Direct Detection of Exogenous Mouse Mammary Tumor Virus Sequences in Lymphoid Cells of BALB/cfC3H Female Mice

TERI J. LIEGLER* AND PHYLLIS B. BLAIR

Department of Genetics and Department of Microbiology and Immunology and the Cancer Research Laboratory, University of California, Berkeley, California 94720

Received 21 January 1986/Accepted 1 April 1986

The presence of exogenous mouse mammary tumor virus (MMTV) (C3H) DNA sequences in lymphoid tissue (spleen, bone marrow, and thymus) and nonlymphoid tissue (liver and kidney) of BALB/cfC3H female mice was directly assessed by DNA hybridization methods. Lymphoid tissues were found positive for integrated MMTV(C3H) sequences in females as young as 4 weeks. In most samples, the level of splenic MMTV(C3H) infection was low (2 to 5%). Infection remained throughout the life of the animal. The percentage of spleen samples found positive for exogenous viral infection was significantly higher in females bearing mammary tumors, whether virgin or multiparous. Liver and kidney DNAs were negative for exogenous MMTV sequences, suggesting tissue type selectivity in MMTV infection.

Murine mammary cancer results from a complex interaction between hormonal, genetic, and viral components (1, 15, 21, 24). Murine mammary tumor virus (MMTV) is the primary causative agent, inducing a high incidence of mammary tumors in females of susceptible strains. MMTV is produced in the mammary gland of infected females and transferred to suckling newborn pups. The females then develop mammary tumors with a latency period and incidence characteristic of their strain. It has been suggested that MMTV is harbored by another cell type or types before infecting mammary epithelium (1, 24), and many different strategies have been utilized for viral detection. Among them are electron microscopy of B particles (3, 11, 35), bioassays establishing transfer of the viral agent from selected tissues of infected mice into uninfected mice (22, 23, 30), and the detection of viral antigens on surfaces of nonmammary cells (12, 13, 17, 27, 37). MMTV has consistently been localized to leukocytes. However, interpretation of these experiments has been complicated by the possible expression of endogenous MMTV sequences, yielding false-positive results for exogenous viral presence. For example, MMTV-specific DNA sequences are found in lymphoid and nonlymphoid cells of BALB/c mice lacking exogenous virus, when treated with viral, chemical, or hormonal agents (2, 16, 28, 39). Moreover, spleen cells of BALB/c and C57BL mice (also lacking exogenous virus) express MMTV-related surface antigens, presumably due to expression of endogenous virus (5, 12, 17, 37).

Direct detection of exogenous MMTV viral sequences in lymphoid cells requires a method which differentiates them from endogenous viral DNA sequences. Previous studies by Cohen et al. (6, 7), using BALB/cfC3H mice, have documented restriction enzyme site heterogeneity with respect to the 5' gag-pol PstI site between the two full endogenous units of BALB/c and the MMTV(C3H) exogenous virus. Fragments diagnostic for exogenous infection can be detected in DNA from infected tissue digested with PstI, size fractionated, Southern blotted, and hybridized with radiolabeled MMTV(C3H).

We have screened PstI-digested DNA from various tissues in BALB/cfC3H females of selected ages and physiological states for exogenous MMTV(C3H) sequences by using a 4.0-kilobase (kb) MMTV(C3H) gag-pol fragment as a hybridization probe. (The 4.0-kb subclone was a generous gift from R. Cardiff.) This probe simplifies the restriction pattern produced when whole virus is used as a probe, yet allows differentiation of exogenous from endogenous sequences.

The MMTV sequence complements pertinent to our study with respect to PstI restriction sites in BALB/cfC3H mice is mapped in Fig. 1A. This includes endogenous units II and III and exogenous MMTV(C3H) sequences (6, 7). Each of these three MMTV sequences yields unique gag-pol fragments after PstI digestion; endogenous units II and III produce fragments of 5.0 and 5.4 kb, respectively, and exogenous MMTV(C3H) produces a 4.0-kb fragment. The PstI 4.0-kb MMTV(C3H) gag-pol fragment can be used as a selective probe to monitor presence of exogenous MMTV sequences (Fig. 1B). BALB/c and BALB/cfC3H liver DNA and mammary tumor DNA were examined. As shown, both liver and tumor samples display the 5.0- and 5.4-kb endogenous fragments, whereas the 4.0-kb genomic band, diagnostic of exogenous infection, is detected only in the mammary tumor sample.

In mammary tumor DNA, the exogenous-specific 4.0-kb band is more intense than the single-copy endogenous sequences of 5.0 or 5.4 kb (Fig. 1B), due to multiple integrations per cell (4, 10, 26, 29). Anticipating that in nontumor tissue the level of infectivity and number of integrations might be lower and thus the fragments more difficult to detect, we first established the limits of detection by Southern blot hybridization (36).

A dilution series was tested in which BALB/cfC3H liver DNA and diminishing amounts of mammary tumor DNA were mixed to determine the lower limit of detection of the 4.0-kb exogenous-specific band (Fig. 2). The tumor DNA sample chosen carries one exogenous MMTV copy per cell as determined by blot hybridization (data not shown). The 4.0-kb band is weakly detected at a liver/tumor dilution ratio of 500:1 (wt/wt), establishing the capability of detecting exogenous MMTV infection in 0.5% of the cells in a given tissue. Our method is approximately 10-fold more sensitive than one previously used (7).
FIG. 1. The 4.0-kb MMTV(C3H) gag-pol fragment is used as an exogenous MMTV-specific DNA hybridization probe. (A) Restriction maps of MMTV-related sequences in BALB/cfC3H mice that are pertinent to our study. Arrows, PstI sites. Wavy lines, cellular DNA sequences flanking integrated proviral sequences. Uninfected sequences carry endogenous sequences only. The BALB/cfC3H strain was originally constructed by foster nursing BALB/c pups on C3H lactating females and is maintained as a strain by nursing pups on their natural mothers. The spontaneous mammary tumor incidence in BALB/cfC3H breeding females reflects that of C3H females, which is 90 to 95% (14, 20). The spontaneous mammary tumor incidence in BALB/c(CRG1) breeding females is 0 to 5% (18, 19). (B) A total of 20 μg of cellular DNA was digested with PstI, blotted onto Zeta-probe nylon membranes (Bio-Rad Laboratories, Richmond, Calif.), and hybridized with MMTV(C3H) gag-pol probe. Lanes: 1, BALB/c spleen; 2, BALB/cfC3H liver; 3, BALB/cfC3H mammary tumor. The higher-molecular-weight bands of 5.0 and 5.4 kb appear as a single band due to the length of autoradiogram exposure.

We next examined tissues other than mammary gland for exogenous MMTV sequences. Lymphoid (spleen, bone marrow, and thymus) and nonlymphoid (liver and kidney) tissues from BALB/cfC3H female donors of various ages and physiological states were assayed to establish which tissues are susceptible to MMTV(C3H), whether infection occurs transiently or permanently, and whether it correlates with changes in mammary gland development. DNA was analyzed from tissues of young (3 to 6 weeks), adult (2 months and older), virgin, parous, mammary tumor-bearing, and non-tumor-bearing females.

Exogenous virus was evident in lymphoid tissues of all ages examined; the youngest mice showing splenic infection of exogenous MMTV(C3H) were 4 weeks old (Table 1). Splenic infection may occur earlier, but at a level too low for this detection method; Ritter and Nandi (32, 33) did report transfer of viral infectivity with blood cells of 2-week-old BALB/cfC3H females. The earliest age at which exogenous MMTV infection of mammary epithelium has been reported is 6 weeks, in experiments detecting B particle production in BALB/cfC3H mammary cells in vitro (P. Nakayama, M.S. thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 1968). Thus, splenic infection appears to precede mammary gland infection.

**Table 1.** Incidence of infection with exogenous MMTV (C3H) in mouse tissue

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tissue</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Virgin</th>
<th>Parous</th>
<th>% Positive (no. tested)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Without mammary tumor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>With mammary tumor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spleen</td>
<td>3 wk</td>
<td>+</td>
<td></td>
<td>0 (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4–6 wk</td>
<td>+</td>
<td></td>
<td>44 (18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adult</td>
<td>+</td>
<td></td>
<td>29 (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adult</td>
<td>+</td>
<td></td>
<td>50 (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bone marrow</td>
<td>Adult</td>
<td>+</td>
<td></td>
<td>25 (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adult</td>
<td>+</td>
<td></td>
<td>25 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thymus</td>
<td>Adult</td>
<td>+</td>
<td></td>
<td>44 (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adult</td>
<td>+</td>
<td></td>
<td>25 (4)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* X, Mouse is too young for mammary cancer to be possible.

b Adult, Females 2 months and older.
infection. Non-tumor-bearing primiparous or multiparous females resembled virgins in the incidence of lymphoid infection. However, in mammary tumor-bearing females, the incidence of splenic, bone marrow and thymic infection was markedly increased (Table 1): 50% or more were positive for infection in tumor-bearing females, versus 50% or fewer in non-tumor-bearing females.

The relative intensity of the 4.0-kb band varies when compared with the single-copy endogenous bands, reflecting variation in the number of cells infected for a given tissue or in the number of viral integrations per cell. The range in splenic infection levels is shown in Fig. 3. Splenic DNA samples from mammary tumor-bearing females may show a more intense 4.0-kb band when compared with spleen DNA samples from non-mammary tumor bearers (lanes 6 versus 2 or 3).

MMTV integrates randomly or at a large number of preferred sites in chromosomal DNA (15). Because of the cell heterogeneity in lymphoid tissues, it is not possible to demonstrate whether MMTV(C3H) sequences are integrated in spleens with restriction enzymes, as is possible with mammary tumors (4, 10, 26, 29). Unintegrated linear and circular forms of MMTV DNA have been found in both murine (8) and in vitro infected heterologous cells (34). Molecular weight sizes consistently range around 9 kb. To test whether the 4.0-kb PstI fragment found in lymphoid tissues represented integrated exogenous MMTV, undigested spleen DNA samples were fractionated in a 0.8% agarose gel, Southern blotted, and hybridized with radiolabeled MMTV. Only high-molecular-weight DNA (>23 kb) was specific for MMTV DNA sequences. There were no smaller MMTV-specific DNA sequences, including those in the 9.0-kb range. These samples were positive for MMTV(C3H) sequences when assayed with PstI. In addition, the DNA preparation procedures used select for high-molecular-weight DNA. Thus, we conclude that the exogenous MMTV(C3H) sequences detected in lymphoid cells by PstI are integrated in the cellular DNA.

The exact mechanism(s) of MMTV-induced transformation of mammary epithelium is currently an area of intense investigation (26, 29). Although the evidence is not as definitive as with mammary cell neoplasia, it is possible that MMTV is also oncogenic for lymphoid cells (8). Numerous T cell lymphomas have amplified MMTV sequences (8, 9, 20), and express MMTV-related antigens on their surfaces (25, 31, 38). However, it has not been possible in these cases to directly implicate MMTV in the etiology of these tumors.

The data presented here demonstrate that exogenous MMTV can infect lymphoid cells and integrate into the DNA. It follows, then, to question the role that lymphoid cells may play in the infection of mammary epithelium by MMTV. The putative mode of MMTV transfer from lymphoid cells to mammary cells is not known. Since MMTV B particles are not produced in lymphoid tissues (11), viral transfer in particle form appears unlikely. Alternate forms such as unencapsulated RNA or DNA may be transferred by cell-to-cell contact. Given the sensitivity of our exogenous-specific hybridization assay, it may be possible to determine the lymphoid cell type or types directly involved with MMTV-mediated transformation.

We thank G. Firestone and R. Goodenow for their expert critical reading of and suggestions regarding this manuscript.

This work was supported by Public Health Service grant CA-05388 from the National Cancer Institute, by Public Health Service Award GM07127 from the National Institutes of Health, by grant IM-69 from the American Cancer Society, Inc., by grant 1490 from the Council for Tobacco Research Inc., and by research funds of the University of California.

LITERATURE CITED


