

Transcription Factor p53 and Skin Aging

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Abstract—The review is dedicated to one of the molecular factors of skin aging essential for cosmetic medicine for the elderly. Cell renewal processes slow down with aging, and the proliferation–apoptosis equilibrium shifts towards cell death. One of the pivotal apoptotic markers is transcription factor p53. Its expression in skin keratinocytes increases under the influence of ultraviolet radiation. Mutant forms of p53 have been revealed in 70% of keratinocytes of skin exposed to ultraviolet radiation. On the one hand, suppression of p53 expression decreases apoptosis in skin cells, thereby decelerating senescence. On the other hand, it promotes the development of neoplasms in the skin. Thus, support of the physiological balance of p53 expression in skin cells is important for theoretical and practical gerontocosmetology. In addition, p53 can be used as a marker for skin cell functionality in response to anti-aging cosmetic products and to instrumental cosmetology.

Keywords: p53 protein, skin, aging

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Skin aging is a complex process, influenced by endogenous and exogenous factors. The former include the accumulation of mutations in cells, telomere shortening, changes in skin cell metabolism, age-related hormonal disorders, etc. The latter are ultraviolet (UV) radiation, ionizing radiation, pollutants, and microorganisms. The numbers and intensities of exogenous and endogenous factors determine the predominance of this or that aging process. Aging includes two major processes: physiological and pathological [5]. The physiological (chronological) process is related to endogenous factors. Its clinical signs are skin dryness and laxity, small lines, and benign neoplasms. The pathological aging process, e.g., photoaging, is induced by exogenous factors. It is characterized by deep furrows, roughness, yellowing, high sensitivity, pigmentation, poor ability to repair wounds, and predisposition to benign and malignant neoplasms.

Studies of skin not exposed to sun show that aging is accompanied by the atrophy of epidermis, which may become 10–50% thinner within the range from 30 to 80 years. Atrophy touches mainly the spinous layer [64]. After the age of 30, the number of melanocytes decreases by 8–20% over each decade and melanocytes become more heterogeneous [22]. Histological studies of epidermis indicate that the basal layer of aging skin experiences profound changes. Keratinocytes of the basal layer become markedly heterogeneous, and the overall volume of a cell increases [10].

These changes are called epidermal dyscrasia. They occur in epidermis damaged by UV radiation [71]. Epidermal dyscrasia is marked by a lower mitosis rate, longer cell cycle, and longer migration of keratinocytes from the basal to the horny layer [18]. In the age range within 25–70 years, the immune function of skin weakens, and the number of white dendritic epidermal cells (Langerhans cells) decreases by 50%. With aging, the total number and activity of T and B lymphocytes in the skin decrease [50]. In elderly people, repair processes in the skin, such as collagen remodeling, cell proliferation, and fibroblast metabolism, slow down [49].

The epidermis is thinned under UV irradiation [16, 21], and the amounts of integrin B1 protein and mRNA in keratinocytes of the basal layer decrease [70]. B1 integrin mediates the attachment of basal layer keratinocytes to each other and to the basal membrane. B1 integrin includes two major protein types: *a2b1* and *a3b1*. They interact with extracellular matrix proteins: fibronectin, laminins 1 and 5, and type I and IV collagens. Lower expression of B1 integrin in keratinocytes of aging skin points to lower keratinocyte proliferation and adhesion.

Permanent exposure of skin to UV radiation also damages the dermoepidermal junction. In upper layers of dermis constantly undergoing UV irradiation, the expression of fibrillin 1 and type VII collagen decreases. The latter forms anchoring fibrils in the dermoepidermal junction [23]. Light-induced skin senescence is accompanied by the accumulation of

atypical elastic fibers in the middle and lower layers of dermis. These degenerative changes are known as solar elastosis [32]. The elastic fibers accumulated with photoaging can replace normal matrix components. In addition, collagen composition changes with skin photoaging. The amount of type I collagen decreases with aging, whereas its expression does not. This effect is caused by faster type I collagen degradation [32, 60]. Experiments *in vitro* and *in vivo* show that UVA and UVB intensify collagen degradation by matrix metalloproteinases and proteases [4, 26, 68]. The most characteristic sign of light-induced skin senescence is the overexpression of p53 protein [6]. It has been found that the expression of active p53 species increases with physiological aging as well. This fact is related to the accumulation of mutations in keratinocytes and telomere shortening.

Thus, p53 is essential for the regulation of apoptosis in skin and other tissues. Aberrations in its expression, including those induced by UV radiation, may cause the formation of tumor cells. These processes are determined by molecular cascades involving p53. These cascades are common for different cell types, and their detailed consideration is beyond the scope of our review. We provide but brief outline of p53 metabolism and its involvement in the regulation of various groups of genes in a cell, so long as it is important for the understanding of the role of p53 in cell aging, including the skin.

p53: Intracellular Metabolism and Regulation of Various Gene Groups

The action of p53 on skin aging is diverse. It touches, as mentioned, dermis and epidermis thickness, hair growth rate, and wound repair. In addition, p53 affects the secretory function of skin sebaceous glands and decreases the amount of subcutaneous fat [27].

The influence of p53 on the secretory activity of sebaceous glands and subcutaneous fat reduction was studied in mice with two phosphomimetic mutations. After DNA damage, p53 is activated by phosphorylation at amino acid residues 21 and 23 to prevent its interaction with Mdm2 and MdmX followed by degradation. Replacements of Thr21 and Ser23 in wild-type p53 by aspartate mimic the phosphorylated state of the protein [34]. The levels of postnatal stem cells in various organs in mutant p53^{21/23} mice are lowered, which causes early senescence. The skin of mutant p53^{21/23} mice shows no change in the expression of apoptosis markers Puma, Noxa, or Bim. However, such mice show higher expression of aging-related markers p16, p21, p27, and PAI1 and lower expression of the proliferation marker Ki67. Protein p53 inhibits mTORC1 and reduces the volume of adipose tissue in the mutant animals. In addition, the mutant mice have lower lev-

els of phosphorylated ribosomal protein kinase S6, which is an mTOR effector.

Study of sebocytes in mutant mice revealed activation of peroxisome proliferator-activated receptor gamma (PPAR γ). It is involved in the differentiation of adipocytes and skin sebocytes. The activation of PPAR γ in mice with the p53^{21/23} mutation arrested Blimp1 synthesis in sebocyte precursors in sebaceous glands and the epidermis. Administration of a PPAR γ antagonist renewed Blimp1 synthesis. It was also noted that sebaceous glands were nearly absent from the adipose tissue of aged p53^{21/23} mice. A decrease in the amount of adipose tissue and PPAR γ activation were recorded in aged mice with wild-type p53. Thus, the senescence signs observed in the skin of p53^{21/23} mice correlated with signs of natural skin aging [27].

Transgenic mice with inactivated Mdm2 protein and overexpressed p53 showed epidermis thinning and a decrease in the population of hair follicle stem cells [27]. This change, together with changes in the functionality of epidermal stem cells in such mice retarded wound repair and hair growth [17]. Activation of p53-induced senescence of epidermal stem cells was also observed in mice whose cells had shortened telomeres. Inactivation of Mdm2 followed by accumulation of active p53 species was recorded in the skin of young (below 10 months) mice, although it was not accompanied by changes in the regulation of p53-activated genes. Then, epidermis thinning and hair fall-off were observed. In addition to epidermis thinning and hair fall-off, transgenic mice with truncated p53 showed changes in the dermis characteristic of natural skin aging. The dermis of aged (24 months) mice heterozygous for p53^{+/m}, which carried the *m* allele, encoding a truncated p53 variant, was thinner than in wild-type animals [61].

Protein p53 is rapidly degraded in cells not exposed to stress factors owing to the interaction with ubiquitin ligase E3—Mdm2. This protein inhibits p53 activity in two ways. It binds to transactivating domains, thereby suppressing the transcription activity of p53 [39, 44] or attaches ubiquitin molecules to p53 to drive the protein to 26S proteasomes for degradation [20, 24, 30]. Conformational changes of p53 mediated by phosphorylation, acetylation, methylation, and sumoylation can stabilize p53 and activate its transcriptional potential. The phosphorylation is conducted by ATM, ATR, DNA-PK, Chk1, and Chk2 kinases. Phosphorylation of Thr81 is observed only after the action of UV and hydrogen peroxide. It is mediated by JNK kinase, which stabilizes and activates p53 [46]. It is conjectured that the phosphorylation of serines in p53 prevents its binding to inhibitor proteins Mdm2 and MdmX and favors p53 stabilization.

Protein p53 takes part in DNA repair. It acts as an adapter protein, cofactor in protein complexes, but its chief role is the regulation of gene transcription [3, 47]. It governs the transcription of genes encoding p21;

MDM2; protein 3, which binds insulin-like growth factor (IGFBP3); and TP53I3 [38]. Genes controlled by p53 can have more than one p53-binding element to enhance their response to regulation. The promoter region of p21 has one binding element highly affine to p53 and several elements with weaker affinities. Binding elements can occur in the promoter region, in introns, and far from the transcription start site [25].

Genes whose transcription involves p53 can be divided into four groups. The first group includes genes participating in cell cycle arrest. Protein p53 directly participates in the expression of the p21^{WAF1/CIP1} protein, an inhibitor of cyclin-dependent kinases and a cell senescence marker. Protein p21 inhibits the passage of the G₁-S and G₂-M checkpoints of the cell cycle. This group also includes the *Reprimo* gene, which is involved in cell cycle arrest in the G₂ phase [64]. The second group includes genes responsible for apoptosis. There are two major pathways to induce apoptosis. Their goal is to activate initiating caspases 8 and 9, which activate effector caspases 2, 3, and 7. The first, extrinsic pathway is triggered by death receptors. The second pathway is intrinsic, or mitochondrial. It is mediated by cytochrome C release from mitochondria. The mitochondrial pathway involves proapoptotic genes *Bax*, *NOXA*, *P53AIP1*, and *PUMA*. Their transcription is triggered by p53 [42, 43]. The *Bax* gene encodes a protein that increases mitochondrial membrane permeability and releases cytochrome C. Its regulatory region contains p53-binding elements. The gene is directly activated by p53 in some groups of human cells [65]. The third group includes genes maintaining cell stability. Genes whose products act in DNA repair belong to this group. Although they do not immediately control cell proliferation or apoptosis, their mutations and inactivation cause DNA damage. The fourth group of genes regulated by p53 inhibits angiogenesis. The formation of new blood vessels favors rapid tumor growth, as observed at later cancer stages. The group of p53-controlled genes preventing angiogenesis includes *GD-AIF* [63], *BAlI* [13], gelatinase *MMP2* [45], *MASPIN* [13], inhibitors of invasion and metastasis *KAlI*, and plasminogen activator inhibitor *PAI-1* [48].

Major Associations of p53 with Skin Aging and Cancer

The chief function of p53 is the support of genome stability and genetic uniformity of cells. Genome stability is maintained by p53 activation and relevant responses to stress signals: DNA damage, oncogene activation, hypoxia, nutrient shortage, and telomere shortening [9, 14, 15, 19, 31]. The stress signals mediated by p53 can be responded by cell cycle arrest, apoptosis, DNA repair, differentiation, or cell senescence.

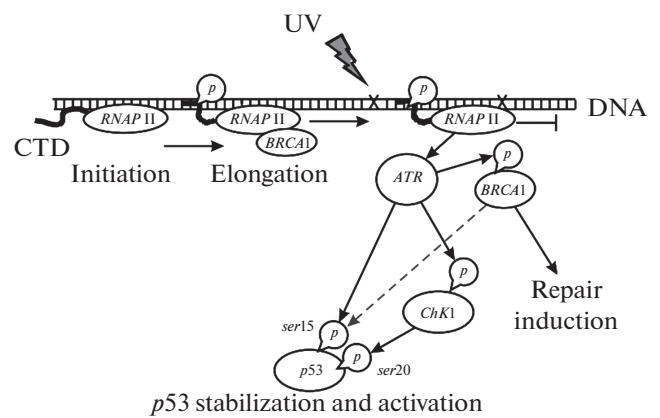


Fig. 1. Influence of UV radiation on the activation of p53 protein [2]. *CTD, carboxy terminal domain.

Expression of p53 in epidermis is detected as early as 30 min after the beginning of UV irradiation [2, 9, 29, 36] (Fig. 1). Ultraviolet radiation produces linkages formed by thymine dimers, which hamper the action of RNA polymerases. It is known that RNA polymerase II performs repair combined with transcription. Inhibition of RNA polymerase II sliding by linkages produced by UV at the elongation stage results in the accumulation of the p53 species phosphorylated at Ser15 and Lys382 [2]. The consequence of the inhibition of RNA polymerase II is the activation of kinase ATR, able to mediate the phosphorylation of p53 at Ser15 and activate kinase Chk1. Kinases Chk1 and Chk2 can phosphorylate Ser20 of p53. In addition to ATR kinase activation by arrest of RNA polymerase II, repair enzymes can be recruited via BRCA1 protein phosphorylation. This protein is associated with RNA polymerase II at the elongation stage. With transcription arrest, it is phosphorylated and removed from the transcription complex [35].

The action of long-wave radiation (UVA) induces intense p53 expression in the basal epidermis layer, whereas shorter wavelengths (UVB) do it in cells of all epidermis layers [53, 62]. Immunohistochemical p53 detection can be applied to visualize keratinocytes and clusters of epidermal p53⁺ clones scattered in the epidermis [54]. Clusters of p53⁺ cells occur in permanently insolated epidermis, among cells adjacent to nonmelanoma skin cancer keratinocytes. It has been found that 70% of such clones bear mutant p53 species [37, 66].

Mutations altering the function of p53 are the cause of malignant tumors in 50% of cancer types [12]. Only 5% of these mutations occur in the regulatory domain of p53, and 95%, in the central region controlling specific p53 binding to DNA [67]. In some cancer types, exemplified by colon tumors, mutant p53 species are observed at advanced malignancy stages, whereas in skin cancer, mutant p53 appears at early neoplasia stages [51].

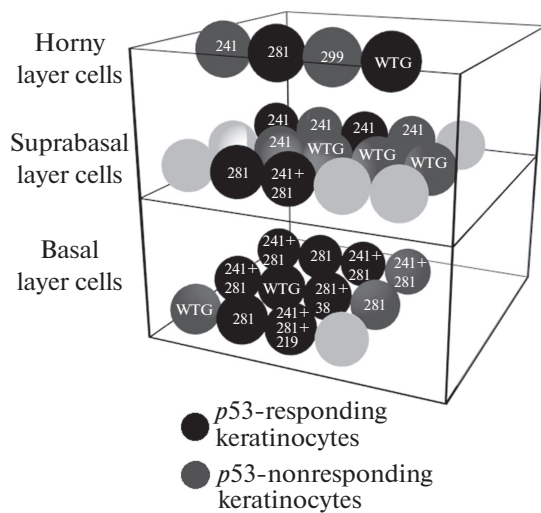


Fig. 2. Location of p53 mutants in skin cells [33]. WTG, wild-type gene; 241, 281, 299, 38, and 219, codons in which mutations were detected.

Nonmelanoma skin cancer is the most widespread cancer form in humans [57]. Mutant variants of the *p53* gene are its characteristic trait [9]. Mutations in *p53* occur in 60% of patients with actinic keratosis [42, 51, 53, 57] and 69%, with squamous cell carcinoma [7, 50, 56]. Typical mutations produced in the skin by UV radiation are tandem substitutions CC→TT [55]. The main mechanism activating *p53* in response to UV is shown in Fig. 1 [2].

UVA can induce DNA lesions indirectly. DNA damage can be mediated by the accumulation of UV-sensitive molecules: riboflavin, pterin, and porphyrin [8].

High *p53* levels are observed in both naturally aging and cultivated skin cells. Aged cultures of human skin fibroblasts showed high levels of active *p53* species [11, 28]. Fibroblast aging in vitro is also accompanied by elevated expression of caspase 3 and lower expression of Ki67. Caspase 3 and Ki67 are commonly used as markers of apoptosis and skin cell proliferation, respectively. Caspase 3 is a marker of apoptosis, and its expression is proven at stages preceding apoptosis. Protein Ki67 is produced in cells at the G1, G2, S, and M phases of the cell cycle. Experiments with rat skin fibroblasts showed that a decrease in caspase 3 production and increase in Ki67 could be achieved with peptides AEDG, KED, KE, and AED, designed at the St. Petersburg Institute of Bioregulation and Gerontology [1].

Studies of normal human epidermal cells revealed *p53*⁺ keratinocytes located in various epidermis layers individually or in clusters. In 70% of cases, they contained mutant *p53* forms [40, 58, 60]. Most of the mutations appeared to be caused by UV radiation, first, C → T replacements in dipyrimidine sites. Moreover, a single keratinocyte could have up to three

different mutant *p53* forms. Examination of cells of an epidermal clone showed that missense mutations in exon 8 (codon 281) and exon 7 (codon 241) were present in all epidermis layers; correspondingly, they might have descended from a single cell (Fig. 2). These mutations touched the *p53* domain responsible for specific binding to DNA [33].

Examination of skin keratinocytes not isolated for two months revealed cells with *p53* mutations typical of UV, although the number of *p53*⁺ cells decreased by 66% [69]. Also, mutant *p53* forms were noted. However, these mutations were not associated with cancer development.

CONCLUSIONS

As *p53* is multifunctional, the investigation of its signaling pathways and their role in skin aging and tumor formation is an urgent problem in modern gerontocosmetology and molecular biology. On the one hand, low *p53* expression reduces apoptosis in skin cells and slows down their senescence. On the other hand, it favors the development of skin neoplasms. Overexpression of *p53* lowers the risk of skin cancer, but cells rapidly reach the Hayflick limit and senesce. Thus, the support of the physiological balance in *p53* expression is essential for theoretical and applied gerontocosmetology. In addition, *p53* can be employed as a marker of the functional state of skin cells in using anti-aging cosmetic products and in machine cosmetology.

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