

MET signalling: principles and functions in development, organ regeneration and cancer

Livio Trusolino, Andrea Bertotti and Paolo M. Comoglio

Abstract | The MET tyrosine kinase receptor (also known as the HGF receptor) promotes tissue remodelling, which underlies developmental morphogenesis, wound repair, organ homeostasis and cancer metastasis, by integrating growth, survival and migration cues in response to environmental stimuli or cell-autonomous perturbations. The versatility of MET-mediated biological responses is sustained by qualitative and quantitative signal modulation. Qualitative mechanisms include the engagement of dedicated signal transducers and the subcellular compartmentalization of MET signalling pathways, whereas quantitative regulation involves MET partnering with adaptor amplifiers or being degraded through the shedding of its extracellular domain or through intracellular ubiquitylation. Controlled activation of MET signalling can be exploited in regenerative medicine, whereas MET inhibition might slow down tumour progression.

Throughout embryogenesis, cells bud off from developing tissues and move outwards to shape and pattern the complex architecture of prospective organs¹. A similar process occurs in adult life during wound healing and tissue repair, when lingering cells migrate into injury sites to recreate the pre-existing structures². The acquisition of cell motility is necessary, but not sufficient, for this event. Cells that detach from their neighbours must elude anoikis, a form of apoptotic cell death that occurs when cells lose adhesion with the extracellular matrix³. Moreover, migratory cells undergo extensive mitotic divisions to produce 'founder populations', which settle in newly forming organs during development or colonize worn tissues during repair^{4,5}.

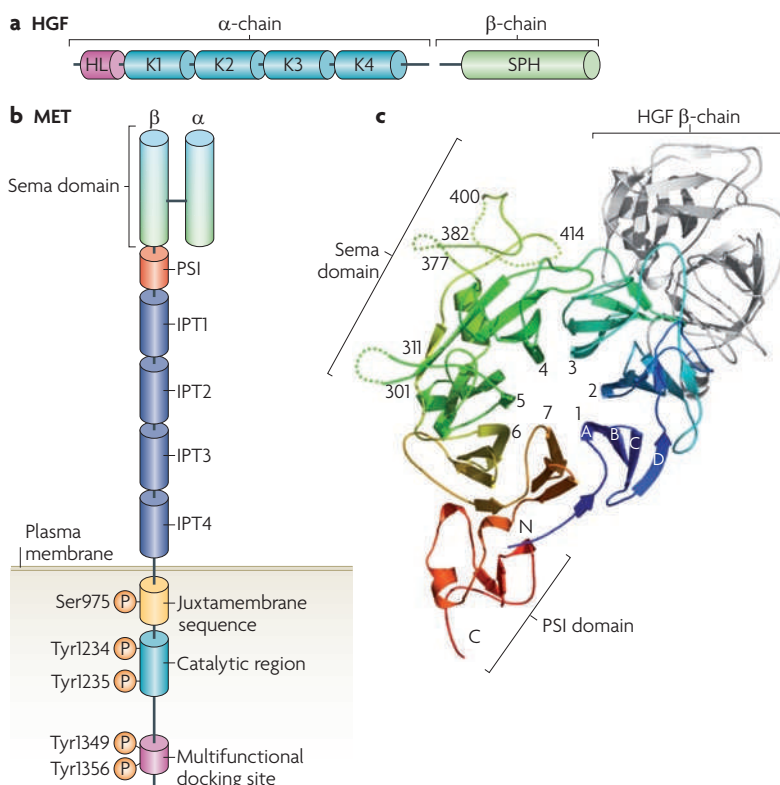
The normal phases of embryogenesis and organ regeneration strongly resemble the pathological process of tumour invasiveness: similarly to cells at the wound edge, cells at the tumour's leading front disrupt intercellular contacts and infiltrate the adjacent surroundings, where they resist anoikis and grow before lodging in the blood vessels for systemic dissemination⁶. This resemblance is not simply a biological correlate, it has a common mechanistic basis: cancer cells resurrect the latent schemes of cellular reorganization, which are usually confined to embryonic development and damaged adult organs, and leverage them to become competent for metastasization⁷.

The activities — motility, survival and proliferation — that occur in developing, injured and neoplastic tissues embody a biological programme that is defined as 'invasive growth'⁸. This is triggered by extracellular stimuli that regulate the activity of several transcription factors that, in turn, modulate the expression of a number of proteins, ranging from cytoskeletal and cell–cell junctional components to cell cycle regulators and anti-apoptotic effectors^{9,10}. One major environmental inducer of invasive growth is hepatocyte growth factor (HGF, also known as scatter factor), the ligand for the MET tyrosine kinase receptor (also known as the HGF receptor)^{11–20} (BOX 1). MET function is required for various morphogenetic events in both embryonic and adult life^{21,22} and it drives the malignant progression of several different types of tumours²³. To do so, MET propagates an intricate system of signalling cascades that result in a comprehensive rewiring of gene expression^{24,25}.

The signal transduction biochemistry of MET includes many idiosyncratic details and only a handful of principles that are common to the other tyrosine kinase receptors. Exhaustive information on the identities and branches of MET-dependent signalling networks can be found in numerous reviews^{22–29}. Here, as well as presenting some basic principles of MET signalling regulation, we consider recent findings that have provided fresh knowledge on this matter at the molecular, cellular

*Institute for Cancer Research and Treatment (IRCC), University of Torino Medical School, 10060 Candiolò, Torino, Italy.
Correspondence to L.T. and P.M.C.
e-mails: livio.trusolino@ircc.it; pcomoglio@gmail.com
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Box 1 | Domain structures of HGF and MET



Hepatocyte growth factor (HGF; also known as scatter factor) is similar to plasminogen, a circulating zymogen that promotes the dissolution of fibrin blood clots in its active form as the serine protease plasmin. Both HGF and plasminogen are synthesized as a single-chain precursor and then converted into an active α - and β -chain heterodimer by extracellular proteases. HGF consists of six domains: an amino-terminal hairpin loop (HL), four kringle domains (K1–K4; each defined by three conserved disulphide bonds) and a serine protease homology (SPH) domain that lacks proteolytic activity (see the figure, part a).

The HGF receptor MET is a single-pass heterodimer comprising an entirely extracellular α -subunit that is linked by a disulphide bond to a transmembrane β -subunit, which contains the intracellular catalytic activity (see the figure, part b). The extracellular region of MET includes three functional domains: the Sema domain (which is also found in the semaphorins and plexins) spans the first 500 residues at the N terminus, encompassing the whole α -subunit and part of the β -subunit; the PSI domain (which is also present in the plexins, semaphorins and integrins, hence its name) covers approximately 50 residues and contains four conserved disulphide bonds; the residual 400 residues connecting the PSI domain to the transmembrane helix are organized into four IPT (immunoglobulin-like fold shared by plexins and transcriptional factors) domains. The intracellular segment is composed of three portions: a juxtamembrane sequence that downregulates kinase activity following phosphorylation of Ser975; a catalytic region that positively modulates kinase activity following *trans*-phosphorylation of Tyr1234 and Tyr1235; and a carboxy-terminal multifunctional docking site that contains two docking tyrosines (Tyr1349 and Tyr1356) that are involved in the recruitment of several transducers and adaptors.

HGF contains two MET binding sites that have different affinities. The high-affinity site is located in the α -chain and recognizes the IPT3 and IPT4 domains of MET independently of HGF processing and maturation¹⁵⁵. The low-affinity site lies within the β -chain, is exposed only after HGF activation and interacts with the Sema domain of MET¹⁵⁶. This latter association is depicted as a ribbon representation (see the figure, part c). The HGF β -chain is shown in grey and part of the extracellular region of MET is shown in a gradient of rainbow colours, from the N terminus (shown in blue) to the PSI domain (shown in red). The numbers in the centre refer to the blades, with the β -strands in blade 1 labelled A–D. The numbers on the edge of the Sema domain represent residue numbers on each side of a disordered region (dotted line). Part c modified, with permission, from REF. 156 © (2004) Macmillan Publishers Ltd. All rights reserved.

and animal levels. Specifically, we discuss how the MET pathway is tuned by the functional cooperation between various signal transducers, as well as by the receptor's subcellular localization and trafficking. We also elaborate on how MET signalling influences different organismal functions in normal physiology and disease, a topic that deserves an overall reconceptualization. Finally, we examine the causative relationships between individual signalling inputs and specific biological outputs in MET-driven processes, and provide our perspective on the medical implications of novel therapies that either promote or neutralize MET activity.

MET signalling: pathway components

HGF is secreted as a single-chain inert precursor and converted into a two-chain functional heterodimer by extracellular proteases (BOX 1). This growth factor is widely distributed in the extracellular matrix of most tissues, where it is sequestered, mainly in its inactive form, by heparin-like proteoglycans^{30,31}. Cells of mesenchymal origin are the major source of HGF, which acts in a paracrine manner on epithelial cells that express the MET receptor³². During tissue repair and cancer invasion, several cytokines that are abundant in the reactive interstitial compartment — for example, interleukin-1 and -6, tumour necrosis factor- α and transforming growth factor- β (TGF β) — induce transcriptional upregulation of both HGF (in fibroblasts and resident macrophages) and MET (in epithelial cells)^{33,34}. The inflammatory and tumour stroma also overexpress proteases that are involved in pro-HGF activation, such as the plasminogen activation system and matriptase^{35,36}. Thus, biologically competent HGF is not only overproduced but also fully activated. This combined transcriptional and post-translational regulation, which leads to optimal MET activation on target cells, can be considered as part of a general mechanism of physiological defence to tissue damage.

Following HGF binding, the kinase activity of MET is switched on by receptor dimerization and *trans*-phosphorylation of two 'catalytic' tyrosine residues (Tyr1234 and Tyr1235) within the kinase activation loop. The subsequent step is phosphorylation of two additional 'docking' tyrosines in the carboxy-terminal tail (Tyr1349 and Tyr1356), and when phosphorylated, these tyrosines act as a degenerate motif for the recruitment of many signal-relay molecules³⁷ (BOX 1). MET is also a substrate for several protein-tyrosine phosphatases (PTPs), including the receptor PTPs density-enhanced phosphatase 1 (DEP1; also known as PTPRJ) and leukocyte common antigen related (LAR; also known as PTPRF)^{38,39} and the non-receptor PTPs PTP1B (also known as PTPN1) and T cell PTP (TCPTP; also known as PTPN2)⁴⁰. Such phosphatases oppose MET signals by triggering dephosphorylation of either the catalytic tyrosines (in the case of PTP1B and TCPTP)⁴⁰ or the docking tyrosines (in the case of DEP1)³⁸. To date, the MET tyrosine residues that are specifically dephosphorylated by LAR have not been identified.

This is the basic signalling machinery of MET. Further levels of complexity are provided by the interaction of MET with different signal modifiers, including

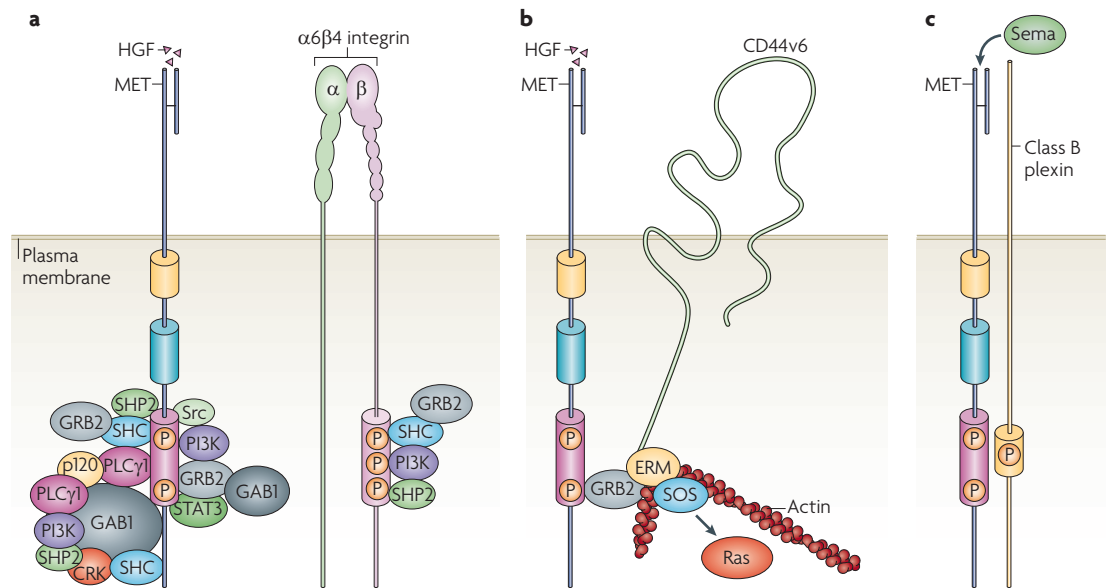


Figure 1 | Signal cooperation between MET pathway components. The strength, duration and versatility of signals triggered by MET (also known as HGF receptor) are regulated by a network of signalling amplifiers and co-receptors that physically associate with MET. **a** | Adaptor proteins that have a scaffolding function, such as GRB2-associated-binding protein 1 (GAB1) and the $\alpha 6 \beta 4$ integrin, associate with MET and act as supplementary docking platforms for the further binding of signal transducers, thus enhancing signalling outputs. GAB1 interacts with MET both indirectly (through growth factor receptor-bound protein 2 (GRB2)) and directly. Following MET-dependent tyrosine phosphorylation, GAB1 provides additional sites for the recruitment of Src-homology-2 domain-containing transforming protein (SHC), phosphoinositide 3-kinase (PI3K), SHP2 (also known as PTPN11), CRK, phospholipase $\text{C}\gamma 1$ (PLC $\gamma 1$) and p120 Ras-GTPase-activating protein (p120). Similarly, the $\beta 4$ subunit of the $\alpha 6 \beta 4$ integrin directly associates with MET, which tyrosine-phosphorylates $\beta 4$ and therefore generates extra binding sites for SHC, PI3K and SHP2. GRB2 can also associate with SHC that is bound to MET or $\alpha 6 \beta 4$ integrin. **b** | The extracellular domain of the v6 splice variant of the hyaluronan receptor CD44 (CD44v6) forms a ternary complex with MET and hepatocyte growth factor (HGF), an event that is necessary for MET activation. The intracellular portion of CD44v6 links the MET cytoplasmic domain to actin microfilaments through GRB2 and intermediate ezrin, radixin and moesin (ERM) proteins, which facilitates MET-induced activation of Ras by the guanine nucleotide exchange factor son of sevenless (SOS). **c** | Members of the class B plexins family associate with MET and transactivate it in response to their semaphorin ligands (Sema), even in the absence of HGF, providing an alternative way to stimulate MET-driven biological responses. Semaphorin-dependent activation of MET also results in tyrosine phosphorylation of the plexin cytoplasmic domain, but the functional consequences of this event are unknown. STAT3, signal transducer and activator of transcription 3.

Paracrine

Describing, or relating to, a regulatory cell that secretes a soluble molecule into an intercellular space, from which it diffuses to a nearby target cell other than the one that produces it.

Reactive interstitial compartment

A connective tissue that responds to neighbouring stimuli such as inflammation and tumour formation or invasion.

Src-homology-2 domain

(SH2 domain). A protein module that recognizes and binds tyrosine-phosphorylated sequences in a sequence-specific context and thereby has a key role in relaying cascades of signal transduction.

GTPase-activating protein

(GAP). A protein that stimulates the intrinsic ability of a GTPase to hydrolyse GTP to GDP. GAPs negatively regulate GTPases by converting them from an active (GTP-bound) to an inactive (GDP-bound) state.

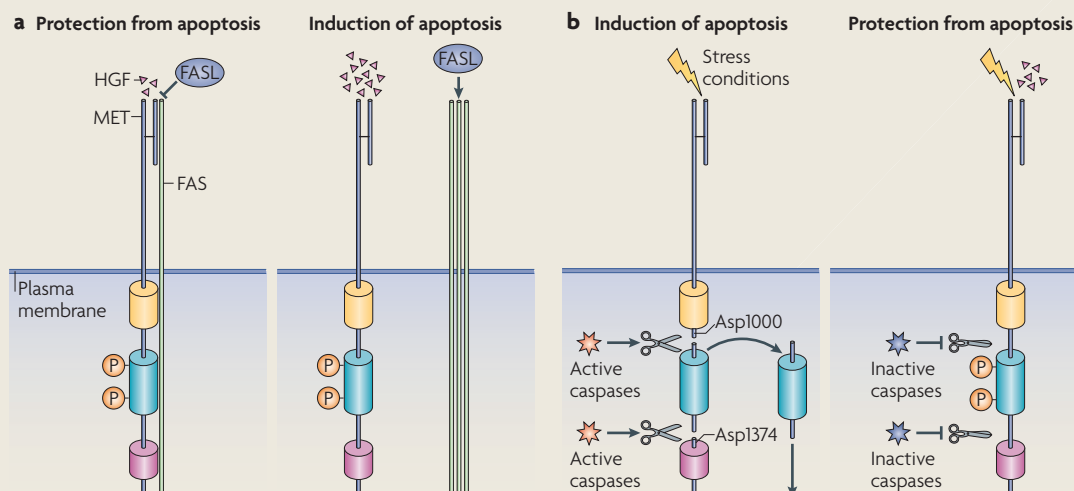
scaffolding adaptors, cytoskeletal connectors and structurally homologous co-receptors^{25,26,41} (FIG. 1). As a whole, this apparatus leads to efficient activation of downstream signal transduction pathways that include the mitogen-activated protein kinase (MAPK) cascades (extracellular signal-regulated kinase 1 (ERK1) and ERK2, Jun amino-terminal kinases (JNKs) and p38), the phosphoinositide 3-kinase–Akt (PI3K–Akt) axis, signal transducer and activator of transcription proteins (STATs), and the nuclear factor- κ B inhibitor- α (I κ B α)–nuclear factor- κ B (NF- κ B) complex^{22,25,42–44}. All of these pathways positively control MET-dependent cell proliferation, survival and migration. However, in defined cellular contexts, some of these signals can mediate a paradoxical pro-apoptotic, rather than anti-apoptotic, activity (BOX 2).

MET and scaffolding adaptors. The promiscuous docking motif in the C-terminal tail of MET binds numerous Src-homology-2 domain (SH2 domain)-containing effectors, such as PI3K³⁷, the non-receptor tyrosine kinase Src³⁷,

the growth factor receptor-bound protein 2 (GRB2) and SH2 domain-containing transforming protein (SHC) adaptors^{37,45,46}, SHP2 (also known as PTPN11; an upstream activator of Src and Ras)⁴⁶, phospholipase $\text{C}\gamma 1$ (PLC $\gamma 1$)³⁷ and the transcription factor STAT3 (REFS 47, 48). MET also associates with GRB2-associated-binding protein 1 (GAB1), a multi-adaptor protein that, upon phosphorylation by the MET receptor, provides extra binding sites for SHC, PI3K, SHP2, CRK, PLC $\gamma 1$ and p120 Ras-GTPase-activating protein (p120-Ras-GAP)^{43,44,49–53}. The association between MET and GAB1 occurs directly, through a unique 13-amino-acid MET binding site (MBS) on GAB1, and indirectly, through MET-bound GRB2 (REFS 51, 54). Hence, many transducers participate in MET signalling through multiple interactions with the receptor, with the GAB1 scaffolding adaptor or with both (FIG. 1a).

In tumours, intensification of MET signals is also favoured by receptor interaction with the $\alpha 6 \beta 4$ integrin. MET activation leads to phosphorylation of the $\beta 4$ -subunit cytoplasmic domain (at three tyrosine

Box 2 | MET and apoptosis: the flip side of the coin



Despite acting as a prototypical survival factor, hepatocyte growth factor (HGF; also known as scatter factor) was initially named 'tumour cytotoxic factor' for its ability to elicit apoptotic responses in sarcoma¹⁵⁷ and hepatoma¹⁵⁸ cells. These results were confirmed in other cell types, including liver and lung myofibroblasts^{133,159} and breast carcinoma cell lines¹⁶⁰, in which HGF-induced apoptosis was attributed to the activation of protein kinase C and Jun amino-terminal kinase (JNK) or to the induction of reactive oxygen species. In ovarian cancer cells that have been treated with conventional chemotherapeutics, HGF enhances apoptosis through a p38 mitogen-activated protein kinase (MAPK)-dependent pathway^{73,74}.

The mechanism by which MET (also known as HGF receptor) activation leads to opposite outcomes — survival by default and apoptosis in restricted cellular contexts — has been only partially elucidated. The extracellular domain of MET interacts with the death receptor FAS (also known as CD95 and TNFRSF6), which prevents FAS receptor–FAS ligand (FASL) recognition and FAS self-aggregation, therefore limiting apoptosis through the extrinsic pathway¹⁶¹ (see the figure, part a). However, elevated HGF levels sensitize cells to FASL-mediated apoptosis¹⁶¹. It has been proposed that excessively high concentrations of HGF would titrate out MET and liberate FAS from its association with MET, suggesting that the pro-apoptotic effects evoked by HGF in some cell lines could be related to a critical stoichiometry in the reciprocal amounts of HGF, MET, FAS and FASL.

The intracellular domain of MET is also involved in the positive control of apoptosis. Under stress conditions, the MET cytoplasmic portion undergoes sequential cleavage by caspases, first at an aspartic acid residue in the carboxy-terminal end (Asp1374) and then at a second aspartic acid in the juxtamembrane portion (Asp1000) (see the figure, part b). This yields an intracellular soluble fragment, which is comprised of the kinase domain and triggers cell death^{162,163}. Notably, if stress induction is accompanied by HGF stimulation, caspase activation is reduced and generation of the intracellular pro-apoptotic fragment is prevented¹⁶². This points to the presence of a cellular rheostat, in which life or death are ultimately dictated by the anti-apoptotic input that is generated by HGF-dependent activation of MET and the pro-apoptotic input that is generated by caspase-dependent cleavage of MET.

residues that are embedded in consensus sequences) and this is required for the recruitment of SHC, PI3K and SHP2 (REFS 55–58). By accomplishing this function, GAB1 and the $\alpha 6 \beta 4$ integrin behave as supplementary docking platforms for the localized recruitment of additional transducers that synergize with those directly bound to MET (FIG. 1a). This mechanism allows signal amplification at the MET-proximal level, which in turn secures potent and enduring activation of downstream transducers.

CD44 links MET to the cytoskeleton. Another protein that cooperates with MET in normal and transformed epithelial cells is CD44, a transmembrane cell adhesion molecule that functions as a linker between the extracellular matrix and the intracellular actin cytoskeleton⁵⁹. Members of the CD44 family differ in their extracellular domain by the insertion of variable regions through alternative splicing, which gives rise to numerous variant isoforms (CD44v1–CD44v10)⁵⁹. The CD44 isoform

containing the v6 sequence participates in MET signaling by a twofold mechanism: the extracellular domain is required for the organization of a ternary complex between MET, HGF and CD44 and for the subsequent activation of MET⁶⁰. The cytoplasmic tail is necessary for signal transfer from active MET to Ras⁶¹. Specifically, upon MET activation, the intracellular domain of CD44v6 drives the assembly of a sub-membraneous network that includes the cytoplasmic region of MET, GRB2, F-actin, ezrin, radixin and moesin (ERM) proteins (which connect actin microfilaments to CD44) and the guanine nucleotide exchange factor son of sevenless (SOS). This network allows for efficient activation of Ras by SOS (FIG. 1b).

In endothelial cells, the v10-containing isoform of CD44 seems to be essential for the partitioning of MET into detergent-insoluble, caveolin-enriched microdomains together with T-lymphoma invasion and metastasis-inducing protein 1 (TIAM1; a RAC1 exchange factor), cortactin (an actin cytoskeletal

Guanine nucleotide exchange factor

A protein that facilitates the exchange of GDP for GTP in the nucleotide-binding pocket of a GTPase.

regulator) and dynamin 2 (a vesicular regulator)⁶². Thus, when MET collaborates with CD44, signal transduction is assisted by its structural and topographical regulation at the inner side of the plasma membrane rather than by its functional interaction with signalling amplifiers. The reasons why only some CD44 variants contribute to MET signalling remain unclear.

Semaphorins activate MET in an HGF-independent manner.

The extracellular domain of MET exhibits structural homology with the semaphorins and plexins, a broad family of ligand–receptor pairs that are endowed with either attractive or repulsive function in different tissues (BOX 1). In particular, MET and class B plexins share a highly homologous Sema domain, which forms a seven-bladed β -propeller that supports multiple interactions between MET and some class B plexins. When oligomerized with plexins, MET can be activated by semaphorins in an HGF-independent manner, leading to stimulation of MET downstream effectors and execution of MET-dependent biological responses^{63–65} (FIG. 1c). This partnership expands the complement of soluble factors that exert biological activity on MET-expressing cells and specifies the quality of cellular outcomes: cells that co-express MET and plexins react to either HGF or semaphorins by acquisition of invasive ability, which is a typical MET-dependent effect; by contrast, cells that express only plexins respond to semaphorins by arresting migration and inducing cellular collapse, which is a plexin-specific repulsive function⁶⁶.

Major MET-regulated signalling pathways

MET-dependent signals are organized in pathways that transmit biochemical information from the cell membrane (where MET resides) to the nucleus (where modulation of gene expression occurs). As described above, the receptor-associated signalling apparatus, including scaffolding adaptors and surface signal modifiers, is somehow unique to MET. Conversely, the downstream transducers are stereotypical signalling modules that are shared among different tyrosine kinase receptors. The prominent examples of these biochemical pathways will now be discussed.

The MAPK cascades. The subfamilies of MAPKs feature a characteristic phospho-relay system in which a series of three protein kinases (MAPK kinase kinase (MAPKKK), MAPK kinase (MAPKK) and MAPK) phosphorylate and activate one another⁶⁷. The ERKs are mainly triggered by tyrosine kinase-dependent stimulation of Ras. MET activates Ras through the GRB2–SOS complex, which can interact directly with the multi-functional docking site in the C-terminal tail of MET or can be associated indirectly through the SHC adaptor protein^{37,45}. Another route leading to Ras–ERK activation involves the tyrosine phosphatase SHP2, which dephosphorylates the p120-Ras-GAP binding site on GAB1; this impedes the recruitment of p120-Ras-GAP, which usually deactivates Ras, to promote Ras activation^{44,53} (FIG. 2a). In the active, GTP-bound state, Ras attracts the Ser/Thr kinase Raf through its effector loop.

This association modifies the three-dimensional configuration of Raf, which acquires signalling activity and proceeds to phosphorylate and thereby activate MAPK/ERK kinase 1 (MEK1; also known as MAPKK1) or MEK2 (also known as MAPKK2), the intermediate kinases of the system. In turn, MEK1 and MEK2 phosphorylate ERK1 and ERK2, the final effectors of the cascade. Active ERKs translocate to the nucleus, where they phosphorylate and stabilize several transcription factors that are involved in the early phases of the G1–S cell cycle transition. MET-dependent activation of the Ras–ERK cascade can be decreased by molecules that are involved in organogenesis and tissue repair, such as the membrane receptor Notch and the intracellular modulator Sprouty^{68,69}. Interestingly, MET is able to transcriptionally upregulate both Sprouty and the Notch ligand Delta, suggesting a mechanism of counter-feedback whereby MET induces negative regulators of its own signalling, possibly to fine-tune the restricted execution of biological outputs in space and time. How the Delta–Notch system and Sprouty impair MET-triggered stimulation of the Ras–ERK pathway remains to be characterized.

As well as the ERKs, MET is able to activate the JNK and p38 MAPKs. For both families, the first MAPKKK components of the cascade (MAPKKK1–MAPKKK4; also known as MEK kinase 1 (MEKK1)–MEKK4) are usually stimulated by Rac, a small GTPase that is switched on by a Ras–PI3K-mediated pathway. MEKK-dependent phosphorylation of MEK4 and MEK7 leads to activation of JNK1, JNK2 and JNK3, whereas phosphorylation of MEK3 and MEK6 leads to activation of p38 α , p38 β , p38 γ and p38 δ (FIG. 2a). Following MET-dependent stimulation, the JNKs and p38s control a range of cellular processes as diverse as cell proliferation, differentiation, transformation and apoptosis^{70–74}.

The PI3K–Akt axis. PI3K can be activated directly by MET and/or indirectly by Ras, the activation of which can also be mediated by MET (see above)³⁷. PI3K activation results in the formation of phosphatidylinositol-3,4,5-triphosphate, which tethers pleckstrin homology domain (PH domain)-containing molecules, such as the Ser/Thr kinase Akt, to the plasma membrane. Akt is then able to suppress apoptosis through inactivation of the pro-apoptotic protein BCL-2 antagonist of cell death (BAD) and activation of the E3 ubiquitin-protein ligase MDM2, which promotes the degradation of the pro-apoptotic protein p53. Moreover, Akt inactivates glycogen synthase kinase 3 β (GSK3 β), which antagonizes the expression of positive cell cycle regulators such as Myc and cyclin D1, and activates mammalian target of rapamycin (mTOR), which stimulates protein synthesis and physical cell enlargement (FIG. 2b).

The STAT pathway. Trans-phosphorylation of the docking site of MET leads to the association of STATs — namely, STAT3 — with its tail^{47,48}. This docking event is followed by MET-dependent tyrosine phosphorylation of STAT3, which causes STATs to dissociate from the

Pleckstrin homology domain
(PH domain). A protein domain that is characteristic of the RNase PH family of bacterial phosphate-dependent ribonucleases.

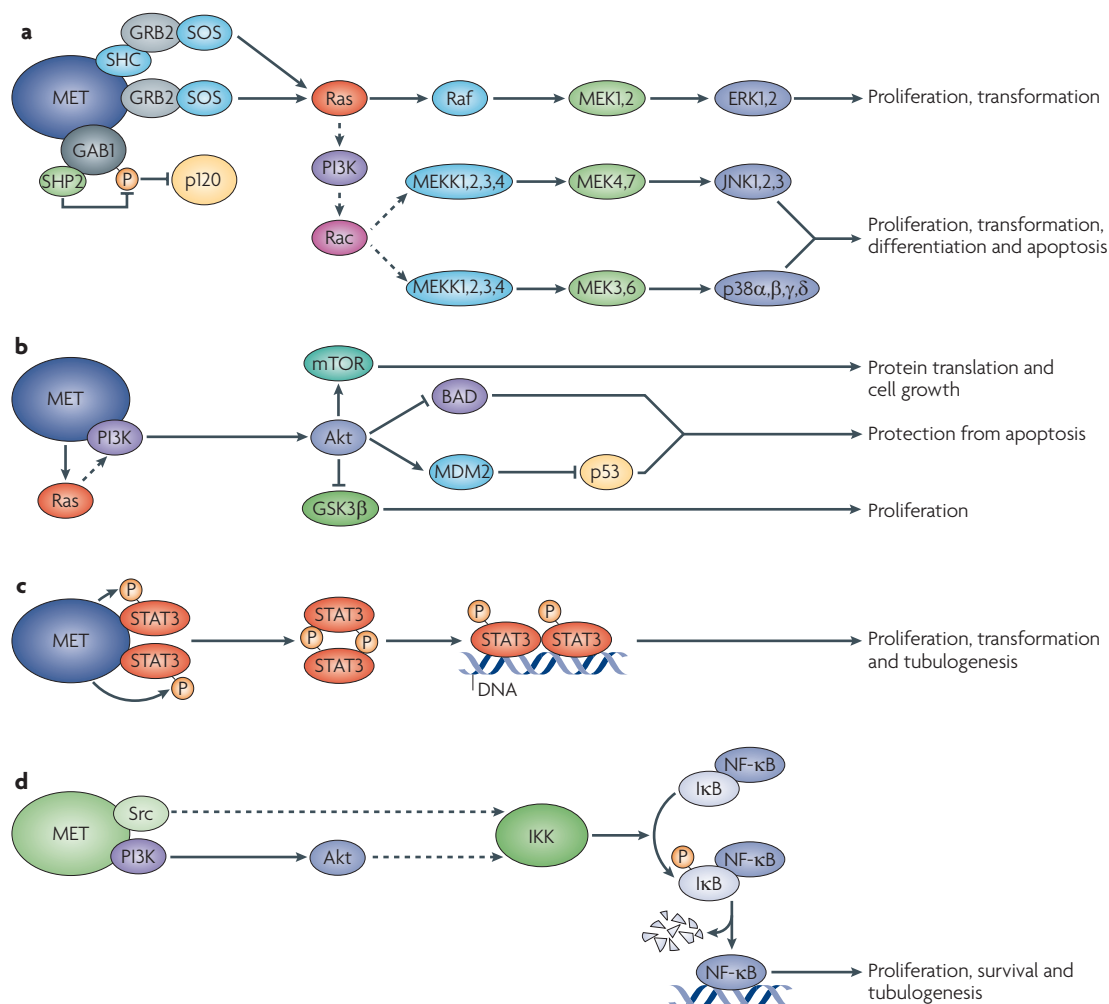


Figure 2 | Major MET-regulated signalling pathways. MET (also known as HGF receptor) triggers several downstream pathways. **a** | The mitogen-activated protein kinase (MAPK) cascades consist of three subfamilies, each of which comprises three protein kinases that activate one another sequentially. The proximal elements are activated directly or indirectly by the Ras small GTPase, which in turn is switched on by son of sevenless (SOS) and switched off by GTPase activating proteins (GAPs), such as p120 Ras-GAP (p120). SOS can be activated and p120 can be inhibited in response to MET signalling. The terminal effectors include extracellular signal-regulated kinases (ERKs), Jun amino-terminal kinases (JNKs) and p38s. These translocate to the nucleus, where they influence the activity of various transcription factors. **b** | Phosphoinositide 3-kinase (PI3K) is a lipid kinase that associates with the multifunctional docking site of MET and catalyses the formation of phosphatidylinositol (3,4,5)-triphosphate (PtdIns(3,4,5)P₃). Production of PtdIns(3,4,5)P₃ creates a docking site for Akt. Once compartmentalized at the inner side of the plasma membrane, Akt becomes activated and phosphorylates several substrates involved in cell proliferation, survival and the regulation of cell size. **c** | Signal transducer and activator of transcription 3 (STAT3) monomers bind to MET through their Src-homology-2 domain (SH2 domain) and become *trans*-phosphorylated. Thereafter, each STAT3 moiety homodimerizes, using its SH2 domain to recognize the phosphotyrosine of its partner, and translocates to the nucleus to operate as a transcription factor. **d** | In response to MET stimulation and the ensuing activation of PI3K- and Src-dependent pathways, nuclear factor-κB inhibitor-α kinase (IKK) is activated, and phosphorylates the nuclear factor-κB inhibitor-α (IκB) proteins (which are bound to nuclear factor-κB (NF-κB)). This triggers the ubiquitin-dependent degradation of IκB, resulting in the nuclear translocation of NF-κB and transcription. In all diagrams, dashed lines indicate that the signalling intermediates between the two nodes have not been characterized in detail. BAD, BCL-2 antagonist of cell death; GAB1, GRB2-associated-binding protein 1; GRB2, growth factor receptor-bound protein 2; GSK3β, glycogen synthase kinase 3β; MEK, MAPK/ERK kinase (also known as MAPKK); MEKK, MEK kinase; mTOR, mammalian target of rapamycin; SHC, SH2 domain-containing transforming protein.

receptors and homodimerize through their SH2 domains. Eventually, STAT dimers translocate to the nucleus, where they operate as transcription factors to regulate the expression of several genes that are implicated in cell proliferation or differentiation (FIG. 2c).

The IκBα–NF-κB complex. The NF-κB system comprises a family of transcription factors that are held inactive in the cytoplasm by a family of inhibitory proteins known as IκBs⁷⁵. These inhibitors are ubiquitinated and degraded by a phosphorylation event that is triggered by the IκB kinase

(IKK). In response to MET, IKK activation is mediated by the PI3K–Akt pathway and Src as signalling intermediates, but the direct distal effectors of IKK stimulation are unknown⁷⁶. IKK-induced destruction of IκBs leads to the release of NF-κB, which translocates to the nucleus to stimulate the transcription of various genes, including mitogenic and anti-apoptotic regulators^{76,77} (FIG. 2d).

Regulation of MET signalling

It is well established that signal transduction pathways that are downstream of tyrosine kinase receptors are modulated not only by the identities of protein–protein interactions but also by the colocalization of signal transducers in membrane domains or, more broadly, in organelles and vesicles⁷⁸. This notion has been recently applied to MET: the prevailing view that the activated receptor recruits signalling effectors at the plasma membrane, which in turn stimulate diffusible intermediates in the cytosol, has now been expanded by the finding that MET signals can also emanate from endosomal compartments. Moreover, the levels of MET expression at the cell surface are finely tuned by other spatially restricted events, including extracellular shedding, intracellular cleavage and ubiquitin-mediated degradation. All of these processes regulate the strength of MET activation and the ensuing robustness of MET-dependent signals.

MET internalization can promote signalling. Following ligand binding, MET is rapidly internalized by clathrin-mediated endocytosis and becomes recruited to peripheral early endosomes⁷⁹. Here, MET triggers the sustained activation of ERKs, which are then relocated to focal complexes, where they mediate HGF-induced cell migration (probably by phosphorylating paxillin and other focal adhesion targets⁸⁰). A crucial regulator of this endosomal signal compartmentalization, and the consequent transfer of ERK to adhesion sites, is protein kinase Cε (PKCε) (FIG. 3a). RNA interference-mediated silencing of PKCε negatively influences the recruitment of ERK1 and ERK2 to focal adhesions⁸¹, possibly by reducing the delivery of ERK–integrin complexes to the plasma membrane⁸².

From the peripheral endosomes, MET traffics along the microtubule network and accumulates in a nondegradative perinuclear endomembrane compartment through a process that is promoted by PKCα^{81,83} (FIG. 3b). This juxtanuclear delivery of MET is required for the optimal activation and nuclear translocation of STAT3 (REF. 84). MET-triggered phosphorylation of STAT3 at the plasma membrane or early endosomes is likely to be below the threshold for nuclear uptake owing to the intense local activity of phosphotyrosine phosphatases that dissipate STAT3 signal intensity during protein diffusion. Conversely, post-endocytic trafficking to the perinuclear compartment brings active MET into close proximity to the nucleus, which shields STAT3 against phosphatase activity and allows its nuclear accumulation (FIG. 3b).

MET internalization can inhibit signalling. Although internalized receptors may remain able to signal in peripheral and perinuclear compartments, the endocytosis of ligand-activated receptors and their subsequent

degradation in the lysosomal compartment remains the major determinant of receptor desensitization and signal restraint⁸⁵. Prompt sequestration of the activated receptor into invaginating pits, and its endosomal sorting for degradation, precludes prolonged signal emission and ensures faithful application of physiological responses.

Trafficking to the lysosomes is triggered by ligand-induced activation of MET, and requires the function of casitas B-lineage lymphoma (CBL), an E3 ubiquitin-protein ligase that is recruited to a juxtamembrane phosphotyrosine residue in the active receptor (Tyr1003)⁸⁶ (FIG. 3c). This leads to MET being monoubiquitylated at multiple sites⁸⁷, which enables its recognition by endocytic adaptors that contain ubiquitin-binding domains, its sorting into clathrin-coated areas at the cell surface and its delivery to the endosomal network. From these sorting endosomes, MET accumulates on the limiting and internal membranes of multivesicular bodies. This terminates signalling by sequestering MET from the cytosol and preventing it being recycled by the plasma membrane. Finally, the multivesicular bodies fuse with the lysosomes and MET undergoes proteolytic demolition^{88,89}. Seemingly active MET is not polyubiquitylated, and is therefore unlikely to be targeted for degradation by the proteasome⁸⁷; however, proteasomal destruction of MET can occur in an ubiquitin-independent manner (see below).

CBL also attracts — through the scaffold molecule CBL-interacting protein 85 (CIN85; also known as SH3KBP1) — endophilins, a family of proteins that assist the negative curvature, invagination and scission of the planar plasma membrane during the early phases of endocytosis⁹⁰. Therefore, CBL promotes the physical internalization of MET while tagging it for lysosomal degradation⁹¹ (FIG. 3c). Sustained association of CBL with active MET is favoured by decorin, an extracellular proteoglycan that binds directly to MET with high affinity and acts as an antagonistic ligand by stimulating receptor activation and, immediately thereafter, receptor downmodulation⁹².

What skews the MET fate towards degradation rather than signalling remains unknown. In the case of the epidermal growth factor (EGF) receptor, it has been suggested that endosomal signalling predominates under conditions of scarce ligand, whereas the degradative pathway is favoured when abundant ligand is present⁹³. A similar scenario might also apply to MET but a formal demonstration of such a mechanism has not been provided so far.

Regulated proteolysis of MET. Downregulation of MET signalling also involves sequential proteolytic cleavages. The first step is a disintegrin and metalloprotease (ADAM)-mediated release (known as shedding) of the extracellular domain, which generates a soluble N-terminal fragment and a membrane-anchored cytoplasmic tail. Then, the surface-associated cytoplasmic remnant undergoes regulated proteolysis by γ-secretase, which yields a labile intracellular portion that is rapidly cleared by proteasome-mediated degradation⁹⁴ (FIG. 3d).

Endosomal

Relating to a vesicle formed by invagination of the plasma membrane.

Endocytosis

Internalization and transport of extracellular material and plasma membrane proteins from the cell surface to intracellular organelles known as endosomes.

Focal complex

A small (1 μm diameter), dot-like adhesion structure that is present mainly at the edge of the lamellipodium.

Focal adhesion

A cellular structure that links, through integrin receptors, the extracellular matrix outside the cell to the actin cytoskeleton inside the cell.

E3 ubiquitin-protein ligase

An enzyme that is responsible for the conjugation of ubiquitin to substrate proteins.

Multivesicular body

An endocytic intermediate organelle in the lysosomal degradative pathway that contains small vesicles and is surrounded by a limiting membrane.

Proteasome

A large multisubunit protein complex that degrades unnecessary or damaged proteins by proteolysis.

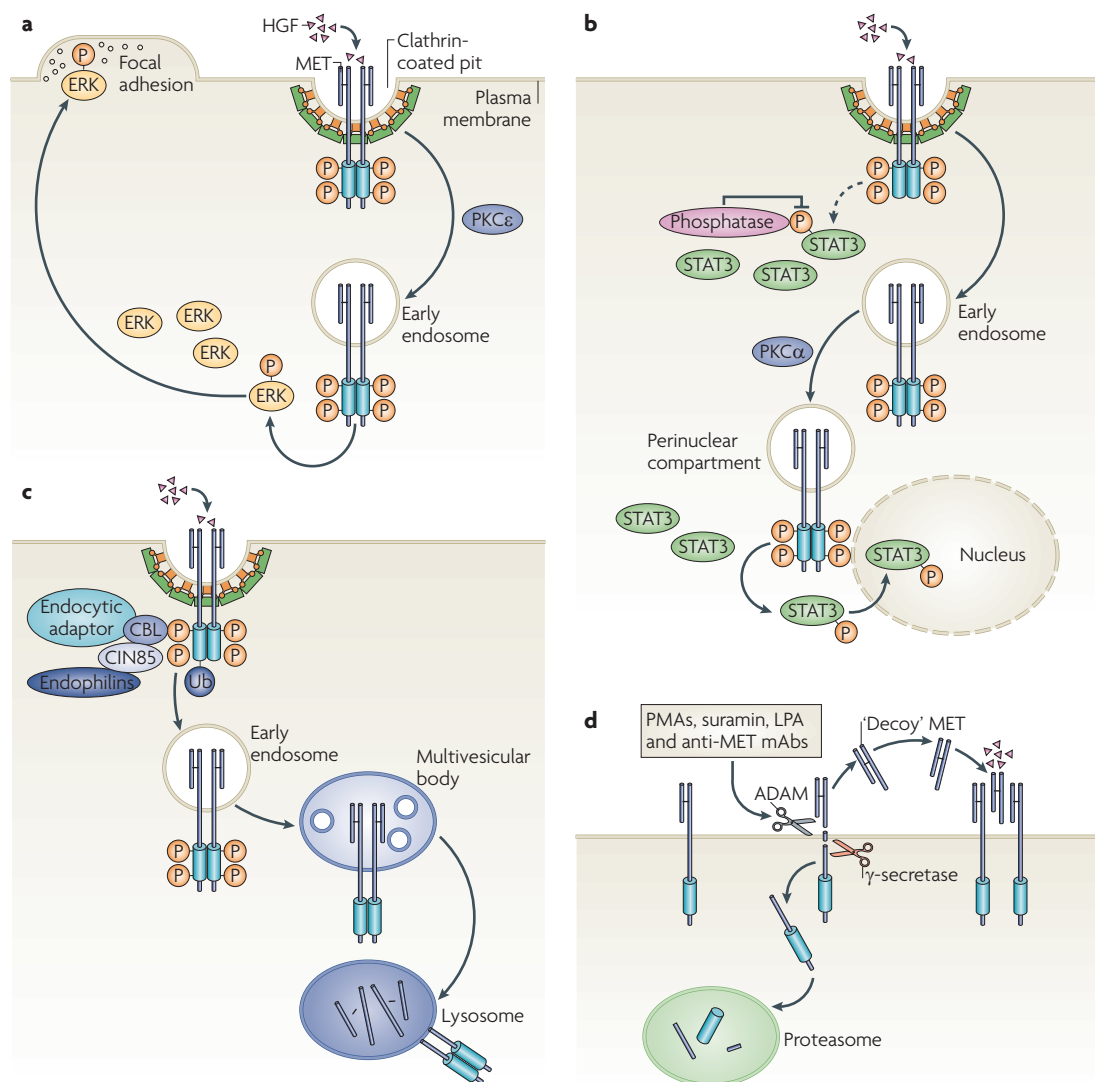


Figure 3 | Compartmentalization of MET signals. After being internalized from the cell surface, MET (also known as HGF receptor) can maintain a signalling-competent modality or can be demolished. **a** | The recruitment of MET into early endosomes is mediated by protein kinase Cε (PKCε) and favours the delivery of active extracellular signal-regulated kinase (ERK) to focal adhesions, where it can mediate hepatocyte growth factor (HGF; also known as scatter factor)-induced cell migration. **b** | MET sorting into non-degradative perinuclear endomembrane compartments is mediated by PKCα. In these compartments, the activity of phosphotyrosine phosphatases, which work on signal transducer and activator of transcription 3 (STAT3) to dissipate signal intensity, is low. This favours efficient phosphorylation of STAT3 by MET and translocation of STAT3 into the nucleus. **c** | Downregulation of active MET is initiated by MET association with casitas B-lineage lymphoma (CBL), an E3 ubiquitin (Ub)-protein ligase that bridges MET and endocytic adaptors. CBL also associates with endophilins through the scaffold molecule CBL-interacting protein 85 (CIN85), which promotes changes in the plasma membrane that are necessary for cell surface curvature in the early phases of endocytosis. Following endocytosis and intermediate accumulation in multivesicular bodies, MET is subjected to lysosomal degradation. **d** | MET can also undergo sequential proteolytic cleavage at two juxtamembrane sites, one in the extracellular domain and the other in the intracellular domain. The first cleavage (known as shedding), which is carried out by a disintegrin and metalloprotease (ADAM)-like extracellular protease, generates a soluble extracellular 'decoy' fragment that interferes with the activity of the full-length receptor and sequesters the ligand. This shedding is stimulated by various agents such as phorbol esters (PMAs), suramin, lysophosphatidic acid (LPA) and monoclonal antibodies (mAbs) against the MET extracellular domain. The second cleavage is performed by γ-secretase and yields an intracellular fragment that is destroyed by the proteasome in an ubiquitin-independent manner. Dashed lines indicate that the signalling intermediates between the two nodes have not been characterized in detail.

Unlike CBL-mediated endosomal degradation, regulated proteolysis of MET is ligand- and ubiquitin-independent and does not require the kinase activity of the receptor: the mechanism occurs basally and affords

MET signalling with chronic, low-grade attenuation under steady-state conditions. The shedding of MET that is catalysed by ADAM metalloproteases can be acutely enhanced by various agents such as phorbol

esters, suramin, lysophosphatidic acid and monoclonal antibodies (mAbs) against the MET ectodomain^{94–102}. Importantly, the extracellular shedding of MET not only decreases the number of receptor molecules on the cell surface but also generates a decoy moiety that interacts with both HGF (by sequestering the ligand) and full-length MET (by impairing dimerization and trans-activation of the native receptor) to further inhibit MET signalling^{103,104}. Therefore, the use of targeted agents — such as mAbs, which increase MET shedding from the cell surface — could have a great therapeutic effect on cancers by reducing MET signalling.

MET signalling in development and disease

To secure output production and to increase functional versatility in the face of recurring perturbations, tyrosine kinase receptors often expand and diversify individual components of their downstream signalling networks, degenerate connections and duplicate entire modules of protein–protein interactions. Signal redundancy, reciprocal signal reinforcement and feedback loops are stereotypical aspects of signal transduction¹⁰⁵. Because of this, extracting functional information from the dissection of individual signalling axes might be judged to be simplistic, if not futile. Signal compensation by other transducers that have overlapping functions must be considered. However, in the case of MET, different cell- and tissue-specific activities seem to be fulfilled by dedicated signalling cascades, with some transducers dominating over others depending on context, timing and biological complexity (TABLE 1). Here, we outline a number of genetic and pharmacologic studies that have contributed to this knowledge. The coverage is purposefully not exhaustive: we will limit our attention to those settings in which a more documented connection between signals and phenotypes has been provided, as well as to those for which information has become available only recently.

Embryonic development. During development, HGF and MET convey essential signals for the growth and survival of hepatocytes and placental trophoblast cells. In *Hgf*- or *Met*-null embryos, the liver is considerably reduced in size and the placental labyrinth is severely hypomorphic^{106–108} (FIG. 4). This hypomorphic phenotype eventually leads to death *in utero* owing to compromised exchange of oxygen and nutrients between maternal and fetal blood. The HGF–MET system also has a decisive role in the proliferation and motility of long-range migrating muscle progenitors. These myogenic precursors delaminate from the dermomyotome, a structure in the dorsolateral region of somites, and travel to the limbs, tongue and diaphragm, where they differentiate to form a subset of the hypaxial muscles¹⁰⁹. Ablation of the *Hgf* or *Met* genes results in complete absence of this specific muscle type, leaving all other muscle groups unaffected^{104–106}. Finally, disruption of HGF–MET function affects the proper wiring of the nervous system, leading to reduced survival of sensory and sympathetic neurons as well as impaired outgrowth and fasciculation (axon bundling) of certain motor nerves^{110–112}.

Using genetic knock-in approaches, several studies have addressed the physiological significance of the different signalling pathways that are regulated by MET in the whole organism. Specificity-switch mutants, in which the MET multifunctional docking site has been converted into an optimal binding motif for PI3K, Src or GRB2, exhibit a rescue of defined phenotypes (when compared with *Met*-null animals) in line with the effectors that are recruited. Mice in which MET exclusively associates with GRB2 are viable, fertile and apparently normal — indicating that GRB2 is sufficient to recruit all of the necessary downstream effectors of MET — whereas mutants with dedicated stimulation of Src or PI3K are embryonic lethal. However, although incompatible with survival, individual activation of Src is sufficient to restore proliferation of placental trophoblasts and myoblasts, and selective activation of PI3K is sufficient to promote axon outgrowth and branching of specific motor nerves¹¹³. Together, these findings suggest that MET-mediated developmental events are accomplished by qualitatively different signals that are endowed with a tissue-specific activity.

The defects that are observed in *Hgf* and *Met* knockout embryos are phenocopied in *Gab1*-null mice — albeit in a slightly attenuated form — indicating that GAB1 has an essential role in MET-based signal transduction pathways¹¹⁴ (FIG. 4). As mentioned above, GAB1 associates with MET directly, through a specific MBS, and indirectly, through the GRB2 adaptor^{51,54}. The mechanism of recruitment of GAB1 to MET influences biological outcomes *in vivo* in a tissue-specific manner: both direct and indirect interactions with MET are necessary for functional MET signalling during liver and placenta formation, whereas either the GRB2 binding site or the MBS, but not both, are required for limb muscle development¹¹⁵. Similar to those observed for MET, interactions of GAB1 with specific downstream effectors control distinct developmental processes. The association between GAB1 and PI3K seems to be essential for EGF receptor-mediated embryonic eyelid closure but this association is not involved in MET-regulated organogenesis¹¹³. MET signalling in embryonic development is mainly channelled by the GAB1–SHP2 interaction; indeed, GAB1 mutants that are unable to bind SHP2 phenotypically copy *Met*-null mutants, with defects such as a thin placental labyrinth layer (FIG. 4) and impaired migration of muscle precursors¹¹⁵. Again, we can conclude that the biological responses elicited by GAB1, like those elicited by MET, have different signal requirements in different tissues during embryonic development.

Organ regeneration. The signalling mechanisms that mediate MET-driven tissue patterning during organ regeneration have been studied both *in vitro*, by performing morphogenetic assays under three-dimensional culture conditions, and *in vivo*, using Cre–*loxP*-mediated conditional deletion of MET in selected tissues.

When embedded in a collagen matrix, normal epithelial cells proliferate and assemble into spheroids, which feature a centrally localized, hollow lumen,

Placental labyrinth

The area of direct exchange between the fetal and maternal blood supply in the mammalian placenta.

Hypaxial muscle

Skeletal muscle that is derived from progenitor cell populations that are located in the lateral myotome of each somite. Examples of hypaxial muscles include, among others, the diaphragm, the abdominal muscles and the muscles of the limb and girdles.

Table 1 | MET-dependent signals and biological responses

Transducer	Position in the pathway	Biochemical activity	Biological activity in vitro	Biological activity in vivo
GAB1	Direct or indirect (through GRB2) interaction with MET	Adaptor	Promotes epithelial tubulogenesis ^{43,44,49,51}	Promotes the proliferation of liver and placenta ¹¹⁴ , the migration of limb muscle precursors ¹¹⁴ and liver regeneration ¹²⁷
GRB2	Direct or indirect (through SHC) interaction with MET	Adaptor	Promotes cell proliferation, transformation and motility ^{37,45,51,164}	Promotes the proliferation of liver and placenta and the migration of limb muscle precursors ¹¹³
Src	Direct interaction with MET	Tyrosine kinase	Promotes anchorage-independent growth and motility ^{37,165}	Promotes proliferation of placenta and myoblasts ¹¹³
PI3K	Direct or indirect (through GAB1) interaction with MET	Lipid kinase	Promotes cell proliferation, survival and motility ^{37,158,166,167}	Promotes axon outgrowth and branching of some motor nerves ¹¹³
SHP2	Direct or indirect (through GAB1) interaction with MET	Tyrosine phosphatase	Promotes epithelial tubulogenesis ^{44,51}	Promotes the proliferation of placenta ¹¹³ , migration of limb muscle precursors ¹¹³ and liver regeneration ¹²⁷
SHC	Direct interaction with MET	Adaptor	Promotes proliferation and motility ⁴⁵	Not determined
STAT3	Direct interaction with MET	Transcription factor	Promotes epithelial tubulogenesis ⁴⁷ and anchorage-independent growth ⁴⁸	Promotes tumorigenesis (specifically leiomyosarcoma) ⁴⁸
CRK	Indirect interaction (through GAB1) with MET	Adaptor	Promotes cell motility and anchorage-independent growth ^{71,168}	Not determined
Akt	Downstream transducer	Ser/Thr kinase	Promotes cell survival ¹⁶⁹	Promotes liver regeneration ¹²⁶
ERK1 and ERK2	Downstream transducer	Ser/Thr kinase	Promotes epithelial tubulogenesis ¹¹⁸ and cell survival ¹⁶⁹ ; inhibits TGF β fibrogenic activity ^{131,132}	Promotes liver regeneration ¹²⁶
JNK	Downstream transducer	Ser/Thr kinase	Promotes cell transformation ⁷⁰ , anchorage-independent growth ⁷¹ and apoptosis ¹⁶⁰	Not determined
p38 MAPK	Downstream transducer	Ser/Thr kinase	Promotes cell proliferation ⁷² and apoptosis ^{73,74}	Not determined
NF- κ B	Downstream transducer	Transcription factor	Promotes cell proliferation ⁷⁷ , epithelial tubulogenesis ⁷⁷ and cell survival ^{76,160}	Not determined

ERK, extracellular signal-regulated kinase; GAB1, GRB2-associated-binding protein 1; GRB2, growth factor receptor-bound protein 2; JNK, Jun amino-terminal kinase; MAPK, mitogen-activated protein kinase; NF- κ B, nuclear factor- κ B; PI3K, phosphoinositide 3-kinase; SHC, Src-homology-2 domain-containing transforming protein; STAT3, signal transducer and activator of transcription 3; TGF β , transforming growth factor- β .

surrounded by polarized cells¹¹⁶. HGF causes spheroids to form elongated tubules in a stepwise sequence of biological events¹¹⁷. First, cells undergo a partial epithelial–mesenchymal transition (EMT), which involves the transformation of tightly packed elements into invasive, spindle-shaped cells that emit long cytoplasmic extensions in the surrounding matrix. Then, these extensions develop into single-file chains, which must resist anoikis to lengthen and thicken. Ultimately, cells redifferentiate: they restore polarity and turn into solid cords that become mature tubules by the progressive formation of a continuous lumen. At the signalling level, the series of events required for HGF-dependent tubule formation has been dissected. As a whole, this process requires the integrity of the STAT3 and NF- κ B pathways^{47,77}. The initial EMT relies on hypersustained activation of the Raf–MEK–ERK pathway, which, as discussed earlier, is triggered by the association of active MET-bound GAB1 with the tyrosine phosphatase SHP2 (REFS 44,53,118,119). Cell survival is promoted by transcription factors of the Snail family¹²⁰. The later phases of epithelial tubulogenesis entail the activity of matrix metalloproteases (MMPs), which, albeit dispensable for

the early formation of extensions and chains, seem to be necessary to produce cords and hollow tubules¹¹⁸. HGF has an important role in the regulation of the functions of MMPs by enhancing the transcriptional levels of a large number of MMPs as well as those of several proteases that convert the precursor forms of MMPs into active enzymes^{121–123}.

In vivo, MET function is particularly important for the regeneration of the liver and the kidney in response to both acute and chronic insults. Production of HGF increases steeply following liver damage, and the ensuing activation of MET in hepatocytes provides strong mitogenic and anti-apoptotic stimuli for organ repair^{14,15,124}. Accordingly, conditional deletion of MET in the liver results in impaired organ reconstitution after toxic insult and hepatectomy^{125,126} (FIG. 4). In these mutant mice, phosphorylation of ERK1 and ERK2 is lost and there is a delay in the timing of maximal activation of Akt that occurs after hepatic injury. The proliferation defect is reflected by low transcriptional induction of cyclins and enhanced expression of the cyclin-dependent kinase (CDK) inhibitor p21 (also known as CIP1 and WAF1)¹²⁶. An analogous phenotype of

Epithelial–mesenchymal transition
(EMT). The transformation of an epithelial cell into a mesenchymal cell that has migratory and invasive properties.

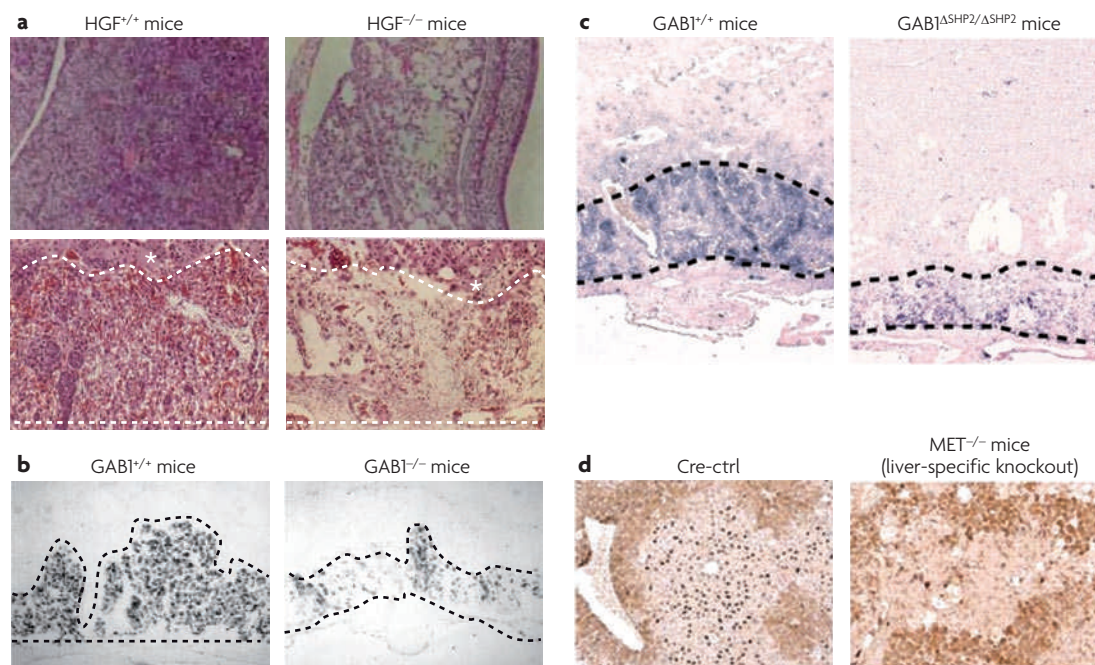


Figure 4 | The phenotypes of genetic abrogation of specific MET signals. Mutant mice with targeted disruption of hepatocyte growth factor (HGF; also known as scatter factor)- or MET (also known as HGF receptor)-dependent signals show various abnormalities that are related to proliferative impairment. **a** | The liver of HGF knockout (HGF^{-/-}) mice features severe loss of cellularity and enlarged sinusoids compared with that of wild-type embryos (HGF^{+/+} mice). Similarly, the labyrinth layer (delimited by dotted lines) contains fewer trophoblast cells, embryonic vessels and maternal sinuses and more mesenchymal cells. The junctional zone (denoted by an asterisk) lies above the labyrinth. **b** | An analogous placental defect, with a large reduction in the size of the labyrinth layer, occurs in mice with genetic deletion of GRB2-associated-binding protein 1 (GAB1). **c** | The same phenotype is also displayed in mice that harbour a knock-in point mutation that abolishes GAB1 interaction with SHP2 (also known as PTPN11) (GAB1^{ΔSHP2/ΔSHP2} mice). **d** | In adult animals, Cre-loxP-mediated conditional deletion of MET in the liver impairs hepatic regeneration following toxic insult, as shown by the reduction of hepatocytes incorporating bromo-deoxyuridine (BrdU), which indicates a decrease in proliferating hepatocytes. Larger necrotic areas are also evident in the liver of MET^{-/-} mice compared with control liver (Cre-ctrl). A similar decrease of proliferating hepatocytes can be observed during post-hepatectomy regeneration in mice with liver-specific knockout of GAB1 and in mice with liver-targeted disruption of SHP2 (REF. 127). Images in part **a** modified, with permission, from REFS 106,107 © (1995) Macmillan Publishers Ltd. All rights reserved. Images in part **b** modified, with permission, from REF. 114 © (2000) The Rockefeller University Press. Images in part **c** modified, with permission, from REF. 115 © (2007) National Academy of Sciences, USA. Images in part **d** modified, with permission, from REF. 125 © (2004) National Academy of Sciences, USA.

compromised hepatic regeneration is also seen in mice with liver-specific ablation of GAB1 or SHP2 (REF. 127), further pointing to a crucial role for GAB1-SHP2 signalling in MET-driven outcomes (FIG. 4).

MET also displays a similar protective activity in the kidney. HGF induces intense proliferative and anti-apoptotic responses in renal epithelial cells by activating Ras-dependent mitogenic signals, the PI3K-Akt pro-survival pathway and, subsequently, the transcriptional upregulation of the anti-apoptotic effectors B-cell lymphoma-extra large (BCL-XL) and BCL-2 (REF. 128). This powerful reno-protective activity prevents acute renal failure due to tubular necrosis and accelerates kidney regeneration.

In the liver and the kidney, persistent damage leads to a severe fibrotic evolution that is sustained by overproduction of TGFβ, which instructs interstitial myofibroblasts to deposit copious amounts of extracellular matrix¹²⁹. HGF acts as a powerful anti-fibrotic

agent by antagonizing TGFβ fibrogenic responses in different ways, from transcriptional downmodulation of TGFβ¹³⁰ to ERK-mediated inhibition of SMADs^{131,132}, the cardinal transcriptional effectors of TGFβ signalling. At least in the liver, fibrosis is further reduced by an atypical pro-apoptotic effect of HGF on myofibroblasts¹³³ (BOX 2).

Epithelial cells also exploit the trophic properties of the HGF-MET system during wound healing. At the wound edges, marginal keratinocytes form the so-called hyperproliferative epithelium, which undergoes rounds of cell division to provide fresh elements that migrate over the provisional matrix of the injured dermis and repopulate the wounded area¹³⁴. Keratinocytes from mutant mice with conditional deletion of MET in the epidermis are unable to contribute to the generation of the hyperproliferative epithelium *in vivo*¹³⁵. *In vitro*, during the closure of scratch wounds, HGF is necessary to re-orient keratinocytes, so that focal adhesion components, actin stress fibres and the plus

Myofibroblast

A modified fibroblast with smooth muscle-like features and contractile properties.

ends of microtubules point towards the wound edges as a prelude for productive cell locomotion. Moreover, HGF fosters the proliferation and migration of epithelial cells into the de-epithelialized zone. The major signalling effectors that mediate these processes are GAB1, Akt, ERK1 and ERK2, as well as p21-activated kinase 1 (PAK1) and PAK2, targets of RhoA that control actin polymerization and protrusion formation¹³⁵.

Cancer growth and metastasis. In most tumours, MET is transcriptionally induced by hypoxia and inflammatory cytokines or pro-angiogenic factors that are abundant in the reactive stroma of full-blown tumours^{34,136}. Hence, MET activation is a late event that aggravates the intrinsic malignant properties of already transformed cells by conveying proliferative, anti-apoptotic and pro-migratory signals (a biological situation that our group calls 'oncogene expedience')²³.

Congruent with the view that invasive cancer cells resume behavioural programmes that are normally operative during embryogenesis and in damaged tissues, MET-driven exacerbation of cancer progression involves stimulation of all the signalling pathways that are known to mediate the several aspects of MET physiological responses in development and adult life. The contribution of specific signals to MET activity in tumours has been partially dissected through the manipulation of the consensus sequences that mediate the recruitment of distinct transducers. By converting the multifunctional docking site of an oncogenic mutant of MET into preferential binding motifs for GRB2 or PI3K, it was demonstrated that Ras signals are primarily involved in MET-triggered cell proliferation, whereas PI3K recruitment is required for the induction of cell motility and invasion; however, a fully metastatic phenotype can be recapitulated only when both effectors are concomitantly associated with MET^{137,138}. Thus, combined activation of multiple pathways is necessary to instruct the full execution of MET-dependent invasive growth in cancer cells. However, blocking a single network node is sufficient to perturb cellular responses, indicating that the targeted inhibition of a specific signalling pathway cannot be compensated for by other, still active, regulatory tiers. This is in line with the well-established observation that obstruction of individual MET-dependent pathways adversely affects tumour growth, survival and migration in various cancer cell types and under different experimental settings^{37,48,50,56–58,70–72,76,139}. For example, the integrity of JNK- and p38-dependent signals is required for MET-stimulated proliferation and anchorage-independent growth in MET-transformed fibroblasts and melanoma cells^{70–72}, and STAT3 signalling and NF- κ B activity are necessary for MET-induced onset of leiomyosarcomas and for the survival of prostate cancer cells, respectively^{48,76}.

The notion that inhibiting a single transducer will suffice to revert or impair the biological phenotype induced by MET activation has strong implications. If there is no redundancy in the many signalling networks regulated by MET, this implicates that targeting any of these pathways would hamper one or more aspects of

MET-driven cancer progression, which could pave the way for the development of several therapeutic strategies together with, or as an alternative to, the selective inhibition of MET. However, recent data suggest that this is unlikely to be the case. In a limited number of tumour cells featuring genetic lesions of MET — caused by gene amplification and, possibly, point mutations^{23,140,141} — receptor hyperactivation is inherent in the cancer's natural history and is required to maintain the transformed phenotype: these cells are dependent on the persistent activity of MET for their relentless proliferation (a situation known as 'oncogene addiction')^{142,143}. In this scenario, MET blockade affects a limited subset of MET downstream signals: many of the pathways controlling MET-driven responses — including STATs, JNK, p38 and NF- κ B — remain active or exhibit scant responses, and only a restricted complement of Ras and PI3K transducers and transcriptional effectors is neutralized^{144–146}. Of note, a similar response to oncogene inactivation also occurs in cells that depend on the EGF receptor for their growth and survival, suggesting that cells that are 'addicted' to oncogenic tyrosine kinase receptors may develop common mechanisms to sustain malignancy and therefore may be susceptible to similar therapeutic interventions^{144,145}.

The mechanisms that are responsible for this kind of selectivity have not been elucidated, but they could rely on feedback effects that are hard-wired into oncogene-addicted tumours. In the case of the EGF receptor, transcriptional induction of the dual specificity phosphatases (DUSPs), which are negative regulators of MAPK activity, has been proposed as a crucial step in modulating receptor signalling outputs¹⁴⁷. Interestingly, DUSPs exert a promiscuous phosphatase activity on multiple members of the MAPK family¹⁴⁸. One could speculate that an imbalance in substrate dephosphorylation might lead to the silencing of some MAPK components while leaving others relatively unaffected.

Intrinsic addiction to MET is characterized by high steady-state signalling due to chronic receptor activation, which is the consequence of a fixed and transmissible genetic alteration; in this setting, the reliance of tumours on the continued activity of MET seems to be governed by a small, self-sufficient group of signal transducers. Conversely, the activation state of MET in the context of oncogene expedience is dynamic because it mainly depends on the hectic and reversible environmental conditions that are typical of cancer; in this situation, MET-regulated outcomes are controlled by multiple, non-redundant signalling crosstalks. This implies that oncogene addiction and oncogene expedience should be considered as separate entities when managing therapeutic opportunities and future strategies against cancer, and in particular when designing prospective combination therapies.

Outlook

Embryonic morphogenesis, organ regeneration and cancer invasion are all facets of a common theme in which MET and MET signals have fundamental roles. Although the regulatory molecules are the same and the

biological outcomes share unifying principles, the precise mechanisms that dictate the final execution of one or another response are far from being elucidated. The regulation of the different outcomes of MET activation, as well as the definition of their biological specificity, could depend on signal modifiers that are endowed with a tissue-restricted distribution (including, as recently demonstrated, microRNAs^{149–153}) or on dedicated protein interaction networks, and could be further tuned by transcriptional modulation.

The ongoing development of new technologies is certainly one prerequisite for unravelling the complexity of these issues. Cell- and context-dependent signal modulators can be now identified by using genome-wide functional screens; higher details in regulatory protein–protein interactions can be achieved by using mass spectrometry; and, finally, information on the presence of positive or negative signalling feedback loops, which are likely to enforce or attenuate MET biochemical outputs, can be extracted from gene expression profiling. The long catalogues of hits pinpointed by such ‘omics’ efforts can be prioritized by using bioinformatics and challenged by using high-throughput platforms for biological validation.

Gathering this kind of knowledge has important medical relevance. Due to the ability of MET to support organ repair and contrast fibrotic evolution, agents that are endowed with agonistic activity are currently being tested in a number of early-phase clinical trials. From an opposite perspective, several MET inhibitors are being evaluated for their efficacy in blocking the growth and progression of various tumour types²³. Most anti-cancer therapies are accompanied by drug-induced toxicity that could be relieved by triggering MET regenerative signals in the damaged organs; ironically, this approach is hindered by the reasonable concern that systemic delivery of MET-activating compounds in cancer patients would promote the spread of neoplastic cells and awaken dormant metastases¹⁵⁴. Even more insidiously, MET-driven stimulation of growth and survival signals might cause the progression of incipient pre-malignant clones to full-blown malignancy in apparently healthy individuals. Detailed knowledge of MET-regulated signals *in vivo* will prove useful to identify the pathways that preferentially mediate the healing properties of MET and those that convey its lethal pro-invasive activity. If successful, this endeavour will provide momentum for clinical applications in both regenerative medicine and cancer therapy.

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Competing interests statement

The authors declare no competing financial interests.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Paolo M. Comoglio's homepage: <http://www.ircc.unito.it/people/home/home.html?user=Paolo%20Comoglio>
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