The Initial Hours of Metastasis: 
The Importance of Cooperative Host–Tumor 
Cell Interactions during Hematogenous 
Dissemination

Myriam Labelle and Richard O. Hynes

INTRODUCTION

Metastasis is the cause of about 90% of cancer-associated 
deaths, yet the mechanisms governing this clinically important 
process remain poorly understood. Tumor cells can 
metastasize via the lymphatics to neighboring lymph nodes. 
However, it remains unclear, in the general case, whether 
lymph nodes serve as a “way-station” en route to the vasculature. 
Distant metastases rely on hematogenous dissemination 
via the blood circulation, and we will concentrate here on this 
latter process. To metastasize successfully, cancer cells 
must complete several complex sequential steps: detachment 
from the primary tumor, intravasation into the vascular system (whether directly or via lymphatics and lymph nodes), survival while in transit through the circulation, initial arrest, 
extravasation, initial seeding, and survival and proliferation 
in the target tissue. Despite the fact that large primary tumors 
can shed millions of cells into the vasculature every day, very 
few metastases eventually develop (1, 2). Thus, metastasis 
is, overall, an inefficient process, implying that tumor cells 
frequently fail to execute one or more of the required steps 
of the metastatic cascade. Tumor cells that succeed in forming 
metastases may have acquired the necessary traits to complete 
these steps while still in the primary tumor, either autonomously 
or as a result of changes induced by inflammation, stromal cells, 
or other environmental conditions (e.g., hypoxia and mechanical forces) 
present in the primary tumor (3). However, the metastatic potential of tumor cells is also 

ABSTRACT

Tumor cells transit from the primary tumor via the blood circulation to form metastases in distant organs. During this process, tumor cells encounter a number of environmental challenges and stimuli that profoundly impact their metastatic potential. Here, we review the cooperative and dynamic host–tumor cell interactions that support and promote the hematogenous dissemination of cancer cells to sites of distant metastasis. In particular, we discuss what is known about the cross-talk occurring among tumor cells, platelets, leukocytes, and endothelial cells and how these cell–cell interactions are organized both temporally and spatially at sites of extravasation and in the early metastatic niche.

Significance: Metastasis is a function not only of tumor cells but also involves cooperative interactions of those cells with normal cells of the body, in particular platelets and leukocytes. These other cell types alter the behavior of the tumor cells themselves and of endothelial cells lining the vasculature and assist in tumor cell arrest and extravasation at sites of metastasis and subsequently in the establishment of tumor cells in the early metastatic niche. A better understanding of the important role that these contact and paracrine interactions play during metastasis will offer new opportunities for therapeutic intervention. Cancer Discov; 2(12); 1091–9. ©2012 AACR.
Nevertheless, recent studies using experimental mouse models have begun to show the importance of host–tumor cell interactions, both in the circulation and at sites of extravasation, for the establishment of metastasis. Many of these studies have been conducted with intravenous injections of tumor cells (experimental metastasis), which is generally considered a standard model for studying hematogenous dissemination. Although this experimental setup presents some limitations (e.g., absence of a primary tumor and injection of tumor cells in a single event rather than scattered over a long period of time), it also offers important experimental advantages. It allows close temporal monitoring of the early interactions between single tumor cells and the host microenvironment and a precise characterization of the specific steps of the metastatic cascade affected by a given experimental treatment (4).

In this review, we discuss the sequence of events and key host cell types that interact with tumor cells during their hematogenous transit and their initial establishment at the secondary site and how these interactions influence metastasis and cancer prognosis.

Transit through the Bloodstream and Initial Arrest (First Minutes)

CTCs are frequently found in the blood of patients with primary solid tumors, and it is generally assumed that a subset of these cells will eventually give rise to distant metastases (5, 6). However, as indicated by intravascular injection of tumor cells into animal models, CTCs typically do not spend much time circulating through the bloodstream. Indeed, most carcinoma cells have diameters that are too large to pass through small capillaries and many are, therefore, trapped in the first capillary bed that they encounter within minutes of entering the circulation (Fig. 1, 2A; ref. 2). During this short period of transit, as well as during initial arrest, cells remain exposed to the blood flow and are vulnerable to death induced by shear stress and turbulence or by immune cells, particularly natural killer (NK) cells. Thus, tumor cells that have intrinsic traits enabling them to escape immune surveillance or to interact with shielding host cells would have an increased rate of success in this early phase of the metastatic cascade.

In this respect, activation of the coagulation cascade and the formation of platelet-rich thrombi around tumor cells in the vasculature have both been proposed to play major roles in physically shielding CTCs from the stress of blood flow and from lysis by NK cells (Fig. 2A; refs. 7–11). Tissue factor expression by tumor cells triggers the formation of thrombin, which leads to both coagulation and platelet activation. In turn, coagulation and platelet activation enhance metastatic spread (11–16). Fibrin can be bound by integrins, αvβ3 on tumor cells and αIIbβ3 on activated platelets, leading to formation of tumor cell–fibrin–platelet aggregates. Therefore, genetic elimination or blockade of β3 integrins on platelets or tumor cells compromises metastasis (8–10, 17–19). Furthermore, expression of diverse P-selectin ligands by tumor cells also favors their interaction with P-selectin on the surfaces of activated platelets (20). Consequently, platelet–tumor cell microthrombi do not form in P-selectin−/− mice and these mice are protected from metastasis (21, 22). More generally, diverse intact platelet functions (e.g., platelet activation, adhesion via surface receptors, and TGF-β release) have been shown to be necessary for efficient metastasis in many experimental models (10, 17, 18, 23–26). Platelets are in fact the major source of TGF-β in the circulation (23). Consistent with a prometastatic role of platelets, high platelet counts and coagulation correlate with decreased patient survival in many different types of cancers, although some of that correlation could well be because of thrombosis caused by the presence of a tumor (9, 10, 27, 28).

In addition to providing physical shielding, platelets and coagulation have been shown to impair NK cell tumorolytic activity in vitro (7, 8). For example, platelet-derived TGF-β downregulates the activating immunoreceptor NKG2D on NK cells (29) and platelet-derived growth factor (PDGF) released by platelets can also suppress NK cell function (30). The coating of the surfaces of tumor cells with normal
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Platelet-derived MHC class I may also favor tumor cell escape from the innate immune system (31). Thus, multiple platelet-tumor cell interactions can lead to the inhibition of NK cells, leading to increased tumor cell survival in the circulation.

Clustering of tumor cells and adhesion with other cell types have also been proposed to contribute to successful tumor cell survival in the circulation. For example, CTC clusters isolated from the blood of patients with metastatic prostate cancer have higher hematoxylin and eosin staining intensity than do individual CTCs, suggesting reduced cell death and potential protection from shear stress (6, 32). Similarly, CTCs incorporated in heterotypic tumor–fibroblast
aggregates retrieved from the blood of tumor-bearing mice have improved viability compared with single CTCs (33). Given the enhancing effects of platelets on metastasis, it is plausible that the CTCs that are most effective in metastasis will prove to be those in aggregates with platelets and possibly also leukocytes. Most current methods for scoring CTCs in patients score only single cells and could be missing an important fraction of the CTC population.

**Arrest and Adhesion to the Vascular Wall (First Hours)**

The propensity of tumor cells to metastasize to specific organs is in part dependent on the circulation pattern, and the preferred sites of metastasis for a given type of cancer often include the first capillary beds downstream of the primary tumor. Examples are metastasis of colon cancer cells to the liver and of breast cancer cells to the lungs, where the initial arrest of tumor cells may be mainly caused by physical restriction in capillaries of small diameter (2). In such cases, the formation of aggregates comprising CTCs and host cells may enhance passive trapping in capillaries by increasing the diameter of tumor cell emboli. However, during metastasis to either the liver or the lung, tumor cells can also arrest in vessels of larger diameter than capillaries (34), showing that active adhesion to the vasculature via specific proteins, such as selectins, integrins, and metalloproteinases, can also contribute to initial arrest (19, 35–38). Importantly, some of these adhesion receptors could be contributed by associated platelets, leukocytes, or stromal fibroblasts.

It is likely that initial trapping, which occurs within minutes of the entry of tumor cells into the circulation, is mostly passive and dependent on circulation patterns, whereas the cells that permanently arrest are those that form specific, longer-lasting adhesive interactions with the endothelium. In accordance with this concept, a high proportion of tumor cells rapidly arrests in capillaries in experimental metastasis models, whereas sustained adhesion to the endothelium leading to permanent seeding seems to be of variable efficiency and often fails. Indeed, whereas some studies have shown that more than 80% of tumor cells survive the circulatory phase of metastasis and successfully seed the lungs after 24 hours (39), others have reported much lower rates of cell retention (~20% or less) at this same time point (1, 40–42). Thus, the rate of tumor cell death or displacement to other organs at this early stage of metastasis can, in many cases, be very high. For example, using real-time imaging in vivo, Kienast and colleagues observed that melanoma or lung carcinoma cells initially arrested in brain capillaries can enter and leave their arrested positions several times during the first 24 hours after intravascular injection (43). A high proportion of these cells die or are dislodged, whereas some studies have shown that more than 8% of tumor cells survive the circulatory phase of metastasis and successfully seed the lungs after 24 hours (39), others have reported much lower rates of cell retention (~20% or less) at this same time point (1, 40–42). Thus, the rate of tumor cell death or displacement to other organs at this early stage of metastasis can, in many cases, be very high. For example, using real-time imaging in vivo, Kienast and colleagues observed that melanoma or lung carcinoma cells initially arrested in brain capillaries can enter and leave their arrested positions several times during the first 24 hours after intravascular injection (43). A high proportion of these cells die or are dislodged, whereas some studies have shown that more than 80% of tumor cells survive the circulatory phase of metastasis and successfully seed the lungs after 24 hours (39), others have reported much lower rates of cell retention (~20% or less) at this same time point (1, 40–42).

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REVIEW

reduced by genetic or pharmacologic ablation of monocyte/macrophage-lineage cells (42, 51, 65), and tail-vein injection of
neutrophils 1 hour after injection of melanoma cells results in
increased retention of tumor cells in the lungs after 24 hours
(ref. 66; Fig. 1, 2B). These latter observations may be explained
by the secretion of IL-8 by tumor cells, which can attract and
activate neutrophils by increasing their expression of β2 intimogens and adhesion to tumor cells (66). In turn, matrix
metalloproteinase (MMP)-9 produced by neutrophils pro-
motes the early survival of metastatic cells (6–24 hours) but
has no effect on subsequent metastatic growth (67). On the
other hand, Granot and colleagues (68) recently showed that
tumor-entrained neutrophils (TEN; a subset of CD11b+Ly-
6G+MMP-9+ neutrophils isolated from tumor-bearing mice)
can counteract metastatic seeding of breast carcinoma cells
in the lungs by killing tumor cells via the generation of
high levels of hydrogen peroxide. These antimetastatic effects
were observed upon the transfer of TENs into mice, but
not if granulocyte colony-stimulating factor–stimulated neu-

trophils were used. Thus, neutrophils can either promote or
inhibit metastasis, depending on the stimuli to which they
are exposed. Presumably, the presence of other host cells and
factors determines the outcome of neutrophil–tumor interac-
tions. For example, the killing activity of TENs can be blocked
by TGF-β in vitro, suggesting that a TGF-β–rich microenviron-
ment [such as that produced by platelet aggregation with
tumor cells (23)] could impede the function of TENs in vivo
and promote metastasis, similarly to the context-dependent
activity of neutrophils observed in primary tumors (69).

Extravasation and Initial Seeding (First Days)

Extravasation efficiency and kinetics depend both on tumor
cells’ intrinsic behavior and host tissue characteristics, and
tumor cells that can extravasate rapidly presumably have an
advantage during the metastatic cascade because of their
ability to escape promptly from the hostile environment of
the blood flow (70, 71). Indeed, cancer cells that are prone
to metastasize to the lungs express high levels of ANGPTL4
or VEGF-A, 2 secreted factors that disrupt endothelial cell
junctions and facilitate extravasation (72, 73). Similarly,
upregulation of other genes involved in vascular and extracel-
lar matrix remodeling (EREG, COX2, MMP1, and MMP2)
promotes extravasation and metastasis (70).

Extravasation, which typically occurs within 1 to 3 days
(Fig. 1), can also be directly enhanced by platelet–tumor cell
interactions, once tumor cells enter the bloodstream. Mechanisti-
cally, platelet-derived TGF-β and direct platelet–tumor cell
contacts synergistically activate the TGF-β/Smad and NF-κB
pathways in cancer cells, inducing an epithelial–mesenchymal
transition in the tumor cells in vitro, and enhancing their
extravasation and seeding in vivo (Fig. 2C; ref. 23). Plate-
let-specific ablation of TGF-β1 leads to reduced metastasis
and to the impairment of tumor cell extravasation, directly
showing the requirement for platelet-derived TGF-β in this
process. Platelet-activated tumor cells also acquire a prometa-
static gene expression signature, which includes enhanced
expression of various proteases, cytokines, and growth factors
(23) that may contribute to metastasis not only by directly
enhancing tumor cell invasive potential but also by modify-
ing the microenvironment. Importantly, these results reveal
that platelets are more than physical shields and that the
metastatic potential of tumor cells continues to evolve out-
side the primary tumor site in response to their interactions
with platelets in the bloodstream. Therefore, by triggering
the activation of specific signaling pathways in tumor cells,
platelets may initiate a cascade of events reaching beyond
the initial hours of metastasis and impacting subsequent steps
of the metastasis cascade, such as survival and growth at the
secondary site. For example, activation of the NF-κB pathway
in tumor cells in response to interaction with platelets pro-
motes the expression of CCL2, a proinflammatory chemokine
involved in monocyte recruitment (23, 74). In experimental
metastasis models, CCL2 secretion by both tumor cells and
stromal cells was shown to recruit inflammatory monocytes
to the lungs early after the injection of breast tumor cells
(Fig. 2C; refs. 51, 75). Tissue factor produced by the tumor
cells also enhances coagulation, and this too contributes to
attract myeloid cells to the vicinity of tumor cells (65). The
monocyte/macrophage-lineage cells recruited by the tumor
cells were shown to enhance the seeding of metastatic mam-
mary tumor cells in the lung (42, 51, 65). Among these cell
populations, a distinct set of metastasis-associated macro-
phages (F4/80+CD11b+Gr1−) secrete VEGF-A that promotes
the extravasation, seeding, and growth of the tumor cells (42),
presumably via increased endothelial permeability. However,
in a colon carcinoma experimental metastasis model, tumor
cell–derived CCL2 has also shown to signal directly to
CCR2 expressed by endothelial cells, resulting in an increase
in vascular permeability and subsequent metastasis by a mecha-
nism independent of myeloid cells (Fig. 2C; ref. 75). Thus,
tumor cell extravasation is facilitated by multiple complex
interactive networks comprising direct platelet-to-tumor cell
signaling, tumor cell-to-endothelium signaling, and monocyte/
macrophage-to-endothelium signaling.

Another example of a prometastatic cascade of events
involving multiple types of host cells was provided by Laubli
and colleagues (55), who showed that colon carcinoma cells,
band with platelets and neutrophils, activate the endothe-
lum. In turn, the activated endothelial cells secrete CCL5,
which leads to increased recruitment of monocytes to the
tumor cells. In this model, monocyte recruitment occurs after
2 days (55), a time point at which platelets are no longer
associated with tumor cells, illustrating the sequential involve-
ment of different host cells in supporting metastatic seeding.
Although not yet tested, it is a plausible hypothesis that
early and transient platelet–tumor cell interactions trigger
cascades of paracrine signals impinging on the recruitment
and function of various types of leukocytes, which in turn
contribute to survival and metastasis of cancer cells. Indeed,
macrophages and specific subsets of bone marrow–derived
immature cells have been implicated in promoting cell sur-
vival and proliferation in models of metastasis to the lungs.
For example, binding of VCAM-1 aberrantly expressed by
tumor cells to α4 integrin expressed by macrophages, protects
cancer cells from proapoptotic cytokines such as TRAIL, lead-
ing to increased survival and metastasis (76). Other examples
of the importance of tumor cell–stroma interactions for early
metastatic colonization come from recent studies, which
showed requirements for periostin and tenascin C expres-
sion by fibroblasts at the site of metastasis for successful
metastatic growth (Fig. 2C; refs. 77, 78). TGF-β seems to be involved in the enhancement of the expression of these ECM proteins, suggesting that TGF-β expressed by tumor cells or host cells (such as platelets, as discussed above) may be important for the initiation of this supportive metastatic niche (78–80). Finally, it is likely that the tumor-promoting effects of BMDCs, which are increasingly well understood for tumor progression at the primary site, may also be important for the subsequent establishment of overt metastases.

The First Hours of Metastasis as a Possible Therapeutic Target

Most of the approved anticancer therapies inhibit the growth of primary tumors. Although some of those therapies also have an effect on metastatic growth, there are currently no therapies specifically aimed at preventing the metastatic process by targeting the different steps of the metastatic cascade. Furthermore, although some potential antimetastatic compounds have been identified in preclinical models, there is a clear need for clinical trials specifically designed to test for antimetastatic effects (e.g., time required for the formation of a new metastasis) rather than for the ability of compounds to prevent tumor growth (81).

The early steps of the metastatic cascade discussed in this review are generally not considered as attractive clinical targets. The rationale for this opinion is that tumor cells can disseminate early during tumor progression (82, 83), and therefore it is likely that some metastatic cancer cells have already completed the early steps of the metastatic cascade by the time of cancer diagnosis. Thus, the later steps comprising escape from dormancy, reinitiation of growth, colonization, and survival in the metastatic niche are likely better targets for therapeutic intervention. Indeed, although CTCs can complete the steps of the metastatic cascade leading to seeding within a few days, reinitiation of growth can be significantly delayed and metastatic growth occurs over an extended period of time, providing a more manageable time window for therapeutic intervention.

That said, the early steps of metastatic dissemination discussed here may offer some new opportunities for therapeutic interventions targeting molecular mechanisms and cellular processes such as adhesion, migration, invasion, and epithelial–mesenchymal transition, that are not affected by the cytotoxic or antiproliferative effects of most traditional anticancer therapies. In addition, cells transiting through the bloodstream may be particularly accessible to pharmacologic intervention. Drugs or combinations of drugs impairing not only the ability of tumor cells to proliferate, but also their ability to interact with host cells and complete the early steps of the metastatic cascade, may prove beneficial to prevent further metastatic dissemination either from the primary tumor or from already existing metastases. Indeed, it has been shown in animal models that tumor cells from metastases have the ability to reenter the circulation and seed other metastases (84, 85) or to self-seed back at the primary tumor site, further contributing to cancer progression (86). Thus, inhibitors of metastatic arrest, extravasation, or seeding may impact overall disease progression, even if disseminated tumor cells are already present in a patient. However, the patients most likely to benefit from metastatic prevention therapy would be those who have been diagnosed at early stages before detectable metastatic spread, or even people that do not have the disease but are at high risk for developing highly metastatic cancers. Specific inhibitors of metastasis could also be envisaged for cases in which surgical ablation of the primary tumor is not possible, or during the perioperative period, as surgery may enhance the release of CTCs into the bloodstream (87, 88).

Even though many aspects of the early steps of metastasis are still incompletely understood, molecules that are critical for the completion of specific steps of the metastatic cascade are starting to emerge and could possibly be exploited as therapeutic targets. Inhibitors of a few of the signaling pathways involved in the early steps of metastasis (e.g., VEGF-A, TGF-β, NF-κB, and CCL2) are already used in the clinic or are being evaluated in clinical trials for the treatment of cancers or other diseases. Furthermore, interfering with the ability of tumor cells to recruit or interact with supportive host cells may prevent the formation of optimal conditions for metastatic progression. In this respect, inhibitors of cell adhesion receptors required for the tumor cell–host cell interactions may be of particular interest.

For example, the anticoagulants heparin or low-molecular-weight heparin (LMWH) have already been shown to prevent metastasis in preclinical models by inhibiting the formation of platelet–tumor cell aggregates (22). More importantly, a number of independent clinical trials have shown that treatment with LMWH improves the survival of cancer patients (9, 89–91). Interestingly, the beneficial effects of a LMWH treatment were predominantly seen in patients with good prognosis or that did not have detectable metastasis at the onset of treatment, consistent with a role for LMWH in inhibiting the seeding of metastases rather than in the growth of existing ones (9, 89–91). Mechanistically, the effect of heparin on metastasis is attributed primarily to its ability to inhibit the interaction of P-selectin with its ligands and not to its anticoagulant activity. Indeed, the synthetic LMWH fondaparinux, which does not inhibit P-selectin but retains anticoagulant activity, fails to inhibit experimental metastasis (92).

In addition to inhibiting P-selectin, heparin can also inhibit α4β1 and αIIbβ3 integrins (93), providing indications that heparin might interfere with multiple prometastatic adhesive interactions. Similarly, function-blocking antibodies targeting α4β1 or αIIbβ3 integrins inhibit experimental metastasis (94, 95). Moreover, small molecules and antibodies that inhibit the function of αIIbβ3 integrin or the binding of VCAM-1 to α4 integrin are already available in the clinic. Antagonists of αIIbβ3 integrin are used as antithrombotics and could be expected to block platelet–tumor cell interactions through fibrinogen as would also be true for antagonists of αvβ3 integrin, present on many tumor cells. Antagonists of α4 and β2 integrins have been developed for the treatment of diseases involving influx of leukocytes, such as inflammation and autoimmunity, and might thus also interfere with the macrophage–tumor cell interactions that promote tumor cell arrest, survival, and reinitiation of tumor growth at the site of metastasis (96, 97).

Overall, although inhibitors of host–tumor cell signaling interactions show promise in experimental models, it remains to be tested whether these agents will prevent or significantly delay metastasis in cancer patients, and clinical
trials will be challenging, given the long time scales necessary. Furthermore, potential side effects affecting vital functions, such as the immune response, coagulation, and hemostasis, will need to be carefully evaluated. Thus, a better and more comprehensive understanding of the molecular mechanisms involved in metastasis is required for the development of specific therapies with minimal potential adverse effects and efficient blocking of cancer metastasis.

CONCLUSIONS

Although the complexity of the metastatic cascade has been acknowledged for many years, the active participation of cells of the host microenvironment to metastatic dissemination is only beginning to be appreciated. The studies reviewed herein provide examples of the importance of dynamic tumor-host cell interactions at each step of the metastatic cascade (Figs. 1 and 2). The context-dependent and concerted actions of different populations of host cells appear to be necessary for efficient metastasis. However, exactly how the different types of host cells interact with each other as well as with tumor cells both temporally and spatially, and the precise hierarchy and function of these interactions, remain incompletely understood. Answering these fundamental questions will likely provide important clues not only about the molecular mechanisms involved during metastatic dissemination but also about how these early processes influence the subsequent metastatic colonization. Deeper understanding of these diverse tumor-host cell interactions may also offer possibilities for novel therapeutic interventions.

Disclosure of Potential Conflicts of Interest

No potential conflicts of interest were disclosed.

Authors’ Contribution

Writing, review, and/or revision of the manuscript: M. Labelle, R.O. Hynes

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