomerase is implicated in various diseases, especially cancer. In many tumors, telomerase is reactivated, facilitating the immortalization of cancer cells (Jaskelioff et al., 2011). This has raised concerns about therapeutic interventions aimed at modulating telomerase activity, as enhancing telomerase in normal cells could potentially lead to tumorigenesis.

Conversely, telomerase deficiency is linked to several age-related diseases. Conditions such as dyskeratosis congenita and pulmonary fibrosis are associated with mutations in telomerase components, resulting in premature aging and telomere shortening (El-Chemaly et al., 2018). Understanding the balance between telomerase activity and regulation is essential for developing targeted therapies for age-related diseases.

Therapeutic Interventions Targeting Telomeres and Telomerase

Lifestyle Modifications

Comprehensive lifestyle changes have been shown to positively influence telomere length. Diet, exercise, and stress management can enhance telomerase activity and promote longer telomeres. For instance, diets rich in antioxidants, such as fruits and vegetables, have been associated with increased telomere length (Cassidy et al., 2010).

Regular physical activity has also been linked to preserved TL, particularly in older adults (LaRocca et al., 2010). Moreover, stress management techniques, including mindfulness and meditation, can mitigate the negative effects of chronic stress on telomere length (Epel et al., 2004).

Pharmacological Approaches

The development of pharmacological agents that target telomerase is an emerging area of research. Compounds like TA-65, derived from the herb *Astragalus membranaceus*, have been studied for their potential to activate telomerase and extend telomeres in humans (Salvador et al., 2016).

Additionally, inhibitors of telomerase, such as Imetelstat, are being explored as potential cancer therapies. These agents aim to reduce the proliferative capacity of cancer cells by targeting their telomerase activity (Johnson et al., 2010).

Oxidative Stress and Inflammation in Telomere Attrition

The Role of Oxidative Stress

Oxidative stress, resulting from an imbalance between reactive oxygen species (ROS) and the body's antioxidant defenses, is a significant contributor to telomere shortening. The guanine-rich sequences of telomeres are particularly susceptible to oxidative damage, which can lead to telomere dysfunction and increased cellular aging (Singh et al., 2019).

Studies have shown that elevated oxidative stress correlates with accelerated telomere attrition, thereby linking oxidative damage to age-related diseases (Zhang et al., 2016).

Chronic Inflammation and Telomeres

Chronic inflammation is another critical factor influencing telomere dynamics. Proinflammatory cytokines, such as IL-6 and TNF-α, can exacerbate telomere shortening and contribute to cellular senescence (Deo et al., 2020).

The interplay between telomere attrition and inflammation creates a feedback loop, where senescent cells release inflammatory factors that further promote telomere dysfunction, potentially leading to age-related diseases (Jurk et al., 2014).

Telomerase Activators and Inhibitors

Telomerase Activators

Telomerase activators, such as TA-65 and Cycloastragenol, have gained attention for their potential to enhance telomerase activity and counteract telomere shortening. Preliminary

studies suggest that these compounds may improve health condition by promoting telomere lengthening and cellular rejuvenation (Idrees et al., 2023).

Telomerase Inhibitors

Conversely, telomerase inhibitors are being investigated for their role in cancer treatment. By inhibiting telomerase activity, these agents aim to limit tumor growth and promote cancer cell apoptosis (Johnson et al., 2010).

Understanding the dual roles of telomerase in normal and cancerous cells is crucial for developing targeted therapies that can effectively modulate telomerase activity without increasing the risk of malignancy.

Conclusion

The interplay between telomeres, telomerase, and cellular aging is complex and multifaceted. As telomeres shorten with age, the implications for cellular function and overall health become increasingly significant. Therapeutic interventions targeting telomeres and telomerase hold promise for delaying the aging process and preventing age-related diseases. Continued research into the mechanisms underlying telomere dynamics will be essential for developing effective strategies for healthy aging and disease prevention.

Recommendations

The telomere/telomerase system could be a promising target, offering possibilities to increase the viability of the cell for therapeutic purposes. The role of telomeres shortening in aging requires a continues research and study to fully understand. It is important to explore potential interventions or therapies that could slow down or reverse telomere shortening to potentially delay the aging process or prevent age-related diseases. Lifestyle factors such as maintaining a healthy diet, regular exercise, and managing stress levels may also help to protect and preserve telomeres. Further research is needed to fully understand the impact of telomere shortening on aging and to develop targeted interventions to promote healthy aging. It is hoped that telomerase-based prevention and therapeutics will be utilized in the future to combat aging-related disease.

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