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Immunolocalization of endomucin-reactive blood vessels and α -smooth muscle actin-positive cells in murine nasal conchae

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Running title: *endomucin and α SMA in nasal conchae*

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: Recently, the biological functions of endomucin-positive blood vessels and closely associated α SMA-positive cells in long bones have been highlighted. The surrounding tissues of the flat bones, such as nasal bones covered with mucosa and lamina propria, are different from those of the long bones, indicating the different distributions of endomucin-positive blood vessels and α SMA-reactive cells in nasal bones. This study demonstrates the immunolocalization of endomucin-reactive blood vessels and α SMA-positive cells in the nasal conchae of 3- and 7-week-old mice.

Methods: The nasal conchae of 3-week-old and 7-week-old male C57BL/6J mice were used for immunoreaction of endomucin, CD34, PDGFbb, TRAP, and c-kit.

Results: While we identified abundant endomucin-reactive blood vessels in the lamina propria neighboring the bone, not all were positive for endomucin. More CD34-reactive cells and small blood vessels were observed in the nasal conchae of 3-week-old mice than in those of 7-week-old mice. Some α SMA-positive cells in the nasal conchae surrounded the blood vessels, indicating vascular smooth muscle cells, while other α SMA-immunopositive fibroblastic cells were detected throughout the lamina propria. α SMA-positive cells did not co-localize with C-kit-immunoreactivity, thereby indicating that the α SMA-positive cells may be myofibroblasts rather than undifferentiated mesenchymal cells.

Conclusions: Unlike long bones, nasal conchae contain endomucin-positive as well as endomucin-negative blood vessels and exhibit numerous α SMA-positive fibroblastic cells throughout the lamina propria neighboring the bone. Apparently, the distribution patterns of endomucin-positive blood vessels and α SMA-positive cells in nasal conchae are different from those in long bones.

241 words

Key words: *nasal bone, blood vessel, endomucin, alpha smooth muscle actin*

1. Introduction

The nasal conchae—scroll-shaped, flattened bones that protrude into the nasal cavity—are covered by mucosa, such as the stratified epithelium of the nasal vestibule, the respiratory epithelium covering most of the cavity, and the olfactory epithelium covering the posterodorsal part of the septum. The lamina propria beneath the epithelial layers tightly connects to the bones of the conchae. The trabeculae of the cancellous bones of the femora and tibiae, unlike the bones of the nasal conchae, are surrounded by bone marrow tissue.

The cancellous bones of the femora and tibiae are rich in blood vessels including sinusoids. The subtypes of bone-specific endothelial cells that are found in long bones have been reported to be strongly positive for both CD31 and endomucin [1, 2], the latter of which is a mucin-like sialoglycoprotein with a molecular weight of 80–120 kDa that is endothelial-specific and expressed solely on the capillary and venous, but not the arterial, endothelium [3–6]. Endomucin-positive bone-specific blood vessels reportedly interact with osteoblasts [1, 2], and the angiogenesis of blood vessels seems to be partially induced by platelet-derived growth factor (PDGF) bb secreted by osteoclasts [7]. A previous report demonstrated that vascular endothelial cells in arteries and arterioles express ephrinB2, whereas endothelial cells in veins contain EphB4 [8]. Based on the previous reports, we have recently presented evidence for a large number of EphB4-positive/endomucin-reactive blood vessels in the femoral metaphyses of mice [9].

The micro-environment surrounding the metaphyseal trabeculae very likely differs from that surrounding the blood vessels of the nasal conchae. Grevers and Herrmann have proposed a biological link between the morphological characteristics of the vascular wall of blood vessels and the functional behavior of the nasal mucosa, describing endothelial fenestrations as one of the characteristics of the microcirculatory system in the nasal mucosa [10]. The microcirculatory system in the nasal mucosa appears to play a major role in, for example, nasal allergy and reaction to cold exposure, and we therefore assumed differences between the physiological functions and the environment surrounding the blood vessels in the nasal conchae and the functions and environment of the metaphyseal cancellous bones of the femora and tibiae.

Regarding alpha smooth muscle actin (α SMA)-positive cells in the femora and tibiae, it is known that only few α SMA-positive vascular smooth muscle cells surround the endomucin-reactive blood vessels in a normal state. However, we have recently reported that parathyroid hormone (PTH) administration significantly increases the numbers of blood vessels surrounded

by α SMA-positive cells [11]. These α SMA-positive cells are not only smooth muscle cells surrounding the blood vessels, but also fibroblastic cells originating from the blood vessels and extending towards the bone cells. The blood vessel-derived α SMA-positive cells extending close to osteoblasts were found to be immunoreactive for c-kit, a type-III receptor tyrosine kinase that transduces signaling by binding stem cell factor [12], which is a hallmark of undifferentiated cells, as well as to tissue-nonspecific alkaline phosphatase (ALP, a marker of osteoblastic lineage). This suggests that α SMA-positive fibroblastic cells derived from blood vessels might be undifferentiated but somehow committed to an osteoblastic lineage. Thus, in a normal state, only a few blood vessels are surrounded by α SMA-positive vascular smooth muscle cells.

In contrast, only a few literatures have described α SMA-positive cells in the nasal conchae; fibroblasts in the nasal mucosa could reportedly transdifferentiate into α SMA-positive myofibroblasts [13]. Jacob *et al.* found that the multipotent mesenchymal stromal cells in the nasal mucosa have the potential to differentiate along the adipogenic, chondrogenic, and osteogenic pathways [14, 15]. Recently, a single-cell RNA sequencing analysis demonstrated that mesenchymal stem cells in the nasal conchae originate from a perivascular or pericyte population [16], which indicates that there are mesenchymal stem cells in the nasal mucosa. However, whether there is a significant number of α SMA-positive cells in the nasal conchae and whether these α SMA-positive cells could be undifferentiated mesenchymal cells is still unclear.

In addition, it is necessary to consider the growth of the murine heads including nasal regions. According to Wei *et al.*, it seems preferable to compare nasal conchae between 3-week-old mice, which show an increasing head length and 7-week-old mice, which have reached the beginning of the plateau of head growth even though their body weight is still increasing [17]. Based on these finding, this study aimed to examine the immunolocalization of α SMA-positive cells in association with endomucin-positive bone-specific blood vessels in the nasal conchae at the growing stage of heads (3-week-old mice) and at the beginning of the plateau of head growth (7-week-old mice).

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Animals and preparation of histochemical specimens

Nasal conchae of 3-week-old and 7-week-old male C57BL/6J mice (n=6 of each age group, Japan CLEA, Tokyo, Japan) were used in this study, which followed the principles for animal care and research use set by Hokkaido University where all experiments were conducted (approval no. #18-0076). Mice were anesthetized with an intraperitoneal injection of a mixture containing 0.3 mg/kg of medetomidine, 4.0 mg/kg of midazolam, and 5.0 mg/kg of butorphanol. All mice were then perfused with 4% paraformaldehyde diluted in 0.1 M phosphate buffer (pH 7.4) through the cardiac left ventricle. The heads were immediately removed and immersed in the same fixative for 24 h at 4 °C. The samples were decalcified with a solution of 10% ethylene diamine tetraacetic disodium salt and dehydrated in ascending ethanol solutions prior to paraffin embedding. The histological sections were made parallel to the assumed line of molars in maxillae prior to immunohistochemical examination.

2. 2. Single immunohistochemical studies

Paraffin-embedded histological sections were used for an immunohistochemical examination of the following antigens: endomucin, α SMA, and CD34. After deparaffinization, standardized procedures for immunostaining were followed as reported previously [18]. In brief, sections were treated for endogenous peroxidase inhibition with 0.3% H₂O₂ in PBS for 30 min, and subsequently for nonspecific stain blocking with 1% bovine serum albumin (BSA; Serologicals Proteins Inc. Kankakee, IL) in PBS (1% BSA-PBS) for 20 min at room temperature. After that, sections were incubated with the corresponding pair of antibodies according to the antigen of interest (primary/secondary), as follows: 1) endomucin, rat antibody against endomucin (Santa Cruz Biotechnology, Inc., Dallas, TX; diluted 1:100)/horseradish peroxidase (HRP)-conjugated anti-rat IgG (Zymed Laboratories Inc., South San Francisco, CA; diluted 1: 100); 2) α SMA, mouse antibody against α SMA (Thermo Fisher Scientific Inc., Cheshire, UK; diluted 1: 400)/HRP-conjugated anti-mouse IgG (Invitrogen Co., Camarillo, CA); 3) CD34, rabbit antibody against CD34 (Abcam plc., Cambridge, UK; diluted 1: 50)/HRP-conjugated anti-rabbit IgG (DakoCytomation, Glostrup, Denmark; diluted 1: 100). Immunoreactions were assessed using 3, 3'-diaminobenzidine tetrahydrochloride (Dojindo Laboratories, Kumamoto, Japan). Specimens were then observed under a Nikon Eclipse Ni microscope (Nikon Instruments Inc. Tokyo, Japan) and light microscopic images were acquired with a digital camera (Nikon DXM1200C, Nikon).

2.3. Double detection of PDGFbb/tartrate resistant acid phosphatase (TRAP) and

αSMA/ALP

For double detection of PDGFbb/TRAP, the dewaxed sections were reacted with mouse anti-PDGFbb (Abcam plc., diluted 1: 100) and then incubated with HRP-conjugated anti mouse IgG (Invitrogen, diluted 1:100). For TRAP detection, immunostained sections were immersed in an aqueous solution containing 2.5 mg of naphthol AS-BI phosphate (Sigma-Aldrich, St. Louis, MO) and 18 mg of Fast Blue RR salt (Sigma-Aldrich) diluted in 30 ml of a 0.1M Tris-HCl buffer (pH 8.5) for 15 min at 37 °C, until immunoreactivity was visible. For endomucin/αSMA double immunohistochemical staining, dewaxed paraffin sections were incubated with 1% BSA-PBS, then with mouse antibody against αSMA (Thermo Fisher), and subsequently with HRP-conjugated secondary antibody as described above. The immunoreacted sections were incubated with anti-endomucin antibody (Santa Cruz), followed by incubation with ALP-conjugated goat anti-rat IgG (Jackson Immuno Research Laboratories, Inc., West Grovw, PA). HRP and ALP visualization was conducted as described above.

2. 4. Double immunofluorescent detection of αSMA/c-kit

For immunofluorescent detection of αSMA/c-kit, dewaxed sections were incubated with mouse antibody against αSMA (Thermo Fisher) and then with Alexa488-conjugated anti-mouse IgG (Invitrogen, diluted 1: 100). Thus-treated sections were reacted with goat antibody against c-kit (R&D Systems Inc., Minneapolis, MN, diluted 1: 25) and then with Alexa 594-conjugated anti-goat IgG (Invitrogen, diluted 1: 100). All sections were embedded in VECTASHIELD hard-set mounting medium with DAPI (Vector Laboratories, Inc. Burlingame, CA).

2. 5. Calculation of numbers of total, endomucin-reactive, and CD34-positive blood vessels

Histological images of the nasal conchae were acquired with a digital camera with an X40 objective lens; three images of assumed boxed areas of 236 μm (width) × 342 μm (length) in different regions were taken in each specimen immunostained with endomucin or CD34 (n=6 for each group of 3-week-old and 7-week-old mice). Mean values of the total numbers, endomucin-reactive, and CD34-positive blood vessels were calculated for each specimen using the three images, and the mean values for the six specimens from each age group were used for further analysis. The numbers of blood vessels were counted by three blinded volunteers.

2. 6. Statistical analysis

The statistical analyses were performed by using BellCurve for Excel (Social Survey Researcj

Information Co., Ltd.). All values are presented as median (lower quartile–upper quartile). Shapiro-Wilk test was used to determine the normality, and then the difference between the 3-week-old and 7-week-old mice was analyzed by the Mann-Whitney U test. Values of $P < 0.05$ were considered statistically significant.

3. Results

3. 1. *Distribution of endomucin-immunoreactive blood vessels in the nasal conchae*

The nasal conchae showed immature bone characterized by fine trabeculae containing a high number of osteocytes at 3 weeks of age, while the bone profile observed at 7 weeks of age seemed relatively mature (**Fig. 1a–d**). In both 3-week-old and 7-week-old mice, the thick lamina propria containing many blood vessels had developed between the epithelium and the bone (**Fig. 1e, f**). Endomucin-immunopositive blood vessels were also observed in the lamina propria of the nasal conchae in both 3-week-old and 7-week-old mice (**Fig. 2a, b**). However, not all blood vessels were immunopositive for endomucin; we detected a high number of endomucin-negative blood vessels in the nasal conchae of both 3-week-old and 7-week-old mice (**Fig. 2c, e**). Statistical analysis showed no significant difference in the percentage of endomucin-positive blood vessels between the 3-week-old and 7-week-old mice (**Fig. 2g**). Approximately 30–40% of blood vessels were positive for endomucin (34.704% [33.557–38.778%] vs 34.025% [30.086–38.961%], difference not significant, 3-week-old vs 7-week-old mice). In the lamina propria of the nasal conchae of 3-week-old and 7-week-old mice, we detected cells and small blood vessels that were positive for CD34—one of the hallmarks of endothelial progenitor cells (**Fig. 2d, f**) [19, 20]. The ratio of CD34-reactive to total numbers of blood vessels was significantly higher in 3-week-old mice than in 7-week-old mice (26.186% [24.516–27.348%] vs 13.798% [5.629–15.823%], $P < 0.05$, 3-week-old vs 7-week-old mice) (**Fig. 2h**). In the long bones, since osteoclasts reportedly synthesize PDGFbb, which indicates their close association with the angiogenesis of blood vessels in bone [7], we examined the double immunodetection of PDGFbb-reactive/TRAP-positive osteoclasts (**Fig. 3a–c**). TRAP-reactive osteoclasts with PDGFbb-immunoreactivity were mostly localized to one side of the conchae bone but hardly seen on the other side (**Fig. 3d, e**). Unexpectedly, endomucin-positive blood vessels were localized not only one side of the conchae with many TRAP-positive/PDGFbb-immunoreactive osteoclasts, but also observed in the other side of conchae

(Fig. 3f). This implies no spatial correlation in the distribution of PDGFbb-reactive/TRAP-positive osteoclasts and endomucin-positive blood vessels.

3. 2. Distribution of α SMA-immunoreactive cells in the nasal conchae

We next examined the immunolocalization of endomucin-positive blood vessels and α SMA-reactive cells in the conchae of both 3-week-old and 7-week-old mice (Fig. 4a, b). Many α SMA-immunoreactive fibroblastic cells were observed throughout the lamina propria between the epithelium and the bone (Fig. 4c–f). Some endomucin-reactive blood vessels were surrounded by α SMA-reactive vascular smooth muscle cells while others were not, in both 3-week-old and 7-week-old mice (Fig. 4c, d). In the region of the thick lamina propria, many α SMA-positive fibroblastic cells extended their cytoplasmic processes, which indicates no close histological association of endomucin-positive blood vessels and α SMA-reactive cells (Fig. 4e, f). To define if these α SMA-positive fibroblastic cells are undifferentiated mesenchyme cells as suggested by Jakob *et al.* [14, 15], we compared the immunolocalization of α SMA cells and cells positive for c-kit. Immunofluorescent analyses demonstrated the similar localization of α SMA-immunopositive cells and c-kit-reactive cells in the lamina propria in 3-week-old mice (Fig. 5a–d). However, images at higher magnification revealed that α SMA-positive cells were in close proximity of, but not overlapping with, c-kit-immunopositive cells (Fig. 5e, f).

4. Discussion

We have recently demonstrated that the metaphyses of the femora and tibiae exhibit many endomucin-positive blood vessels that are also immunoreactive for EphB4, with the exception of the region close to the chondro-osseous junction—a site of vascular invasion into the growth plate cartilage [9]. In contrast, in the current study, only 30–40% of all blood vessels in the nasal conchae showed endomucin-immunoreactivity, and the endomucin-reactive blood vessels did not show spatially close associations with PDGFbb-reactive/TRAP-positive osteoclasts. This implies that the blood vessels in the nasal conchae are not functionally similar to those in the metaphyses of long bones. We also observed an increase in the numbers of CD34-positive small blood vessels, which implies active angiogenesis in the nasal conchae at 3 rather than 7 weeks of age, which seems to be in line with the growth process of the nasal conchae.

Endomucin is an endothelial-specific, mucin-like sialoglycoprotein that is expressed solely on the capillary and venous, but not the arterial, endothelium [3–6]. The lamina propria of the nasal conchae contains not only veins and venules but also arterial endothelia, which do not show endomucin, thereby forming a microcirculation system specific to nasal circumstances. Endomucin reportedly inhibits the assembly of focal adhesion complexes and the interaction between cells and the extracellular matrix [21] as well as between neutrophils and endothelial cells [22]. On the other hand, the nasal conchae are often exposed to inflammatory circumstances, due to, for example, rhinitis and allergy, and to external stimulants such as mechanical force; the blood vessels in the nasal conchae may therefore be adapted to these stimuli, presumably by interacting with extracellular matrices as well as neutrophils and lymphocytes. Hence, the microcirculatory circumstances in the nasal mucosa seem to differ from those in the metaphyses of the femora and tibiae.

We have previously reported that we detected only few α SMA-positive blood vessels in normal metaphyses of the tibiae and femora [11]. After the administration of parathyroid hormone (PTH), a number of α SMA-positive blood vessels appeared, not only surrounding the blood vessels but also extending out of the periphery of the blood vessels, thus exhibiting a characteristic of undifferentiated cells while somehow being committed to an osteoblastic fate [11]. In the current study, in contrast to the long bones, many α SMA-positive fibroblastic cells were seen throughout the lamina propria of the nasal conchae of the 3-week-old and 7-week-old mice. Some reports have proposed that α SMA serves as a marker of undifferentiated mesenchymal cells [23–25], while others suggested that α SMA indicates fully-differentiated myofibroblasts [26, 27]. Since α SMA-positive fibroblastic cells were not co-localized with c-kit-reactive cells in our current examination, we assume that α SMA-positive fibroblastic cells might be myofibroblasts rather than undifferentiated mesenchyme cells. Myofibroblasts have been discovered in the periodontal ligaments of teeth, assumedly in response to mechanical force and to alter the microenvironment of the extracellular matrix [27]. α SMA-positive cells in the periodontal ligaments have the potential to trans-differentiate from periodontal fibroblasts into myofibroblasts, thereby playing a role in contractile activity against mechanical stress, e.g., occlusion [28]. Taken together, it is likely that the reason why the lamina propriae interconnecting the epithelium and bone contain many α SMA-positive myofibroblasts is that the nasal conchae are easy to undertake the mechanical force.

In contrast to α SMA-positive myofibroblasts, Suphanantachat *et al.* have demonstrated

an important role of c-kit in maintaining the undifferentiated stage of mesenchymal cells [12]. Since cells in the lamina propria of the nasal conchae can reportedly differentiate into osteogenic cells [29–31], it might be the c-kit-reactive cells, rather than the α SMA-positive cells, that undergo this differentiation under certain circumstances.

5. Conclusion

Although the lamina propria is closely connected to the bone of the nasal conchae, we found that unlike in the metaphyseal trabeculae of the femora and tibiae, 30–40% of blood vessels in this layer were positive for endomucin, indicating that veins and venules are not predominant in the nasal conchae in mice between the age of 3 and 7 weeks. Many α SMA-positive fibroblastic cells that did not exhibit c-kit immunoreactivity were present throughout the lamina propria, and the α SMA-positive fibroblastic cells did not only surround the blood vessels but also extended their cytoplasmic processes. This suggests that the α SMA-positive cells in the nasal conchae might be myofibroblasts, presumably responding to specific nasal physiological and pathological circumstances such as mechanical force and inflammation.

Ethical statement

The study followed the principles for animal care and research use set by Hokkaido University (approval no. #18-0076).

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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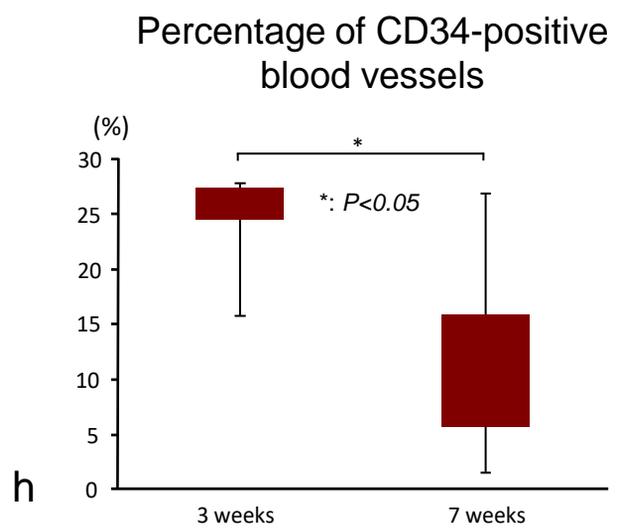
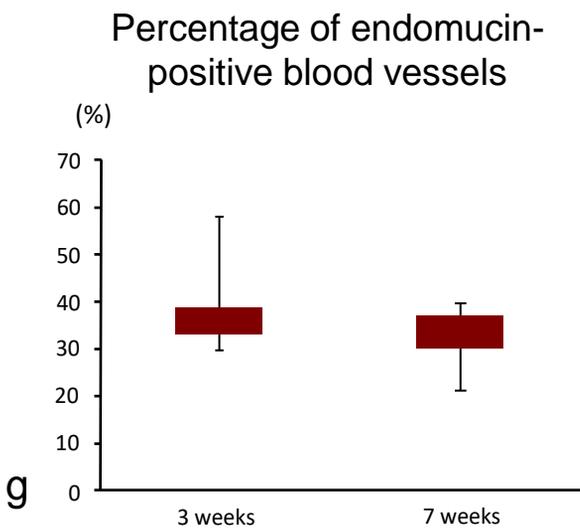
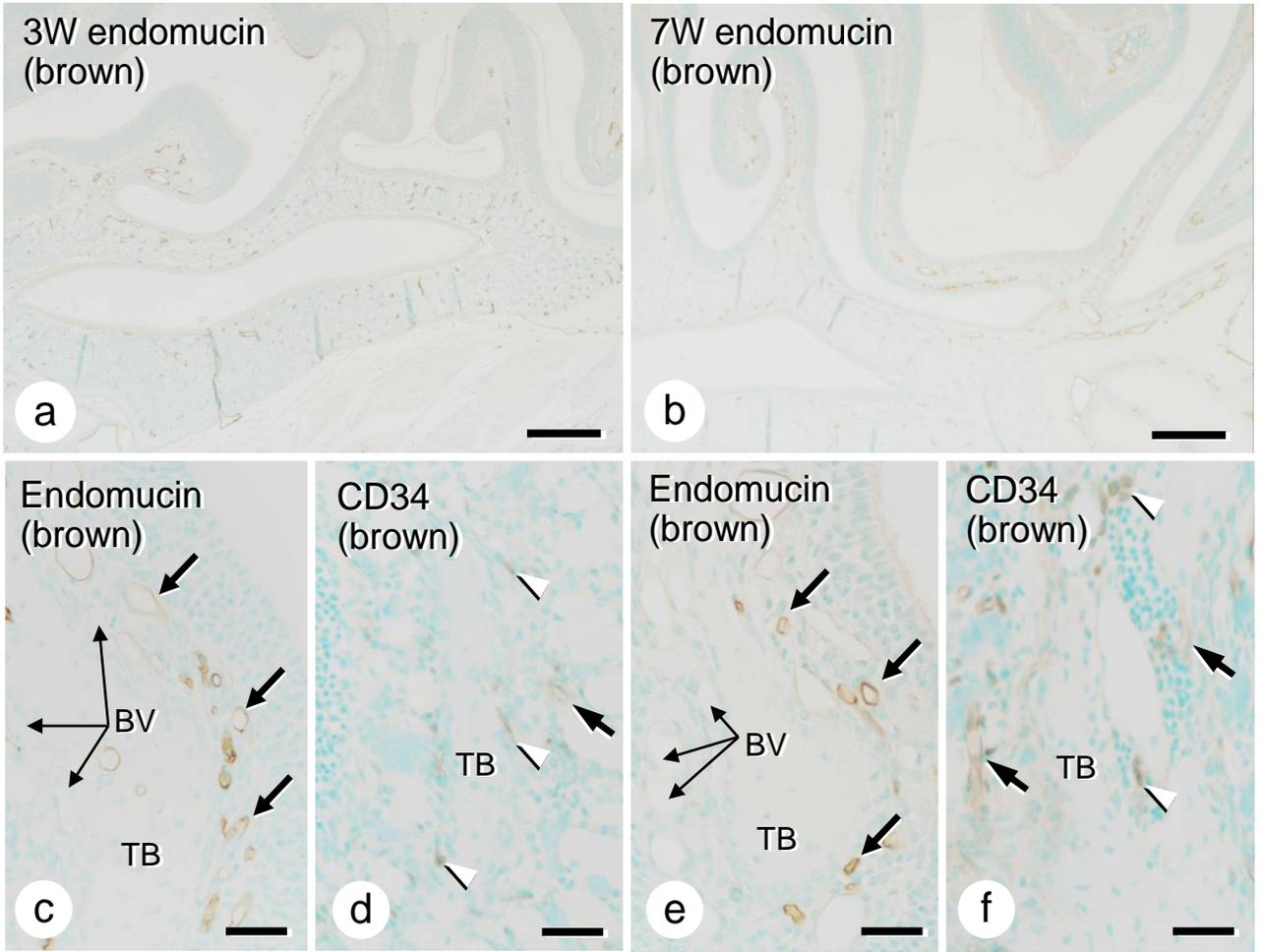


Fig.2

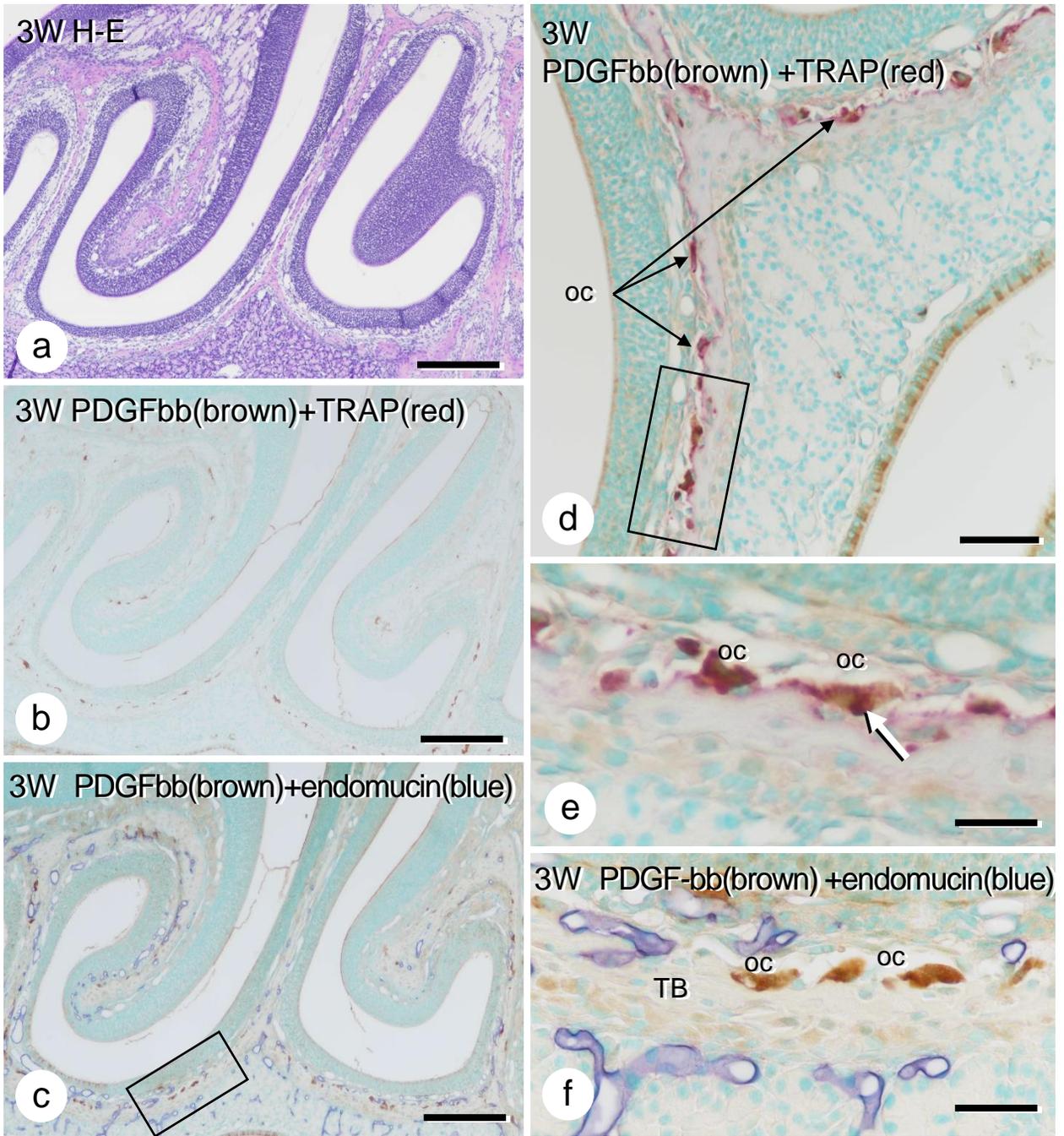
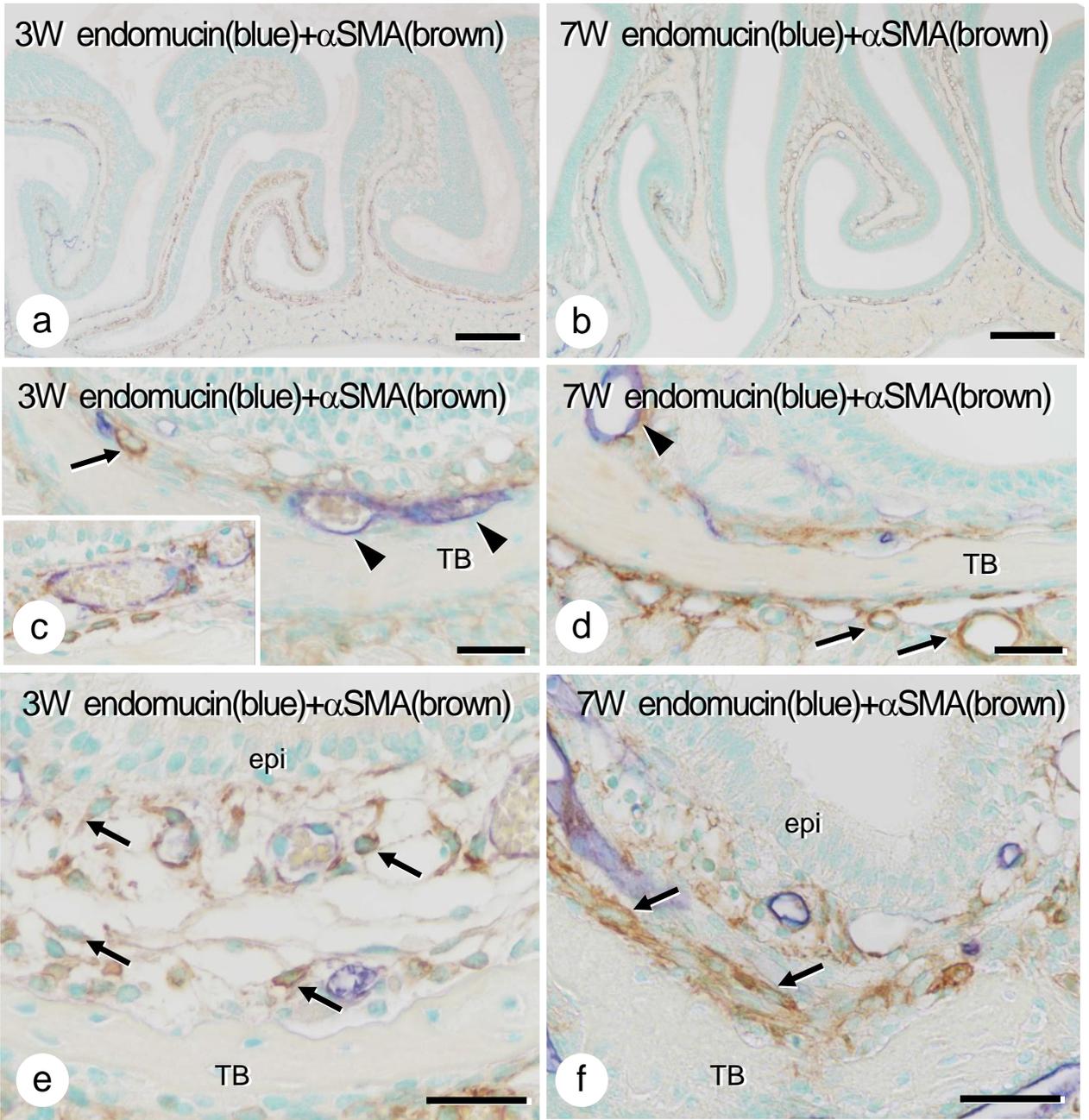


Fig.3



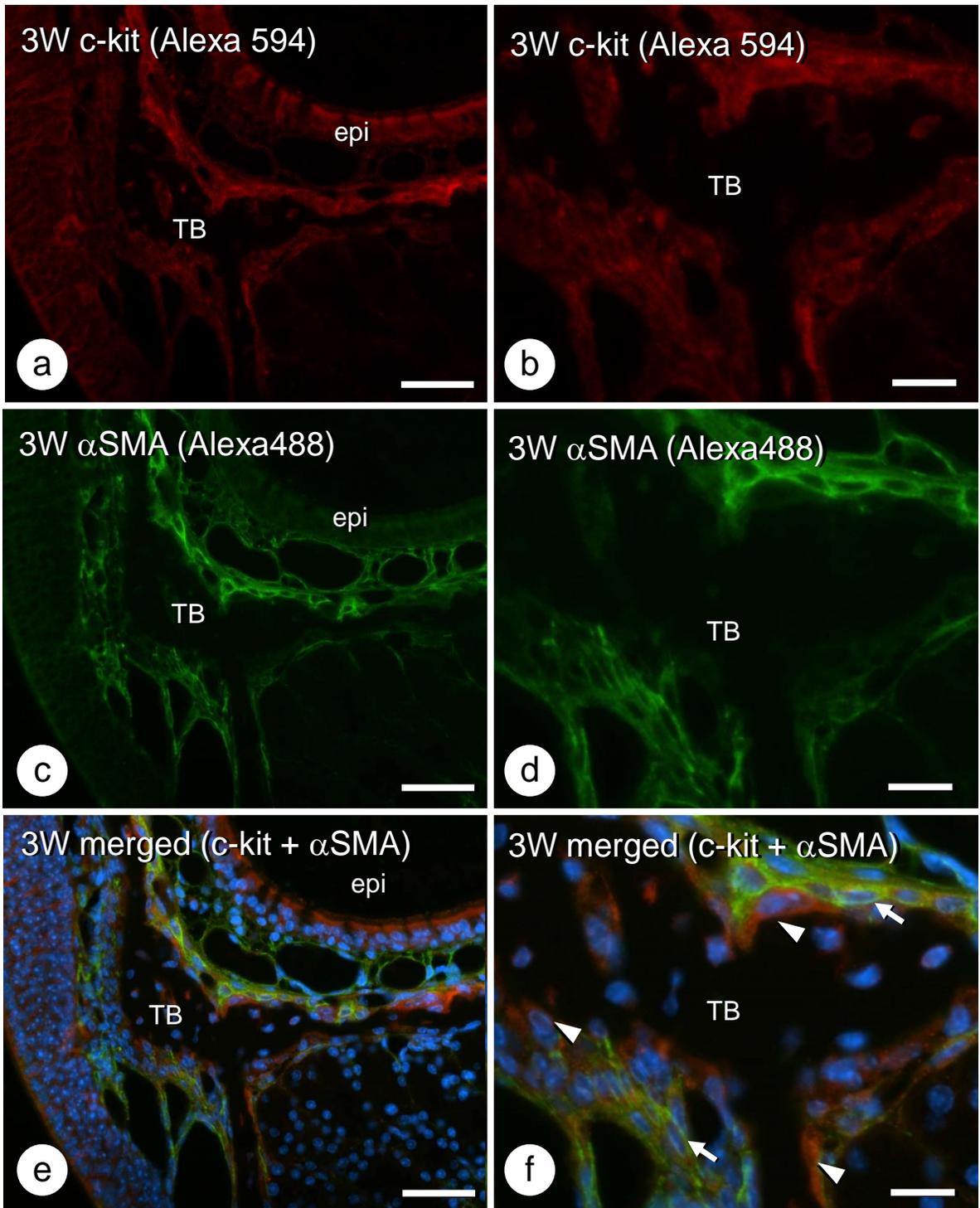


Fig.5

Figure Legends

Figure 1

Histology of the nasal conchae of mice at 3 and 7 weeks of age

Panels **a** and **b** show images at lower magnification of the nasal conchae of 3-week (3W)-old (**a**) and 7-week (7W)-old mice (**b**). The trabecular bone (TB) of the nasal conchae at 3 weeks of age shows a woven bone profile (**c**), while that of 7-week-old mice reveals a relatively matured histology (**d**). Panels **e** and **f** are highly magnified images of the boxed areas of panels **c** and **d**, respectively. In panels **e** and **f**, the lamina propria overlying the conchae bone includes many blood vessels (BV). epi: epithelium

Bars, a and b: 200 μ m, **c–f:** 40 μ m

Figure 2

Distribution of endomucin-immunoreactive blood vessels and CD34-positive cells in the nasal conchae

Panels **a** and **b** are the low power images of immunolocalization of endomucin-positive blood vessels (brown) in the nasal conchae of 3-week-old (**a**) and 7-week-old mice (**b**). In the conchae at 3 weeks of age (**c**), some blood vessels display the brown-colored immunoreactivity of endomucin (black arrows), while other blood vessels show no endomucin-reactivity (BV with connected fine arrows). Similarly, at 7 weeks of age (**e**), some blood vessels showed endomucin-reactivity (brown colored blood vessels indicated by arrows), but the others demonstrated no immunoreactivity of endomucin (BV with connected fine arrows). Panels **d** and **f** demonstrate the immunolocalization of CD34-positive cells (brown color, white arrowheads) and small blood vessels (brown color, black arrows) in the nasal conchae of 3-week-old (**d**) and 7-week-old mice (**f**). Panels **g** and **h** show statistical analyses by the Mann-Whitney U test on the percentages of endomucin-positive (**g**) and CD-34-positive blood vessels (**h**) in the nasal conchae of 3-week-old and 7-week-old mice. There was no significant difference in the percentage of endomucin-positive blood vessels both in 3-week-old and 7-week-old mice. Notice the significant difference between the percentages of CD34-positive blood vessels in 3-week-old and 7-week-old mice ($P<0.05$). TB: trabecular bone

Bars, a and b: 200 μ m, **c–f:** 20 μ m

Figure 3

Distribution of PDGFbb-positive/TRAP-reactive osteoclasts and endomucin-positive blood vessels in the nasal conchae

Panels **a–c** show images of the serial histological sections of the nasal conchae (**a**), and double detection of PDGFbb (brown)/TRAP (red) (**b**) and PDGFbb (brown)/endomucin (blue) (**c**). Notice the many PDGFbb-positive/TRAP-reactive osteoclasts (oc) located on one side of the conchae bone (**d**). Panel **e** is a highly magnified image of the boxed area in panel **d**. TRAP-positive osteoclasts (oc) reveal brown-colored PDGFbb-positivity (white arrow, **e**). Endomucin-positive blood vessels (deep blue color) are seen not only on one side of the trabecular bone (TB) alongside the many TRAP-positive/PDGFbb-reactive osteoclasts (oc), but also on the other side (**f**). Panel **f** is a highly magnified image of the boxed area in panel **c**.

Bars, a–c: 200 μ m, **d:** 50 μ m, **e, f:** 10 μ m

Figure 4

Distribution of α SMA-reactive cells in the nasal conchae

All panels of Figure 4 show double detection of endomucin-positive blood vessels (deep blue color) and α SMA-reactive cells (brown color) in the conchae of both 3-week-old (**a, c, e**) and 7-week-old (**b, d, f**) mice. In the region of the thin lamina propria (**c, d**), endomucin-positive (blue color) blood vessels without α SMA-positive vascular smooth muscle cells (brown color) (black arrowheads in panels **c** and **d**) and endomucin-negative but α SMA-positive blood vessels (brown color, black arrows in panels **c** and **d**) are visible. Notice that endomucin-positive (deep blue)/ α SMA-reactive (brown color) blood vessels are also observable (See the inset of panel **c**). In the thick layer of the lamina propria (**e, f**), many fibroblastic cells positive for α SMA (brown color) can be seen in 3-week-old (**e**) and 7-week-old mice (**f**).

Bars, a and b: 300 μ m, **c–f:** 20 μ m

Figure 5

Double immunofluorescence of c-kit and α SMA in the nasal conchae of 3-week-old mice

Panels **a–d** show c-kit (**a, b**) and α SMA (**c, d**) immunofluorescent images, respectively. Panels **e** and **f** are merged images of c-kit and α SMA immunofluorescent images observed at a lower (**e**) and higher (**f**) magnification. Notice that α SMA-positive cells (white arrows in panel **f**) can

be seen in close proximity of, but not overlapping with, c-kit-positive cells (white arrowheads in panel **f**). TB: trabecular bone, epi: epithelium

Bars, a, c, e: 30 μ m, **b, d, f:** 10 μ m