LKB1 Inactivation Dictates Therapeutic Response of Non-Small Cell Lung Cancer to the Metabolism Drug Phenformin

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ccr.2012.12.008

SUMMARY

The LKB1 (also called STK11) tumor suppressor is mutationally inactivated in ~20% of non-small cell lung cancers (NSCLC). LKB1 is the major upstream kinase activating the energy-sensing kinase AMPK, making LKB1-deficient cells unable to appropriately sense metabolic stress. We tested the therapeutic potential of metabolic drugs in NSCLC and identified phenformin, a mitochondrial inhibitor and analog of the diabetes therapeutic metformin, as selectively inducing apoptosis in LKB1-deficient NSCLC cells. Therapeutic trials in Kras-dependent mouse models of NSCLC revealed that tumors with Kras and Lkb1 mutations, but not those with Kras and p53 mutations, showed selective response to phenformin as a single agent, resulting in prolonged survival. This study suggests phenformin as a cancer metabolism-based therapeutic to selectively target LKB1-deficient tumors.

INTRODUCTION

The gene encoding the serine/threonine kinase LKB1 was identified originally as the tumor suppressor gene responsible for the inherited cancer disorder Peutz-Jeghers syndrome (Hemminki et al., 1998). LKB1 is also the second most commonly mutated tumor suppressor in sporadic human lung cancer (after TP53), particularly in multiple subtypes of NSCLC (Sanchez-Cespedes et al., 2002). LKB1 is mutated in at least 15%–30% of NSCLCs, but the true frequency might be even higher because of difficulties in detecting inactivating lesions (Ding et al., 2008; Gill et al., 2011; Ji et al., 2007). Roughly half of the NSCLC tumors with LKB1 mutation also bear activating KRAS mutations, and current estimates suggest that 7%–10% of all NSCLC are comutated for KRAS and LKB1 (Ding et al., 2008; The Cancer Genome Atlas). Studies in genetically engineered mouse models have shown that simultaneous activation of KrasG12D and biallelic deletion of Lkb1 in the lung dramatically increases tumor burden and metastasis (Carretero et al., 2010; Chen et al., 2012; Ji et al., 2007).

Biochemical and genetic analyses in worms, flies, and mice have shown that LKB1 is the major kinase phosphorylating the AMP-activated protein kinase (AMPK) under conditions of energy stress across metazoans (Hardie et al., 2012). AMPK is a highly conserved energy sensor and modulator of cell growth and metabolism that is activated under conditions of low intracellular ATP. Activated AMPK regulates cell growth at least in

Significance

Targeted therapeutics are making significant advances in subsets of NSCLC bearing activated oncogenic targets, such as EGFR and ALK. More prevalent in NSCLC are mutations in the KRAS oncogene coincident with mutations in the LKB1 or p53 tumor suppressor genes. Currently, there are limited options for LKB1 mutant tumors. Here, we define the hypersensitivity of LKB1-defective cells to metabolic stress and test the therapeutic use of phenformin, a mitochondrial inhibitor and a former type 2 diabetes drug, in mouse models of NSCLC. Phenformin as a single agent reduced tumor burden and prolonged survival in Kras;Lkb1 compound mutant mice but not Kras;p53 mice. These findings suggest phenformin or related agents may find clinical utility to treat NSCLC bearing LKB1 mutations.

Cancer Cell 23, 143–158, February 11, 2013 ©2013 Elsevier Inc. 143
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A

A549-pBabe | A549-LKB1WT | A549-LKB1KD
Vehicle | AICAR | Metformin | Phenformin | 2DG | Troglitazone

PARP
Clv'd PARP

Clv'd caspase 3

eIF4E

B

Vehicle | Phenformin | Metformin

LKB1
P-Thr172-AMPKα
AMPK
P-Ser792-Raptor
Raptor
P-Ser51-eIF2α
eIF2α
Clv'd PARP
Clv'd caspase3
Actin

A549 (KRASG12S; LKB1−/−; BRG1−/−; p16−/−)

C

pBabe | LKB1WT | LKB1KD

AnnexinV-PE

Vehicle | Phenformin

18.6% | 78.3%
8.4% | 48.2%
16.8% | 77.1%

D

H460 | H157 | A427

Veh | Phen | Met

P-Thr172-AMPKα
AMPKα
P-Ser792-Raptor
Raptor
Clv'd PARP
Clv'd Caspase 3
Actin

KRASG12S; LKB1−/−; PIK3CAmut; p16−/−
KRASG12S; LKB1−/−; p53−/−; p16−/−
KRASG12S; LKB1−/−; CTNNB1mut; p16−/−

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part through inhibition of mTORC1 signaling achieved through dual phosphorylation of TSC2 (Inoki et al., 2003) and Raptor (Gwinn et al., 2008). AMPK is also hypothesized to maintain energy homeostasis in part by targeting defective mitochondria for autophagy (Egan et al., 2011) and control of fatty acid metabolism (Jeon et al., 2012).

The diabetes therapeutic biguanide compounds metformin and phenformin have been shown to inhibit complex I of the mitochondria (Dykens et al., 2008; El-Mir et al., 2000; Owen et al., 2000), resulting in increases in intracellular AMP and ADP that bind to the gamma regulatory subunit of AMPK and trigger LKB1-dependent phosphorylation of AMPK (Hawley et al., 2010). Consistent with activation of a low energy checkpoint, metformin treatment has been found to reduce tumor growth in xenograft, transgenic, and carcinogen-induced mouse cancer models (Algire et al., 2011; Anisimov et al., 2005; Buzzai et al., 2007; Memmott et al., 2010). Epidemiological studies revealed that diabetic patients taking metformin show a statistically significant reduced tumor incidence (Dowling et al., 2012; Evans et al., 2005). Given the extensive knowledge on the safety and use of metformin, there is increasing interest in using metformin as an anticancer agent (Taubes, 2012). Phenformin is a 50-fold more potent inhibitor of mitochondrial complex I than metformin (Dykens et al., 2008; Owen et al., 2000). Moreover, uptake of metformin, but not phenformin, into tissue appears to require the expression of Organic Cation Transporter 1 (OCT1), which is highly expressed in hepatocytes but not elsewhere (Shu et al., 2007). Consistent with greater potency and broader tissue bioavailability, phenformin delayed tumor progression in a Pten+/− spontaneous lymphoma mouse model to a much greater extent than metformin (Huang et al., 2008).

In most settings metabolic stress induces a cytostatic growth arrest, dependent in part on AMPK. However, in cells lacking a functional LKB1 pathway, metabolic stress has been demonstrated to result in rapid apoptosis as the cells are unable to sense the energy stress and activate mechanisms to restore energy homeostasis (Shaw et al., 2004). Similar effects are seen in autophagy-defective cells that are unable to restore metabolism under low nutrient conditions (Jin et al., 2007). Here, we directly examine the hypothesis that LKB1-deficient lung tumors may be targeted with metabolic drugs.

**RESULTS**

**Phenformin Selectively Induces Apoptosis in LKB1-Deficient NSCLC Cell Lines**

We previously reported that nontransformed murine embryonic fibroblasts and HeLa cervical carcinoma cells deficient of LKB1 exhibit increased apoptosis in response to metabolic stresses, including glucose deprivation and the AMP mimic AICAR (Shaw et al., 2004). However, whether tumor cells undergo growth arrest or apoptosis following a particular cellular insult is dependent in part on the full constellation of oncogenic mutations present in the cell. We sought to determine whether NSCLC cell lines bearing KRAS mutations and lacking LKB1 would show enhanced rates of apoptosis following metabolic stress treatments compared to isogenic lines in which wild-type LKB1 had been restored.

We performed our initial studies using the KRAS mutant and LKB1-deficient NSCLC cell line A549 and derivatives with retrovirally introduced stable expression of wild-type LKB1 cDNA (LKB1WT), a kinase-inactive LKB1 cDNA (LKB1KD), or an empty vector (pBabe). These cells were treated with a variety of drugs with established roles in causing metabolic stress: metformin, phenformin, the cell permeable AMP-mimetic AICAR, the glycolysis inhibitor 2-deoxyglucose, or the thiazolidinedione compound troglitazone that acts as a mitochondrial inhibitor in addition to effects on PPARγ (Hardie et al., 2012). Immunoblotting for cleaved caspase 3 and cleaved PARP as markers of apoptosis induction, we observed that, of the agents tested, only phenformin induced apoptosis in the cells lacking functional LKB1 (Figure 1A). Although both biguanides lowered ATP production in A549 cells (Figure S1A available online), phenformin reduced cellular ATP more, consistent with previous studies (Owen et al., 2000; Dykens et al., 2008). The ATP-lowering effect of both drugs was modestly blunted when wild-type LKB1 was present, consistent with the current model that AMPK acts to restore ATP levels and with previous findings in wild-type and Lkb1-deficient myocytes (Sakamoto et al., 2005). Consistent with a greater impact on ATP levels, phenformin but not metformin induced apoptosis in A549 cells lacking functional LKB1 by multiple measures: cleaved PARP and caspase 3 immunoblot (Figure 1B), activated caspase 3/7 luminescence assay (Figure S1B), and flow cytometry measuring AnnexinV and 7AAD staining (Figure 1C).

As human daily doses of metformin routinely run between 500 and 1,000 mg, and phenformin was given in the range of 50 to 100 mg previously when used clinically, we performed a direct comparison of metformin to phenformin at ratios of 1:1 and 1:10 in time course experiments in isogenic A549 cell lines. At early time points (8 or 12 hr) metformin at 2 or 20 mM or phenformin at 2 mM similarly induced AMPK signaling as shown by increased P-AMPK and P-Raptor levels (Figure S1C). However, only phenformin induced higher levels of cellular stress, triggering induction of P-Ser51 eIF2α and its downstream target CHOP, and markers of apoptosis at later times (Figures 1B and

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Figure 1. Phenformin Selectively Induces Apoptosis in LKB1++/− NSCLC Tumor Cells

(A) A549 human NSCLC cells expressing the pBabe vector (A549-pBabe), full-length LKB1 (A549-LKB1WT), or kinase-dead LKB1 (A549-LKB1KD) were treated with vehicle (DMEM), AICAR (2 mM), metformin (20 mM), phenformin (2 mM), 2DG (10 mM), or troglitazone (25 μM) for 48 hr. Lysates were immunoblotted with the indicated antibodies.

(B) A549 isogenic cell lines were treated for 24 hr with vehicle (DMEM), AICAR (2 mM), metformin (20 mM), phenformin (2 mM), 2DG (10 mM), or troglitazone (25 μM) for 48 hr. Lysates were immunoblotted with the indicated antibodies. Cancer gene driver mutations found in these cell lines listed under each.

See also Figure S1.
Phenformin Therapy Targets LKB1-Deficient NSCLC

We demonstrated that the bioluminescence output from the ROSA26-encoded luciferase was proportional to tumor burden (see the Supplemental Experimental Procedures). Analyzing lung tumor progression in $K_{LUC}$, $K_{LUC}$, and $K_{PUC}$ mice, we detected bioluminescence as early as 4 weeks in $K_{LUC}$ and $K_{PUC}$ mice and confirmed the presence of adenomas by hematoxylin and eosin (H&E) staining (Figures 2A–D; Figures S2A–S2C). At 6 weeks, tumors in the $K_{LUC}$ and $K_{PUC}$ mice began to change from adenomatous features to a more malignant tumor phenotype typical of carcinomas (Figure 2D). The most common histologic pattern in both $K_{LUC}$ and $K_{PUC}$ mice were high-grade invasive papillary adenocarcinoma. Squamous cell and adenocarcinomas were commonly observed tumor subtypes in $K_{LUC}$ mice, as previously noted (Ji et al., 2007). Interestingly, $K_{LUC}$ mice also displayed severe mucus bronchial-epithelial adenocarcinoma (mBEAC) and bronchial mucinous papillary lesions, which were rarely seen in $K_{LUC}$ or $K_{PUC}$ mice (Figure S2D).

Next, we characterized AMPK and mTORC1 signaling in $K_{LUC}$, $K_{LUC}$, and $K_{PUC}$ lung tumors by immunohistochemical staining for P-AMPK and P-4E-BP1 (Figure 2E). Notably, the $K_{LUC}$ tumors contained the highest degree of P-4E-BP1, consistent with mTORC1 being particularly hyperactive in LKB1-deficient tumors. $Lkb1$ deletion in the Kras mutant tumors was also accompanied by near-complete loss of P-AMPK as seen in many other tissues previously (Figure 2E).

Phenformin Activates the AMPK Signaling Pathway in $K_{LUC}$ and $K_{PUC}$ Lung Nodules

To further examine their prospects as anticancer agents, we compared the bioavailability of metformin and phenformin in mouse lung tissue. Phenformin is a more lipophilic molecule compared to metformin (Figure S3A) and, unlike metformin requiring OCT1 for cell entry (Shu et al., 2007), readily permeates cells and tissues (Hawley et al., 2010; Huang et al., 2008). We performed intraperitoneal (i.p.) injections of vehicle, metformin, or phenformin on wild-type mice and isolated lung tissue at 1, 4, and 8 hr postinjection. Immunoblot analysis showed a weaker activation of the AMPK signaling pathway by metformin that only was observed at the 1 hr time point, unlike phenformin, which showed a robust activation at 4 hr postinjection (Figure 3A). However, mice bearing lung tumors did not tolerate daily i.p. injections over multiple weeks, and therefore phenformin was administered through the drinking water of mice fed ad libitum, as previously described (Appleyard et al., 2012; Huang et al., 2008). Quantitative analysis of P-AMPK staining in $K_{LUC}$ lung tumors from mice treated for 2 weeks showed greater activation of AMPK with phenformin than metformin (Figures S3B and S3C). As expected, no induction of P-AMPK was ever seen in $K_{LUC}$ tumors. Measurement of metformin and phenformin in blood plasma of mice by mass spectrometry revealed that levels of both were steady over days when administered via drinking water (Figure S3D).

Immunoblot analysis of snap-frozen $K_{LUC}$, $K_{LUC}$, and $K_{PUC}$ lung tumor nodules revealed that tumors from $K_{LUC}$ and $K_{PUC}$ mice treated with phenformin had higher levels of AMPK activation compared to vehicle treated mice, whereas $K_{LUC}$ lung tumors showed a lack of AMPK signaling as expected (Figure 3B).
Figure 2. Time Course of Tumor Progression in KLuc, KLluc, and KP luc Lung Tumor Models
(A–C) Tumor progression in KLuc (A), KLluc (B), and KP luc (C) murine lung tumor measured by H&E staining or bioluminescence (bottom panel) at the indicated time points. Scale bars (black) = 300 μm. Scale bars (white) = 100 μm. Mice shown are representative of 10–12 mice per genotype.
(D) Detailed analysis of H&E-stained lung tumors from a KLluc mouse (red circled mouse from the bottom of B) at 6 weeks post-AdCre administration. Scale bars (red) = 1 mm, (black) = 500 μm, and (white) = 100 μm.
(E) Immunohistochemical analysis of representative lung tumors from KLuc, KLluc, and KP luc mice 10 weeks post-AdCre administration. Sections were stained with H&E or the indicated antibodies. Scale bars (black) = 500 μm. Scale bars (white) = 100 μm.
See also Figure S2.
Figure 3. Phenformin Treatment Activates AMPK Pathway in K-Ras-Driven Lung Tumors In Vivo

(A) Lung tissue lysates from wild-type FVB mice following i.p. injection of saline (0.9%), metformin (300 mg/kg), or phenformin (150 mg/kg) and immunoblotted with the indicated antibodies.

(B) Lysates of lung tumor nodules from Kluc, KLluc, and KP luc mice treated with vehicle (water) or phenformin via 5 days ad lib feeding were immunoblotted with the indicated antibodies.

(C) Representative images of Kluc, KLluc, and KP luc lung tumor sections stained with hematoxylin and eosin (H&E), P-AMPK, or P-4E-BP1. P-AMPK or P-4E-BP1 positively stained cells (in green) and nuclei (in blue). Scale bar = 100 μm.

(D and E) Box plots representing the mean P-AMPK (D) or P-4E-BP1 (E) signal from Kluc, KLluc, and KP luc lung tumors treated with vehicle or phenformin. n = 6 mice analyzed per treatment group in each genotype (Kluc, KLluc, and KP luc) treatment group.

All data are represented as the mean ± SEM.

See also Figure S3.
Normal lung lysates from wild-type FVB mice given phenformin ad libitum for 2 weeks showed an increase in AMPK signaling and lowered mTORC1 signaling, when compared to the vehicle-treated mice (Figure S3E). Phenformin also increased levels of P-eIF2α and its target BiP/Grp78 in normal lung as well as in lung tumors (Figures S3E and S3F) (the CHOP antibody afore used recognized human but not mouse CHOP). There was no observed difference in IGF-IR/IR or Akt signaling between the vehicle- or phenformin-treated mice. Analysis of the AMPK activation in lung tumors by quantitative immunohistochemistry following phenformin treatment paralleled the results observed by immunoblotting (Figures 3C and 3D), and phenformin was observed to modestly reduce the mTORC1 substrate P-4E-BP1 levels in all genotypes (Figures 3C and 3E).

Lkb1−/− Lung Tumors Reveal Higher Levels of Apoptosis and Reduced Tumor Burden following Phenformin Treatment

Having established that phenformin had greater bioavailability and was capable of more potently inducing energy stress in tumors than metformin, we next tested phenformin as a single-agent therapeutic in the KLluc, KLluc, and KPluc mice. Following tumor induction, we performed bioluminescent imaging (BLI) to monitor tumor growth and sorted mice into equal groups according to their BLI value to normalize the cohorts receiving vehicle or phenformin (Figures S4A–S4C). We first tested phenformin as a chemotherapeutic by initiating treatment 6 weeks postadenoviral cre delivery for the KP luc and KL luc mice and 9 weeks postadenoviral cre delivery in the K luc mice (Figure S4D) in order to target aggressively growing tumors transitioning from benign to malignant tumors (Figures 2A–2C). After 3 weeks of treatment, BLI imaging revealed modestly reduced tumor burden in mice of all genotypes receiving phenformin, but the only statistically significant decrease was in the KL luc lung tumors (Figures 4A and 4B).

To better quantify tumor burden in mice, we combined BLI with quantitative histological analysis. H&E-stained lungs were imaged with morphometric software to quantify the surface area composed of tumor as opposed to normal tissue of representative cross-sections of each lung lobe for each mouse was determined (Figures S4E and S4F). Importantly, tumor burden determined by histological analysis correlated closely with BLI. KL luc mice showed significant reductions in lung tumor area (Figures 4C and 4D), while modest reductions in tumor burden were also seen in both K luc and KP luc mice. Normalization of the tumor burden for each tumor genotype, performed by calculating the ratio of phen:veh tumor mass, showed the largest decrease in tumor burden for the KL luc mice as compared to K luc and KP luc mice (Figure S4G). In addition, we observed no change in rate of metastasis following phenformin treatment in any of our therapeutic trials. These results demonstrate phenformin as a single agent selectively attenuates Lkb1-deficient lung tumor growth in vivo.

We next analyzed apoptosis and tumor proliferation in the lung tumors by TUNEL and Ki67 staining, respectively. Phenformin treatment modestly reduced Ki67 index in KL luc tumors but not K luc and KP luc tumors (Figures 4E and 4F), and TUNEL staining revealed that KL luc lung tumors had the highest levels of apoptotic tumor cells following phenformin (Figures 4E and 4G). Interestingly, KLLuc lung tumors also had higher basal levels of apoptosis compared to KP luc and K luc tumors, perhaps reflecting the prosurvival role of LKB1 in restoring energy homeostasis under conditions of metabolic stress, which may spontaneously arise in the context of a tumor.

Phenformin Induced a Significant Increase in Survival and Therapeutic Response in KL luc Mice following Long-Term Treatment

Given the response of late-stage KL luc lung tumors to phenformin treatment, we decided to treat earlier stage lung tumors in KL luc and KP luc mice. To better mimic the human clinical use of biguanides, we used oral gavage (o.p.) to deliver daily the maximum tolerated dose of 100 mg/kg phenformin starting at 3 weeks posttumor induction (Figure S5A). As expected, delivery of phenformin by this method resulted in AMPK pathway activation in KP luc but not KL luc tumor nodules (Figures S5B and S5C). Mass spectrometry on phenformin in blood plasma following o.p. delivery demonstrated a rapid uptake of phenformin followed by a steady decrease in blood plasma over 24 hr (Figure S5D). Importantly, these FVB mice are on a chow diet and nondiabetic, and the dose of phenformin used following 6 weeks of daily administration did not significantly impact blood plasma insulin levels, glucose levels, or lead to increased blood lactate levels as compared to vehicle-treated mice (Figures S5E–S5H).

The loss of LKB1 function in tumors predicts increased glycolytic metabolism and 18F-fluoro-2-deoxyglucose positron emission tomography (FDG-PET) avidity as shown in gastrointestinal polyps from Lkb1−/− mice (Shackelford et al., 2009) and in NSCLC in mice and humans (Chen et al., 2012). Therefore, we explored the use of FDG-PET as a surrogate endpoint biomarker in combination with microCT (μCT) imaging to longitudinally monitor tumor progression and response in KL luc and KP luc mice following phenformin treatment. KL luc and KP luc mice were given baseline FDG-PET and μCT scans, which were scored by a radiologist blinded to the identities of the mice. Mice in both groups were determined to be negative for tumors by both PET and CT scans and were randomly sorted into treatment groups (Figure 5C).

When phenformin was administered by o.p. for an extended time, it significantly increased survival in KL luc mice compared to KP luc mice (Figures 5A and 5B). Phenformin treatment resulted in delayed tumor progression in KL luc mice but not KP luc mice as shown by μCT measurements of lung tumor volume over time for individual mice in the study (Figures 5C–5E, SSJ, and SSK). At 4 and 6 weeks of treatment, average lung tumor size was significantly reduced in KL luc mice (Figure 5D). There was a trend toward smaller tumors in the KP luc mice but did not reach statistical significance (Figure 5E). However, at endstage, there was the presence of large, advanced solid tumors of the vehicle and phenformin groups in both KL luc and KP luc tumor genotypes (Figure SSJ). The 18FDG uptake into tumors was quantified by the standardized uptake value (SUVmax) at 4 and 6 weeks of treatment. The SUVmax for phenformin-treated KL luc lung tumors was significantly reduced compared to vehicle ones (Figure 5F). No difference was seen in the SUVmax for the KP luc mice at these same time points (Figure 5G). These data suggest a therapeutic response in KL luc lung tumors following phenformin treatment. However, the SUVmax values in endstage tumors were
Figure 4. Phenformin Preferentially Inhibits LKB1-Deficient Lung Tumors In Vivo

(A) Representative ventral view images of bioluminescence from $K_{luc}$, $KL_{luc}$, and $KP_{luc}$ mice. Bioluminescence imaging (BLI) performed on $K_{luc}$ (veh, n = 11; phen, n = 12 mice), $KL_{luc}$ (veh, n = 10; phen, n = 10 mice), and $KP_{luc}$ (veh, n = 7; phen, n = 7 mice) following 3 weeks of treatment with vehicle (water) or phenformin via ad lib feeding.

(B) Average BLI for each treatment group of the $K_{luc}$, $KL_{luc}$, and $KP_{luc}$ mice at 3 weeks treatment.

(C) Representative images of tumor burden in $K_{luc}$, $KL_{luc}$, and $KP_{luc}$ mice as shown by H&E-stained lung sections (top panel) or the same images tissue segmented and pseudocolored with Inform software (bottom panel). Scale bar = 1 mm.

(F) Ki67 Index

(G) TUNEL Score

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increased in both KLluc and KPuc mice (Figures S5L and S5M), suggesting the emergence of phenformin-resistant tumors in KLluc mice (Figures S5J and S5L).

Histopathological analysis of 6 week o.p. phenformin-treated lungs revealed that KLluc but not KPuc lung tumors had large regions of necrosis, which was absent in the vehicle-treated controls (Figure 6A; Figure S6A). Further analysis of KLluc lung sections revealed an 8-fold increase in necrotic tumor areas as shown by the presence of necrotic bodies with ghost cells (Figures 6B and 6F). Staining of KLluc and KPuc tumors for cleaved caspase 3 revealed a significant increase in tumor cell apoptosis in both KLluc and KPuc lung tumors following phenformin (Figures 6C, 6G, S6A, and S6B) but no difference in Ki67 indices in either genotype following phenformin treatment (Figures 6D, 6H, S6A, and S6C). Elevated P-AMPK levels were observed in both tumor and lung parenchyma of phenformin-treated KPuc mice (Figure S6D), further reflecting that this dosing regimen was capable of inducing energy stress in these different lung cell populations. Strikingly, the abundant mucinous bronchiolar-epithelial adenocarcinoma (mBEAC), which occluded much of the upper airways in KLluc mice, showed a 2-fold decrease in surface area in mice receiving phenformin compared to the vehicle group (Figures 6E and 6I). Altogether, these results indicate that phenformin as a single agent induces a tumor response in both KLluc and KPuc lung tumors with Lkb1-deficient tumors showing the most robust overall therapeutic response to phenformin.

Mitochondrial Defects May Sensitize LKB1-Deficient NSCLC Tumor Cells to Phenformin

To examine the molecular mechanism behind the selective induction of apoptosis in LKB1-deficient lung cancer cells, we analyzed signals downstream of its main target AMPK. Recently, we demonstrated that AMPK phosphorylates and activates the autophagy kinase ULK1, which is required for mitophagy and cell survival under starvation conditions (Egan et al., 2011). We previously observed an accumulation of mitochondria with defective mitochondrial membrane potential (ΔΨm) in Ampk- and Ulk1-KO fibroblasts and hepatocytes (Egan et al., 2011), similar to that observed in Lkb1-KO hematopoietic stem cells (Nakada et al., 2010), so we examined here whether ULK1 and mitochondrial homeostasis might be disrupted in LKB1 mutant NSCLC cells. A549 cells reconstituted with functional LKB1 showed AMPK activation and its phosphorylation of endogenous ULK1 on Ser555 following phenformin treatment, paralleling phosphorylation of Raptor, another AMPK substrate (Figure 7A). Phenformin treatment also resulted in a decrease in levels of the p62/Sqstm1 protein only in the wild-type LKB1-reconstituted cells, indicative of efficient autophagy reliant on LKB1 function (Figure 7A). Importantly, p62 levels were not reduced by metformin here, perhaps reflecting the lower level of AMPK signaling from metformin as compared to phenformin. Expression of functional LKB1 in LKB1-deficient H157 and H838 cells also restored their P-Ser555 ULK1 signal, indicating this is a general defect in LKB1-deficient NSCLC cell lines (Figure S7A). As observed previously in AMPK- and ULK1-defective fibroblasts and hepatocytes, here A549, H157, and H838 NSCLC cells defective for LKB1 function exhibited increased mitochondrial content as assayed by flow cytometry for mitotracker red staining (Figure 7B and S7B), suggesting that reconstitution of wild-type LKB1 into these LKB1-deficient NSCLC cell lines may actively induce functional mitophagy. A549-pBabe and A549-LKB1KD cells had impaired ΔΨm, reflecting impaired mitochondrial membrane integrity, as exhibited by the failure of JC-1 dye to accumulate in the mitochondrial membrane when compared to A549-LKB1WT cells (red to green ratio of JC-1 staining in Figure 7C). Following treatment with phenformin, LKB1-deficient tumor cells showed a complete loss of mitochondrial membrane potential, whereas expression of functional LKB1 fully prevented this loss. In contrast, treatment with the mitochondrial uncoupler CCCP induced loss of ΔΨm in all cell lines, though LKB1-reconstituted cells still retained the most mitochondrial membrane potential (Figure 7C). As one measure of functionality of the mitochondria in these cell lines, we examined oxygen consumption as a direct measurement of mitochondrial respiration. Consistent with mitochondrial defects, A549-pBabe and A549-LKB1KD cells had a lower basal rate of oxygen consumption rate (OCR) than the A549WT cells (Figures 7D and S7C). Treatment of these cells with either phenformin or rotenone resulted in inhibition of mitochondrial respiration as shown by an acute drop OCR in levels (Figures S7C and S7D). OCR levels tracked inversely with mitotracker red staining here, consistent with the idea that the accumulated mitochondria in the LKB1-deficient cells are respiration defective.

Mitochondrial Complex I inhibition has been reported to induce reactive oxygen species (ROS) similar to that seen with Complex III inhibition (Hirst et al., 2008; Kushnareva et al., 2002). Thus, we next examined the release of mitochondrial reactive oxygen species (mtROS) following the treatment with phenformin, metformin, or the complex III inhibitor antimycin A and found that phenformin was a more potent inducer of mtROS than metformin (Figure S7E). Staining of A549-pBabe and A549-LKB1KD cells showed modest elevations in mtROS compared to A549-LKB1WT cells, both basally and following phenformin treatment (Figure 7E). To examine whether the doses of phenformin used in our therapeutic study were effective enough to induce LKB1-dependent effects on mitophagy, we performed western blot analysis of lung tumor nodules from mice with and without phenformin treatment for 5 days and discovered reduced phosphorylation of ULK1 and an accumulation of the mitophagy regulator Parkin in KLluc but not KPuc, or KPuc lung tumors (Figure 7F). These results suggest defects of the AMPK-ULK1 signaling

(D) Box plots representing the mean tumor burden following 3 weeks of treatment. Tumor burden was calculated by averaging the red pseudocolored tumor area from H&E-stained whole lung sections shown in (C) bottom panel.

(E) Representative images of H&E-, Ki67-, or TUNEL-stained KLluc, KLluc, and KPuc lung tumor sections. Ki67 or TUNEL positively stained cells (in green) and nuclei (in blue). Scale bar = 100 μm.

(F and G) Box plots representing the mean K67 (F) and TUNEL scores (G) from KLluc, KLluc, and KPuc mice treated with vehicle or phenformin. (*) Statistical significance (p < 0.05) calculated using a nonparametric one-way ANOVA (Tukey test). All data are represented as the mean ± SEM. See also Figure S4.
Figure 5. Phenformin Significantly Increased Overall Survival and Slowed Tumor Progression in KL_luc Mice Shown by 18FDG-PET and μCT Imaging

(A and B) Kaplan-Meier survival curves for KL_luc mice (A) or KP_luc mice (B) treated with vehicle (n = 5) or phenformin (n = 5) for each tumor genotype, respectively, with a **p = 0.008 for KL_luc mice determined by Wilcoxon logrank test.

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pathway and mitophagy in vivo following loss of LKB1 (Figure 7G), which may help sensitize these tumors to the effects of phenformin on mitochondrial integrity.

**DISCUSSION**

In this study we have found that the diabetes drug phenformin shows selective and significant antitumor activity in genetically engineered mouse models of lung cancer bearing LKB1 mutations. Molecular targeted therapeutics hold great promise for the future of cancer treatment, but for the 15%–30% of NSCLC bearing inactivating mutations in \( \text{LKB1} \), there has been little in the way of targeted agents to date. As loss of LKB1 results in hyperactivation of mTORC1 in addition to other progrowth pathways (Shackelford and Shaw, 2009), initial interest has been in rapamycin analogs or other mTOR inhibitors. However, rapamycin treatment of an autochthonous lung tumor model with \( \text{Kras} \) and \( \text{Lkb1} \) mutations similar to the one used here showed a minimal therapeutic effect (Liang et al., 2010), perhaps because of the multitude of pathways deregulated from LKB1 deficiency that can still fuel tumorigenesis even when mTORC1 is suppressed. Hyperactivation of Src family kinases was also discovered as a biochemical marker and potential therapeutic target in \( \text{Lkb1} \)-deficient lung tumors (Carretero et al., 2010). Combination of the Src inhibitor dasatinib with PI3K and MEK inhibitors in similar mouse lung tumor models showed a synergistic tumor response, though dasatinib as a single agent displayed a minimal effect (Carretero et al., 2010). The fact that phenformin induces therapeutic response as a single agent taken together with the success of dasatinib

(C) Representative images of micro-FDG-PET and CT scans of lungs from \( \text{KLuc} \) and \( \text{KPac} \) mice at baseline (pretreatment) or following 4 and 6 weeks treatment with vehicle or phenformin. Heart is labeled (H), and tumors are labeled with arrows (white or blue).

(D and E) Mean tumor volume measured by micro-CT at 4 and 6 weeks treatment for \( \text{KLac} \) (D) and \( \text{KPac} \) (E) mice, respectively. **\( p = 0.0009 \) for \( \text{KLac} \) mice as determined by Wilcoxon rank-sum test.

(F and G) Mean FDG-PET SUVmax measured at 4 and 6 weeks treatment for \( \text{KLac} \) (F) and \( \text{KPac} \) (G) mice, respectively. **\( p = 0.005 \) for \( \text{KLac} \) mice as determined by Wilcoxon rank-sum test. \( n=5 \) mice per treatment group of each genotype. All data are represented as the mean ± SEM. See also Figure S5.

Figure 6. Phenformin Induces a Significant Therapeutic Response in \( \text{KLac} \) Lung Tumors

(A) Hematoxylin and eosin (H&E)-stained whole lung sections of \( \text{KLac} \) mice treated with vehicle (saline) or phenformin, scale bar = 4 mm.

(B–E) Representative images of lung tumors from \( \text{KLac} \) mice treated with vehicle (saline) or phenformin. (B) Tumor necrosis, scale bar = 50 \( \mu \)m. (C) Activated caspase 3, scale bar = 50 \( \mu \)m. Inset represents magnification of caspase-3-stained cells, scale bar = 25 \( \mu \)m. (D) Ki67 stain, scale bar = 50 \( \mu \)m. Inset represents magnification of Ki67-stained cells, scale bar = 25 \( \mu \)m. (E) Mixture of bronchiolar-epithelial adenocarcinoma (BEAC) and mucinous bronchiolar-epithelial adenocarcinoma (mBEAC) shown with arrow, scale bar = 200 \( \mu \)m. Inset represents magnification of mBEAC cells, scale bar = 50 \( \mu \)m.

(F) Mean percentage of necrotic tumor area in vehicle- and phenformin-treated \( \text{KLac} \) mice. **\( p = 0.002 \).

(G) Mean percentage of tumor cell apoptosis from vehicle- and phenformin-treated \( \text{KLac} \) mice. ***\( p < 0.0001 \).

(H) Ki67 index for vehicle- and phenformin-treated \( \text{KLac} \) mice.

(I) Total BEAC and mBEAC tumor area (\( \mu \)m²) in vehicle- and phenformin treated \( \text{KLac} \) mice. \( p < 0.006 \). \( n = 5 \) \( \text{KLac} \) mice per treatment group (vehicle or phenformin). Statistical analysis performed using an unpaired Student’s t test. All data are represented as the mean ± SEM. See also Figure S6.
Figure 7. Mitochondrial Defects in LKB1<sup>−/−</sup> NSCLC Confer Sensitivity to Phenformin

(A) Lysates from A549-pBabe, A549-LKB1<sup>WT</sup>, and A549-LKB1<sup>KD</sup> cells were treated with vehicle (DMEM), phenformin (2 mM), or metformin (20 mM) for 4 hr and immunoblotted with the indicated antibodies.

(B) FACS analysis of cells from (A) stained with Mitotracker Red.

(C) Cells from (A) stained with JC-1 dye following 4 hr of treatment with vehicle (DMEM), phenformin (2 mM), metformin (20 mM), or CCCP (100 μM). Mitochondrial membrane potential (Δψ, red/green ratios) were measured by emission of red and green fluorescence using FACS.

(D) Oxygen consumption rate (OCR) of cells from (A).

(E) Cells from (A) were stained with MitoSOX Red following 16 hr of treatment with vehicle (DMEM) or phenformin and analyzed by FACS.

(F) Lung tumor lysates from <i>Klu<sub>C</sub></i>, <i>KL<sub>Luc</sub></i>, and <i>KP<sub>Luc</sub></i> mice treated 5 days with vehicle or phenformin ad lib feeding were immunoblotted with the indicated antibodies.

(G) Model illustrating mitochondrial defects and phenformin induced cell death in LKB1<sup>−/−</sup>-deficient tumor cells.

All data are represented as the mean ± SEM. See also Figure S7.
in combinations suggests that phenformin may also show greater success in defined combinations, which will be a focus for future investigations. Of relevance, a recent study treating the same three NSCLC models used here with a combination of standard-of-care docetaxel with MEK inhibitors revealed the same three NSCLC models used here with a combination for future investigations. Of relevance, a recent study treating greater success in defined combinations, which will be a focus in combinations suggests that phenformin may also show due to the apparent reliance of metformin on a tissue-restricted cell-surface transporter, Oct1, to efficiently cross the plasma membrane, unlike the more lipophilic phenformin (Hawley et al., 2010). Phenformin was removed from clinical use for type 2 diabetes because of incidence of fatalities from lactic acidosis (Crofford, 1995; Owen et al., 2000), reported in 64 cases per 100,000 patients per year, with patients bearing compromised kidney function at greatest risk. However, phenformin or another biguanide analog may still find utility as anticancer agents as the dosing and shorter duration in cancer therapy would be quite different from its prior clinical use for diabetes. Patients could also be prescreened for kidney function and other biomarkers to reduce any risk of lactic acidosis. Based on our findings here and previous studies of metformin, it seems most likely that phenformin might have potential use for early-stage lung tumors or as an adjuvant therapy following resection of early-stage NSCLC tumors. Although phenformin is unlikely to be suitable as a single-agent therapy in advanced-stage disease, it may synergize with other modalities, which warrants future investigation. A critical need for future clinical studies will be developing biomarkers of metformin and phenformin action in human tissues using clinically achievable doses (Pollak, 2010). Our identification of phospho-Ser51 eIF2α and its targets CHOP and BiP/Grp78 as AMPK-independent markers of phenformin-induced stress may prove valuable for such studies.

Whether LKB1 deficiency confers sensitivity toward other agents that perturb ATP production via effects on mitochondria, glycolysis, or glutaminolysis also remains an interesting area for future targeted therapeutic development. Given the large percentage of sporadic lung, cervical, and endometrial cancers bearing LKB1 mutations, identifying agents selectively targeting LKB1 mutant tumors is a critical goal and one that seems particularly amenable to drugs targeting tumor metabolism.

**EXPERIMENTAL PROCEDURES**

**Antibodies and Reagents**

Antibodies from Cell Signaling Technologies (Danvers, MA, USA) used for immunoblots were diluted 1:1,000 and included LKB1 (D60C5) (#3047), phospho-AMPK Thr172 (#2531), total AMPK α1/2 (#2532), phospho-Raptor Ser792 (#2083), total Raptor (#2280), phospho-ULK1 (ser555) (#5869), eIF4E (#9742), phospho-eIF2α (ser51) (#3982), total eIF2α (#9722), cleaved caspase 3 (#9664), PARP (#9542), cleaved PARP (Asp214) (#5625), cleaved PARP mouse-specific (Asp214) (#9544), phospho-S6 (ser235/236) (#2217), phospho-4E-BP1 (thr37/46) (#2855), 4E-BP1 (#9644), phospho-IGF-IR/IR (#3024), IGF-IR/IR (#3027), phospho-AKT (ser473) (#4680), AKT

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Institute of Technology (Jackson et al., 2005) and ME, USA) courtesy of Bill Kaelin (Safran et al., 2003). Mice were inbred on Stop-Lox-Luc mice were obtained from Jackson Laboratories (Bar Harbor, and grown for 18 hr before treatment.

Probes JC-1 dye kit (Carlsbad, CA, USA; cat no. M34152). CCCP was obtained from the Molecular Probes JC-1 dye kit (Carlsbad, CA, USA; cat no. M34152).

Cell Culture

Cells were incubated at 37°C and maintained at 5% CO2. A549, H460, A427, H838, and HeLa cell lines were obtained from ATCC, and H157 cells were a kind gift from Dr. John Minna. Cells were grown in Dulbecco’s modified Eagle’s medium (DMEM) or RPMI 1640 medium (GIBCO) plus 10% fetal bovine serum (HyClone, Logan, UT, USA) and penicillin and streptomycin. Retroviral gene expression was performed as described previously (Gwinn et al., 2008). Briefly, for retroviral infection, the pBabe, pBabe-FLAG-LKB1, and pBabe-FLAG-LKB1-KD (Addgene’s #s 1764, 8592, and 8593) constructs were transfected along with the amphot packaging plasmid into growing HEK293 T cells. Viral supernatants were collected 48 hr after transfection, spun for 5 min at 3,000 rpm, and filtered, and target cells were infected in the presence of polybrene. Twenty-four hours later, cells were selected with puromycin. Cells were plated at a density of 1 x 10⁶ per well in 6-well dishes and grown for 18 hr before treatment.

Mouse Therapeutic Trials

Lox-Stop-Lox KrasG12D were obtained from Tyler Jacks at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (Jackson et al., 2005) and p53−/− mice from the Mouse Models of Human Cancers Consortium (Jonkers et al., 2001). Lkb1−/− mice are as previously reported (Shaw et al., 2005). Rosa26-Lox-Stop-Lox-Luc mice were obtained from Jackson Laboratories (Bar Harbor, ME, USA) courtesy of Bill Kaieli (Safra et al., 2003). Mice were inbred on an FVB background. Lung tumors were induced by intranasal inhalation of 5 x 10⁶ plaque forming units adeno-Cre (purchased from University of Iowa adenoviral core) as previously described (Jackson et al., 2005). Mice that displayed chronic signs of disease, such as labored breathing or severe weight loss, were euthanized and necropsied. The mean tumor latencies we observed were comparable to previous studies with the exception of KPC mice, which developed large, aggressive lung tumors with the same latency of KPC mice (Jackson et al., 2005; Jil et al., 2007). In the experiments in Figure 4, mice were administered with vehicle (water), metformin, or phenformin (Toronto Research Corporation, Ontario, Canada) ad lib through their drinking water, and their daily intake of fluids were monitored. Fresh metformin (1.8 mg/ml) or phenformin (1.8 mg/ml) was administered every other day. Long-term treatments consisted of 3 weeks treatment (schematic in Figure 4D), and acute treatments lasted 5 days. For the intraperitoneal injections in Figure 4A, mice were given one injection of saline (0.9%), metformin (300 mg/kg), or phenformin (150 mg/kg) and euthanized at 1, 4, and 8 hr post-injection, and lung tissue was isolated. In the therapeutic trials in Figures 5 and 6 (schematized in Figure 55A), mice were administered phenformin (100 mg/kg/day) by o.g. once daily 6 days/week beginning at 3 weeks post-delivery of adenovirus expressing Cre. All experimental procedures performed on mice were approved by the Salk Institute and University of California at Los Angeles Institutional Animal Care and Use Committees.

Statistical Analysis Methods

Means were compared and p values determined by parametric or nonparametric ANOVA, and statistical test details and significance at p < 0.05 are indicated in the text and figure legends. Survival curves were computed using the Kaplan-Meier method. All statistical calculations were carried out using GraphPad Prism 5 software (San Diego, CA) or SAS 9.3 (SAS, Cary, NC). For analysis of SUVmax and tumor volume from FDG-PET and µCT imaging, comparisons were made between vehicle (V) versus Phenformin (P) treatments at week 7 and week 9. Values that were below the level of detection, referred to as left-censored observations, were coded with “zero”, although the actual value may be above zero but is usually lower than the lowest observed value.

SUPPLEMENTAL INFORMATION

Supplemental Information includes seven figures and Supplemental Experimental Procedures and can be found with this article online at http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ccr.2012.12.008.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

D.B.S. performed all cell experiments and all mouse experiments with assistance from E.A., L.G., and D.S.V.; D.B.S. and R.J.S. designed the study, analyzed the data, and wrote the paper; M.L.L. is a board-certified veterinary pathologist; M.C.F and A.S. are board-certified clinical pathologists who performed all pathological analysis; and P.S.M. contributed resources and critical feedback on the project. We thank Lawrence Pang and L.W., who performed PET and CT imaging on the mice and J.C. and Dr. Ken Herrmann, who reviewed PET and CT scans on the mice. We thank Anne Atkins in Ron Evans lab (Salk) for the high-performance liquid chromatography and mass spectrometry analysis of metformin and phenformin levels in blood. We thank Dr. Jeff Gombein for statistical analysis and Laurent Vergnes, who performed the Seahorse experiments supported by grant S10RR026744. We thank UCLA’s Translational Pathology Core Laboratory and Dr. Clara Magyar for assistance with the Aperio and Definiens software. We thank Dr. Steven M. Dubinett for critically reviewing the manuscript and providing feedback. D.B.S. was supported by a training grant (T32 CA09370) to the Salk Institute Center for Cancer Research and through generous support by the Adler Family Foundation, by the Ahnansn Tranlsational Imaging Division at UCLA’s School of Medicine, and by the National Center for Advancing Translational Sciences through UCLA CTSL grant numbers UL1TR000124 and KL2TR000122. R.J.S. is funded by the National Institutes of Health R01 DK080425 and P01CA120984 and an American Cancer Society Research Scholar Award (RSG-07-2101-MGO). This was also supported in part through the Salk CCSG P30 CA014195 and the Samuel Waxman Cancer Research Foundation. We also thank the Leona M. and Harry B. Helmsley Charitable Trust for their generous support.

Received: May 16, 2011
Revised: October 7, 2012
Accepted: December 20, 2012
Published: January 17, 2013

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