

Amyloids

The Human Host-Defense Peptide Cathelicidin LL-37 is a Nanomolar Inhibitor of Amyloid Self-Assembly of Islet Amyloid Polypeptide (IAPP)

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Abstract: Amyloid self-assembly of islet amyloid polypeptide (IAPP) is linked to pancreatic inflammation, β -cell degeneration, and the pathogenesis of type 2 diabetes (T2D). The multifunctional host-defence peptides (HDPs) cathelicidins play crucial roles in inflammation. Here, we show that the antimicrobial and immunomodulatory polypeptide human cathelicidin LL-37 binds IAPP with nanomolar affinity and effectively suppresses its amyloid self-assembly and related pancreatic β -cell damage in vitro. In addition, we identify key LL-37 segments that mediate its interaction with IAPP. Our results suggest a possible protective role for LL-37 in T2D pathogenesis and offer a molecular basis for the design of LL-37-derived peptides that combine antimicrobial, immunomodulatory, and T2D-related anti-amyloid functions as promising candidates for multifunctional drugs.

Amyloid self-assembly of islet amyloid polypeptide (IAPP) is linked to pancreatic β -cell degeneration and the pathogenesis of type 2 diabetes (T2D).^[1] The 37-residue IAPP is secreted from the β -cells together with insulin and acts in its soluble form as a neuropeptide regulator of glucose homeostasis (Scheme 1).^[1] However, under conditions of T2D, the intrinsically disordered but highly amyloidogenic IAPP self-assembles into cytotoxic oligomers and amyloid fibrils, which mediate pancreatic inflammation and β -cell degeneration.^[1,2]

The multifunctional host-defence peptides (HDPs) cathelicidins play crucial roles in inflammatory processes, including both pro- and anti-inflammatory ones.^[3] So far, the only known human cathelicidin is LL-37 (Scheme 1).^[3b] LL-37 is a 37-residue polypeptide that is broadly expressed by

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IAPP	KC-NTATCATQRLANFLVHSSNNFGAIISS TNVGSNTY
LL-37	LLGDFFRKSKEKIGKEFKRIVQRIKDFLRNLL-VPRTES
LL-37(1-14)	LLGDFFRKSKEKIG
LL-37(15-37)	KEFKRIVQRIKDFLRNLLVPRTES
scrLL-37	GLKLRFEFSKIKGEFLKTPVFRFRDIKLDNRISVQR

Scheme 1. Primary structures of IAPP, LL-37, scrambled LL-37 (scrLL-37), and LL-37 segments synthesized and studied (IAPP has a C-terminal amide; LL-37 and related peptides have a C-terminal COOH). IAPP and LL-37 sequence alignment was performed by LALIGN;^[8] similar residues are blue and identical green coloured.

a plethora of immune and non-immune cells, including the β -cells of pancreas.^[3a,e,4] LL-37 plays a crucial role in innate immunity; its best known functions are its broad-spectrum antimicrobial activity and its potent immunomodulatory effects.^[3] Importantly, secretion of the mouse LL-37 orthologue cathelicidin related antimicrobial peptide (CRAMP) by pancreatic β -cells was recently found to suppress pancreatic β -cell inflammation in a mouse model of type 1 diabetes (T1D) by converting inflammatory cells into regulatory ones.^[4] In addition, CRAMP/LL-37 treatment promoted insulin and glucagon secretion and enhanced islet function.^[4b] Thus, a protective role for LL-37 in T1D has been suggested.^[4] The multifunctional nature of LL-37 makes it of high biomedical importance and numerous studies toward the design of LL-37-derived peptides with antimicrobial or immunomodulatory functions have been reported.^[3,5]

Increasing evidence suggests that interactions of amyloidogenic polypeptides with other polypeptides are crucial modulators of amyloid self-assembly.^[6] For instance, high-affinity interactions of non-fibrillar species of IAPP with insulin or amyloid β peptide (A β 40(42)) of Alzheimer's disease (AD) have been found to suppress IAPP amyloidogenesis in vitro.^[6c,e,7] In addition, LL-37 was recently shown to interact with A β 42 resulting in suppression of A β 42 amyloidogenesis and neuroinflammation in vitro.^[6b]

Based on the above information and in particular on the presence of LL-37 in the pancreas, we asked whether it might also interact with IAPP. Notably, LL-37 and IAPP share a remarkable (42%) sequence similarity (Scheme 1). Herein, we show that LL-37 in fact binds with nanomolar affinity to IAPP and effectively suppresses its amyloid self-assembly and related pancreatic β -cell-damage in vitro. In addition, we identify key LL-37 segments that mediate its interaction with IAPP.

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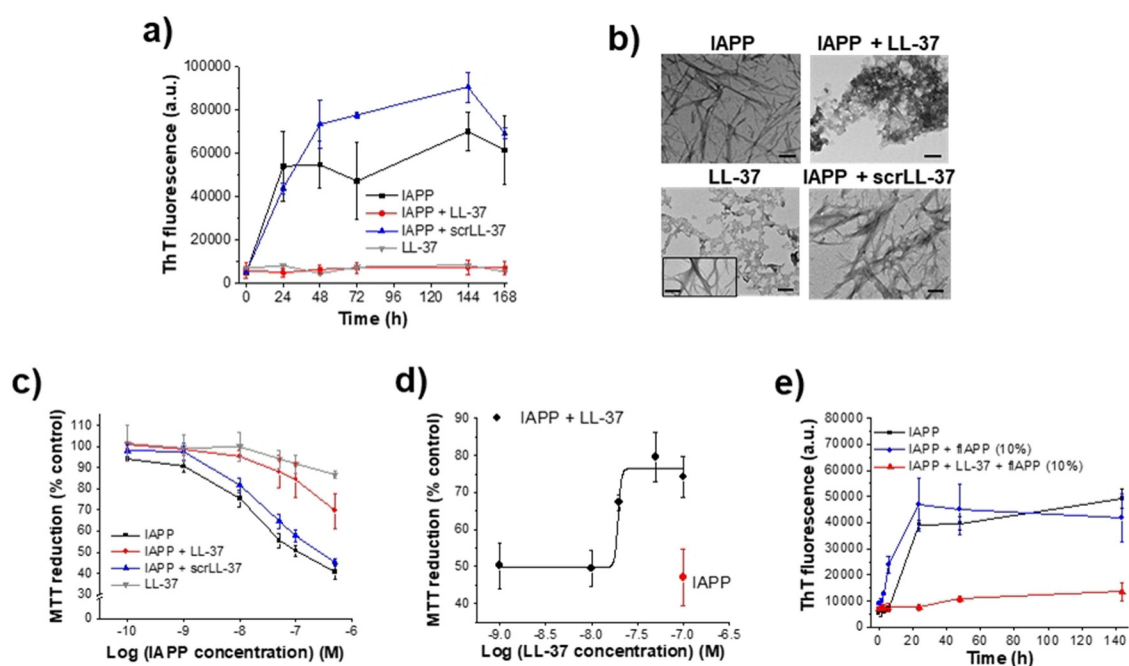


Figure 1. Effects of LL-37 on IAPP amyloid self-assembly and cell-damaging effects. a) Fibrillogenesis of IAPP (16.5 μM) alone or with LL-37 (1:1) determined by ThT binding (means \pm SD, 3 assays). LL-37 alone is shown for comparison (1 assay). b) TEM images of 7 days aged solutions from (a) as indicated (bars, 100 nm); inset in LL-37 image shows LL-37 fibrils (minor population). c) Cell viability of cultured RIN5fm cells after treatment with IAPP and its mixtures from 1a (7 days aged) determined by MTT reduction [mean \pm SD, 3 assays ($n=3$ each)]; effects of LL-37 alone are also shown (1 assay, $n=3$). d) IC_{50} of inhibitory effect of LL-37 on IAPP cytotoxicity determined by titration of IAPP (100 nM; red symbol) with LL-37 and MTT reduction [mean \pm SD, 3 titration assays ($n=3$ each)]. e) Fibrillogenesis of IAPP (16.5 μM) alone or with LL-37 (1:1) following seeding with fIAPP (10%) determined by ThT binding (mean \pm SD, 3 assays).

We first addressed the question of whether LL-37 might interfere with IAPP amyloidogenesis and the formation of cell-damaging assemblies by using the ThT binding assay in combination with TEM and a cell viability assay (Figure 1). In fact, LL-37 (1:1 relative to IAPP) effectively suppressed IAPP amyloid self-assembly (Figure 1a). The results of the ThT assay were confirmed by TEM, which revealed amorphous aggregates as major species in aged IAPP-LL-37 mixtures (Figure 1b). Interestingly, a few fibrils were also observed in aged LL-37 alone in addition to amorphous aggregates consistent with previous findings.^[9] The dose-dependence of the amyloid inhibitory effect was confirmed by additional studies (Figure S1). Addition of the above solutions to cultured pancreatic β -cells (RIN5fm) and determination of cell damage through a the 3-[4,5-dimethylthiazol-2-yl]-2,5-diphenyltetrazolium bromide (MTT) reduction assay showed that LL-37 effectively suppressed formation of cytotoxic IAPP assemblies as well (Figure 1c,d). Of note, scrambled LL-37 (scrLL-37) was unable to inhibit up to an at least 10-fold molar excess and LL-37 alone was not cytotoxic (Scheme 1, Figures 1a–c & S2). To quantify the inhibitory activity of LL-37, titrations of cytotoxic IAPP with LL-37 were performed and an IC_{50} of 17(\pm 1.7) nM was obtained (Figure 1d); thus, LL-37 is a nanomolar inhibitor of IAPP cytotoxic self-assembly. Furthermore, we asked whether LL-37 may also interfere with nucleation of IAPP fibrillogenesis by addition of seed amounts of preformed IAPP fibrils (fIAPP). In fact, in the presence of LL-37 (1/1), the seeding effect of fIAPP (10%) was fully suppressed (Figure 1e).

To characterize the LL-37-IAPP interaction, we performed fluorescence spectroscopic titrations, CD spectroscopy, cross-linking, and dot blots (DBs). First, titration of N-terminal fluorescein-labeled IAPP (Fluo-IAPP, 5 nM) with various amounts of LL-37 was performed; its interaction with 100-fold molar excess of LL-37 resulted in a 322% increase in its fluorescence emission (Figure 2a). The titration yielded an apparent (app.) K_d of 88.1(\pm 12) nM consistent with a high-affinity interaction (Figure 2a). Since freshly made solutions of Fluo-IAPP at 5 nM consist mainly of monomers, these results suggest that LL-37 binds monomeric IAPP with nanomolar affinity.^[6d] To find out whether LL-37 binds IAPP fibrils as well, DBs were performed using N-terminal fluorescein-labeled LL-37 (FAM-LL-37). In fact, FAM-LL-37 bound both IAPP fibrils and monomers (Figure 2b).

To determine the effects of LL-37 on IAPP conformation and misfolding, far-UV CD spectra of IAPP, LL-37, and the IAPP/LL-37 mixture (1:1) were measured at various incubation time points (Figures 2c–e).^[10] The spectrum of IAPP (0 h) exhibited a strong minimum at approximately 200 nm, which is indicative of large amounts of unordered structure (Figure 2c). By contrast, the spectrum of LL-37 exhibited a strong $n \rightarrow \pi^*$ minimum at around 227 nm, a smaller one at around 210 nm, and a maximum at around 198 nm. These features were indicative of large amounts of α -helix and/or β -sheet/turn structure. Importantly, the spectrum of the mixture differed from the sum of the spectra confirming the interaction (Figure 2c). Also, the CD spectra of the mixture and of LL-37 were very similar to each other; α -helical homo-

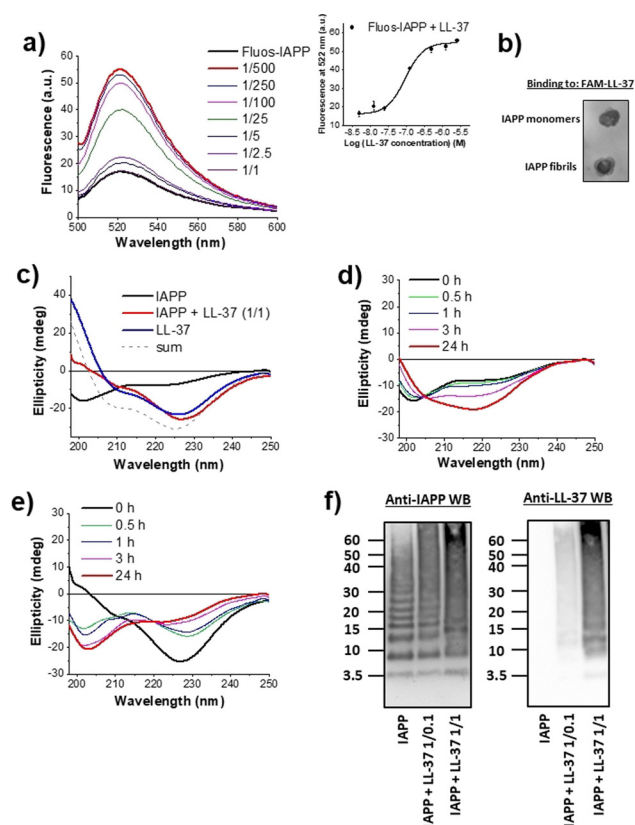


Figure 2. Characterization of the LL-37-IAPP interaction. a) Determination of the app. K_d by fluorescence spectroscopic titrations. Fluorescence emission spectra of Fluos-IAPP (5 nM) alone or with various amounts of LL-37 (pH 7.4) as indicated. Inset: binding curve (mean \pm SD, 3 titration assays). b) Binding of FAM-LL-37 to IAPP monomers and fibrils as determined by DB. IAPP monomers and fibrils (40 μ g) were spotted on a nitrocellulose membrane and probed with FAM-LL-37 (200 nM; results representative of 4 assays). c) Far-UV CD spectra of IAPP (5 μ M), IAPP-LL-37 (1:1; 5 μ M each), and LL-37 (5 μ M, 0 h, pH 7.4). The sum of the spectra of LL-37 and IAPP is also shown. d, e) Kinetic follow-up of IAPP misfolding alone (d) or its 1:1 mixture with LL-37 (e) through far-UV CD spectroscopy. Conditions as in (c). f) Characterization of IAPP/LL-37 hetero-assemblies through cross-linking with glutaraldehyde (pH 7.4), NuPAGE, and western blotting (IAPP 30 μ M; IAPP/LL-37 1:0.1 or 1:1). A representative gel ($n > 5$) is shown.

hetero-oligomers could account for the 227 and 210 nm minima (Figure 2c).^[9b,11] In fact, LL-37 has a well-known propensity to self-assemble into α -helical oligomers, while α -helix-mediated homo-dimerization might precede IAPP amyloidogenesis.^[3d,10-12] Of note, scrLL-37 (1:1 relative to IAPP) did not affect IAPP conformation (Figure S2). The CD spectra of IAPP at various incubation time points indicated a conformational transition into β -sheet-rich assemblies, leading to fibril formation and precipitation (24 h; Figure 2d).^[10] By contrast, the LL-37/IAPP mixture exhibited a strong time-dependent increase of random-coil content and no precipitation occurred (Figure 2e). Thus, the LL-37/IAPP interaction yielded soluble, partly disordered hetero-assemblies that suppressed IAPP fibrillogenesis.

To further characterize the LL-37/IAPP hetero-assemblies, cross-linking studies were performed. IAPP solutions

contained low MW oligomers, mostly di- to hexamers, and higher MW aggregates (Figure 2f). A similar pattern was observed in the presence of non-inhibitory amounts (0.1 equivalents) of LL-37. By contrast, in the presence of an inhibitory (equimolar) LL-37 amount, a novel prominent band, which was absent in the IAPP-only incubations, was found at around 15 kDa and suggested the formation of IAPP/LL-37 hetero-tetramers (Figure 2f). In addition, a strong reduction of low MW oligomeric IAPP bands, likely corresponding to cytotoxic IAPP oligomers, was observed (Figure 2f). Western blot (WB) with anti-LL-37 antibody confirmed the presence of LL-37 in the 15 kDa band of the IAPP/LL-37 mixtures (Figure 2f). Notably, LL-37 alone also contained a band at around 15 kDa corresponding to LL-37 homo-tetramers (Figure S3).^[9b,11a] Together, these studies identified LL-37/IAPP hetero-tetramers as major hetero-oligomeric populations and suggested that their formation may underlie the inhibitory effect of LL-37. Furthermore, IAPP seeding studies suggest that binding of LL-37 to IAPP fibrils converts them into seeding-incompetent assemblies, thereby providing an additional mechanistic explanation for its potent amyloid inhibitor function (Figure 3 and Supporting Information).

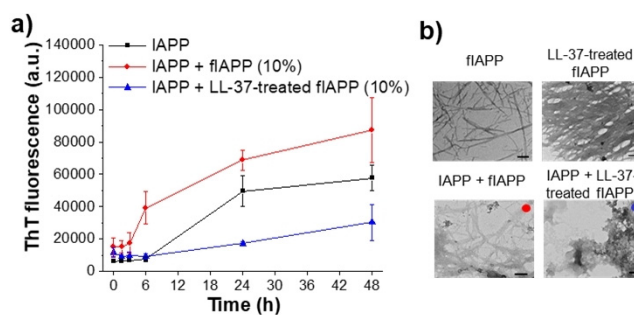


Figure 3. LL-37 binding to IAPP fibrils (fIAPP) converts them into seeding-incompetent assemblies: a) Fibrillogenesis of IAPP (16.5 μ M) alone or following seeding with 10% fIAPP or with 10% LL-37-treated fIAPP determined by ThT binding (means \pm SD, 3 assays). b) TEM images of solutions from (a): fIAPP seeds, LL-37-treated fIAPP seeds, and IAPP seeded with fIAPP (10%, red dot) or LL-37-treated fIAPP (10%, blue dot; both at 6 h). Scale bars = 100 nm.

Specific partial LL-37 sequences within its central/C-terminal parts such as LL-37(17(18)-29) or LL-37(13-32) have been found to be sufficient for antibacterial, antiviral, or immunomodulatory activity and are thus being used for drug design.^[3a,c-e,5] To find out whether the amyloid-inhibition function of LL-37 resides within specific sequence parts as well, we dissected it into the two segments: LL-37(1-14) and LL-37(15-37), which contain the N- and central/C-terminal helical parts, respectively.^[3c,13] The peptides were synthesized and their interactions and effects on IAPP amyloid self-assembly were studied. Importantly, neither segment was able to interfere with IAPP amyloid self-assembly and cell-damaging effects (1:1 with IAPP; Figure 4a,b). In addition, fluorescence titrations revealed that LL-37(15-37) bound Fluos-IAPP with as high affinity (app. $K_d = 31.9(\pm 2.2)$ nM) as full length LL-37; by contrast, a circa 30-fold weaker binding

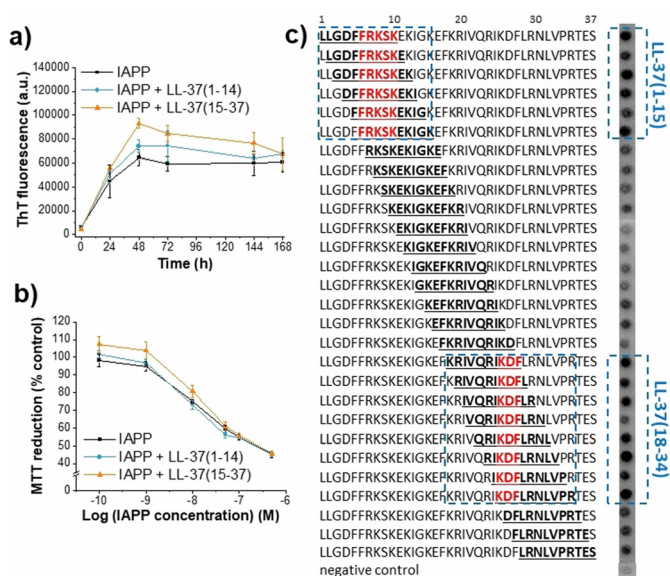


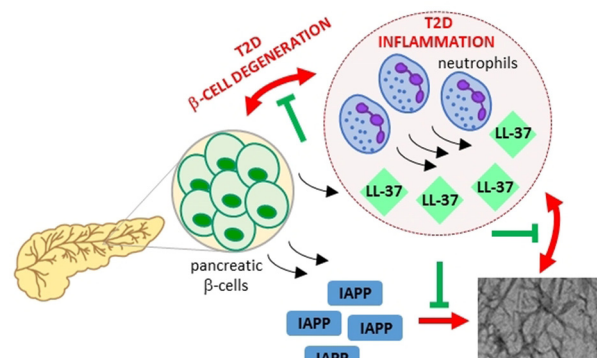
Figure 4. Identification of regions of LL-37 that mediate its interaction with IAPP and its potent amyloid-inhibition function. a) Fibrillogenesis of IAPP (16.5 μM) alone or in the presence of LL-37(1-14) or LL-37(15-37) (1:1) as determined by ThT binding (mean \pm SD, 3 assays). b) β -cell-damaging effects of 24 h aged solutions from (a) determined by MTT reduction [RIN5f cells; mean \pm SD, 3 assays ($n=3$ each)]. c) Identification of LL-37 regions that bind IAPP using peptide microarrays. Glass slides with decamers consisting of overlapping LL-37 sequences (bold) were incubated with Fluos-IAPP (1 μM); visualization by fluorescence. Identified IAPP binding clusters are indicated by dashed blue line frames; LL-37 “binding cores” by red letters (results representative from 4 assays).

(app. $K_d = 2.54(\pm 0.5)$ μM) was found for LL-37(1-14); Figure S4). Thus, while the central/C-terminal LL-37 part likely mediates its high-affinity interaction with IAPP, it is not sufficient for amyloid inhibition; the concerted action of central/C-terminal and N-terminal parts appears to be required.

To better characterize the LL-37 regions involved in its interaction with IAPP, we used peptide arrays of LL-37 decamers covering full-length LL-37 and positionally shifted by one residue; peptides were covalently attached on glass slides.^[14] Incubation with Fluos-IAPP revealed two clusters of 6–8 consecutive IAPP binding segments: the first one in LL-37(1-15) and the second one in LL-37(18-34) (Figure 4c). The common sequence parts within each binding cluster, that is, the “binding cores”, were LL-37(6-10) or FRKSK at the N-terminus, and LL-37(25-27) or KDF within the C-terminal part (Figure 4c). These findings were in line with the LL-37 dissection studies; in addition, they identified the segments mediating its interaction with IAPP.

In summary, we have identified a high-affinity interaction between LL-37 and IAPP that effectively suppresses IAPP amyloid self-assembly in vitro, along with key LL-37 segments that mediate this interaction. Our results suggest that the inhibitor function of LL-37 is mediated by binding to 1) early prefibrillar IAPP species and their sequestration into soluble, non-fibrillar hetero-assemblies and 2) IAPP fibrils and their conversion into seeding-incompetent assemblies.

Together with findings by others, our results support the hypothesis that LL-37 secreted by pancreatic β -cells or infiltrated neutrophils under conditions of pancreatic inflammation binds IAPP and suppresses its amyloid self-assembly and related β -cell damage, thus slowing down T2D pathogenesis (Scheme 2).^[2a,c,4a] Studies on the potential physiological relevance of the LL-37/IAPP interaction are now of high priority.



Scheme 2. Suggested protective role of the LL-37/IAPP interaction in pancreatic amyloid formation, inflammation, β -cell degeneration, and T2D pathogenesis.

In conclusion, our studies have uncovered a high-affinity amyloid-suppressing interaction between a major antimicrobial and immunomodulatory polypeptide and the key amyloid polypeptide of T2D, and offer a molecular basis for the design of novel molecules combining antimicrobial, immunomodulatory, and T2D-related anti-amyloid functions as candidates for multifunctional drugs.

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Conflict of interest

Valentina Armiento, Annelise E. Barron, and Aphrodite Kapurniotu are coinventors in a provisional application for a US patent on LL-37-based treatment strategies in diabetes.

Keywords: amyloids · inhibitors · protein interactions · self-assembly · type 2 diabetes

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