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Digging deeper into the immunopeptidome: characterization of post‑translationally modifed peptides presented by MHC I

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Abstract

Peptides presented by MHC molecules on the cell surface, or the immunopeptidome, play an important role in the adaptive arm of the immune response. Antigen processing for MHC class I molecules is a ubiquitous pathway present in all nucleated cells which generates and presents peptides of both self and non-self-origin. Peptides with post-translational modifcations represent one category of peptides presented by MHC class I molecules. However, owing to the complexity of self-peptides presented by cells, the diversity of peptides with post-translational modifcations is not well-studied. In this study, we carried out MHC Class I immunopeptidomics analysis of Loucy T-cell leukemia and A375 malignant melanoma cell line to characterize the diversity of post-translational modifcations of MHC class I-bound peptides. Using high resolution mass spectrometry, we identifed 25,761 MHC-bound peptides across both cell lines using Bolt and Sequest search engines. The enrichment method was highly specific as \sim 90% of the peptides were of typical length (8–12 amino acids long) and the motifs were expected based on previously reported motifs for MHC I alleles. Among the MHC-bound peptides, we identifed phosphorylation as a major post-translational modifcation followed by deamidation. We observed site-specifc localization of these post-translational modifcations, at position P4 for phosphorylated peptides and position P3 for deamidated peptides. We identifed a smaller number of peptides with acetylated and methylated lysine, possibly due to very low stoichiometric levels of these PTMs compared to phosphorylation and deamidation. Using PEAKS de novo sequencing algorithm, we identified spliced peptides that accounted for \approx 5–7% of MHC-bound peptides that were otherwise similar in their features as normal MHC-bound peptides. We validated the identity of several post-translationally modifed peptides and spliced peptides through mass spectrometric analysis of synthetic peptides. Our study confrms post-translationally modifed peptides to be present at low stoichiometric levels along with unusual spliced peptides through unbiased identifcation using high resolution mass spectrometry.

Keywords Immunopeptidome · MHC class I · MHC binding motifs · Post-translational modifcations · Spliced peptides

Abbreviations

- MHC Major Histocompatibility Complex
- PTM Post translational modifcations
- HCD High energy collision-induced dissociation
- PCPS Proteosome-catalyzed peptide splicing

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Introduction

The immunopeptidome presented by MHC class I molecules on the cell surface represents a unique set of intracellularly processed peptides in all nucleated cells. Circulating immune cells monitoring these MHC-bound peptides

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for the presence of foreign antigens form a crucial part of adaptive immunity. In the MHC class I antigen presentation pathway, endogenous proteins are degraded by proteasome machinery in the cytoplasm and products are transported to the endoplasmic reticulum before being further processed by endoplasmic reticulum resident proteases to a desired length. The peptides then associate with MHC class I molecules and are transported to the surface of the cell (Neefes et al. [2011](#page-9-0)).

Because of the polymorphic nature of genes encoding the MHC molecules, notably class I, thousands of MHC class I alleles are known to exist (Robinson et al. [2017](#page-9-1)). This leads to an extraordinary diversity in peptides presented by these MHC alleles. Additional diversity is introduced through post translational modifcations, defective ribosomal products (Yewdell et al. [2001\)](#page-9-2), proteasome catalyzed spliced peptides (Vigneron et al. [2017](#page-9-3)) and peptides encoded by genomic variants. Peptides derived from genomic variation can include those that are specifc to sequence alterations in tumor cells, commonly referred to tumor neoantigens, as they are not observed in the immunopeptidome of normal cells. Mass spectrometry has been the major analytical workfow used for the unbiased identifcation of thousands of peptides presented by MHC molecules (Bassani-Sternberg et al. [2016\)](#page-8-0). Hitherto, the tumor neoantigens have largely been identifed using next generations sequencing approaches followed by bioinformatics predictions and immunogenicity analysis (Linnemann et al. [2015;](#page-9-4) Tran et al. [2015](#page-9-5)). Largescale identifcation of these tumor specifc antigens using mass spectrometry has remained challenging thus far due to low expression of the variant proteins. Unlike tumor specifc antigens, tumor-associated antigens represent proteins enriched in tumors, such as diferentiation antigens and overexpressed proteins including proteins with post-translational modifcations (Buonaguro et al. [2011](#page-8-1)). Several post-translational modifcations identifed among the MHC-bound peptides include phosphorylation, deamidation, citrullination, etc. (Engelhard et al. [2006\)](#page-8-2). However, identifcation of these modifed peptides has been challenging due to low stoichiometric levels of these PTMs. Another limiting factor has been the requirements for compute-intensive infrastructure for database searching with non-enzymatic cleavage sites along with additional post-translational modifcations. For these reasons, published reports of unbiased searches for the post-translational modifcations among immunopeptidome data sets are limited. In contrast to peptides with post-translational modifcations, spliced peptides constitute a unique class of peptides generated post-translationally by the proteasome complex in the cytoplasm (Vigneron et al. [2017\)](#page-9-3). Several recent studies have focused on identifcation and characterization of these spliced peptides (Liepe et al. [2016](#page-9-6); Faridi et al. [2018](#page-8-3)), which are clinically relevant because of tumor-infiltrating CD8⁺ T lymphocyte responses (Mishto and Liepe [2017](#page-9-7)).

Here, we employ high resolution mass spectrometry to study the diversity of the MHC class I immunopeptidome from Loucy T-cell leukemia and A375 cell lines to identify several post-translationally modifed peptides including spliced peptides.

Methodology

Culturing of cell lines

Loucy and A375 cell lines were obtained from ATCC. A375 cell line was cultured in DMEM medium and Loucy cell line was cultured in RPMI-1640 medium supplemented with 10% fetal bovine serum and 1% penicillin/streptomycin. The cell lines were maintained in $CO₂$ incubator with 5% $CO₂$ level. Upon reaching confuence, cell lines were washed with phosphate bufered saline (PBS) three times, fash frozen in liquid nitrogen and stored at -80 °C.

Crosslinking of W6/32 clone MHC class I antibody to protein A‑sepharose 4B beads

Pan-specifc MHC Class I antibody (W6/32 clone) was ordered from BioXCell. 5 mg of antibody was loaded on 1 mL of Protein A-Sepharose 4B beads (Invitrogen) packed in a polypropylene column (BioRad) and incubated for 30 min. Antibody-bound beads was washed with borate bufer (pH 9) and incubated with 20 mM dimethyl pimelimidate (DMP) linker for 45 min. Crosslinking reaction was stopped by incubating the column with ethanolamine for 2 h. Then the column was washed with phosphate buffer saline and stored in PBS with 0.02% sodium azide at 4 °C. On the day of experiment, column was washed with 0.1 N acetic acid and equilibrated with 100 mM Tris–HCl, pH 8.0.

Enrichment of MHC–peptide complexes

MHC–peptide complexes were enriched using previously described protocol (Bassani-Sternberg et al. [2016](#page-8-0)). Loucy and A375 cell lines were lysed in bufer containing 0.25% sodium deoxycholate, 0.2 mM IAA, 1 mM EDTA, 1 mM PMSF, 1% Octyl-B-glucopyranoside, 1:200 protease inhibitor cocktail for 1 h on ice. Cell debris was separated by centrifugation of the lysate at 25,000×*g*, 4 °C for 50 min. The supernatant was loaded onto an MHC class I crosslinked affinity column and incubated for 1 h with gentle rotation. The column was washed with 150 mM NaCl in 20 mM Tris HCl pH 8.0, 400 mM NaCl in 20 mM Tris HCl pH 8.0 followed by 150 mM NaCl in 20 mM Tris HCl pH 8.0 and 20 mM Tris HCl pH 8.0. MHC-bound peptide complexes were eluted using 1% TFA and the eluate was subjected to C_{18} cleanup to purify the eluted peptides. The peptides were dried using a speedvac concentrator prior to LC–MS/MS analysis.

LC–MS/MS analysis

LC–MS/MS analysis was carried out on an Orbitrap Eclipse Tribrid mass spectrometer (Thermo Scientifc, San Jose, CA) connected online to a Dionex RSLC3000 liquid chromatography system (Thermo Scientifc, San Jose, CA). Peptides were suspended in solvent A (0.1% formic acid) and loaded on a trap column (PepMap C_{18} 2 cm \times 100 µm, 100 Å) followed by high resolution separation column (EasySpray 50 cm \times 75 µm, C₁₈ 1.9 µm, 100 Å, Thermo Scientific, San Jose, CA). The mass spectrometer was operated in data dependent mode with a cycle time of 2 s. Survey MS scan was acquired in Orbitrap mass analyzer with 120 K resolution, 4×e5 AGC target and 50 ms injection time. Monoisotopic precursor ions with charge state 2–4 were subjected to MS/MS with top scan priority followed by precursor with charge 1. Precursor ions $(z=2-4)$ were fragmented with 28% HCD normalized collision energy and acquired in orbitrap mass analyzer with 15 K resolution. Precursor ions $(z=1)$ with a mass range of 700–1400 *m/z* were fragment with 32% HCD NCE and analyzed in orbitrap analyzer. Dynamic exclusion was enabled with 30 s exclusion duration. Additional flters included monoisotopic precursor selection and intensity threshold of 2.5×10^4 .

Database searching

Raw fles were processed using Sequest in Proteome Discoverer 2.4 software and Bolt in Pinnacle software (v99.0) platforms. Database searching was performed using UniProt human canonical protein sequences with no enzyme specificity. Peptide length of 7–25 amino acids was considered for database searching with a precursor ion tolerance of 10 ppm, and fragment ion tolerance of 0.05 Da. Oxidation (methionine), phosphorylation (serine, threonine and tyrosine), deamidation (asparagine) and acetylation (protein N-terminus) were set as dynamic modifcations in Sequest search engine. In addition to these modifcations, two other modifcations—acetylation (lysine) and methylation (lysine)—were included in the search using Bolt search algorithm. False discovery rate was maintained at 1% peptide level for both search engines.

De novo sequencing for the identifcation of spliced peptides

De novo sequencing was performed using PEAKS Studio 10 software using search settings as described above. De novo search results (up to 5 sequence candidates for each spectrum) were fltered for an average local confdence (ALC) score for≥80%. The resulting scans were further fltered for the scans without a peptide spectral match in the traditional database search. Scans were then fltered out if any of the de novo candidate sequences matched to the canonical human protein sequences. Only scans which passed all the abovementioned criteria were considered for the identifcation of spliced sequences. De novo candidate sequences from these scans were mapped against all human protein sequences by partial sequence match. Candidate peptide sequences that completely map to a protein by splicing (cis-splicing) were identifed using an in-house Python script. Finally, only the peptides which contained at least two amino acids in both spliced fragments were considered as confident spliced peptides.

Data analysis

Unsupervised clustering of the peptides was performed using GibbsCluster server 2.0 using default parameters (Andreatta et al. [2017\)](#page-8-4). The number of clusters with highest Kullbach Leibler distance was considered from the clustering results. Binding prediction of the MHC-bound peptides was carried out using NetMHC pan 4.1 server (Reynisson et al. [2020](#page-9-8)). Hydrophobicity indices of the spliced peptides were predicted using SSRCalc Version Q.O tool (Krokhin and Spicer [2009\)](#page-9-9).

Results and discussion

Summary of the immunopeptidomics analysis

In this study, immunoprecipitation of MHC complexes was carried out on Loucy T-cell leukemia cell line $(1 \times 10^9 \text{ cells})$ and A375 malignant melanoma cell line $(4 \times 10^8 \text{ cells})$ using pan-MHC-specifc class I antibody (W6/32 clone). The workflow employed for the immunopeptidomics analysis is outlined in Fig. [1](#page-3-0)A. Cell pellets were lysed in a detergent lysis bufer followed by the immunoprecipitation and elution of MHC–peptide complexes. MHC-bound peptides were further purifed from MHC molecules and β-2-microglobulin and subjected to LC–MS/MS analysis in technical replicates.

LC–MS/MS analysis was carried out using Orbitrap Eclipse mass spectrometer and raw fles were processed using two diferent search engines, Sequest and Bolt. In all, 25,761 peptides were identifed across both cell lines (19,597 in Loucy and 8803 in A375) with a limited overlap of ~ 10% peptide identifcations across cell lines (Fig. [1](#page-3-0)B) (Supplementary Tables 1–4). Database searching using Bolt led to an increase in the number of peptides identified in both Loucy and A375 cell lines with $\sim 65\%$ of the peptides identifed being common to both search engines (Supplementary Fig. 1). Peptides of conventional length

Fig. 1 Summary of the immunopeptidomics analysis of Loucy and A375 cell lines. **A** Sample preparation workfow involved in the purifcation of MHC–peptide complexes followed by LC–MS/MS analysis. **B** Non-redundant number of peptides identifed by LC–MS/MS

analysis in A375 and Loucy cell lines using both Sequest and Bolt search engines. **C** Distribution of the number of peptides identifed across 8–12 amino acids range in Loucy and A375 cell lines

for MHC class I-bound peptides (8–12 amino acids) represented ~ 90% of peptides identifed from both cell lines (Fig. [1](#page-3-0)B). 9-mer peptides constituted the majority of the immunopeptidome across both the cell lines followed by 10-mer peptides (Fig. [1C](#page-3-0)). Motif enrichment analysis was performed using unsupervised clustering of peptides to identify the binding motifs among these peptides. Motifs identifed from the clustering process corresponded to the binding motifs expected for the MHC alleles present in these cell lines (Fig. [2](#page-4-0)). In addition, binding affinity predictions of identifed peptides with their respective MHC alleles showed that \sim 90% of the peptides were expected to be strong binders to the known MHC haplotype of Loucy and A375 cell lines. These results indicate that enrichment of MHC–peptide complexes followed by high resolution mass spectrometry

reveals high specifc and in-depth analysis of the MHC class I immunopeptidome.

Identifcation of post‑translationally modifed peptides in immunopeptidome

Because of the large search space and prolonged database search time, only phosphorylation, deamidation and protein N-terminus acetylation were included as dynamic modifcations during the Sequest search as these are the most abundant post-translational modifcations in cellular systems. However, due to unique architecture of Bolt software, which makes it suitable in terms of speed and capacity to handle large databases, additional post-translational

Fig. 2 Unsupervised clustering of the identifed peptides using GibbsCluster sever 2.0. Binding motifs enriched among the identifed peptides with 8–12 aa length in A375 and Loucy cell lines

modifcations—acetylation (K) and methylation (K)—were included in Bolt search.

Overall, we identifed 277 and 153 post-translationally modifed peptides (8–12 aa) in Loucy and A375, respectively (Fig. [3A](#page-5-0)). 42 and 117 phosphorylated peptides were identifed in A375 and Loucy cell lines using both Sequest and Bolt search engines. Out of these peptides, 21 and 46 phosphorylated peptides were identifed both by Sequest and Bolt. Among the phosphorylation sites, phosphorylation on serine was observed more frequently than threonine or tyrosine, which is keeping with their relative abundance in cells (Fig. [3](#page-5-0)B). We then compared the phosphosites identifed in this study against PhosphoSitePlus and PhosphoNET databases to check whether the identifed phosphosites have been previously reported. Notably, out of 149 phosphosites (155 phosphopeptides) identified from both cell lines, $\sim 80\%$ of the phosphosites were previously reported in these databases. Only 31 phosphosites $(\sim 20\%)$ were previously not reported to be phosphorylated, and among these peptides, \sim 35% were predicted to be phosphorylated by P-Site Predictor algorithm (PhosphoNET). Further studies will be needed to characterize these novel phosphosites both in the context of signaling mechanisms and the immunopeptidome.

Similarly, 51 and 81 peptides were identifed with deamidation modifcation in A375 and Loucy cell lines and only 3 peptides were common between these cell lines. One of the common peptides, KLNDTYVNV, contained deamidation modifcation at P3 position in both cell lines. Though deamidation modifcation can occur as an experimental artifact, deglycosylation of asparagine residue catalyzed by NGLY1 enzyme also leads to deamidation (Misaghi et al. [2004](#page-9-10)). Out of the 129 deamidated peptides identifed from both cell lines, 57 peptides $(-44%)$ have deamidation modification localized to *N*-glycosylation motif *N*-X(P)-S/T indicating deglycosylation of peptides before presentation by MHC molecules. Further gene ontology analysis of the proteins with deamidation sites indicated these proteins localize to diferent membrane compartments in the cell. Despite the deep coverage of the immunopeptidome, other modifcations, such as lysine acetylation and lysine methylation, were found to be very low in our data sets. We identifed 4 and 3 lysine-acetylated, 5 and 9 lysine-methylated peptides in A375 and Loucy cell lines, respectively. Further fractionation of the enriched MHC-bound peptides can increase the depth of identifying these post-translationally modified peptides.

Localization of PTMs at P3–P8 position in the MHC‑bound peptide

Next, we looked at the frequency of the phosphorylation and deamidation modifcations at diferent amino acids along the length of MHC-bound peptides. We observed that these modifcations were enriched on P3–P8 amino acid positions

Fig. 3 Identifcation of the post-translationally modifed peptides. **A** Bar chart showing the number of post-translationally modifed peptides by both Sequest and Bolt search engines in A375 and Loucy cell lines. **B** Number of peptides phosphorylated at serine, threonine and

excluding the MHC class I binding anchor positions P2 and P9. This suggests that modifcation at binding anchor positions would interfere with binding to MHC molecules. Notably, we observed that the phosphorylation modifcation is strongly localized at P4 position in 93 peptides out of 155 phosphorylated peptides identifed in both A375 and Loucy cell lines (Fig. [3C](#page-5-0)). Considering the amino acid properties in the MHC binding motif, the selectivity of phosphorylation modifcation at P4 is probably due to higher localization of acidic amino acids at this position in the respective MHC allele binding motifs. Similarly, deamidation modifcation is highly localized at P3 to P7 positions with P3 as the commonest position of deamidation in most peptides (Fig. [3D](#page-5-0)). Out of 129 deamidated peptides identifed across both cell lines, 104 peptides were deamidated at positions P3–P7. Even though the number of peptides with acetylation and methylation was small, we observed that a majority of these have the modifcation localized at P4 position. As P3–P8 position of the peptide is protruding out of the MHC binding pocket and interacting with the T-cell receptor, high

tyrosine residues in A375 and Loucy cell lines. **C**, **D** Localization of phosphorylation and deamidation modifcations along the length of the peptides

frequency of the PTMs at these locations indicates a possible role of interaction with the T-cell receptor.

Identifcation of spliced peptides through de novo sequencing pipeline

Identifcation of spliced peptides poses another challenge due to non-genome encoded, post-translational de novo assembly of these sequences catalyzed by the proteasome. In addition, due to unpredictable branching points of the splicing reaction, identifcation of spliced peptides has been performed using de novo sequencing of the MS/MS spectra as described by Mylonas et al. ([2018](#page-9-11)). Peptides identifed by PEAKS de novo sequencing pipeline were fltered for − 10log*P* score of>15 and average local confdence score of $>80\%$. Further processing of these peptides was performed using an in-house pipeline which identifies the splicing position of the de novo peptide by matching the fragments of the peptide against the human protein sequences. Furthermore, single amino acid spliced variants

were removed from the fnal list of spliced peptides due to possibility of single nucleotide variants, or improper fragmentation of the peptides leading to loss of b1 or y1 ions. Our analysis focused on the identifcation of only cis-spliced peptides due to the controversial nature of the existence of trans-spliced peptides.

Overall, we identifed 415 and 1298 spliced peptides from A375 and Loucy representing \sim 5–7% of the MHCbound peptides (Supplementary Tables 5–6). The relative contribution of the diferent lengths of the spliced peptides in both the cell lines followed similar trend to the nonspliced peptides identifed with more 9-mer than 10-mer peptides (Fig. [4](#page-6-0)A, B). Our fndings are in agreement with a previous report on the contribution of spliced peptides to the immunopeptidome (Mylonas et al. [2018\)](#page-9-11). We further analyzed the spliced peptide sequence assignments by calculating the sequence-specifc hydrophobicity index and correlated with the observed retention time of the spliced peptides. As expected, retention times were positively correlated with the predicted hydrophobicity indices indicating that majority of them are confdent identifcations (Fig. $4C$, D). In addition, binding affinity predictions of these spliced peptides against MHC alleles of A375 and Loucy cell lines predicted \sim 50% of these peptides to be strong binders. To validate the identity of these peptides, raw data fles were searched against combined human and spliced peptide databases and database searching was performed using similar settings as the original search. The identifed peptides were fltered for 1% PSM-level false discovery rate. 234 out of 415 peptide sequences and 446 out of 1298 peptides were identifed in A375 and Loucy, respectively. The missed identifcation of several peptides is probably due to low scoring of these identifcations which fell below the 1% PSM-level FDR criteria.

Fig. 4 Identifcations of spliced peptides. **A**, **B** Bar graph of the total number of identifed MHC-bound peptides and spliced peptides in A375 and Loucy cell lines. **C**, **D** Scatter plots of the predicted hydrophobicity index (HI) calculated using SSRCalc and observed reten-

tion times (RT) of the spliced peptides. As the peptides are separated based on their hydrophobicity on reverse-phase resin-based separation columns, a positive correlation of HI with peptide retention time indicates the reliability of the peptide sequence assignment

Validation of post‑translationally modifed peptides using synthetic peptides

Synthetic standard peptides were prepared to validate the identifcation of both post-translationally modifed peptides and spliced peptides. We selected a total of 75 peptides for validation including 26 phosphorylated peptides, 10 peptides with deamidation modification and 39 spliced peptides (Supplementary Table 7). Synthetic peptides were analyzed by LC–MS/MS analysis on Orbitrap Eclipse mass spectrometer. MS/MS spectra of the synthetic peptides showed good correlation to the experimental spectrum for 25 phosphorylated, 10 deamidated and 34 spliced peptides validating the identifcation of these post-translationally modifed MHCbound peptides (Supplementary Fig. 2). Overlaid MS/MS spectrum of experimentally derived and synthetic peptides for SEASPSREAI (phosphorylated peptide), FVYNITTNK (deamidated peptide) and spliced peptides (SAAERLLAF, FLFQDFLRQA) are shown in Fig. [5.](#page-7-0)

Conclusions

In this study, we profled the post-translational landscape of the MHC class I immunopeptidome from 2 cell lines, i.e., A375 and Loucy using a highly sensitive mass spectrometer. Our results showed that peptides with post-translational modifications constitute \sim 1.5% of the total number of MHC-bound peptides. Gene ontology analysis and enrichment of N–X–S/T motif of the deamidated peptides suggests that these are indeed derived from glycosylated proteins. Excluding possible experimental artifacts, a fraction of

Fig. 5 Validation of the identifed peptides using synthetic peptide. Synthetic peptides were synthesized and analyzed by LC–MS/MS analysis. Peptides were validated by overlaying the experimental MS/ MS spectrum with the synthetic MS/MS spectrum. Representative

MS/MS spectrum was shown for **A** SEA**S**PSREAI (phosphorylated peptide), **B** FVY**N**ITTNK (deamidated peptide) and **C**, **D** spliced peptides (SAAERLLAF, FLFQDFLRQA)

these deamidated peptides could reveal novel glycosylation motifs as only 44% of the deamidated peptides identifed in this study belonged to the known N-glycosylation motif of N–X–S/T. A recent study has shown that selective inhibition of the N-glycanase (PNGase) leads to a reduction in the levels of deamidated peptides among enriched MHC-bound peptides (Mei et al. [2020](#page-9-12)). Though only a small number of other modifcations were identifed, our results indicate a diverse PTM footprint of the MHC class I immunopeptidome. Across the diferent post-translational modifcations, several peptides have modifications localized to P3–P7 positions possibly playing an important role in forming a stable TCR–peptide–MHC complex during the interaction with T-lymphocyte. Though phosphorylated and deamidated peptides were shown to have the potential to elicit the T-cell immune response (Zarling et al. [2006;](#page-9-13) Dalet et al. [2011](#page-8-5)), large scale characterization of diverse PTMs and their role in generating the immune response is very much needed to expand the scope of immunotherapy.

Proteasome-catalyzed peptide splicing (PCPS) further diversifes the peptides presented by MHC class I by producing non-contiguous peptides formed by combining two distant regions of a protein (Dalet et al. [2010](#page-8-6)). Identifcation of spliced peptides has been a challenging task as it is limited by the de novo sequencing capabilities and is further made complex by the possibility of improper fragmentation of precursor ions. Several studies have reported contrasting results on the contribution of spliced peptides using MHC class I immunopeptidome. For example, Liepe et al. ([2016\)](#page-9-6) and Faridi et al. ([2018\)](#page-8-3) have identifed that spliced peptides contribute to \sim 30% of the MHC-bound peptides. Our findings that spliced peptides constitute \sim 5% of all MHC-bound peptides is supported by previous studies (Mylonas et al. [2018](#page-9-11); Rolfs et al. [2019](#page-9-14)). Further fltering of the spliced peptides is possible as the source of these peptide sequences can also be derived from non-coding regions of the genome, falsely representing as spliced peptides. However, therapeutically, spliced peptide sequences pose a distinct advantage as they can be a unique source of non-self-antigens presented by MHC molecules crucial for the generation of immune response against the target cell.

In conclusion, our study demonstrated that enrichment of MHC–peptide complexes followed by mass spectrometry analysis enables an in-depth analysis of the immunopeptidome which is characterized by the presentation of several post-translationally modifed peptides and spliced peptides under the huge background of non-modifed peptides. Our study reiterates the need to further improve the methods, such as fractionation or enrichment of post-translational modifcations to identify ultra-low stoichiometric PTMs.

Supplementary Information The online version contains supplementary material available at<https://doi.org/10.1007/s42485-021-00066-x>. **Author contributions** This study was designed by KKM and AP. KKM carried out the cell culture. KKM, ZCR and KKG were involved in carrying out the experiments related to immunoprecipitation. KKM, AP and AKM were involved in bioinformatics analysis. JAP performed the peptide synthesis. AP and KKM were involved in data interpretation. KKM, AKM and GD were involved in preparation of figures. AP edited, critically read and revised the manuscript. All the authors have read and approved the fnal manuscript.

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Availability of data and materials The mass spectrometry proteomics data have been deposited with the ProteomeXchange Consortium via the PRIDE partner repository with the data set identifer PXD024562.

Declarations

Conflict of interest All authors declare that there is no confict of interest.

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