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(54) Title: HUMAN IMMUNODEFICIENCY VIRUS ANTIGENS, VECTORS, COMPOSITIONS, AND METHODS OF USE THEREOF

(57) Abstract: Synthetic HIV envelope proteins, vectors and compositions thereof, and methods for inducing protective immunity against human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infection are described. Viral expression vectors encoding the synthetic HIV envelope proteins can be used in vaccines to provide improved protective immunity against HIV.

TITLE OF THE INVENTION

[0001] Human Immunodeficiency Virus Antigens, Vectors, Compositions, and Methods of Use Thereof

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0002] Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) affects millions of people worldwide, and the prevention of HIV through an efficacious vaccine remains a very high priority, even in an era of widespread antiretroviral treatment. HIV-1 is the most common and pathogenic strain of the virus, with more than 90% of HIV/AIDS cases deriving from infection with HIV-1 group M. The M group is subdivided further into clades or subtypes. An efficacious vaccine ideally would be capable of eliciting both potent cellular responses and broadly neutralizing antibodies capable of neutralizing HIV-1 strains from different clades.

[0003] The high genetic variability of HIV-1 makes the development of a HIV-1 vaccine an unprecedented challenge. In order to improve coverage of potential T-cell epitopes, and improve cellular responses, "mosaic" HIV-1 Gag, Pol and Env antigens, derived from HIV Group Antigen (Gag), Polymerase (Pol), and Envelope (Env) proteins, were described by others and developed in an attempt to provide maximal coverage of potential T-cell epitopes (e.g., Barouch et al, *Nat Med* 2010, 16: 319-323). The mosaic antigens are similar in length and domain structure to wild-type, naturally occurring HIV-1 antigens.

[0004] For example, mosaic HIV antigens described and used in vaccines include those described in Barouch et al, *supra*, and WO 2010/059732 such as:

(a) Gag mosaic antigens including:

(a)(i) a first mosaic Gag sequence ("mos1Gag") having the amino acid sequence as set forth herein in SEQ ID NO: 1, and

(a)(ii) a second mosaic Gag sequence ("mos2Gag") having the amino acid sequence as set forth herein in SEQ ID NO: 2;

(b) Pol mosaic antigens including:

(b)(i) a first mosaic Pol sequence ("mos1Pol") having the amino acid sequence as set forth herein in SEQ ID NO: 3, and

(b)(ii) a second mosaic Pol sequence ("mos2Pol") having the amino acid sequence as set forth herein in SEQ ID NO: 4; and

(c) Env mosaic antigens including:

(c)(i) a first mosaic Env sequence ("mos1Env") having the amino acid sequence as set forth herein in SEQ ID NO: 5, and

(c)(ii) a second mosaic Env sequence ("mos2Env") having the amino acid sequence as set forth herein in SEQ ID NO: 6.

[0005] Sequences encoding these antigens have been cloned in vectors, for example, such as recombinant adenoviral vectors, e.g., recombinant adenovirus serotype 26 (rAd26), and these recombinant vectors were previously used as vaccines to generate immune responses to the antigens (see e.g. Barouch et al, *supra*; and WO 2010/059732). For example, the mos1Gag and mos1Pol mosaic antigen sequences are typically combined into a fusion protein of Gag and Pol ("mos1GagPol"), and the coding sequence of which is cloned into a first Ad26 vector ("rAd26.mos1GagPol"); and the mos2Gag and mos2Pol antigen sequences are combined into another fusion protein of Gag and Pol ("mos2GagPol"), and the coding sequence of which is cloned into a second Ad26 vector ("rAd26.mos2GagPol"). Constructs encoding mos1Env and mos2Env are typically cloned into separate Ad26 vectors ("rAd26.mos1Env" and "rAd26.mos2Env", respectively).

[0006] A set of such mosaic antigens as described above gives good global coverage of Group M HIV-1 isolates, where rAd26 vectors encoding mosaic 1 antigen sequences (e.g., rAd26.mos1GagPol and rAd26.mos1Env) favor clade B and CRF01 HIV-1 subtypes, and rAd26 vectors encoding mosaic 2 antigen sequences (e.g., rAd26.mos2GagPol and rAd26.mos2Env) favor clade C strains. Mosaic HIV-1 Gag, Pol, and Env antigens expressed in rAd26 vectors can be used to improve both the breadth and depth of antigen-specific T-lymphocyte responses in rhesus monkeys, without compromising the magnitude of both cellular and humoral responses when compared with consensus or natural sequence HIV-1 antigens (Barouch et al, *supra*; and WO 2010/059732).

[0007] However, upon further development efforts on the vaccine components described above, it was found that rAd26.mos2Env showed non-optimal cell surface expression and immune response in non-human primates, but moreover displayed a hitherto unreported, unexpected and unpredictable non-optimal genetic stability during the manufacturing process as compared to the other rAd26 vectors, such as rAd26.mos1Env. Thus, vaccines containing rAd26.mos2Env may result in non-optimal immune responses against Clade C HIV-1 subtypes, since the mos2Env mosaic antigen favors clade C HIV-1 strains. Accordingly, there is a need for an alternative to the mos2Env antigen in vaccines against HIV that can be used to induce improved immune responses against HIV-1 clade C.

BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0008] The invention relates to novel synthetic human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) envelope proteins that have improved cell surface expression and genetic stability as compared to the previously described mos2Env antigen. The invention also relates to compositions and methods of using such novel synthetic HIV envelope proteins and/or coding sequences thereof to induce increased immune responses against HIV-1, particularly HIV-1 clade C, preferably when used in combination with other HIV antigens.

[0009] In one general aspect, the invention relates to a nucleic acid encoding a synthetic HIV envelope protein comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 8, or SEQ ID NO:8 having one or more mutations selected from the group consisting of (i) I529P (i.e., a substitution of Ile to Pro at position 529 of SEQ ID NO:8), (ii) K480E (i.e., a substitution of Lys to Glu at position 480 of SEQ ID NO:8), and (iii) a combination of EK479-480RRRR (i.e. a replacement of Glu-Lys at positions 479-480 of SEQ ID NO:8 with four consecutive Arg residues), I529P, A471C (i.e., a substitution of Ala to Cys at position 471 of SEQ ID NO:8) and T575C (i.e., a substitution of Thr to Cys at position 575 of SEQ ID NO:8). In one embodiment, the synthetic HIV envelope protein further comprises a signal sequence, for instance a signal sequence having the amino acid sequence selected from the group consisting of SEQ ID NOs: 9-12. In one embodiment, the signal sequence has the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 9.

[0010] In certain embodiments, the synthetic HIV envelope protein further comprises a transmembrane domain, preferably a transmembrane domain having the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 13.

[0011] In certain embodiments, the synthetic HIV envelope protein further comprises a fragment of a cytoplasmic domain, preferably a fragment of a cytoplasmic domain comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO:14, or amino acids 1-4 thereof (i.e., NRVR). In embodiments wherein the synthetic HIV envelope protein further comprises a transmembrane domain and a fragment of a cytoplasmic domain, it is preferred that the protein also comprises the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 37, which is fused to the carboxyl-terminus (C-terminus) of SEQ ID NO:8 and the amino-terminus (N-terminus) of the transmembrane region.

[0012] In another embodiment, the synthetic HIV envelope protein comprises a trimerization domain, for instance, a trimerization domain comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 15 (GCN4) or SEQ ID NO:16 (foldon domain). In one preferred

embodiment, the trimerization domain comprises the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 15. Such embodiments with trimerization domains are useful for soluble (i.e. non membrane-bound) synthetic HIV envelope proteins based on the ectodomain sequences provided herein, such as that comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 8, wherein the trimerization domain is located at the C-terminus of the synthetic HIV envelope protein.

[0013] In yet other embodiments, the synthetic HIV envelope protein comprises SEQ ID NO: 8 with the following mutations: EK479-480RRRR, I529P, A471C and T575C. The introduction of 6 consecutive arginine residues (positions 478 and 481 in the native sequence of SEQ ID NO: 8 already are Arg residues) results in a further optimized furin cleavage site, so that an improved processed (i.e. cleaved) ectodomain is obtained. The three mutations of I529P, A471C and T575C are known as SOSIP mutations, wherefrom the last two mutations result in introduction of a possible disulfide bridge between the newly created cysteine residues. Overall, these mutations result in a soluble, trimerized, synthetic HIV envelope protein, without necessity for a trimerization domain.

[0014] In a preferred embodiment, the invention relates to a nucleic acid encoding a synthetic HIV envelope protein comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO:17, SEQ ID NO: 18, or aa 1-686 of SEQ ID NO: 19. Most preferably the synthetic HIV envelope protein encoded by the nucleic acid comprises or consists of the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 18.

[0015] In another general aspect, the invention relates to a vector comprising a nucleic acid encoding a synthetic HIV envelope protein according to an embodiment of the invention. In one embodiment, the vector is a viral vector. In a preferred embodiment, the viral vector is an adenoviral vector. In one preferred embodiment, the adenoviral vector is an adenovirus 26 vector.

[0016] Another general aspect of the invention relates to a composition, preferably a vaccine composition, comprising an immunogenically effective amount of a vector according to an embodiment of the invention, and a carrier, wherein the nucleic acid encoding the synthetic HIV envelope protein is operably linked to a promoter sequence. In one embodiment, the composition comprises an adenovirus vector, preferably an adenovirus 26 vector, encoding a synthetic HIV envelope protein comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 18.

[0017] In another general aspect, the invention relates to a vaccine combination for inducing an immune response against a human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) in a subject in need thereof. The vaccine combination comprises a first composition comprising an

immunogenically effective amount of a vector, preferably an adenovirus vector, more preferably an adenovirus 26 vector, encoding a synthetic HIV envelope protein having the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 18, a second composition comprising an immunogenically effective amount of a second vector, preferably a second adenovirus vector, more preferably a second adenovirus 26 vector, encoding an HIV antigenic polypeptide comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 5, and optionally at least one additional composition comprising an immunogenically effective amount of at least one selected from the group consisting of a vector encoding an antigenic polypeptide having the amino acid sequence selected from the group consisting of SEQ ID NOs: 1-4, 28 and 29, and a polypeptide comprising an immunogenically effective amount of an isolated HIV antigenic polypeptide, including but not limited to, a polypeptide having residues 30-708 of the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 7, or a polypeptide having residues 30-724 of SEQ ID NO:36, wherein the first composition, second composition and optional additional composition are present in the same composition or in one or more different compositions.

[0018] Yet another general aspect of the invention relates to methods of inducing an immune response against a human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) in a subject in need thereof, comprising administering to the subject a composition or vaccine combination according to an embodiment of the invention. The invention also relates to methods of inducing an immune response against an HIV comprising priming and boosting the immune response using a composition or a vaccine combination according to an embodiment of the invention.

[0019] Yet a further aspect of the invention relates to a synthetic HIV envelope protein comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 8, or SEQ ID NO: 8 having one or more mutations selected from the group consisting of (i) I529P, (ii) K480E, (iii) a combination of EK479-480RRRR, I529P, A471C and T575C. In one embodiment, the synthetic HIV envelope protein comprises SEQ ID NO:8 with the mutations of EK479-480RRRR, I529P, A471C and T575C. In another embodiment, the synthetic HIV envelope protein comprises residues 30-704 or 30-711 of the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 18. In yet another embodiment the synthetic HIV envelope protein comprises residues 30-686 of the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO:19.

[0020] Another aspect of the invention relates to a cell, preferably an isolated cell, comprising a vector according to an embodiment of the invention.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE SEVERAL VIEWS OF THE DRAWINGS

[0021] The foregoing summary, as well as the following detailed description of the invention, will be better understood when read in conjunction with the appended drawings. It should be understood that the invention is not limited to the precise embodiments shown in the drawings.

[0022] In the drawings:

[0023] FIGS. 1A-1C are schematic representations of the structure of HIV envelope proteins; FIG. 1A shows a full length HIV envelope protein; FIG. 1B shows the structure of a soluble single chain HIV envelope protein according to an embodiment of the invention in which the transmembrane domain (TM) is replaced with a GCN4 trimerization domain, and the furin cleavage site is mutated (sC4); FIG. 1C shows the structure of a membrane bound HIV envelope protein according to an embodiment of the invention comprising a transmembrane domain and a fragment of a cytoplasmic domain (C4D7);

[0024] FIG. 2 shows expression levels of the soluble sC1 envelope protein, which is based on the mos2Env mosaic antigen sequence with an additional C-terminal trimerization domain, and a soluble synthetic HIV envelope protein (sC4) according to an embodiment of the invention; expression was measured by quantitative Western blot using a polyclonal antibody against gp120; plasmids encoding sC1 or sC4 were transiently expressed twice, and each transfection was quantified twice by densitometry; the sC1 protein showed very low expression levels compared to the sC4 synthetic HIV envelope protein, which showed relatively high expression levels;

[0025] FIGS. 3A and 3B show the binding of synthetic HIV envelope proteins with monoclonal antibody 17b (mAb17b) in the presence (light gray) and absence (dark gray) of soluble CD4 as determined by ELISA assay; FIG. 3A shows binding of sC1; FIG. 3B shows binding of sC4;

[0026] FIG. 4 is an image of a Western blot from a native polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis of the sC1 protein, and the sC4 synthetic HIV envelope protein;

[0027] FIG. 5 shows the relative cell surface expression levels of the membrane-bound C1, C1D7, C4 and C4D7 synthetic HIV envelope proteins by FACS analysis of cells expressing these proteins using an anti-gp120 polyclonal antibody (GP120), and by binding to broadly neutralizing antibodies PG9 (PG9) and PG16 (PG16) that are quaternary-structure dependent and preferentially bind to correctly folded Env trimer;

[0028] FIG. 6 is a graphical representation of the stability of adenovirus vectors containing sequences encoding synthetic HIV envelope proteins of the invention including

full-length C4 (FLC4) , C4D7, and sC4 after multiple viral passages; recombinant adenovirus 26 vectors were generated in PER.C6 cells; after the initial 3 passages for transfection and plaque purification, 5 plaques were selected and upscaled for 10 passages in T25 format, resulting in a total viral passage number (vpn) of 13; the stability after vpn 3, 5, 10, and 13 as determined by E1 transgene cassette polymerase chain reaction (PCR) is shown; for example, 3/5 means 3 plaques were stable out of 5 plaques tested, and 5/5 means 5 plaques were stable out of 5 plaques tested; and

[0029] FIGS. 7A and 7B show virus neutralization titers against HIV-1 envelope pseudotyped virus particles (EVPs) in a TZM-bl cell-based neutralization assay in rabbits; log10-transformed IC_{50} values of the high-adenoviral vector dosed groups were measured against EVPs VSV-G (negative control) and MW965.26 (Tier 1A clade C) at weeks 1, 8, 14, and 20; each dot represents the log10-transformed IC_{50} value of an individual rabbit, with the group mean indicated by a horizontal line; HD: Highest Dilution tested (upper solid line); LD: Lowest Dilution tested (lower solid line); LOB: limit of background, 95 percentile value of compiled negative samples (dotted line); Log10 IC_{50} values exceeding the LD or HD threshold were set at the corresponding line; a one-way non-parametric comparison with control using the Dunn method for joint ranking was done for each time point; statistically significant differences are indicated in the graphs: * = $P<0.05$, ** = $P<0.01$, and *** = $P<0.001$; FIG. 7A shows the results with VSV-G (negative control); and FIG. 7B shows the results with MW965.26 (Tier 1A clade C).

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

[0030] Various publications, articles and patents are cited or described in the background and throughout the specification; each of these references is herein incorporated by reference in its entirety. Discussion of documents, acts, materials, devices, articles or the like which has been included in the present specification is for the purpose of providing context for the invention. Such discussion is not an admission that any or all of these matters form part of the prior art with respect to any inventions disclosed or claimed.

[0031] Unless defined otherwise, all technical and scientific terms used herein have the same meaning as commonly understood to one of ordinary skill in the art to which this invention pertains. Otherwise, certain terms used herein have the meanings as set forth in the specification. All patents, published patent applications and publications cited herein are incorporated by reference as if set forth fully herein. It must be noted that as used herein and

in the appended claims, the singular forms "a," "an," and "the" include plural reference unless the context clearly dictates otherwise.

[0032] As used herein, "subject" means any animal, preferably a mammal, most preferably a human, to whom will be or has been administered a vector, composition or combination vaccine according to embodiments of the invention. The term "mammal" as used herein, encompasses any mammal. Examples of mammals include, but are not limited to, cows, horses, sheep, pigs, cats, dogs, mice, rats, rabbits, guinea pigs, monkeys, humans, etc., more preferably a human.

[0033] The invention generally relates to synthetic HIV envelope proteins, nucleic acid and vectors encoding the synthetic HIV envelope proteins, and methods of inducing an immune response against HIV with vectors encoding the synthetic HIV envelope proteins or the synthetic HIV envelope proteins, alone or in combination with one or more additional vectors encoding one or more additional HIV antigenic polypeptides and/or in combination with one or more additional isolated HIV antigenic polypeptides.

[0034] Human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) is a member of the genus Lentivirinae, which is part of the family of Retroviridae. Two species of HIV infect humans: HIV-1 and HIV-2. HIV-1 is the most common strain of HIV virus, and is known to be more pathogenic than HIV-2. As used herein, the terms "human immunodeficiency virus" and "HIV" refer, but are not limited to, HIV-1 and HIV-2.

[0035] HIV is categorized into multiple clades with a high degree of genetic divergence. As used herein, the term "HIV clade" or "HIV subtype" refers to related human immunodeficiency viruses classified according to their degree of genetic similarity. There are currently three groups of HIV-1 isolates: M, N and O. Group M (major strains) consists of at least ten clades, A through J. Group O (outer strains) can consist of a similar number of clades. Group N is a new HIV-1 isolate that has not been categorized in either group M or O.

[0036] As used herein, the terms "HIV antigenic polypeptide," "HIV antigenic protein," and "HIV immunogen" refer to a polypeptide capable of inducing an immune response, e.g., a humoral and/or cellular mediated response, against HIV in a subject. The antigenic polypeptide can be a protein of the HIV, a fragment or epitope thereof, or a combination of multiple HIV proteins or portions thereof, that can induce an immune response or produce an immunity, e.g., protective immunity, against the HIV in a subject.

[0037] Preferably, an antigenic polypeptide is capable of raising in a host a protective immune response, e.g., inducing an immune response against a viral disease or infection, and/or producing an immunity in (i.e., vaccinates) a subject against a viral disease or

infection, that protects the subject against the viral disease or infection. For example, the antigenic polypeptide can comprise a protein or fragments thereof from Simian Immunodeficiency Virus (SIV) or an HIV, such as the HIV or SIV envelope gp160 protein, the HIV or SIV matrix/capsid proteins, and the HIV or SIV *gag, pol* and *env* gene products.

[0038] An HIV antigenic polypeptide can be any HIV-1 or HIV-2 antigen or fragment thereof. Examples of HIV antigens include, but are not limited to *gag, pol*, and *env* gene products, which encode structural proteins and essential enzymes. *Gag, pol*, and *env* gene products are synthesized as polyproteins, which are further processed into multiple other protein products. The primary protein product of the *gag* gene is the viral structural protein gag polyprotein, which is further processed into MA, CA, SP1, NC, SP2, and P6 protein products. The *pol* gene encodes viral enzymes (Pol, polymerase), and the primary protein product is further processed into RT, RNase H, IN, and PR protein products. The *env* gene encodes structural proteins, specifically glycoproteins of the virion envelope. The primary protein product of the *env* gene is gp160, which is further processed into gp120 and gp41. Other examples of HIV antigens include gene regulatory proteins Tat and Rev; accessory proteins Nef, Vpr, Vif and Vpu; capsid proteins, nucleocapsid proteins, and p24 viral protein.

[0039] In certain embodiments, the HIV antigenic polypeptide comprises an HIV Gag, Env, or Pol antigen, or any antigenic portion or epitope or combination thereof, preferably an HIV-1 Gag, Env, or Pol antigen or any antigenic portion or epitope or combination thereof.

[0040] HIV antigenic polypeptides can also be mosaic HIV antigens. As used herein, "mosaic antigen" refers to a recombinant protein assembled from fragments of natural sequences. Mosaic antigens resemble natural antigens, but are optimized to maximize the coverage of potential T-cell epitopes found in the natural sequences, which improves the breadth and coverage of the immune response. Mosaic HIV antigens for use with the invention are preferably mosaic Gag, Pol, and/or Env antigens, and more preferably a mosaic HIV-1 Gag, Pol, and/or Env antigens. As used herein, "a mosaic HIV Gag, Pol, and/or Env antigen" specifically refers to a mosaic antigen comprising multiple epitopes derived from one or more of the Gag, Pol and/or Env polyprotein sequences of HIV.

[0041] In one embodiment, a mosaic HIV antigen for use with the invention is a mosaic HIV Gag antigen with epitopes derived from the sequences of *gag* gene products (examples are provided in SEQ ID NOs: 1, 2); a mosaic HIV Pol antigen with epitopes derived from the sequences of *pol* gene products (examples are provided in SEQ ID NOs: 3, 4); or a mosaic HIV Env antigen with epitopes derived from the sequences of *env* gene products (examples are provided in SEQ ID NOs: 5, 6; also the novel antigens of the invention, e.g. in SEQ ID

NOs: 8, 17, 18, 19, can be considered mosaic HIV Env antigens). In certain embodiments, a mosaic HIV antigen for use with the invention may comprise a combination of epitopes derived from sequences of *gag, pol,* and/or *env* gene products. Illustrative and non-limiting examples include mosaic Env-Pol antigens with epitopes derived from the sequences of *env* and *pol* gene products; mosaic Gag-Pol antigens with epitopes derived from the sequences of *gag* and *pol* gene products; and mosaic Gag-Env antigens with epitopes derived from the sequences of *gag* and *env* gene products. The sequences of *gag, pol,* and *env* gene products can be derived from one or more clades.

[0042] Examples of mosaic HIV Gag, Pol and/or Env antigens that can be used in the invention include those described in, e.g., US20120076812; Barouch et al., *Nat Med* 2010, 16:319-323; and Barouch et al., *Cell* 155:1-9, 2013, all of which are incorporated herein by reference in their entirety. Preferably, mosaic HIV Gag, Pol, and/or Env antigens for use with the present invention include, but are not limited to, mos1Gag (SEQ ID NO: 1), mos2Gag (SEQ ID NO: 2), mos1Pol (SEQ ID NO: 3), mos2Pol (SEQ ID NO: 4), mos1Env (SEQ ID NO: 5), mos2Env (SEQ ID NO: 6), mos1GagPol (SEQ ID NO: 28), mos2GagPol (SEQ ID NO: 29), and combinations thereof.

[0043] As used herein, each of the terms "HIV envelope protein," "env protein," and "Env" refers to a protein that is expressed on the envelope of an HIV virion and enables an HIV to target and attach to the plasma membrane of HIV infected cells, or a fragment or derivative thereof that can induce an immune response or produce an immunity against the HIV in a subject in need thereof. The HIV *env* gene encodes the precursor protein gp160, which is proteolytically cleaved into the two mature envelope glycoproteins, gp120 and gp41. The cleavage reaction is mediated by a host cell protease, furin, at a sequence highly conserved in retroviral envelope glycoprotein precursors. More specifically, gp160 trimerizes to $(gp160)_3$ and then undergoes cleavage into the two noncovalently associated gp120 and gp41. Viral entry is subsequently mediated by a trimer of gp120/gp41 heterodimers. Gp120 is the receptor binding fragment, and binds to the CD4 receptor on a target cell that has such a receptor, such as, e.g., a T-helper cell. Gp41, which is non-covalently bound to gp120, is the fusion fragment and provides the second step by which HIV enters the cell. Gp41 is originally buried within the viral envelope, but when gp120 binds to a CD4 receptor, gp120 changes its conformation causing gp41 to become exposed, where it can assist in fusion with the host cell. Gp140 is the uncleaved ectodomain of trimeric gp160, i.e., $(gp160)_3$, that has been used as a surrogate for the native state of the cleaved, viral spike.

[0044] According to embodiments of the invention, an "HIV envelope protein" can be a gp160, gp140, gp120, gp41 protein, combinations, fusions, truncations or derivatives thereof. For example, an "HIV envelope protein" can include a gp120 protein noncovalently associated with a gp41 protein. It can also include a stabilized trimeric gp140 protein that can have or can be modified to include a trimerization domain that stabilizes trimers of gp140. Examples of trimerization domains include, but are not limited to, the T4-fibritin "foldon" trimerization domain; the coiled-coil trimerization domain derived from GCN4; and the catalytic subunit of *E. coli* aspartate transcarbamoylase as a trimer tag. An "HIV envelope protein" can also be a truncated HIV envelope protein including, but not limited to, envelope proteins comprising a C-terminal truncation in the ectodomain (i.e. the domain that extends into the extracellular space), a truncation in the gp41, such as a truncation in the transmembrane domain of gp41, or a truncation in the cytoplasmic domain of gp41. An "HIV envelope protein" can further be a derivative of a naturally occurring HIV envelope protein having sequence mutations, e.g., in the furin cleavage sites, and/or so-called SOSIP mutations.

[0045] Preferably, an "HIV envelope protein" is a "synthetic HIV envelope protein." As used herein, the term "synthetic HIV envelope protein" refers to a non-naturally occurring HIV envelope protein that is optimized to induce an immune response or produce an immunity against one or more naturally occurring HIV strains in a subject in need thereof. Mosaic HIV Env proteins are examples of synthetic HIV Env proteins, and the invention provides novel synthetic HIV Env antigens, e.g. the ones comprising SEQ ID NOs: 8, 17, 18, or 19.

Synthetic HIV envelope proteins and coding sequences thereof

[0046] Embodiments of the invention relate to novel synthetic HIV envelope proteins and nucleic acid molecules encoding these.

[0047] In one embodiment, the invention relates to a synthetic HIV envelope protein comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 8, or SEQ ID NO:8 having one or more mutations selected from the group consisting of (i) I529P, (ii) K480E, and (iii) a combination of EK479-480RRRR, I529P, A471C and T575C. SEQ ID NO:8 comprises a synthetic mature gp120 and a synthetic truncated gp41without the transmembrane region, nor the cytoplasmic domain. SEQ ID NO:8 is a non-naturally occurring sequence comprised of a chimera of sequences from the mos2Env mosaic antigen (SEQ ID NO: 6), and other HIV envelope protein sequences. The sequence of the novel synthetic Env antigen comprising SEQ ID NO:8 is optimized to provide broad coverage and an enhanced T-cell response

against HIV clade C (as compared to the mos2Env antigen (SEQ ID NO: 6)). In certain embodiments, further amino acids can be added to SEQ ID NO: 8 or one of its variants defined herein.

[0048] In certain embodiments, the synthetic HIV envelope protein further comprises a signal sequence. The synthetic HIV envelope protein is synthesized with a signal sequence that is cleaved from the nascent polypeptide chain during its transport into the lumen of the endoplasmic reticulum (ER). In principle, any known signal sequence could be used. Preferably an HIV Env signal sequence or a variant thereof is used. Different signal sequences have been used in the art for HIV Env proteins (see e.g. WO 2014/107744). In certain embodiments, the signal sequence comprises SEQ ID NO:9, SEQ ID NO:10, SEQ ID NO:11 or SEQ ID NO:12. In one preferred embodiment, the signal sequence comprises SEQ ID NO: 9.

[0049] In certain embodiments, the synthetic HIV envelope protein further comprises a transmembrane domain. The transmembrane domain anchors the synthetic HIV envelope protein to the ER membrane, and contributes to membrane assembly and function of the HIV envelope. Preferably, the transmembrane domain comprises SEQ ID NO:13.

[0050] In another embodiment, the synthetic HIV envelope protein comprises a gp41 having a truncated cytoplasmic domain. The gp41 has an unusually long cytoplasmic domain at its carboxyl end, typically about 150 amino acids (Edwards et al., *J. Virology*, 2002, 76:2683-2691). Truncation of the cytoplasmic domain was reported to induce exposure of conserved regions in the ectodomain of HIV-1 Env protein (*Id.*). The truncated cytoplasmic domain in a synthetic HIV envelope of the invention can range from one to about 140 amino acids, such as 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 15, 20, 30, 40, 50, 60, 70, 80, 90, 100, 110, 120, 130, or 140 amino acids of a full-length cytoplasmic domain. In certain embodiments the truncated cytoplasmic domain is derived from amino acids 704-862 of SEQ ID NO: 17 (i.e. from the cytoplasmic domain of the C4 molecule of the invention), by truncation after a given amino acid up to the C-terminus. In a preferred embodiment, the synthetic HIV envelope protein comprises a truncated cytoplasmic domain having 1 to 10 amino acids residues, more preferably 4 to 8 amino acid residues, and most preferably 7 amino acid residues of an HIV gp41 cytoplasmic domain. The cytoplasmic domain or fragment thereof of a synthetic HIV envelope protein is located C-terminal to the extracellular domain (ectodomain), and when the synthetic HIV envelope protein also comprises a transmembrane domain, the cytoplasmic domain or fragment thereof is located C-terminal to the transmembrane domain. See, e.g., FIGS. 1A and 1C. In a particular embodiment, the synthetic HIV envelope protein comprises

a gp41 with a truncated cytoplasmic domain having the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO:14 or a fragment thereof, such as residues 1-4 thereof (i.e. NRVR). Other truncated cytoplasmic domains have been described and could be used (e.g. Schiernle et al., *PNAS* 1997; Abrahamyan et al., *J Virol* 2005).

[0051] In embodiments wherein the synthetic HIV envelope protein further comprises a transmembrane domain and a fragment of a cytoplasmic domain, it is preferred that the protein also comprises the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 37, which contains residues 655-682 of SEQ ID NO: 18, wherein the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 37 is fused to the C-terminus of SEQ ID NO: 8 and the N-terminus of the transmembrane domain.

[0052] In a particularly preferred embodiment of the invention, the synthetic HIV envelope protein further comprises a transmembrane domain, such as that having the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO:13, and a truncated cytoplasmic domain or a fragment of cytoplasmic domain, such as that having the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 14 or residues 1-4 of SEQ ID NO:14 (i.e., NRVR). Most preferably, the synthetic HIV envelope protein comprises or consists of the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 18, with or without the signal sequence (i.e., amino acid resides 1-29 of SEQ ID NO:18).

[0053] In another embodiment, the synthetic HIV envelope protein comprises a trimerization domain that replaces an Env transmembrane region. The trimerization domain increases the stability of an Env trimeric structure. Preferably, the synthetic HIV envelope protein comprises a gp140 polypeptide that is modified to include a trimerization domain that stabilizes trimers of gp140. Examples of trimerization domains include, but are not limited to, the T4-fibritin "foldon" trimerization domain, such as that comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID:16; the coiled-coil trimerization domain derived from GCN4, such as that comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID:15; the catalytic subunit of *E. coli* aspartate transcarbamoylase as a trimer tag; or matrillin-based trimerization motifs. If present, the trimerization domain typically is located C-terminal to the extracellular domain (see FIG. 1B). In certain preferred embodiments where the synthetic HIV envelope protein comprises a trimerization domain, the synthetic HIV envelope protein comprises the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 19, with or without the signal sequence (i.e., amino acid residues 1-29 of SEQ ID NO:19). These embodiments with trimerization domains are mainly useful for soluble ectodomain variants of the synthetic HIV envelope protein. In certain embodiments of such soluble variants of the invention, it is possible to mutate the furin cleavage site (e.g. mutation of Lys to Glu at position 480 in SEQ ID NO: 8) to inactivate this

cleavage site, so that the protein will be a single chain; this combines well with a trimerization domain, especially with the GCN4 trimerization domain of SEQ ID NO: 19.

[0054] Alternative versions of such soluble ectodomain variants of the synthetic HIV envelope protein without use of trimerization domains are also embodiments of the invention, and can be prepared from SEQ ID NO: 8 by combining mutations that optimize the furin cleavage site (replacing the Gly-Lys dipeptide at positions 479-480 by four Arg residues) as well as so-called SOSIP mutations (I>P mutation at position 529, and introduction of a disulfide bridge between positions 471 and 575 by replacement of the respective Ala and Thr on those positions in SEQ ID NO: 8 each with a Cys residue). This yields a protein having the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 8 with the following combination of mutations: EK479-480RRRR, I529P, A471C and T575C.

[0055] One possible modification to further increase the trimer content of a synthetic HIV envelope protein of the invention (comprising SEQ ID NO: 8), is modification of Ile to Pro at position 529. This can be effective for both soluble and membrane-bound variants.

[0056] Vectors

[0057] Another general aspect of the invention relates to vectors comprising nucleic acid encoding a synthetic HIV envelope protein. According to embodiments of the invention, the vectors can comprise any of the synthetic HIV envelope proteins described herein. In a preferred embodiment of the invention, the vector comprises nucleic acid encoding a synthetic HIV envelope protein comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 8, SEQ ID NO:17, SEQ ID NO: 18, or SEQ ID NO: 19, and more preferably SEQ ID NO: 18.

[0058] According to embodiments of the invention, the nucleic acid encoding the synthetic HIV envelope protein is operably linked to a promoter, meaning that the nucleic acid is under the control of a promoter. The promoter can be a homologous promoter (i.e., derived from the same genetic source as the vector) or a heterologous promoter (i.e., derived from a different vector or genetic source). Examples of suitable promoters include the cytomegalovirus (CMV) promoter and the Rous Sarcoma virus (RSV) promoter. Preferably, the promoter is located upstream of the nucleic acid within an expression cassette. An exemplary CMV promoter sequence that can be operably linked to nucleic acid encoding the synthetic HIV envelope protein is shown in SEQ ID NO: 24.

[0059] According to embodiments of the invention, a vector can be an expression vector. Expression vectors include, but are not limited to, vectors for recombinant protein expression and vector for delivery of nucleic acid into a subject for expression in a tissue of the subject, such as a viral vector. Examples of viral vectors suitable for use with the invention include,

but are not limited to adenoviral vectors, adeno-associated virus vectors, pox virus vectors, MVA vectors, enteric virus vectors, Venezuelan Equine Encephalitis virus vectors, Semliki Forest Virus vectors, Tobacco Mosaic Virus vectors, lentiviral vectors, etc. The vector can also be a non-viral vector. Examples of non-viral vectors include, but are not limited to plasmids, bacterial artificial chromosomes, yeast artificial chromosomes, bacteriophages, etc.

[0060] In certain embodiments of the invention, the vector is an adenovirus vector. An adenovirus according to the invention belongs to the family of the Adenoviridae, and preferably is one that belongs to the genus Mastadenovirus. It can be a human adenovirus, but also an adenovirus that infects other species, including but not limited to a bovine adenovirus (e.g. bovine adenovirus 3, BAdV3), a canine adenovirus (e.g. CAdV2), a porcine adenovirus (e.g. PAdV3 or 5), or a simian adenovirus (which includes a monkey adenovirus and an ape adenovirus, such as a chimpanzee adenovirus or a gorilla adenovirus). Preferably, the adenovirus is a human adenovirus (HAdV, or AdHu), or a simian adenovirus such as chimpanzee or gorilla adenovirus (ChAd, AdCh, or SAdV). In the invention, a human adenovirus is meant if referred to as Ad without indication of species, e.g. the brief notation "Ad26" means the same as HadV26, which is human adenovirus serotype 26. Also as used herein, the notation "rAd" means recombinant adenovirus, e.g., "rAd26" refers to recombinant human adenovirus 26.

[0061] Most advanced studies have been performed using human adenoviruses, and human adenoviruses are preferred according to certain aspects of the invention. In certain preferred embodiments, a recombinant adenovirus according to the invention is based upon a human adenovirus. In preferred embodiments, the recombinant adenovirus is based upon a human adenovirus serotype 5, 11, 26, 34, 35, 48, 49, 50, 52, etc. According to a particularly preferred embodiment of the invention, an adenovirus is a human adenovirus of serotype 26. An advantage of this serotypes is a low seroprevalence and/or low pre-existing neutralizing antibody titers in the human population, and experience with use in human subjects in clinical trials.

[0062] Simian adenoviruses generally also have a low seroprevalence and/or low pre-existing neutralizing antibody titers in the human population, and a significant amount of work has been reported using chimpanzee adenovirus vectors (e.g. US6083716; WO 2005/071093; WO 2010/086189; WO 2010085984; Farina *et al*, 2001, *J Virol* 75: 11603-13 [13]; Cohen *et al*, 2002, *J Gen Virol* 83: 151-55 [69]; Kobinger *et al*, 2006, *Virology* 346: 394-401 [70]; Tatsis *et al.*, 2007, *Molecular Therapy* 15: 608-17 [71]; see also review by Bangari and Mittal, 2006, *Vaccine* 24: 849-62 [72]; and review by Lasaro and Ertl, 2009, *Mol*

Ther 17: 1333-39 [73]). Hence, in other embodiments, the recombinant adenovirus according to the invention is based upon a simian adenovirus, e.g. a chimpanzee adenovirus. In certain embodiments, the recombinant adenovirus is based upon simian adenovirus type 1, 7, 8, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27.1, 28.1, 29, 30, 31.1, 32, 33, 34, 35.1, 36, 37.2, 39, 40.1, 41.1, 42.1, 43, 44, 45, 46, 48, 49, 50 or SA7P.

[0063] Preferably, the adenovirus vector is a replication deficient recombinant viral vector, such as rAd26, rAd35, rAd48, rAd5HVR48, etc.

[0064] In a preferred embodiment of the invention, the adenoviral vectors comprise capsid proteins from rare serotypes including Ad26. In the typical embodiment, the vector is an rAd26 virus. An "adenovirus capsid protein" refers to a protein on the capsid of an adenovirus (*e.g.,* Ad26, Ad35, rAd48, rAd5HVR48 vectors) that is involved in determining the serotype and/or tropism of a particular adenovirus. Adenoviral capsid proteins typically include the fiber, penton and/or hexon proteins. As used herein a "capsid protein" for a particular adenovirus, such as an "Ad26 capsid protein" can be, for example, a chimeric capsid protein that includes at least a part of an Ad26 capsid protein. In certain embodiments, the capsid protein is an entire capsid protein of Ad26. In certain embodiments, the hexon, penton and fiber are of Ad26.

[0065] One of ordinary skill in the art will recognize that elements derived from multiple serotypes can be combined in a single recombinant adenovirus vector. Thus, a chimeric adenovirus that combines desirable properties from different serotypes can be produced. Thus, in some embodiments, a chimeric adenovirus of the invention could combine the absence of pre-existing immunity of a first serotype with characteristics such as temperature stability, assembly, anchoring, production yield, redirected or improved infection, stability of the DNA in the target cell, and the like.

[0066] In certain embodiments the recombinant adenovirus vector useful in the invention is derived mainly or entirely from Ad26 (*i.e.,* the vector is rAd26). In some embodiments, the adenovirus is replication deficient, e.g., because it contains a deletion in the E1 region of the genome. For adenoviruses being derived from non-group C adenovirus, such as Ad26 or Ad35, it is typical to exchange the E4-orf6 coding sequence of the adenovirus with the E4-orf6 of an adenovirus of human subgroup C such as Ad5. This allows propagation of such adenoviruses in well-known complementing cell lines that express the E1 genes of Ad5, such as for example 293 cells, PER.C6 cells, and the like (*see, e.g.* Havenga, et al., 2006, *J Gen Virol* 87: 2135-43; WO 03/104467). However, such adenoviruses will not be capable of replicating in non-complementing cells that do not express the E1 genes of Ad5.

[0067] The preparation of recombinant adenoviral vectors is well known in the art. Preparation of rAd26 vectors is described, for example, in WO 2007/104792 and in Abbink *et al.*, (2007) *Virol* 81(9): 4654-63. Exemplary genome sequences of Ad26 are found in GenBank Accession EF 153474 and in SEQ ID NO:1 of WO 2007/104792. Examples of vectors useful for the invention for instance include those described in WO2012/082918, the disclosure of which is incorporated herein by reference in its entirety.

[0068] Typically, a vector useful in the invention is produced using a nucleic acid comprising the entire recombinant adenoviral genome (*e.g.,* a plasmid, cosmid, or baculovirus vector). Thus, the invention also provides isolated nucleic acid molecules that encode the adenoviral vectors of the invention. The nucleic acid molecules of the invention can be in the form of RNA or in the form of DNA obtained by cloning or produced synthetically. The DNA can be double-stranded or single-stranded.

[0069] The adenovirus vectors useful in the invention are typically replication deficient. In these embodiments, the virus is rendered replication deficient by deletion or inactivation of regions critical to replication of the virus, such as the E1 region. The regions can be substantially deleted or inactivated by, for example, inserting a gene of interest, such as a gene encoding a synthetic HIV envelope protein (usually linked to a promoter), or a gene encoding an HIV antigenic polypeptide (usually linked to a promoter) within the region. In some embodiments, the vectors of the invention can contain deletions in other regions, such as the E2, E3 or E4 regions, or insertions of heterologous genes linked to a promoter within one or more of these regions. For E2- and/or E4-mutated adenoviruses, generally E2- and/or E4-complementing cell lines are used to generate recombinant adenoviruses. Mutations in the E3 region of the adenovirus need not be complemented by the cell line, since E3 is not required for replication.

[0070] A packaging cell line is typically used to produce sufficient amounts of adenovirus vectors for use in the invention. A packaging cell is a cell that comprises those genes that have been deleted or inactivated in a replication deficient vector, thus allowing the virus to replicate in the cell. Suitable packaging cell lines for adenoviruses with a deletion in the E1 region include, for example, PER.C6, 911, 293, and E1 A549.

[0071] According to embodiments of the invention, and as noted above, any of the synthetic HIV envelope proteins described herein can be expressed in the vectors of the invention. In view of the degeneracy of the genetic code, the skilled person is well aware that several nucleic acid sequences can be designed that encode the same protein, according to methods entirely routine in the art. The nucleic acid encoding the synthetic HIV envelope

protein can optionally be codon-optimized to ensure proper expression in the treated host (*e.g.,* human). Codon-optimization is a technology widely applied in the art. Some non-limiting examples of sequences encoding a synthetic HIV envelope protein of the invention are provided in SEQ ID NOs: 25, 26 and 27. Typically, the nucleic acid encoding the synthetic HIV envelope protein is cloned into the E1 and/or the E3 region of the adenoviral genome.

[0100] In a preferred embodiment of the invention, the vector is an adenovirus vector, and more preferably a rAd26 vector, most preferably a rAd26 vector with at least a deletion in the E1 region of the adenoviral genome, e.g. such as that described in Abbink, *J Virol*, 2007. 81(9): p. 4654-63, which is incorporated herein by reference.

[0072] The invention also provides cells, preferably isolated cells, comprising any of the vectors described herein. The cells can be used for recombinant protein production, or for the production of viral particles.

[0073] Embodiments of the invention thus also relate to a method of a making a synthetic HIV antigenic polypeptide. The method comprises transfecting a host cell with an expression vector comprising nucleic acid encoding the synthetic HIV antigenic polypeptide operably linked to a promoter, growing the transfected cell under conditions suitable for expression of the synthetic HIV antigenic polypeptide, and isolating the synthetic HIV antigentic polypeptide from the cell. The synthetic HIV antigenic polypeptide can be isolated or collected from the cell by any method known in the art including affinity chromatography, etc. Techniques used for recombinant protein expression will be well known to one of ordinary skill in the art in view of the present disclosure.

[0074] The invention also includes a method for manufacturing a vector encoding a synthetic HIV antigenic polypeptide of the invention, the method comprising culturing a cell that comprises the vector, to propagate and multiply the vector during said culturing, and isolating the vector that encodes the synthetic HIV antigenic polypeptide of the invention from the cell culture, e.g. from the cells, from the culture medium, or both. The vector may be further purified according to methods known in the art.

[0075] In certain embodiments, the invention provides a vector according to an embodiment of the invention comprising a nucleic acid encoding a synthetic HIV antigenic polypeptide, and in certain exemplary embodiments the nucleic acid has a nucleotide sequence selected from the group consisting of SEQ ID NO: 25, 26 and 27.

[0076] Compositions

[0077] In another general aspect, the invention relates to a composition comprising a vector comprising a nucleic acid encoding a synthetic HIV envelope protein and a carrier. According to embodiments of the invention, any of vectors described herein can be included in the composition. Preferably, the vector is a viral vector, more preferably an adenovirus vector, and even more preferably an adenovirus 26 vector. In a preferred embodiment, a composition comprises an adenovirus vector, preferably an adenovirus 26 vector encoding a synthetic HIV envelope protein comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 8, SEQ ID NO: 18, or SEQ ID NO: 19, and more preferably the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 18.

[0078] In one aspect, the invention provides a combination vaccine comprising one or more vectors together comprising nucleic acid sequences encoding (i) a synthetic HIV envelope protein comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 8 (e.g. SEQ ID NO: 18 or 19) and (ii) a second HIV envelope protein comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 5. The vectors may each be in a separate composition, or be combined in a single composition. Both nucleic acids in the vector(s) are intended to be administered to one subject, which will result in an immune response to HIV that is broader than the immune response that would be obtained upon administration of either vector alone. Both nucleic acid sequences could also be present on one single vector.

[0079] According to embodiments of the invention, a composition comprises an immunogenically effective amount of a vector, such as a viral vector. As used herein, "an immunogenically effective amount" or "immunologically effective amount" means an amount of a composition sufficient to induce a desired immune effect or immune response in a subject in need thereof. In one embodiment, an immunogenically effective amount means an amount sufficient to induce an immune response in a subject in need thereof. In another embodiment, an immunogenically effective amount means an amount sufficient to produce immunity in a subject in need thereof, e.g., provide a protective effect against a disease such as a viral infection. An immunogenically effective amount can vary depending upon a variety of factors, such as the physical condition of the subject, age, weight, health, etc.; the particular application, whether inducing immune response or providing protective immunity; the specific recombinant vector administered; the immunogen or antigenic polypeptide encoded by the recombinant vector administered; the specific antigenic polypeptide administered; and the particular disease, e.g., viral infection, for which immunity is desired.

An immunogenically effective amount can readily be determined by one of ordinary skill in the art in view of the present disclosure.

[0080] As general guidance, an immunogenically effective amount when used with reference to a recombinant viral vector such as an adenviral vector can range from about 10^8 viral particles to about 10^{12} viral particles, for example 10^8, 10^9, 10^{10}, 10^{11}, or 10^{12} viral particles. An immunogenically effective amount can be administered in a single composition, or in multiple compositions, such as 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, or 10 compositions (e.g., tablets, capsules or injectables), wherein the administration of the multiple capsules or injections collectively provides a subject with the immunogenically effective amount. In general, when used with reference to a polypeptide, such as an isolated antigenic polypeptide, an immunogenically effective amount can range from, e.g. about 0.3 to about 3000 microgram (μg), e.g. 1-1000 μg, e.g. 10-500 μg, e.g. about 10, 50, 100, 150, 200, 250, 300, 350, 400, 450 or 500 μg. As a non-limiting example, it is possible to combine administration of the vector encoding the synthetic HIV Env antigen of the invention (having SEQ ID NO: 8) with administration of an Env polypeptide, e.g. 250 μg of HIV Clade C Env trimer protein having amino acids 30-708 of SEQ ID NO: 7. It is also possible to administer an immunogenically effective amount to a subject, and subsequently administer another dose of an immunogenically effective amount to the same subject, in a so-called prime-boost regimen. This general concept of a prime-boost regimen is well known to the skill person in the vaccine field. Further booster administrations can optionally be added to the regimen, as needed.

[0081] Compositions of the invention further comprise a carrier. A carrier can include one or more pharmaceutically acceptable excipients such as binders, disintegrants, swelling agents, suspending agents, emulsifying agents, wetting agents, lubricants, flavorants, sweeteners, preservatives, dyes, solubilizers and coatings. The precise nature of the carrier or other material can depend on the route of administration, e.g., intramuscular, subcutaneous, oral, intravenous, cutaneous, intramucosal (e.g., gut), intranasal or intraperitoneal routes. For liquid injectable preparations, for example, suspensions and solutions, suitable carriers and additives include water, glycols, oils, alcohols, preservatives, coloring agents and the like. For solid oral preparations, for example, powders, capsules, caplets, gelcaps and tablets, suitable carriers and additives include starches, sugars, diluents, granulating agents, lubricants, binders, disintegrating agents and the like. For nasal sprays/inhalant mixtures, the aqueous solution/suspension can comprise water, glycols, oils, emollients, stabilizers, wetting agents, preservatives, aromatics, flavors, and the like as suitable carriers and additives.

[0082] Compositions of the invention can be formulated in any matter suitable for administration to a subject to facilitate administration and improve efficacy, including, but not limited to, oral (enteral) administration and parenteral injections. The parenteral injections include intravenous injection or infusion, intra-arterial injection, subcutaneous injection, intramuscular injection, and intra-articular injection. Compositions of the invention can also be formulated for other routes of administration including transmucosal, ocular, rectal, long acting implantation, sublingual administration, under the tongue, from oral mucosa bypassing the portal circulation, inhalation, or intranasal.

[0083] According to certain embodiments of the invention, a composition comprises an immunogenically effective amount of purified or partially purified adenovirus vector, such as an adenovirus 26 vector, comprising a nucleic acid encoding a synthetic HIV envelope protein of the invention. Said compositions can be formulated as a vaccine (also referred to as an "immunogenic composition") according to methods well known in the art.

[0084] Compositions of the invention can further optionally comprise an adjuvant to enhance immune responses. The terms "adjuvant" and "immune stimulant" are used interchangeably herein, and are defined as one or more substances that cause stimulation of the immune system. In this context, an adjuvant is used to enhance an immune response to the vectors encoding synthetic HIV envelope proteins of the invention and/or HIV antigenic polypeptides used in combination with vectors encoding synthetic HIV envelope proteins of the invention.

[0085] Adjuvants suitable for use with the invention should be ones that are potentially safe, well tolerated and effective in people, such as for instance QS-21, Detox-PC, MPL-SE, MoGM-CSF, TiterMax-G, CRL- 1005, GERBU, TERamide, PSC97B, Adjumer, PG-026, GSK-I, GcMAF, B-alethine, MPC-026, Adjuvax, CpG ODN, Betafectin, aluminum salts (e.g. AdjuPhos), Adjuplex, and MF59. The optimal ratios of each component in the formulation can be determined by techniques well known to those skilled in the art in view of the present disclosure.

[0086] In a preferred embodiment, the adjuvant is an aluminum salt, such as AdjuPhos.

[0087] The preparation and use of immunogenic compositions are well known to those of ordinary skill in the art. Liquid pharmaceutical compositions generally include a liquid carrier such as water, petroleum, animal or vegetable oils, mineral oil or synthetic oil. Physiological saline solution, dextrose or other saccharide solution or glycols such as ethylene glycol, propylene glycol or polyethylene glycol can also be included.

[0088] For instance recombinant adenovirus vector may be stored in the buffer that is also used for the Adenovirus World Standard (Hoganson *et al.,* 2002, *Bioprocessing J* 1: 43-8): 20 mM Tris pH 8, 25 mM NaCl, 2.5% glycerol. Another useful adenovirus formulation buffer suitable for administration to humans is 20 mM Tris, 2 mM $MgCl_2$, 25 mM NaCl, sucrose 10% w/v, polysorbate-80 0.02% w/v. Another formulation buffer that is suitable for recombinant adenovirus comprises 10-25 mM citrate buffer pH 5.9-6.2, 4-6% (w/w) hydroxypropyl-beta-cyclodextrin (HBCD), 70-100 mM NaCl, 0.018-0.035% (w/w) polysorbate-80, and optionally 0.3-0.45% (w/w) ethanol. Obviously, many other buffers can be used, and several examples of suitable formulations for the storage and for pharmaceutical administration of purified vectors are known.

[0089] According to embodiments of the invention, a composition of the invention can be used together with one or more additional vectors encoding one or more additional HIV antigenic polypeptides, and/or one or more isolated HIV antigenic polypeptides. The additional vectors and/or HIV antigenic polypeptides can be present in the same composition comprising a synthetic HIV Env protein of the invention. They can also be present in one or more different compositions that can be used together with a composition comprising a synthetic HIV Env protein of the invention in a vaccine combination. Preferably, the one or more additional vectors are viral vectors, such as adenovirus vectors, and are most preferably adenovirus 26 vectors. The one or more additional vectors can encode any HIV antigenic polypeptide known to those skilled in the art in view of the present disclosure.

[0090] In one embodiment, a composition or a vaccine combination further comprises a second adenovirus vector, preferably an adenovirus 26 vector, encoding a HIV antigenic polypeptide comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 5. An advantage of such embodiments is increased breadth of the immune response (covering strains from Clades B and C).

[0091] In another embodiment, a composition or a vaccine combination of the invention further comprises an adenovirus vector, preferably an adenovirus 26 vector, encoding an HIV antigenic polypeptide comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 28 (mos1GagPol).

[0092] In another embodiment, a composition or a vaccine combination of the invention further comprises an adenovirus vector, preferably an adenovirus 26 vector, encoding an HIV antigenic polypeptide comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 29 (mos2GagPol).

[0093] In a particular embodiment, a composition or a vaccine combination of the invention further comprises a second adenovirus vector, preferably an adenovirus 26 vector, encoding a HIV antigenic polypeptide comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 5,

and one or more additional adenovirus vectors, preferably adenovirus 26 vectors, encoding one or more HIV antigenic polypeptides comprising the amino acid sequence selected from the group consisting of SEQ ID NO: 28 or SEQ ID NO: 29. For example, a composition or a vaccine combination according to an embodiment of the invention can comprise four adenovirus vectors, preferably adenovirus 26 vectors, with a first vector encoding a synthetic HIV envelope protein comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 8 (e.g. SEQ ID NO: 18); a second vector encoding a HIV antigenic polypeptide comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 5; a third vector encoding a synthetic HIV envelope protein comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 28; and a fourth vector encoding a synthetic HIV envelope protein comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 29.

[0094] In some embodiments, the composition or a vaccine combination further comprises one or more isolated HIV antigenic polypeptides. Any HIV antigenic polypeptide known to those skilled in the art in view of the present disclosure can be further included in a composition or a vaccine combination of the invention, including, but not limited to an HIV envelope protein (e.g., gp160, gp140, gp120, or gp41), preferably a stabilized trimeric gp140 protein, such as a stabilized clade C or clade A gp140 protein. In a preferred embodiment, the isolated HIV antigenic polypeptide is a stabilized HIV clade C trimeric gp140 protein, such as that comprising residues 30-708 of the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO:7 (residues 1-29 of SEQ ID NO:7 are in the signal sequence). An alternative or additional HIV Env polypeptide that could be used in addition to the clade C gp140 protein or alone, is a mosaic Env trimer protein, for instance having an amino acid sequence as disclosed in amino acids 30-724 of SEQ ID NO: 36 (corresponding to SEQ ID NO: 2 of WO 2014/107744, residues 1-29 of SEQ ID NO:36 are in the signal sequence).

[0095] According to a particular embodiment of the invention, an HIV antigenic protein can be a synthetic HIV envelope protein of the invention. Thus, a synthetic envelope protein of the invention can be used in isolated and/or purified form to induce an immune response or provide a protective immunity, etc. against HIV in a subject in need thereof. Any of the synthetic envelope proteins described herein comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 8 can be used as an HIV antigenic protein in isolated and/or purified form. In a preferred embodiment, when used in isolated form as an HIV antigenic protein, the synthetic envelope protein comprises residues 30-711 of the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 18 or residues 30-686 of the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 19, and more preferably residues 30-704 of the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 18. The isolated HIV antigenic

polypeptide can also comprise SEQ ID NO: 8 with the following mutations: EK479-480RRRR, I529P, A471C and T575C.

[0096] Embodiments of the invention also relate to compositions or vaccine combinations comprising an isolated synthetic HIV envelope protein comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 8. Any of the synthetic HIV envelope proteins described herein can be used. In particular embodiments of the invention, the isolated synthetic HIV envelope protein comprises residues 30-704 or 30-711 of the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO:18, residues 30-686 of the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 19, or the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 8 with the following mutations: EK479-480RRRR, I529P, A471C and T575C. Such compositions or vaccine combinations can further comprise one or more expression vectors, e.g., adenoviral vectors such as adenovirus 26 vectors, encoding one or more additional HIV antigenic polypeptides, such as the synthetic HIV envelope proteins of the invention, or other HIV antigenic proteins such as those set forth in SEQ ID NOs: 4, 5, 7, 28 or 29, or fragments thereof.

[0097] The invention also relates to a method of producing a composition or a vaccine combination of the invention. According to embodiments of the invention, a method of producing a composition or a combination comprises combining a vector comprising nucleic acid encoding the synthetic HIV envelope protein of the invention with a carrier, and optionally one or more additional vectors encoding one or more additional HIV antigenic polypeptides and/or one or more isolated HIV antigenic polypeptides. One of ordinary skill in the art will be familiar with conventional techniques used to prepare such compositions.

[0098] Vaccine and Vaccine Combinations

[0099] According to embodiments of the invention, a composition can be a vaccine. As used herein, the term "vaccine" refers to a composition comprising an expression vector, preferably a viral vector, encoding a synthetic HIV envelope protein of the invention that can provide protective immunity or a protective immune response to a subject, or to vaccinate a subject. According to embodiments of the invention, upon administration of the composition to a subject, the expression vector expresses the encoded synthetic HIV envelope protein, and the expressed synthetic HIV envelope protein is presented to the immune system of the subject, thereby inducing the required response to produce immunity, or induce an immune response.

[00100] Thus, in another general aspect, the invention provides a vaccine for inducing an immune response against a human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) in a subject. According to embodiments of the invention, the vaccine comprises a composition comprising an

immunogenically effective amount of an expression vector encoding a synthetic HIV envelope protein comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 8, and preferably the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO:18. Preferably, the expression vector is a viral vector, more preferably an adenovirus vector, and most preferably an adenovirus 26 vector.

[00101] According to embodiments of the invention, "inducing an immune response" when used with reference to the methods and compositions described herein encompasses providing protective immunity and/or vaccinating a subject against an infection, such as a HIV infection, for prophylactic purposes, as well as causing a desired immune response or effect in a subject in need thereof against an infection, such as a HIV infection, for therapeutic purposes. Preferably, the methods of the invention are for prophylactic purposes, such as for providing protective immunity. The immune response can be a cellular immune response and/or a humoral immune response.

[00102] As used herein, the term "protective immunity" or "protective immune response" means that the vaccinated subject is able to control an infection with the pathogenic agent against which the vaccination was done. Usually, the subject having developed a "protective immune response" develops only mild to moderate clinical symptoms or no symptoms at all. Usually, a subject having a "protective immune response" or "protective immunity" against a certain agent will not die as a result of the infection with said agent.

[00103] According to embodiments of the invention, vaccine compositions can further comprise one or more additional vectors, e.g., viral vectors, such as adenovirus vectors, preferably adenovirus 26 vectors, encoding one or more additional HIV antigenic polypeptides and/or one or more isolated HIV antigenic polypeptides. The synthetic HIV envelope protein, additional vectors and/or one or more isolated HIV antigenic polypeptides can be formulated in the same composition or one or more different compositions in the vaccine.

[00104] The invention also relates to vaccine combinations for priming and boosting an immune response to one or more HIV clades in a subject in need thereof using one or more vectors in combination with an isolated antigenic polypeptide. Thus, in another general aspect, the invention provides a vaccine combination for inducing an immune response against a HIV in a subject. According to embodiments of the invention, the vaccine combination comprises:

(i) a first composition comprising an immunogenically effective amount of an expression vector encoding a synthetic HIV envelope protein comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 8 or SEQ ID NO: 8 having one or

more mutations selected from the group consisting of (a) I529P, (b) K480E, and (c) a combination of EK479-480RRRR, I529P, A471C and T575C, and a carrier; and

(ii) a second composition comprising an immunogenically effective amount of an isolated HIV antigenic polypeptide and a carrier,

wherein one of the first and second compositions is for priming immunization and the other composition is for boosting immunization.

[0105] According to embodiments of the invention, the vaccine combination optionally further comprises an immunogenically effective amount of one or more additional expression vectors encoding one or more additional HIV antigenic polypeptides. The one or more additional expression vectors can be included in the first composition or the second composition, or the one or more additional expression vectors can be included in one or more additional compositions to be administered together with the first and/or second composition.

[0106] As used herein, the terms "co-delivery", "co-administration" or "administered together with" refers to simultaneous administration of two or more components, such as a viral expression vector and an isolated antigenic polypeptide, or multiple viral expression vectors. "Simultaneous administration" can be administration of the two or more components at least within the same day. When two components are "administered together with," they can be administered in separate compositions sequentially within a short time period, such as 24, 20, 16, 12, 8 or 4 hours, or within 1 hour or less, or they can be administered in a single composition at the same time.

[0107] In particular embodiments of a vaccine combination of the invention, the first composition comprises an adenovirus vector, preferably an adenovirus 26 vector, encoding a synthetic HIV envelope protein comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 18; and the isolated HIV antigenic polypeptide comprises residues 30-708 of the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 7 or residues 30-724 of SEQ ID NO: 36. In one particular embodiment, the first composition further comprises an adenovirus vector, preferably an adenovirus 26 vector, encoding a HIV antigenic polypeptide comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 5. In another particular embodiment, the first composition further comprises one or more additional adenovirus vectors, preferably adenovirus 26 vectors, encoding one or more additional HIV antigenic polypeptides comprising the amino acid sequences selected from the group consisting of SEQ ID NOs: 28 and 29.

[0108] Another general aspect of the invention relates to a kit comprising a vaccine combination according to an embodiment of the invention.

[0109] Other embodiments of the synthetic HIV envelope protein, expression vectors, additional expression vectors, HIV antigenic polypeptides encoded by the expression vectors, and isolated HIV antigenic polypeptide etc. that can be used in the vaccine combinations of the invention are discussed in detail above and in the illustrative examples below.

[0110] Method for Inducing Protective Immunity Against HIV Infection

[0111] The invention also relates to a method of inducing an immune response against one or more HIV clades in a subject in need thereof. The methods described herein include methods of priming and boosting an immune response using one or more expression vectors in combination with one or more isolated antigenic polypeptides.

[0112] In one general aspect, a method of inducing an immune response against a human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) in a subject comprises administering to the subject a composition comprising an immunogenically effective amount of an expression vector comprising a nucleic acid encoding a synthetic HIV envelope protein comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 8. Any of the compositions described herein can be used in a method of inducing an immune response against HIV in a subject. Preferably, the composition comprises an adenovirus vector, preferably an adenovirus 26 vector, comprising a nucleic acid encoding a synthetic HIV envelope protein comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 18. The composition can further comprise one or more additional vectors encoding one or more additional HIV antigenic polypeptides and/or one or more additional isolated HIV antigenic polypeptides.

[0113] In another general aspect, a method of inducing an immune response against a human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) in a subject comprises:

(i) administering to the subject a first composition comprising an immunogenically effective amount of an expression vector encoding a mosaic HIV envelope protein having the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 8 or SEQ ID NO: 8 having one or more mutations selected from the group consisting of (a) I529P, (b) K480E, and (c) a combination of EK479-480RRRR, I529P, A471C and T575C, and a carrier;

(ii) administering to the subject a second composition comprising an immunogenically effective amount of an isolated HIV antigenic polypeptide and a carrier; and

(iii) optionally, administering to the subject an immunogenically effective amount of one or more additional expression vectors encoding one or more additional HIV antigenic polypeptides,

wherein steps (i) and (ii) are conducted in either order, with one of the steps for priming immunization and the other step for boosting immunization. According to embodiments of the invention, the optional, effective amount of the one more additional expression vectors is administered together with the first composition or the second composition. In a preferred embodiment, the optional effective amount of the one or more additional expression vectors is administered together with the first composition.

[0114] In a particular embodiment of a method of inducing an immune response, the first composition comprises an adenovirus vector, preferably an adenovirus 26 vector, encoding a synthetic HIV envelope protein comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 8 and a second adenovirus vector, preferably an adenovirus 26 vector, encoding a HIV antigenic polypeptide comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 5; the second composition comprises an isolated HIV antigenic polypeptide having residues 30-708 of the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO:7 or residues 30-724 of SEQ ID NO:36; and the one or more additional expression vectors are adenovirus vectors, preferably adenovirus 26 vectors, encoding one or more additional HIV antigenic polypeptides comprising the amino acid sequences selected from the group consisting of SEQ ID NOs: 28 and 29; wherein the first composition is administered to the subject, together with the one or more additional expression vectors, one or more times for priming immunization, and the second composition is administered to the subject one or more times for boosting immunization.

[0115] Administration of the immunogenic compositions comprising the expression vectors and/or antigenic polypeptides is typically intramuscular, intradermal or subcutaneous. However, other modes of administration such as intravenous, rectal, cutaneous, oral, nasal, etc can be envisaged as well. Intramuscular administration of the immunogenic compositions can be achieved by using a needle to inject a suspension of the expression vectors, e.g. adenovirus vectors, and/or antigenic polypeptides. An alternative is the use of a needleless injection device to administer the composition (using, e.g., Biojector^{TM}) or a freeze-dried powder containing the vaccine.

[0116] For intramuscular, intravenous, cutaneous or subcutaneous injection, or injection at the site of affliction, the vector will be in the form of a parenterally acceptable aqueous solution which is pyrogen-free and has suitable pH, isotonicity and stability. Likewise, the isolated antigenic polypeptide will be in the form of a parenterally acceptable solution having a suitable pH, isotonicity, and stability. Those of ordinary skill in the art are well able to prepare suitable solutions using, for example, isotonic vehicles such as Sodium Chloride Injection, Ringer's Injection, Lactated Ringer's Injection. Preservatives, stabilizers, buffers,

antioxidants and/or other additives can be included, as required. A slow-release formulation can also be employed.

[0117] Typically, administration of the vaccine compositions according to embodiments of the invention will have a prophylactic aim to generate an immune response against an HIV antigen before infection or development of symptoms. In other embodiments, the expression vectors, e.g., adenovirus vectors, and/or HIV antigenic polypeptides can be administered for post-exposure prophylactics.

[0118] The immunogenic compositions containing the expression vectors, e.g., adenovirus vectors, and/or antigenic polypeptides are administered to a subject, giving rise to an anti-HIV immune response in the subject. An amount of a composition sufficient to induce a detectable immune response is defined to be an "immunogenically effective dose" or "immunogenically effective amount." In a typical embodiment of the invention, the immune response is a protective immune response.

[0119] The actual amount administered, and rate and time-course of administration, will depend on the nature and severity of what is being treated. Prescription of treatment, e.g., decisions on dosage etc., is within the responsibility of general practitioners and other medical doctors, or in a veterinary context a veterinarian, and typically takes account of the disorder to be treated, the condition of the individual patient, the site of delivery, the method of administration and other factors known to practitioners. Examples of the techniques and protocols mentioned above can be found in Remington's Pharmaceutical Sciences, 16th edition, Osol, A. ed., 1980.

[0120] Following production of adenovirus vectors and optional formulation of such particles into compositions, the vectors can be administered to an individual, particularly a human or other primate. Delivery to a non-human mammal need not be for a therapeutic purpose, but can be for use in an experimental context, for instance in investigation of mechanisms of immune responses to the synthetic HIV envelope protein expressed by the adenovirus vectors of the invention.

[0121] In one embodiment of the disclosed methods, one or more adenovirus vectors encoding one or more HIV antigenic polypeptides are used to prime the immune response. One or more isolated HIV antigenic polypeptides can be used together with the one or more adenovirus vectors for the priming immunization. The priming immunization may be administered only once but can optionally also be administered multiple times, for example, initial priming administration at time 0, followed by another priming administration about 4-14 weeks, e.g. 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13 or 14 weeks, or any time in between, after the

initial priming administration. One or more isolated HIV antigenic polypeptides optionally together with one or more additional adenovirus or other vectors encoding one or more additional HIV antigenic polypeptides can be used to boost the immune response. A boosting immunization can also be administered once or multiple times, for example, first at about 18-36, e.g. 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35 or 36 weeks, or any time in between, after the initial priming administration, followed by another boosting administration at about 36-52, e.g. 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59 or 60 weeks, or any time in between, after the initial priming administration. The immune response induced by the immunization is monitored.

[0122] Embodiments of the disclosed methods also contemplate shorter prime-boost regimens, meaning that the final boosting immunization is administered about 22-26 weeks after the initial priming administration. The priming immunization can be administered at week 0. The boosting immunization can be administered multiple times, for example, first at about 7-9 weeks or 11-13 weeks, or at about 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, or 14 weeks, or any time in between, after the initial priming administration, followed by another boosting administration at about 22-26 weeks, or at about 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24 ,25, 26, 27, or 28 weeks, or any time in between, after the initial priming administration. In certain embodiments, one or more isolated HIV antigenic polypeptides is administered together with the one or more adenovirus vectors for the priming and/or boosting immunization.

[0123] It is readily appreciated by those skilled in the art that the regimen for the priming and boosting administrations can be adjusted based on the measured immune responses after the administrations. For example, the boosting compositions are generally administered weeks or months after administration of the priming composition, for example, about 2-3 weeks or 4 weeks, or 8 weeks, or 16 weeks, or 20 weeks, or 24 weeks, or 28 weeks, or 30 weeks or 32 weeks or one to two years after administration of the priming composition.

[0124] According to embodiments of the invention, an adjuvant can be administered together with the isolated HIV antigenic polypeptide as part of the priming and/or boosting immunization. Any adjuvant can be used in view of the present disclosure, and in certain embodiments the adjuvant is an aluminum salt, such as AdjuPhos.

[0125] In a preferred embodiment of the invention, the adenovirus vectors used in the methods disclosed herein include a rAd26 vector. Preferably, an rAd26 vector encoding a synthetic HIV envelope protein comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 18 or SEQ ID NO: 19, most preferably SEQ ID NO: 18, is used to prime the immune response, alone or in combination with one or more additional rAd26 vectors encoding one or more

additional HIV antigenic polypeptides, such as mos1Env having the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO:5, and an isolated HIV antigenic polypeptide, such as that comprising residues 30-708 of the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 7 or residues 30-724 of SEQ ID NO: 36, is used to boost the immune response, or vice versa.

[0126] In one exemplary embodiment, an rAd26 vector encoding a synthetic HIV envelope protein comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 18 is used to prime the immune response in combination with an rAd26 vector encoding an HIV antigenic polypeptide having the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 5. One or more additional rAd26 vectors encoding one or more additional HIV antigenic polypeptides having the amino acid sequences selected from the group consisting SEQ ID NOs: 1-4, 28 and 29 can also be administered together with the other rAd26 vectors to prime the immune response. The priming administration in certain embodiments is administered twice before any boosting immunization is administered. An isolated HIV antigenic polypeptide, such as that comprising residues 30-708 of the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 7 (preferably), or that comprising residues 30-724 of the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO:36, or a combination of at least two of such isolated HIV antigenic polypeptides, is then administered to boost the immune response, and is preferably administered more than once. Preferably, an adjuvant is further administered with the isolated HIV antigenic polypeptide in the boosting immunization.

[0127] In a particular embodiment, the an immune response is primed by administration of four HIV antigens encoded on adenoviral vectors, preferably rAd26 vectors, the four antigens that are encoded being: (i) a synthetic HIV envelope protein comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 18, (ii) polypeptide having the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 5, (iii) polypeptide having the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 28, and (iv) polypeptide having the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 29. Each of these four antigens can be encoded on a separate adenoviral vector, preferably a rAd26 vector, administered at a total dose of about 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, or 10 $x10^{10}$ viral particles (vp), e.g. about $5x10^{10}$ vp (for all vectors together). The vectors may be pre-mixed, e.g. in a 1:1:1:1 ratio. The priming administration may be repeated after the initial priming administration, e.g. at 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15 or 16 weeks after the initial priming administration. In this embodiment, an immune response is boosted by administration of the same adenoviral vector vaccine used for the priming administration together with isolated HIV Env gp140 protein, e.g. clade C gp140 protein (comprising residues 30-708 of the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 7), or mosaic gp140 protein (comprising residues 30-724 of the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID

NO:36), or clade C gp140 protein and mosaic gp140 protein, at a total dose of about 50-300 µg protein, e.g. 50, 100, 150, 200, 250, or 300 microgram, or any amount in between, of clade C gp140 protein, or e.g. 50, 100, 150, 200, 250, or 300 microgram, or any amount in between, of mosaic gp140 protein, or e.g. 50, 100, 150, 200, 250, or 300 microgram, or any amount in between, of a combination of clade C gp140 protein and mosaic gp140 protein (e.g. in a 1:1 ratio, either mixed together or separately administered). Preferably the gp140 protein is administered together with adjuvant, e.g. aluminium phosphate. The adenovirus plus gp140 protein administration to boost the immune response may be performed at about 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29 or 30 weeks, or at any time in between, after the initial priming administration. The boost administration may be repeated, e.g. at about 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53 or 54 weeks, or any time in between, after the initial priming administration. All administrations according to this embodiment are preferably performed via the intramuscular route.

EMBODIMENTS

[0128] Embodiment 1 is a nucleic acid encoding a synthetic HIV envelope protein comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 8, or SEQ ID NO: 8 having one or more mutations selected from the group consisting of (i) I529P, (ii) K480E, and (iii) a combination of EK479-480RRRR, I529P, A471C and T575C.

[0129] Embodiment 2 is a nucleic acid according to embodiment 1, wherein the synthetic HIV envelope protein further comprises a signal sequence, for instance a signal sequence comprising the amino acid sequence selected from the group consisting of SEQ ID NOs:9 to 12, preferably SEQ ID NO: 9.

[0130] Embodiment 3 is a nucleic acid according to embodiment 1 or 2, wherein the synthetic HIV envelope protein further comprises a transmembrane domain, for instance a transmembrane domain having the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 13, preferably the synthetic HIV envelope protein further comprises SEQ ID NO:37 that is fused to the C-terminus of SEQ ID NO:8 and the N-terminus of the transmembrane domain.

[0131] Embodiment 4 is a nucleic acid according to embodiment 3, wherein the synthetic HIV envelope protein further comprises a fragment of a cytoplasmic domain, preferably a fragment of a cytoplasmic domain comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 14, or amino acid residues 1-4 thereof (i.e., NRVR) .

[0132] Embodiment 5 is a nucleic acid of any one of the preceding embodiments 1-4, wherein the synthetic HIV envelope protein comprises the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 18.

[0133] Embodiment 6 is a nucleic acid according to embodiment 1 or 2, wherein the synthetic HIV envelope protein either (a) further comprises a trimerization domain selected from the group consisting of GCN4, fibritin (foldon domain), for instance a trimerization domain having the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 15 or SEQ ID NO:16, preferably SEQ ID NO: 15, or (b) comprises SEQ ID NO:8 with a combination of the following mutations: EK479-480RRRR, I529P, A471C and T575C.

[0134] Embodiment 7 is a nucleic acid according to embodiment 6, wherein the synthetic HIV envelope protein comprises the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 19.

[0135] Embodiment 8 is a nucleic acid according to embodiment 5, wherein the synthetic HIV envelope protein consists of the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 18.

[0136] Embodiment 9 is a nucleic acid according to embodiment 7, wherein the synthetic HIV envelope protein consists of the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 19.

[0137] Embodiment 10 is a vector comprising the nucleic acid of any one of embodiments 1-9, wherein the nucleic acid is operably linked to a promoter sequence.

[0138] Embodiment 11 is a vector according to embodiment 10 being a viral vector, preferably an adenovirus vector, and more preferably an adenovirus 26 vector.

[0139] Embodiment 12 is an isolated cell comprising the vector of embodiment 10 or embodiment 11.

[0140] Embodiment 13 is a composition comprising an immunogenically effective amount of the vector of embodiment 10 or claim 11, and a carrier.

[0141] Embodiment 14 is a vaccine combination, comprising a first composition comprising an immunogenically effective amount of an adenovirus vector, preferably an adenovirus 26 vector, encoding a synthetic HIV envelope protein having the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 18, a second composition comprising an immunogenically effective amount of a second adenovirus vector, preferably a second adenovirus 26 vector, encoding an HIV antigenic polypeptide comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 5, and optionally at least one additional composition comprising an immunogenically effective amount of at least one selected from the group consisting of a vector encoding an antigenic polypeptide having the amino acid sequence selected from the group consisting of SEQ ID NOs: 1-4, 28 and 29, and an isolated HIV antigenic polypeptide having residues 30-708 of the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 7, or residues 30-724 of the amino acid sequence of

SEQ ID NO: 36, wherein the first composition, second composition and additional composition are present in the same composition or in one or more different compositions.

[0142] Embodiment 15 is a method of inducing an immune response against a human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) in a subject in need thereof, the method comprising administering to the subject the composition of embodiment 13 or the vaccine combination of embodiment 14.

[0143] Embodiment 16 is a composition of embodiment 13 or a vaccine combination of embodiment 14, comprising an adenovirus vector, preferably an adenovirus 26 vector, encoding a synthetic HIV envelope protein comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO:18, a second adenovirus vector, preferably an adenovirus 26 vector, encoding an HIV antigenic polypeptide comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 5, one or more additional adenovirus vectors encoding one or more additional antigenic polypeptides comprising the amino acid sequence selected from the group consisting of SEQ ID NOs: 1-4, 28 and 29, and an isolated HIV antigenic polypeptide comprising residues 30-708 of the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 7 or residues 30-724 of SEQ ID NO: 36, for use in inducing an immune response against a human immunodeficiency virus (HIV).

[0144] Embodiment 17 is a synthetic HIV envelope protein comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 8 or SEQ ID NO: 8 having one or more mutations selected from the group consisting of (i) I529P, (ii) K480E, and (iii) a combination of EK479-480RRRR, I529P, A471C and T575C.

[0145] Embodiment 18 is a synthetic HIV envelope protein of embodiment 17, comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 8 with a combination of mutations EK479-480RRRR, I529P, A471C and T575C, or residues 30-704 of the amino acid sequence SEQ ID NO: 18 or residues 30-686 of SEQ ID NO: 19.

[0146] Embodiment 19 is a composition of embodiment 13, further comprising one or more additional expression vectors encoding one or more additional HIV antigenic polypeptides, and/or one or more isolated HIV antigenic polypeptides.

[0147] Embodiment 20 is a composition of embodiment 13 comprising an adenovirus vector, preferably an adenovirus 26 vector, encoding a synthetic HIV envelope protein consisting of the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 18.

[0148] Embodiment 21 is a composition according to embodiment 20 further comprising a second adenovirus vector, preferably an adenovirus 26 vector, encoding an HIV antigenic polypeptide comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 5, and optionally one or more additional adenovirus vectors, preferably adenovirus 26 vectors, encoding one or more

additional HIV antigenic polypeptides comprising the amino acid sequences of SEQ ID NOs: 1-4, 28 and 29.

[0149] Embodiment 22 is a method of producing an immune response against a human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) in a subject in need thereof, the method comprising administering to the subject a composition according to any one of embodiments 19, 20, or 21.

[0150] Embodiment 23 is a method of producing a composition or a vaccine combination, comprising combining the vector of embodiment 10 or embodiment 11 with a carrier, and optionally one or more additional vectors encoding one or more additional HIV antigenic polypeptides and/or one or more isolated HIV antigenic polypeptides in one or more compositions, together with a carrier.

[0151] Embodiment 24 is a vaccine combination for inducing an immune response against a human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) in a subject, comprising:

(i) a first composition comprising an immunogenically effective amount of an expression vector encoding a synthetic HIV envelope protein comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 8 or SEQ ID NO: 8 having one or more mutations selected from the group consisting of (i) I529P, (ii) K480E, and (iii) a combination of EK479-480RRRR, I529P, A471C and T575C, and a carrier; and

(ii) a second composition comprising an immunogenically effective amount of an isolated HIV antigenic polypeptide and a carrier,

wherein one of the first and second compositions is for priming immunization and the other composition is for boosting immunization, and

wherein the vaccine combination optionally further comprises an immunogenically effective amount of one or more additional expression vectors encoding one or more additional HIV antigenic polypeptides, and the one or more additional expression vectors are included in the first or the second composition or one or more additional compositions to be used together with the first or second composition.

[0152] Embodiment 25 is a vaccine combination according to embodiment 24, wherein the first composition comprises an adenovirus vector, preferably an adenovirus 26 vector, encoding a synthetic HIV envelope protein comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 18; the isolated HIV antigenic polypeptide comprises residues 30-708 of the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 7, or residues 30-724 of SEQ ID NO: 36; and the one or more additional expression vectors are adenovirus vectors, preferably adenovirus 26 vectors,

encoding one or more additional HIV antigenic polypeptides comprising the amino acid sequences selected from the group consisting of SEQ ID NOs: 1-5, 28 and 29.

[0153] Embodiment 26 is a method of inducing an immune response against a human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) in a subject in need thereof, the method comprising:

(i) administering to the subject a first composition comprising an immunogenically effective amount of an expression vector encoding a synthetic HIV envelope protein comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 8 or SEQ ID NO: 8 having one or more mutations selected from the group consisting of (i) I529P, (ii) K480E, and (iii) a combination of EK479-480RRRR, I529P, A471C and T575C, and a carrier;

(ii) administering to the subject a second composition comprising an immunogenically effective amount of an isolated HIV antigenic polypeptide and a carrier; and

(iii) optionally, administering to the subject an immunogenically effective amount of one or more additional expression vectors encoding one or more additional HIV antigenic polypeptides,

wherein steps (i) and (ii) are conducted in either order, with one of the steps for priming immunization and the other step for boosting immunization, and preferably, the optional, effective amount of the one more additional expression vectors is administered together with the first composition.

[0154] Embodiment 27 is a method according to embodiment 26, wherein the first composition comprises an adenovirus vector, preferably an adenovirus 26 vector, encoding a synthetic HIV envelope protein having the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 18 and a second adenovirus vector, preferably and adenovirus 26 vector, encoding a HIV antigenic polypeptide comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 5; the second composition comprises an isolated HIV antigenic polypeptide having residues 30-708 of the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 7, or residues 30-724 of SEQ ID NO: 36; and the optional one or more additional expression vectors are adenovirus vectors, preferably adenovirus 26 vectors, encoding one or more additional HIV antigenic polypeptides comprising the amino acid sequences selected from the group consisting of SEQ ID NOs: 28 and 29; wherein the first composition is administered to the subject, optionally together with the one or more additional expression vectors, one or more times for priming immunization, and the second composition is administered to the subject one or more times for boosting immunization.

[0155] Embodiment 28 is a synthetic HIV envelope protein consisting of the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 18 or SEQ ID NO: 19, with or without the signal sequence.

[0156] Embodiment 29 is a vaccine combination comprising one or more vectors together comprising nucleic acid sequences encoding (i) a first synthetic HIV envelope protein comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 8 and (ii) a second HIV envelope protein comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 5.

[0157] Embodiment 30 is a vaccine combination according to embodiment 29, wherein the first synthetic HIV envelope protein comprises the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 18.

[0158] Embodiment 31 is a vaccine combination comprising the following components:
(i) an Ad26 vector encoding a synthetic HIV envelope protein consisting of the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 18; and
(ii) an Ad26 vector encoding an HIV envelope protein consisting of the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 5.

[0159] Embodiment 32 is a vaccine combination according to embodiment 31, further comprising the following component:
(iii) an Ad26 vector encoding HIV antigens consisting of the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 28.

[0160] Embodiment 33 is a vaccine combination according to embodiment 31 or 32, further comprising the following component:
(iv) an Ad26 vector encoding HIV antigens consisting of the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 29.

[0161] Embodiment 34 is a vaccine combination according to any one of embodiments 31-33, further comprising the following component:
(v) isolated HIV antigenic polypeptide having residues 30-708 of the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 7, or residues 30-724 of the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 36, optionally further comprising an adjuvant.

[0162] Embodiment 35 is a method of inducing an immune response against a human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) in a human subject in need thereof, the method comprising:
(a) administering to the subject: (i) a rAd26 vector encoding a synthetic HIV envelope protein comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 18; (ii) a rAd26 vector encoding an antigen comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 5; (iii) a rAd26 vector encoding an antigen comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 28; and (iv) a rAd26 vector encoding an antigen comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 29; preferably

wherein the rAd26 vectors are administered in a ratio of about 1:1:1:1 at a total dose of about 1-10x10^{10} viral particles (vp), e.g. 5x10^{10} vp;
(b) repeating step (a) at about 10-14 weeks, e.g. at 12 weeks after step (a);
(c) administering to the subject: (i) a rAd26 vector encoding a synthetic HIV envelope protein comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 18; (ii) a rAd26 vector encoding an antigen comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 5; (iii) a rAd26 vector encoding an antigen comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 28; (iv) a rAd26 vector encoding an antigen comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 29; (v) isolated HIV gp140 protein having the sequence of amino acids 30-708 of SEQ ID NO: 7; and (vi) aluminium phosphate adjuvant; preferably wherein the rAd26 vectors are administered in a ratio of about 1:1:1:1 at a total dose of about 1-10x10^{10} viral particles (vp), e.g. 5x10^{10} vp and wherein the isolated HIV gp140 protein is administered at a dose of about 50-300 microgram, e.g. 250 microgram; at about 20-28 weeks, e.g. at 24 weeks after step (a); and
(d) repeating step (c) at about 42-54 weeks, e.g. at 48 weeks after step (a).

[0163] Embodiment 36 is a method of inducing an immune response against a human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) in a human subject in need thereof, the method comprising:
(a) administering to the subject: (i) a rAd26 vector encoding a synthetic HIV envelope protein comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 18; (ii) a rAd26 vector encoding an antigen comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 5; (iii) a rAd26 vector encoding an antigen comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 28; and (iv) a rAd26 vector encoding an antigen comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 29; preferably wherein the rAd26 vectors are administered in a ratio of about 1:1:1:1 at a total dose of about 1-10x10^{10} viral particles (vp), e.g. 5x10^{10} vp;
(b) repeating step (a) at about 10-14 weeks, e.g. at 12 weeks after step (a);
(c) administering to the subject: (i) a rAd26 vector encoding a synthetic HIV envelope protein comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 18; (ii) a rAd26 vector encoding an antigen comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 5; (iii) a rAd26 vector encoding an antigen comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 28; (iv) a rAd26 vector encoding an antigen comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 29; (v) isolated HIV gp140 protein having the sequence of amino acids 30-708 of SEQ ID NO: 7; (vi) isolated HIV gp140 protein having the sequence of amino acids 30-724 of SEQ ID NO: 36; and (vii) aluminium phosphate adjuvant; preferably wherein the rAd26 vectors are administered in a ratio of about 1:1:1:1 at a total dose of about 1-10x10^{10} viral particles (vp), e.g. 5x10^{10} vp and wherein the isolated HIV gp140 proteins are administered in a ratio of

about 1:1 at a total dose of about 50-300 microgram, e.g. 250 microgram; at about 20-28 weeks, e.g. at 24 weeks after step (a); and

(d) repeating step (c) at about 42-54 weeks, e.g. at 48 weeks after step (a).

EXAMPLES

Example 1: Design of HIV envelope antigen sequences

[0164] Several HIV envelope antigen sequences were designed having sequence similarity to the mosaic HIV antigen mos2Env (SEQ ID NO: 6; previously also described in WO 2010/059732). The newly designed, membrane bound, sequences were based on (a combination of) fully natural wild-type sequences from HIV envelope proteins, or a chimera of mos2Env sequence and wild-type HIV envelope protein sequences. In addition to full length envelope protein sequences (see FIG. 1A), sequences having a C-terminal truncation of the cytoplasmic domain were also designed (see, e.g., FIG. 1C). See also e.g., Schiernle et al., PNAS 1997; Abrahamyan et al., J Virol 2005); Edwards et al., *J. Virology*, 2002, 76:2683-2691. Soluble variants were also prepared by C-terminal truncation before the transmembrane (TM) region, which was replaced by a trimerization domain, such as a GCN4 trimerization domain (see, e.g., FIG. 1B). These soluble variants were further converted into a single chain variant by mutation of the furin-cleavage site, thus inhibiting the processing of the extracellular domain of the envelope protein into gp120 and gp41 subunits.

[0165] Of the all the constructs generated and tested, constructs based on C4 had the most optimal properties, e.g., good manufacturability, folding, immunogenicity, etc. and these were selected for further studies. A soluble variant of the C4 construct having a GCN4 trimerization domain in place of the transmembrane domain (sC4, FIG. 1B), and a variant comprising a 7-amino acid fragment of the cytoplasmic domain (C4D7, FIG. 1C) were also generated and tested in further studies. The amino acid sequences of C4, sC4, and C4D7 are shown in SEQ ID NOs: 17, 19, and 18, respectively. Sequences encoding these are shown in SEQ ID NOs: 25, 27, and 26, respectively. Construct C1 has an extracellular domain sequence based on the mos2Env sequence (SEQ ID NO: 6). A soluble variant of construct C1 having a GCN4 trimerization domain in place of the transmembrane domain (sC1), and a variant comprising a 7-amino acid fragment of the cytoplasmic domain (C1D7), similar to sC4 and C4D7 as shown in FIGS. 1B and 1C, respectively, were also generated. Construct C1 and its variants were used in further studies for comparison purposes, since these are essentially based on the mos2Env sequence of the prior art. The amino acid sequences of C1, sC1 and C1D7 are shown in SEQ ID NOs: 31, 30, and 32, respectively. Nucleic acid

sequences encoding these are shown in SEQ ID NOs: 34, 33, and 35, respectively. Other constructs that were tested were less optimal than the ones based on construct C4, and were not taken into further development.

Example 2: Expression and Folding of Synthetic HIV envelope proteins

[0166] The expression level, folding, and cell-surface expression of synthetic HIV envelope proteins were measured.

[0167] Expression Levels

[0168] HEK293F cells were transiently transfected with a plasmid encoding the soluble synthetic HIV envelope proteins sC1 and sC4 as described in Example 1. Expression levels of the soluble protein were measured in the supernatant using quantitative Western blot (QWB). The results are shown in FIG. 2. The low expression levels for sC1 (which essentially corresponds to mos2Env with an added transmembrane domain) are in line with our recent insights for mos2Env. As demonstrated by the results, the sC4 variant of the invention showed significantly higher expression levels than the sC1 variant (control).

[0169] Protein Folding

[0170] Protein folding was tested by measuring the binding of soluble synthetic HIV envelope proteins to an antibody (MAb 17b) known to bind the co-receptor binding site of the HIV envelope protein, which is exposed only after binding of CD4, by enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA). In particular, binding of purified sC4 was tested for binding to MAb 17b with prior binding of sC4 to CD4, and without prior binding of sC4 to CD4. Purified sC1 was used as a control. Binding of MAb 17b to sC4 without prior CD4 binding to the envelope protein is an indication of partially unfolded or pre-triggered envelope protein (i.e., an unstable Env that adopts the "open" conformation in the absence of CD4 binding). The results of the ELISA assay are shown in FIGS. 3A and 3B.

[0171] As shown in FIG. 3B, sC4 shows strong binding to MAb 17b with prior binding to CD4, but no detectable binding to MAb 17b without prior binding to CD4. In contrast, as shown in FIG. 3A, sC1 showed much lower binding to MAb 17 both with and without prior binding to CD4. The results suggest that sC4 has a correct folding pattern, with no exposure of the co-receptor binding site prior to CD4 binding.

[0172] Protein folding was also analyzed by native polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis (PAGE) of sC1 and sC4 to evaluate the quaternary structure of the soluble protein variants, and possible incorrect disulfide bridge formation between protomers. After electrophoresis on a native gel, protein in the gel was detected by Western blot analysis. As shown by the

results in FIG. 4, the majority of sC4 is present in a trimeric state, which is the correct quaternary structure.

[0173] Taken together, the results of the protein folding experiments demonstrate that the sC4 soluble synthetic HIV envelope protein has the desired folding profile, which is improved as compared to the folding profile of the existing mos2Env antigen (represented by sC1).

[0174] Cell surface expression

[0175] Cell surface expression of the membrane-bound variants of HIV envelope proteins C1 (full length), C4 (full length, see FIG. 1A), C1D7, and C4D7 was also studied. HEK293T cells were transiently transfected with only eGFP-encoding plasmid (negative control, NC), or with eGFP-encoding plasmid together with an expression construct encoding an HIV envelope protein variant. Two days post-transfection, cells were subjected to fluorescence activated cell sorting (FACS)-analysis upon exposure to several poly- and monoclonal antibodies directed against gp120, and secondary antibodies, and then examined for envelope protein cell-surface expression levels. Quality of the envelope variants was assessed by determining the overall expression levels using an anti-gp120 polyclonal antibody, and by assessing relative binding of the broadly neutralizing antibodies PG9 and PG16, which are quaternary-structure dependent, and preferentially bind to correctly folded envelope trimer.

[0176] The results of the cell surface expression experiments are shown in FIG. 5. The surface expression levels of truncated variants C1D7 and C4D7 as measured using an anti-gp120 antibody, are much higher than the surface expression levels of their full length counterparts, C1 and C4, respectively. This confirms that deletion of 144 residues from the carboxy-terminus of Env increases envelope surface expression levels. The full length C4 construct of the invention also showed improved PG9 and PG16 binding as compared to full length C1, suggesting that the C4 envelope sequence is properly folded (i.e., a trimer) on the cell surface.

[0177] The results also demonstrate that the C1D7 variant, which is essentially Mos2Env with an added transmembrane domain and 7 amino acids of the cytoplasmic domain, can be surface-expressed on HEK293T cells. This is in contrast to the soluble construct in Ad26.mos2Env, which cannot be expressed at detectable levels on the surface when transfected to A549 cells. However, relative binding to PG9 and PG16 is barely detectable above background, suggesting that the C1D7 envelope sequence is poorly folded and is probably not present as an intact trimer on the cell surface.

[0178] Overall, the C4D7 envelope variant has the most optimal antibody binding profile, with higher gp120 expression than its full-length counterpart C4, and with greater than 15-fold increased PG9 and PG16 binding compared to C1 and C1D7 (FIG. 5).

Example 3: Stability of vectors encoding HIV envelope sequences

[0179] Previous work in our laboratories (unpublished) indicated that adenovirus 26 (Ad26) vectors encoding the mos2Env antigen sequence showed had relatively high VP/IU ratios (indicating lower quality of adenovirus product batches) and moreover that such vectors displayed stability issues. Accordingly, it was important to test the stability of the synthetic HIV envelope proteins constructs of the invention in an adenovirus background.

[0180] Recombinant Ad26 (rAd26) vectors encoding HIV antigen sequences of the invention C4, C4D7, and sC4 as described above in Example 1 were generated in PER.C6 cells (referred to as "rAd26.C4", "rAd26.C4D7", and "rAd26.sC4", respectively). Vector clones (plaques) were picked and scaled-up for the generation of research batches. A maximum of 5 viral clones (plaques) were scaled-up to T25 format and serially passaged for 10 passages in T25 format (passages 1-3 being the transfection and plaque purification steps, followed by 10 passages in T25 format, resulting in a total of 13 passages). Genetic stability was assessed at viral passage number (vpn) 3, 5, 10 and 13 by an E1 transgene cassette PCR assay, followed by sequencing at vpn 13. The results are shown in FIG. 6.

[0181] The rAd26 vectors encoding full length C4 (rAd26.C4) showed poor growth characteristics, as determined by no full cytopathogenic effect (CPE) in 2-3 days; genetic instability, as determined by deletions of the E1 transgene cassette region; or a combination thereof (FIG. 6). Due to the poor growth characteristics and observed genetic instability, this vector encoding full length C4 was not pursued further.

[0182] In contrast, for the rAd26 vectors encoding C4D7 (rAd26.C4D7) and sC4 (rAd26.sC4), all propagated plaques remained genetically stable during the course of the experiment (FIG. 6). Thus, the novel sC4 and C4D7 constructs outperform the original mos2Env construct with respect to stability in an adenoviral vector background. The genetic stability testing up to vpn 13 represents propagation several passages beyond that used in the industrial scale preparation of the vectors.

Example 4: Expression and *in vivo* antigenicity of HIV envelope sequences in adenovirus vectors

[0183] Expression and antigenicity of rAd26.C4D7 and rAd26.sC4 were assessed separately or in combination with a recombinant Ad26 vector encoding mos1Env (SEQ ID NO: 5) (hereinafter "rAd26.mos1Env") in vector-transduced A549 cells (human cell line) *in vitro* (data not shown). Flow cytometry analysis demonstrated that all antigens were expressed in cell cultures transduced with either $2x10^4$ viral particles (vp) of the single envelope antigens as controls, or with $1x10^4$ vp of the 2 combined Env antigens by adenovirus transduction. All transductions additionally contained single doses ($1x10^4$ vp) of adenovirus vectors encoding mos1GagPol ("rAd26.mos1GagPol") and mos2GagPol ("rAd26.mos2GagPol") (Barouch et al, *Nat Med* 2010, 16:319-323), so that the assessed vector combinations exhibited the same relative ratios of the different adenoviral vectors as intended for pre-clinical and clinical use. Preferably, the vectors encoding synthetic HIV envelope proteins of the invention are combined with vectors encoding the mos1GagPol and the mos2GagPol antigens for clinical use.

[0184] The combination of rAd26.mos1Env and rAd26.C4D7 yielded a maximal coverage of the assessed epitopes as determined by monoclonal antibody binding. Particularly, the exposure of the PG16 epitope, which was contributed by transformation with Ad26.C4D7 is promising for vaccine use since PG16 represents a broadly neutralizing monoclonal antibody recognizing the V1/V2 loop region of HIV-1 Env (Walker et al, Science. 2009). Hence, the synthetic HIV envelope protein of the invention derived from the C4 sequence increases the breadth of the immune response against the HIV envelope protein compared to the immune response generated by mos1Env only. Vaccine-induced antibody responses directed towards the envelope protein region have been shown to correlate with protection from HIV-1 infection in the RV144 study (Haynes et al, N Engl J Med. 2012), and thus the synthetic HIV envelope protein of the invention is a promising candidate to include in HIV vaccine regimens.

Example 5: Immunogenicity of vectors encoding synthetic HIV envelope proteins

[0185] The synthetic HIV envelope protein sequences of the invention in an Ad26 vector background were tested in rabbits to determine if these constructs were an immunogenic alternative to the rAd26.mos2Env construct.

[0186] The immunogenicity of adenovirus vector encoding mos1Env (rAd26.mos1Env; SEQ ID NO: 5) was tested alone, and in combination with adenovirus vectors encoding

synthetic HIV envelope proteins of the invention (rAd26.C4D7 and rAd26.sC4; comprising SEQ ID NO: 8, in particular SEQ ID NOs: 18 and 19, respectively). In all cases, adenovirus 26 vectors encoding mos1GagPol and mos2GagPol antigens (rAd26.mos1GagPol [SEQ ID NO: 28] and rAd26.mos2GagPol [SEQ ID NO: 29], respectively) were also administered. More specifically, the immunogenicity of rAd26.mos1Env alone (trivalent vaccine: rAd26.mos1GagPol, rAd26.mos2GagPol and rAd26.mos1Env) was compared to the immunogenicity of rAd26.mos1Env in combination with one of rAd26.C4D7 or rAd26.sC4 (tetravalent vaccine: administration of either rAd26.mos1GagPol, rAd26.mos2GagPol, rAd26.mos1Env and rAd26.C4D7; or administration of rAd26.mos1GagPol, rAd26.mos2GagPol, rAd26.mos1Env and rAd26.sC4). This comparison of the trivalent vaccine, which lacks any vectors encoding the synthetic HIV envelope proteins of the invention, with the tetravalent vaccine, which contains vectors encoding the synthetic HIV envelope proteins of the invention, allows for a determination of whether the HIV envelope proteins of the invention contribute to the breadth of protection.

[0187] Administration was done in vaccine regimens, wherein these Ad26 vectors were administered at weeks 0 and 6 as a double prime, and a clade C gp140 protein (a trivalent Env gp140 protein having SEQ ID NO: 7 without the signal peptide sequence of residues 1-29, see also WO 2010/042942) at weeks 12 and 18 as a double boost (see e.g. Barouch et al, 2015, Science 349: 320-324). Table 1 describes the vaccine regimens used for the current study. rAd26.Empty refers to a control vector lacking any gene encoding a sequence for an HIV antigenic protein. Each group contained six rabbits.

Table 1: Vaccine regimens tested in immunogenicity study in rabbits

Group	First and second Immunizations			Third and fourth immunizations			N=
	adeno vectors	Dose (vp)	Total dose (vp)	protein boost	Dose (ug)	Adjuvant	
1	rAd26.Mos1Env	$2.5x10^{10}$	$5x10^{10}$	GP140 (clade C)	10	AdjuPhos 250µg	6
	rAd26.Mos1GagPol	$1.25x10^{10}$					
	rAd26.Mos2Gagpol	$1.25x10^{10}$					
2	rAd26.Mos1Env	$1.25x10^{10}$	$5x10^{10}$	GP140 (clade C)	10	AdjuPhos 250µg	6
	rAd26.C4D7	$1.25x10^{10}$					
	rAd26.Mos1GagPol	$1.25x10^{10}$					
	rAd26.Mos2Gagpol	$1.25x10^{10}$					
3	rAd26.Mos1Env	$1.25x10^{10}$	$5x10^{10}$	GP140 (clade C)	10	AdjuPhos 250µg	6
	rAd26.sC4	$1.25x10^{10}$					
	rAd26.Mos1GagPol	$1.25x10^{10}$					
	rAd26.Mos2Gagpol	$1.25x10^{10}$					
control	rAd26.Empty	$5x10^{10}$	$5x10^{10}$	NA	0	AdjuPhos 250µg	6

[0188] The comparison of the trivalent Ad26 vaccine (lacking the novel Env antigens of the invention) with the tetravalent Ad26 vaccine (which comprises the novel sC4 or C4D7 Env antigens) allows for testing if the novel antigens contribute to breadth of protection. An established TZM-bl cell-based neutralization assay [Montefiori DC. *Methods Mol Biol* 2009,**485**:395-405; Sarzotti-Kelsoe M et al., *J Immunol Methods* 2014,**409**:131-146] was used to measure neutralizing activity of the vaccine candidates.

[0189] Results are shown in Fig 7, and were statistically analyzed by using the trivalent vaccine (group 1 in Table 1) as control group and comparing to each of the novel quadrivalent vaccines (groups 2 and 3 in Table 1).

[0190] Overall, the novel C4-derived (i.e. encoding Env proteins comprising SEQ ID NO: 8, being an alternative for mos2Env) adeno constructs were immunogenic after two homologous intramuscular immunizations in rabbits.

[0191] Neutralization capacity of rabbit immune sera against Tier 1B pseudoviruses was absent (data not shown), which is not unexpected as it was known that such viruses are more difficult to neutralize.

[0192] Pseudovirus neutralization capacity of rabbit immune sera against a clade B Tier 1A virus was unaffected by the addition of new components (data not shown). This demonstrates that the novel antigen did not negatively interfere with immunogenicity of the existing clade B antigen present in the vaccine (although the new components were directed to clade C, such undesirable interference could not be excluded a priori before it had been tested).

[0193] Pseudovirus neutralization capacity of rabbit immune sera against a clade C Tier 1A virus was significantly enhanced in the quadrivalent novel C4D7 containing adeno (quadrivalent, group 2), compared to trivalent (having only mos1Env) immunization alone (group 1) (Fig 7 panel B). In addition, pseudovirus neutralization capacity of rabbit immune sera against a clade C Tier 1A virus at week 8 was significantly enhanced in the quadrivalent novel sC4 containing adeno (quadrivalent, group 3), compared to trivalent (having only mos1Env) immunization alone (group 1) (Fig 7 panel B).

[0194] In conclusion, the C4D7 and sC4 constructs encoded in Ad26 were immunogenic and addition thereof expanded the binding- and neutralization capacity of a vaccine that has mos1Env (mainly clade B) as sole Ad26-encoded Env component, towards clade C strains (Fig 7B).

Example 6: Immunogenicity of vaccine regimens including vectors encoding synthetic HIV envelope proteins of the invention

[0195] One further rabbit study assessed the tetravalent vector combination Ad26.Mos4.HIV (consisting of four adenoviral vectors: Ad26.Mos1GagPol [encoding SEQ ID NO: 28], Ad26.Mos2GagPol [encoding SEQ ID NO: 29], Ad26.Mos1Env [encoding SEQ ID NO: 5] and Ad26.Mos2SEnv [the name "C4D7" as used above is also referred to as "Mos2S"; this vector encodes the novel SEQ ID NO: 18 according to the invention], in a 1:1:1:1 mixture at a total dose of $5x10^9$ vp,) applied intramuscularly as double prime immunizations in weeks 0 and 6, in combination with recombinant HIV-1 Env protein boosts using Clade C gp140 [having the sequence of amino acid residues 30-708 of SEQ ID NO: 7], Mosaic gp140 [having the sequence of amino acid residues 30-724 of SEQ ID NO: 36], or a combination of Clade C gp140 and Mosaic gp140, in weeks 13 and 19. These protein boosts were applied intramuscularly at a total dose of 10 or 50 micrograms of protein combined with 250 mcg aluminum phosphate adjuvant formulated on the day of immunization.

[0196] Results indicate that all tested regimens were immunogenic in all animals, inducing high antibody titers and moderate neutralization activity against Tier 1 Env pseudotyped viruses. If Mosaic gp140 was used as vaccine antigen, either alone or in combination with Clade C gp140, Mosaic gp140-specific ELISA titers and Clade B pseudovirus recognition were significantly increased at week 15 in comparison to the reference group boosted with Clade C gp140 alone. The overall effect size of the improvement was moderate, and bigger for the group boosted with the bivalent Clade C gp140 – Mosaic gp140 combination compared to Mosaic gp140 alone. At week 21 of the study, these differences were lost and immune responses measured for the cohorts receiving bivalent Clade C gp140 – Mosaic gp140 boosts or monovalent Clade C gp140 boosts were statistically indistinguishable.

[0197] The bivalent protein regimen showed comparable induction of Clade C ELISA titers and pseudovirus recognition as the Clade C gp140 alone boosted regimen, indicating that the inclusion of the clade B-related immunogen Mosaic gp140 had no negative effect on clade C antigen coverage, whilst significantly enhancing clade B coverage at week 15 of the study.

[0198] The data confirm that the Ad26.Mos2SEnv vector encoding a synthetic Env antigen according to the invention can successfully used in vaccine regimens.

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CLAIMS

1. A nucleic acid encoding a synthetic HIV envelope protein comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 8, or SEQ ID NO:8 having one or more mutations selected from the group consisting of (i) I529P, (ii) K480E, and (iii) a combination of EK479-480RRRR, I529P, A471C and T575C.
2. The nucleic acid of claim 1, wherein the synthetic HIV envelope protein further comprises a signal sequence, for instance, a signal sequence comprising the amino acid sequence selected from the group consisting of SEQ ID NO:9 to SEQ ID NO: 12.
3. The nucleic acid of claim 1 or 2, wherein the synthetic HIV envelope protein further comprises a transmembrane domain, for instance, a transmembrane domain comprising SEQ ID NO:13, preferably the synthetic HIV envelope protein further comprises SEQ ID NO:37 fused to the C-terminus of SEQ ID NO:8 and the N-terminus of the transmembrane domain.
4. The nucleic acid of claim 3, wherein the synthetic HIV envelope protein further comprises a fragment of a cytoplasmic domain, preferably a fragment of a cytoplasmic domain comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO:14 or residues 1-4 thereof.
5. The nucleic acid of any one of the preceding claims 1-4, wherein the synthetic HIV envelope protein comprises the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 18.
6. The nucleic acid of claim 1 or 2, wherein the synthetic HIV envelope protein either: (a) further comprises a trimerization domain, for instance a trimerization domain having the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 15 or SEQ ID NO:16; or (b) comprises SEQ ID NO:8 having a combination of mutations EK479-480RRRR, I529P, A471C and T575C.
7. The nucleic acid of claim 6, wherein the synthetic HIV envelope protein comprises the amino acid sequence of residues 1-686 of SEQ ID NO: 19.
8. A vector comprising the nucleic acid of any one of claims 1- 7, wherein the nucleic acid is operably linked to a promoter sequence.
9. The vector of claim 8, being a viral vector, preferably an adenovirus vector.
10. The vector of claim 9, wherein the adenovirus vector is a human adenovirus serotype 26 (Ad26) vector.
11. An isolated cell comprising the vector of any one of claims 8-10.
12. A composition comprising an immunogenically effective amount of the vector of any one of claims 8-10, and a carrier.

13. A vaccine combination, comprising:

(i) a first composition comprising an immunogenically effective amount of an adenovirus vector, preferably an adenovirus 26 vector, encoding a synthetic HIV envelope protein having the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 8, preferably SEQ ID NO: 18;

(ii) a second composition comprising an immunogenically effective amount of a second adenovirus vector, preferably a second adenovirus 26 vector, encoding an HIV antigenic polypeptide comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 5; and optionally

(iii) at least one additional composition comprising an immunogenically effective amount of at least one selected from the group consisting of

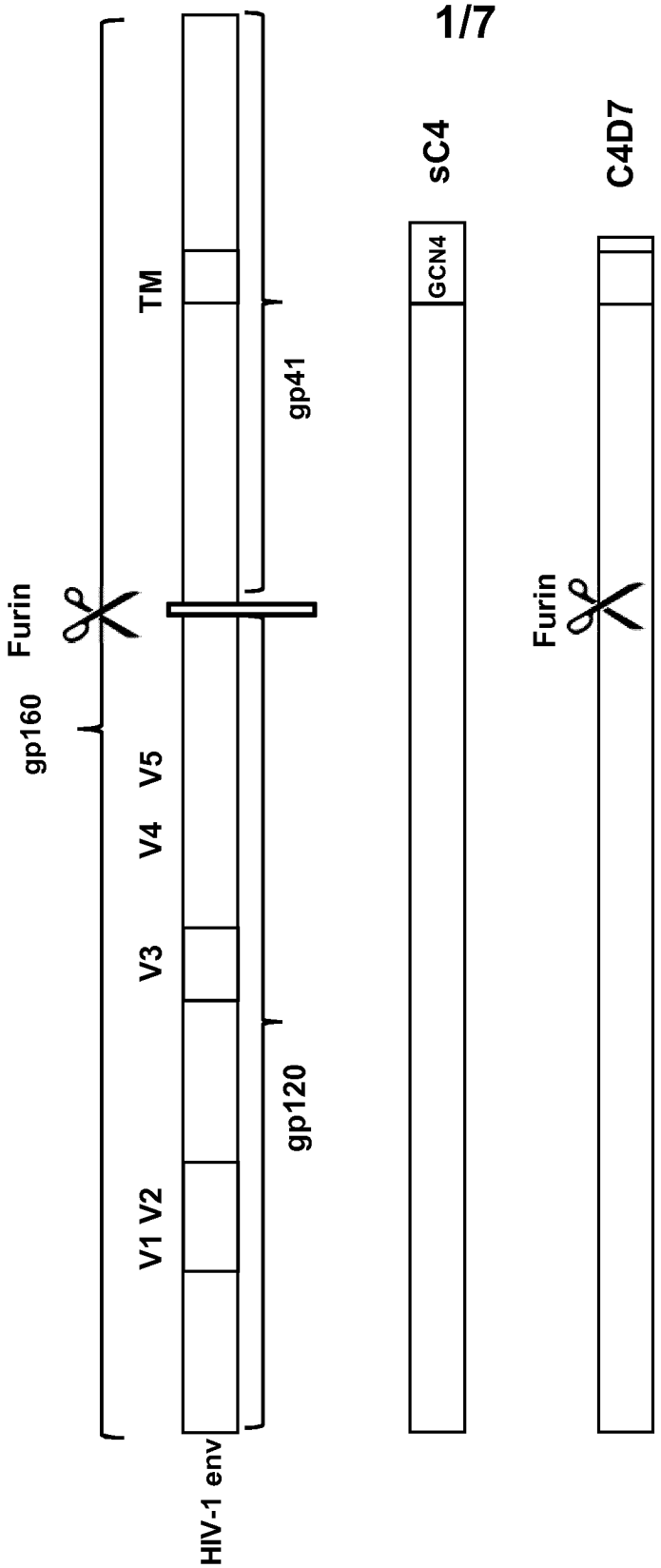
(iiia) a vector encoding at least one antigenic polypeptide having the amino acid sequence selected from the group consisting of SEQ ID NOs: 1-4, 28 and 29, and

(iiib) a polypeptide comprising an immunogenically effective amount of an isolated HIV antigenic polypeptide having residues 30-708 of the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO: 7, or residues 30-724 of SEQ ID NO: 36,

wherein the first composition, second composition and additional composition are present in the same composition or in one or more different compositions.

14. A method of inducing an immune response against a human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) in a subject in need thereof, the method comprising administering to the subject the composition of claim 12 or the vaccine combination of claim 13.

15. A synthetic HIV envelope protein comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO:8 or SEQ ID NO:8 having one or more mutations selected from the group consisting of (i) I529P, (ii) K480E, and (iii) a combination of EK479-480RRRR, I529P, A471C and T575C, preferably, comprising (i) SEQ ID NO:8 having a combination of mutations EK479-480RRRR, I529P, A471C and T575C; (ii) amino acid residues 30-704 of SEQ ID NO: 18, or (iii) amino acid residues 30-686 of SEQ ID NO: 19.


TM
gp41
Furin
gp160
V5
V4
V3
gp120
V1 V2
HIV-1 env
sC4
GCN4
C4D7
Furin

A. B. C. Fig. 1

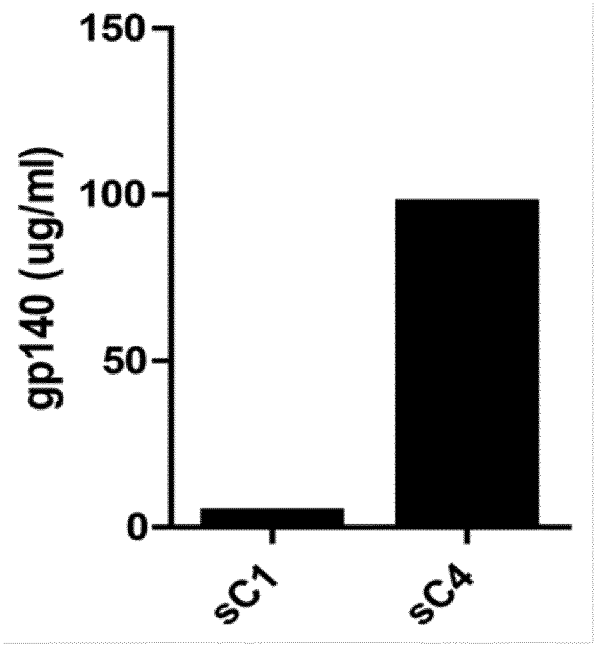
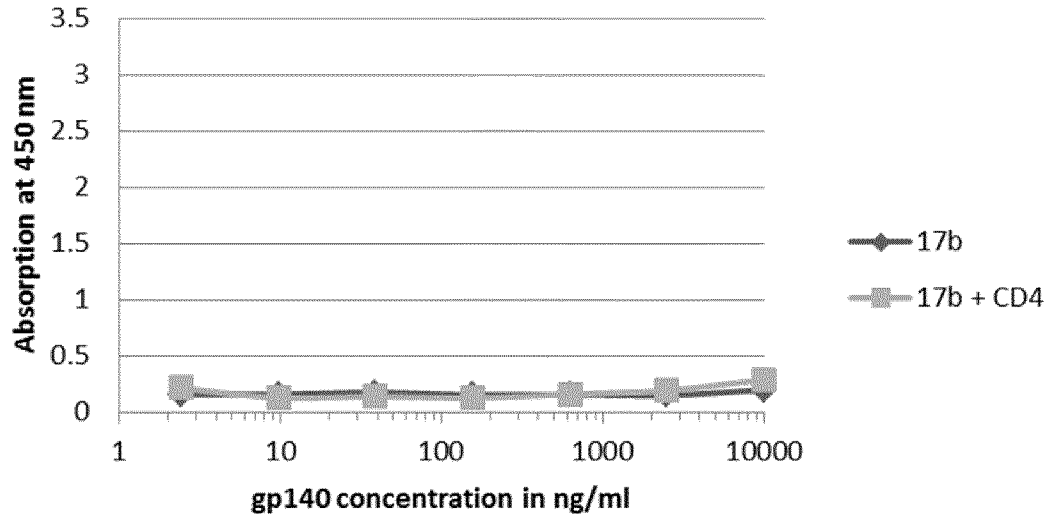


Fig. 2

A.


sC1
Absorption at 450 nm
3.5
3
2.5
2
1.5
1
0.5
0
1
10
100
1000
10000
gp140 concentration in ng/ml
17b
17b + CD4

B.

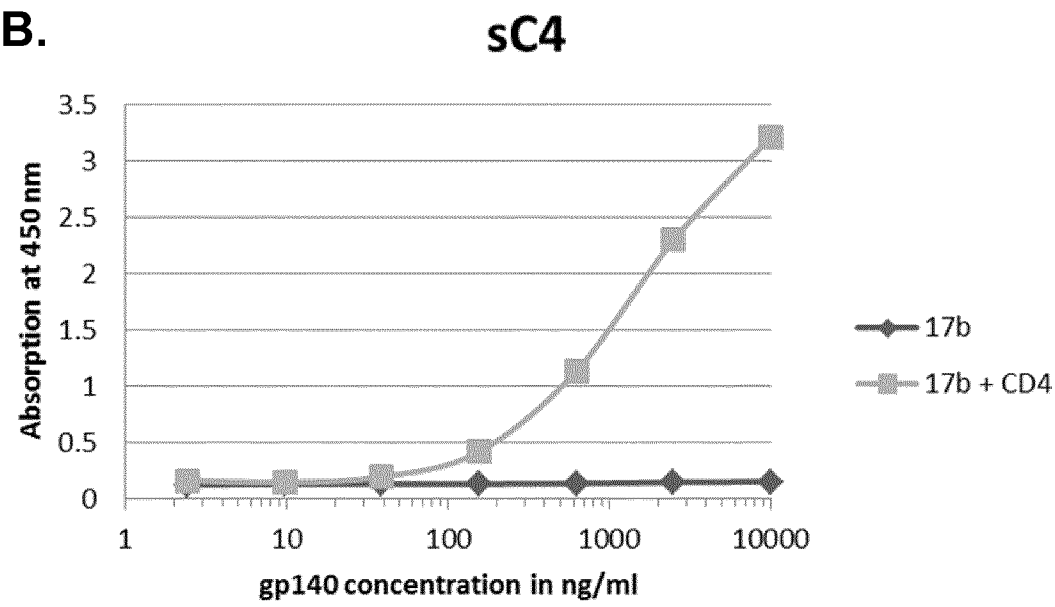

sC4
Absorption at 450 nm
3.5
3
2.5
2
1.5
1
0.5
0
1
10
100
1000
10000
gp140 concentration in ng/ml
17b
17b + CD4

Fig. 3

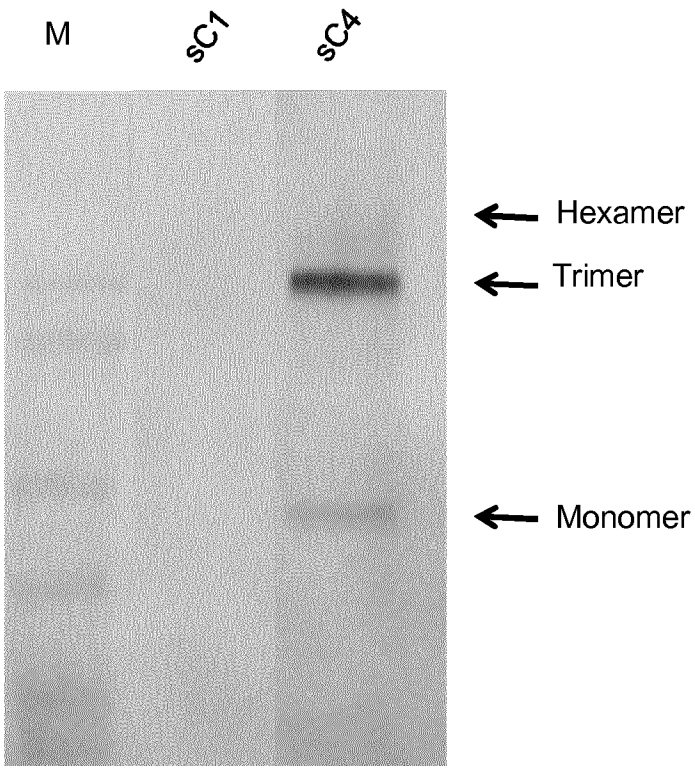


Fig. 4

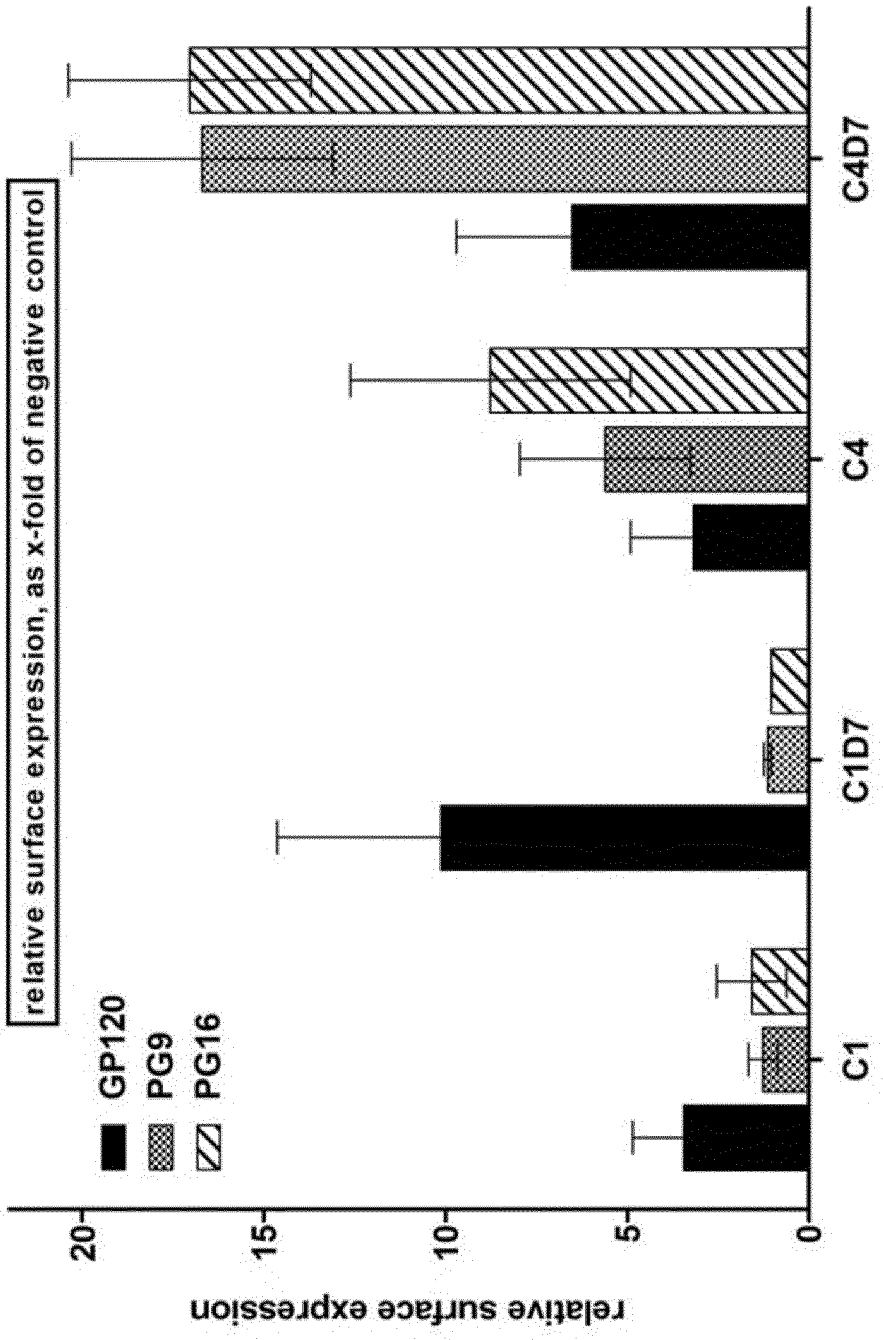

relative surface expression, as x-fold of negative control
GP120
PG9
PG16
C1
C1D7
C4
C4D7
relative surface expression
0
5
10
15
20

Fig. 5

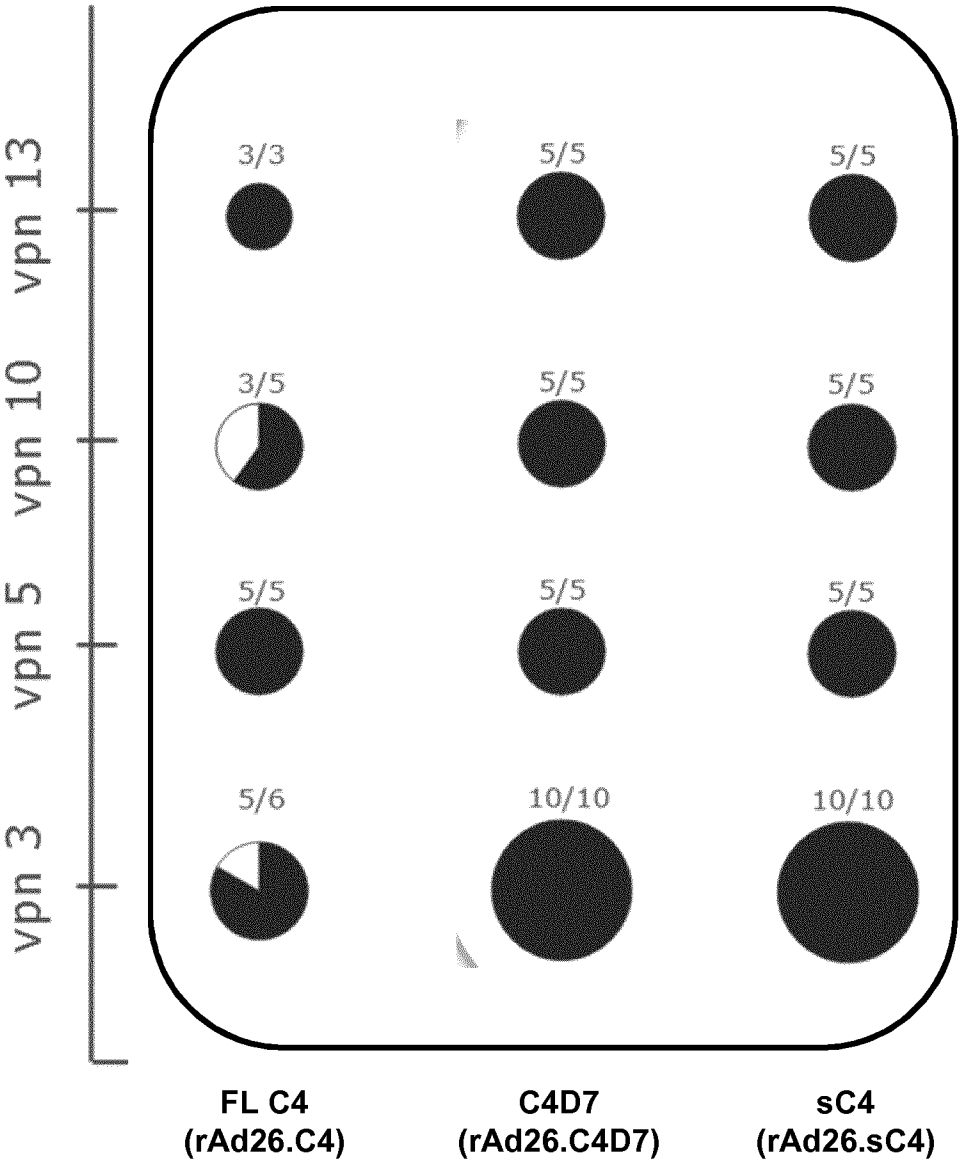

vpn 13
vpn 10
vpn 5
vpn 3
3/3
5/5
5/5
3/5
5/5
5/5
5/5
5/5
5/5
5/6
10/10
10/10
FL C4
(rAd26.C4)
C4D7
(rAd26.C4D7)
sC4
(rAd26.sC4)

Fig. 6

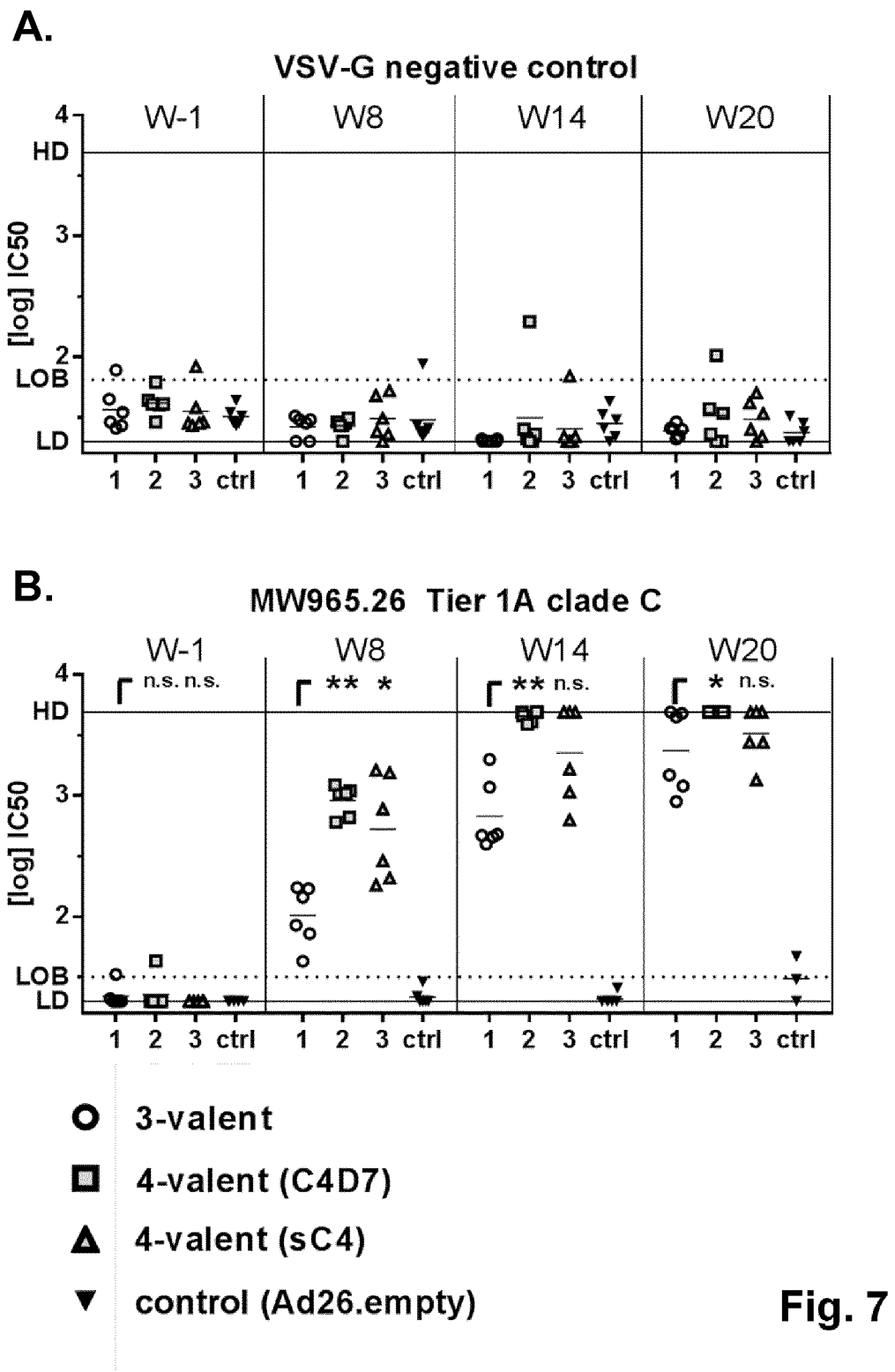

A.
VSV-G negative control
W-1
W8
W14
W20
[log] IC50
HD
LOB
LD
1 2 3 ctrl
B.
MW965.26 Tier 1A clade C
n.s. n.s.
** *
** n.s.
* n.s.
3-valent
4-valent (C4D7)
4-valent (sC4)
control (Ad26.empty)

Fig. 7

INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No
PCT/EP2016/081159

A. CLASSIFICATION OF SUBJECT MATTER
INV. C07K14/16
ADD.

According to International Patent Classification (IPC) or to both national classification and IPC

B. FIELDS SEARCHED

Minimum documentation searched (classification system followed by classification symbols)
C07K C12N

Documentation searched other than minimum documentation to the extent that such documents are included in the fields searched

Electronic data base consulted during the international search (name of data base and, where practicable, search terms used)
EPO-Internal, Sequence Search, EMBASE, WPI Data

C. DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT

Category*	Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages	Relevant to claim No.
A	WO 2010/059732 A1 (BETH ISRAEL HOSPITAL [US]; LOS ALAMOS NAT LAB [US]; BAROUCH DAN H [US]) 27 May 2010 (2010-05-27) claim 9; sequences 2,30 -----	1-15
A	"RecName: Full=Endogenous retrovirus group K member 9 Env polyprotein {ECO:0000256¦SAAS:SAAS00159347}; AltName: Full=Endogenous retrovirus group K member 113 Env polyprotein {ECO:0000256¦SAAS:SAAS00159454}; AltName: Full=Endogenous retrovirus group K member 13-1 Env polyprotein {ECO:0000256¦SAAS:SAAS", UNIPROT, 1 March 2005 (2005-03-01), XP002757477, [retrieved on 2005-03-01] the whole document ----- -/--	1-15

[X] Further documents are listed in the continuation of Box C.

[X] See patent family annex.

* Special categories of cited documents :

"A" document defining the general state of the art which is not considered to be of particular relevance

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"L" document which may throw doubts on priority claim(s) or which is cited to establish the publication date of another citation or other special reason (as specified)

"O" document referring to an oral disclosure, use, exhibition or other means

"P" document published prior to the international filing date but later than the priority date claimed

"T" later document published after the international filing date or priority date and not in conflict with the application but cited to understand the principle or theory underlying the invention

"X" document of particular relevance; the claimed invention cannot be considered novel or cannot be considered to involve an inventive step when the document is taken alone

"Y" document of particular relevance; the claimed invention cannot be considered to involve an inventive step when the document is combined with one or more other such documents, such combination being obvious to a person skilled in the art

"&" document member of the same patent family

Date of the actual completion of the international search	Date of mailing of the international search report
9 February 2017	06/03/2017

Name and mailing address of the ISA/	Authorized officer
European Patent Office, P.B. 5818 Patentlaan 2 NL - 2280 HV Rijswijk Tel. (+31-70) 340-2040, Fax: (+31-70) 340-3016	Sprinks, Matthew

1

Form PCT/ISA/210 (second sheet) (April 2005)

C(Continuation). DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT

Category*	Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages	Relevant to claim No.
A	COMPANS R W ET AL: "Recombinant protein gp41 heterologous transmembrane region, SEQ ID 1", GENESEQ,, 15 January 2009 (2009-01-15), XP002757478, [retrieved on 2009-03-19] the whole document -----	1-15
A	MARASCO W A: "Transmembrane domain peptide, SEQ ID 14", GENESEQ,, 26 January 2006 (2006-01-26), XP002757479, [retrieved on 2006-03-23] the whole document -----	1-15
A	"GCN4 fusion linker peptide, SEQ ID NO 3", GENESEQ,, 11 January 2007 (2007-01-11), XP002757480, [retrieved on 2007-03-08] the whole document -----	1-15

INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

Information on patent family members

International application No
PCT/EP2016/081159

Patent document cited in search report	Publication date	Patent family member(s)	Publication date
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		EP 2358757 A1	24-08-2011
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