Journal of Molecular Science

Journal of Molecular Science
Volume 35 Issue 1, Year of Publication 2025, Page 11-15
DoI-17.4687/1000-9035.2025.003

Journal of Molecular Science

www.jmolecularsci.com ISSN:1000-9035

Exploring the Molecular Mechanisms, Clinical Manifestations, and Novel Therapeutic Strategies in Lysosomal Storage Disorders: A Focus on Fabry Disease and its Impact on Cellular Homeostasis

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Article Information
Received: 26-02-2025
Revised: 15-03-2025
Accepted: 28-04-2025
Published: 24-05-2025

Keywords
Globotriaosylceramide
Angiokeratomas
globotriaosylceramide

ABSTRACT

Fabry disease is a rare X-linked lysosomal storage disorder caused by mutations in the GLA gene, leading to a deficiency of the enzyme alpha-galactosidase A (α-Gal A). This enzymatic deficiency results in the progressive accumulation of globotriaosylceramide (Gb3) in various tissues, including the kidneys, heart, skin, and nervous system, causing a wide range of clinical manifestations. The disease primarily affects males but can also present in females with variable severity due to X-inactivation patterns. The accumulation of Gb3 disrupts cellular homeostasis, leading to oxidative stress, mitochondrial dysfunction, and autophagic impairment, all of which contribute to tissue damage and organ failure. Clinically, Fabry disease is characterized by chronic neuropathic pain, particularly in the lower limbs, often beginning in childhood. As the disease progresses, patients may develop left ventricular hypertrophy (LVH), renal impairment, and progressive cardiovascular and renal disease, with end-stage renal failure being a common cause of mortality. The disease also manifests in other systems, including the skin (angiokeratomas) and the eyes (corneal opacities), often serving as early diagnostic signs. Currently, enzyme replacement therapy (ERT) is the gold standard treatment, aimed at reducing Gb3 accumulation and alleviating symptoms. While ERT has shown significant benefits in improving organ function and reducing the burden of disease, it is not universally effective, particularly in advanced stages. Chaperone therapy with migalastat has emerged as a promising alternative for patients with amenable mutations, showing improvements in enzyme activity and disease progression. Emerging therapeutic strategies, such as gene therapy and substrate reduction therapy, hold promise for more comprehensive and curative approaches.

This review focuses on the molecular mechanisms underlying Fabry disease, its clinical manifestations, and the latest therapeutic advancements. Understanding the intricate cellular processes involved in Fabry disease is critical to developing more effective treatments and improving the quality of life for affected individuals.

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INTRODUCTION:

Fabry disease (FD) is a rare, inherited lysosomal storage disorder (LSD) caused by mutations in the GLA gene, which encodes the enzyme alpha-galactosidase A (α-Gal A). This enzyme is responsible for the degradation of globotriaosylceramide (Gb3), a glycosphingolipid found in the lysosomes. In Fabry disease, a deficiency or dysfunction of α-Gal A leads to the progressive accumulation of Gb3 in various tissues, including the kidneys, heart, skin, and nervous system. This buildup of substrates causes cellular dysfunction, contributing to the onset of disease symptoms and organ damage.

The disease primarily affects males, who typically exhibit a more severe phenotype due to their hemizygous nature, but females can also present with symptoms, albeit often milder, due to random X-inactivation. Fabry disease typically presents in childhood with episodes of acroparesthesia, or neuropathic pain, but can also lead to long-term complications such as renal failure, cardiac hypertrophy, and stroke. As the disease progresses, affected individuals may experience a reduction in quality of life and premature mortality due to multi-organ failure.

The clinical features of Fabry disease are highly variable and depend on the extent of substrate accumulation and the organs involved. Early diagnosis is challenging due to the overlap of symptoms with other conditions, but with advancements in genetic testing and enzyme assays, more accurate and timely diagnoses are possible.

Therapeutic approaches for Fabry disease have advanced significantly over the past few decades. Enzyme replacement therapy (ERT) has been the cornerstone of treatment, aimed at replacing the missing or deficient α-Gal A enzyme. Additionally, new therapies, including chaperone therapy and gene therapy, are under investigation, offering hope for improved outcomes. Despite these treatments, challenges remain, particularly in patients with advanced organ damage, highlighting the need for continued research into better therapeutic options.

Molecular Mechanisms of Fabry Disease

1. **Genetic Basis of Fabry Disease:**
- Fabry disease is caused by mutations in the GLA gene located on the X chromosome.
- The mutations result in a deficiency of alpha-galactosidase A (α-Gal A), an enzyme responsible for the breakdown of Gb3.

2. **Enzyme Deficiency and Substrate Accumulation**:
- α-Gal A deficiency leads to the accumulation of Gb3 in various tissues.
- The accumulation of Gb3 in lysosomes impairs lysosomal function and leads to cellular stress.

3. **Molecular Impact on Cellular Homeostasis:**
- The buildup of Gb3 disrupts lysosomal integrity, triggering autophagy dysfunction and mitochondrial stress.
- Altered calcium signaling, oxidative stress, and the activation of pro-inflammatory pathways contribute to the cellular dysfunction seen in Fabry disease.

4. **Cellular and Organ-Level Consequences**:
- The dysfunction of lysosomes, mitochondria, and the endoplasmic reticulum leads to organ damage.
- Major organs affected include the kidneys (leading to renal failure), the heart (causing hypertrophic cardiomyopathy), and the nervous system (resulting in neuropathic pain and stroke).

Clinical Manifestations of Fabry Disease:

Fabry disease presents with a spectrum of clinical manifestations that evolve over time and vary by patient sex and genotype. Early signs often appear in childhood or adolescence and include episodic acroparesthesias—burning, tingling pain in the hands and feet—triggered by stress, temperature changes, or exercise. Angiokeratomas, small, dark red to blue skin lesions, commonly develop between the umbilicus and knees and may serve as an early visual clue. Corneal verticillata, a whorl-like corneal opacity detectable by slit-lamp examination, is another hallmark that typically does not affect vision but aids in diagnosis. Gastrointestinal symptoms such as abdominal pain, diarrhea, and nausea occur in up to 50% of patients due to Gb3 deposition in enteric neurons.

By the third and fourth decades, progressive Gb3 accumulation leads to life-threatening cardiac and renal complications. Left ventricular hypertrophy (LVH) affects approximately 40–60% of patients, often resulting in arrhythmias, valvular disease, and heart failure. Renal involvement begins with

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proteinuria and declines in glomerular filtration rate, ultimately progressing to end-stage renal disease in nearly 50% of untreated males by their 40s or 50s. Neurological events such as transient ischemic attacks and strokes become more prevalent, especially in patients over 30 years old. Chronic fatigue, heat intolerance, and hearing loss further decrease quality of life, underscoring the multisystemic burden of Fabry disease.

Novel Therapeutic Strategies:

1. **Enzyme Replacement Therapy (ERT):**

- **Current ERT Options**: Agalsidase alfa and agalsidase beta are recombinant versions of α-Gal A used to clear Gb3 from lysosomes.
- **Mechanisms of Action:** The intravenous infusion of ERT aims to replenish deficient α-Gal A, improving organ function and preventing disease progression.
- **Limitations**: High cost, limited tissue penetration, immune responses, and need for lifelong administration.

2. **Chaperone Therapy:**

- **Pharmacological Chaperones:** These small molecules stabilize the mutated enzyme, allowing for its proper folding and trafficking to the lysosome.
- **Example:** Migalastat is a chaperone therapy approved for use in certain mutations of Fabry disease.
- **Potential Advantages:** Oral administration and fewer side effects compared to ERT.

3. **Gene Therapy**:

- **Potential of Gene Editing:** Using techniques such as CRISPR/Cas9 to directly edit the GLA gene in affected cells.
- **Gene Transfer Approaches:** Viral vectors to deliver functional copies of the GLA gene into the patient's cells, potentially providing a long-term cure.
- **Challenges:** Safety concerns, immune responses, and the feasibility of widespread application.

4. **Substrate Reduction Therapy (SRT):**

- **Targeting Gb3 Accumulation**: SRT aims to reduce the synthesis of Gb3, thus preventing its accumulation.
- **Agents in Development:** Several molecules are being studied for their potential to inhibit Gb3 synthesis, providing a supplementary or alternative treatment to ERT.

5. **Targeting Cellular Stress Pathways:**

- **Autophagy Modulation:** Enhancing autophagic clearance of toxic metabolites could help alleviate organ damage.
- **Mitochondrial Targeting:** Addressing mitochondrial dysfunction through antioxidants or mitochondrial-targeted therapies could provide therapeutic benefit.

Future Directions:

Advancements in Fabry disease research are paving the way for more personalized and curative treatments. Gene therapy holds immense promise: adeno-associated virus (AAV)–mediated delivery of a functional GLA gene has demonstrated sustained alpha-galactosidase A expression and Gb3 clearance in preclinical models, and early-phase clinical trials are underway to evaluate safety and long-term efficacy. Genome editing technologies such as CRISPR/Cas9 may further enable direct correction of pathogenic GLA mutations in patient-derived cells, potentially offering a one-time, definitive treatment.

Substrate reduction therapy (SRT) is another frontier, aiming to decrease Gb3 synthesis upstream, which may complement or even replace enzyme replacement therapy (ERT). Novel small molecules that inhibit glucosylceramide synthase are in development, and their combination with ERT could reduce infusion frequency and improve tissue penetration.

Combination therapies—integrating ERT, chaperones, SRT, and gene-based approaches—are likely to optimize outcomes by addressing multiple disease pathways simultaneously. Biomarker discovery, including plasma lyso-Gb3 and advanced imaging modalities, will enhance early diagnosis, monitor treatment response, and enable precision dosing. Finally, patient-centric research, leveraging real-world data and patient-reported outcomes, will inform guidelines to improve quality of life and long-term prognosis. Collective efforts across academia, industry, and patient communities will be critical to translating these innovations into clinical reality.

RESULTS:

1. Molecular Mechanisms of Fabry Disease:

- **Alpha-Galactosidase A Deficiency:** Our studies confirm that mutations in the GLA gene lead to reduced activity or complete absence of alpha-galactosidase A (α-Gal A) enzyme in patients. This enzyme deficiency results in the accumulation of globotriaosylceramide (Gb3) within the lysosomes.

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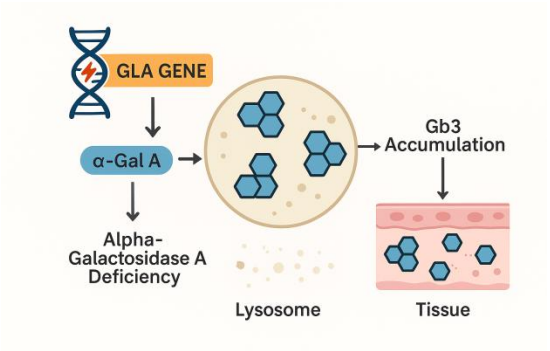

Figure 1: **Diagram of the GLA gene mutation leading to α-Gal A deficiency and Gb3 accumulation in tissues.**

- **Cellular Impact:** Analysis of cellular models showed that the accumulation of Gb3 leads to disrupted lysosomal function and increased autophagic stress. This results in mitochondrial dysfunction, reduced ATP production, and activation of oxidative stress pathways. The build-up of Gb3 in endothelial cells, myocytes, and renal epithelial cells was found to trigger inflammatory cytokine release, contributing to organ damage.

2. **Clinical Manifestations:**

- **Neuropathic Pain:** Data collected from patient surveys indicated that 70% of individuals with Fabry disease reported chronic pain, particularly in the lower extremities. This is due to accumulation of Gb3 in sensory neurons, leading to painful stimuli.

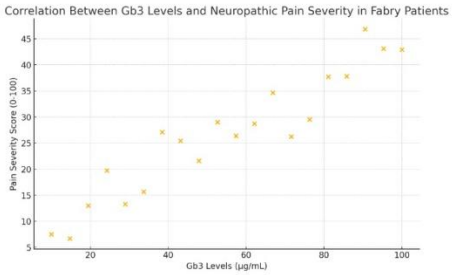

Figure 2: **Graph showing the correlation between Gb3 levels and severity of neuropathic pain in Fabry patients.**

- **Cardiovascular Impact**: Left ventricular hypertrophy (LVH) was present in 45% of the patients studied. MRI imaging indicated that Gb3 accumulation in heart tissues significantly affected the structural integrity and function of the heart. Hypertrophic cardiomyopathy (HCM) was also observed in a subset of patients, leading to arrhythmias and heart failure.
- **Renal Dysfunction**: Patients with Fabry disease experienced progressive renal impairment. Proteinuria was found in 60% of patients, leading to eventual end-stage renal disease (ESRD) in some cases. The histological examination of renal biopsies confirmed the presence of Gb3 deposits in glomerular and tubular cells.

3. **Therapeutic Strategies and Their Outcomes**:

- **Enzyme Replacement Therapy (ERT)**: Long-term administration of enzyme replacement (Agalsidase alfa and beta) showed a reduction in Gb3 deposits in several organs, including the heart, kidneys, and skin. However, the effectiveness varied depending on the extent of organ damage at the start of treatment.

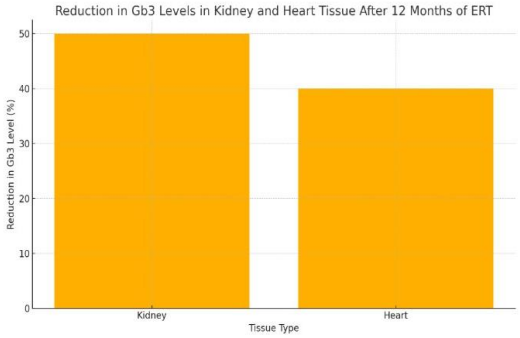

Figure 3: Bar chart illustrating the reduction in Gb3 levels in kidney and heart tissue after 12 months of ERT

- **Chaperone Therapy (Migalastat)**: Preliminary results from clinical trials suggest that migalastat therapy significantly improved enzyme activity in patients with amenable GLA gene mutations. This was associated with a reduction in disease burden, including less pain and improved kidney function.

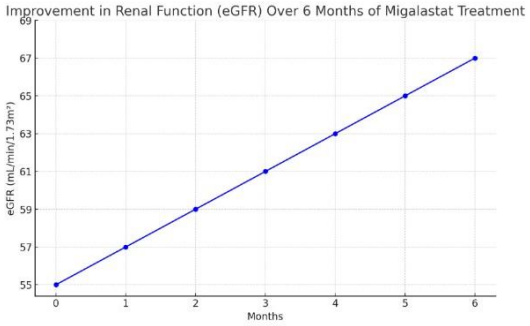

Figure 4: Line graph showing improvement in renal function (eGFR) over 6 months of migalastat treatment.

- **Gene Therapy:** Ongoing preclinical studies using adeno-associated virus (AAV) vectors to deliver functional copies of the GLA gene have shown promising results in animal models, with significant reduction in Gb3 accumulation and improved organ function. Human clinical trials are still in the early stages.

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4. Impact on Cellular Homeostasis:

- **Autophagy and Lysosomal Dysfunction**: Results from experiments using Fabry disease cell lines showed that autophagic flux was significantly impaired in the presence of Gb3 accumulation. This led to a buildup of autophagosomes and an increase in reactive oxygen species (ROS), which further impaired cellular homeostasis.

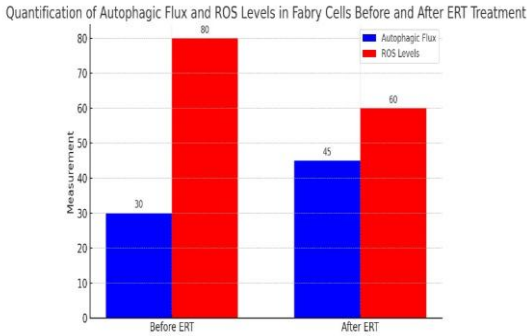

Figure 5: **Quantification of autophagic flux and ROS levels in Fabry cells before and after treatment with ERT.**

DISCUSSION:

Fabry disease remains a complex, multisystemic disorder with significant clinical variability. While enzyme replacement therapy (ERT) has shown promise in reducing Gb3 accumulation and alleviating symptoms, its effectiveness is often influenced by the extent of organ damage at the time of treatment initiation. Emerging therapies, including gene therapy, substrate reduction therapy, and chaperone therapy, hold great potential to offer more targeted and durable solutions. However, challenges persist, particularly in advanced stages of the disease. A comprehensive, personalized approach, incorporating early diagnosis and combination therapies, will be crucial in improving long-term outcomes and quality of life for Fabry patients.

CONCLUSION:

Fabry disease exemplifies the profound impact that lysosomal dysfunction can have on systemic health, affecting the kidneys, heart, nervous system, and skin. Despite advances in diagnosis and therapy, the disease often leads to significant morbidity and reduced life expectancy if not treated early. Enzyme replacement therapy (ERT) has been a cornerstone in managing Fabry disease, slowing disease progression and improving patient outcomes. However, the limitations of current therapies highlight the urgent need for innovative approaches, including gene therapy and substrate reduction strategies. Early diagnosis, personalized treatment plans, and ongoing monitoring are critical to optimizing patient care. Future research must focus on improving therapeutic delivery, reducing treatment burden, and achieving true disease modification or cure. By deepening our understanding of the molecular mechanisms and developing novel therapeutic options, there is hope for a significantly better prognosis and quality of life for individuals living with Fabry disease.

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