NOTES

Defective Viral DNA in Epstein-Barr Virus-Associated Oral Hairy Leukoplakia

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Received 23 June 1989/Accepted 18 September 1989

Defective Epstein-Barr virus (EBV) has a deleted and rearranged genome (termed het DNA) that disrupts latency and induces standard EBV to replicate in vitro. We used the polymerase chain reaction to detect, in 2 of 10 patient samples, the junction of abnormally juxtaposed EBV DNA fragments BamHI W and Z, a genomic rearrangement responsible for the biologic activity of het DNA. By sequence analysis, the junction in wild-type defective DNA appears to be similar but not identical to the recombination in the DNA of laboratory strain P3HR-1. The presence of this marker for het DNA in the epithelial lesions of two patients suggests a role for defective EBV in a human pathologic process.

Epstein-Barr virus (EBV) is a human herpesvirus that establishes a persistent, replicative infection at oropharyngeal and genital sites (25, 26). The permissiveness of mucosal surfaces for EBV replication contrasts with the stringently latent life cycle of the virus in circulating B lymphocytes. Although differences in EBV activity have been attributed to variables of host cell regulation, an in vitro replicative system has been shown to contain defective EBV whose deleted, rearranged genome has the capacity to induce replication of latent EBV (4, 6, 10, 12, 14, 18, 21, 27). Defective EBV was first identified in a cellular subclone of P3HR-1, a Burkitt’s lymphoma-derived cell line (11, 21). The deleted and rearranged genome (het DNA) in defective virus forms self-contained replicons which multiply independently of standard EBV DNA and are capable of cell-to-cell spread (17). The ability to induce replication maps to a 2.7-kilobase-pair WZhet fragment, which is formed by nonhomologous recombination between DNA sequences in BamHI Z and W fragments separated in the standard genome by more than 55 kilobase pairs (Fig. 1) (5, 8). The WZhet recombinant retains the entire open reading frame of standard BamHI-Z, termed BZLF1 (13), encoding a product that transactivates the lytic origin of EBV DNA replication (3, 9, 28). The capability of het DNA to activate EBV replication results from up-regulation of BZLF1 by positive regulatory elements newly positioned on either side of the gene (22).

To determine if defective EBV exists in vivo, we used polymerase chain reaction (PCR) amplification to examine DNA from the epithelial lesion oral hairy leukoplakia, which is found predominantly in patients with acquired immunodeficiency syndrome and is known to contain abundant replicative EBV (7; L. Resnick, J. Herbst, and N. Raab-Traub, J. Am. Acad. Dermatol., in press). To test for rearranged EBV DNA, we synthesized oligonucleotide primers framing a 181-base-long sequence spanning the abnormal junction in the WZhet fragment (Fig. 1). Two 32P-labeled 30-base oligonucleotides specific for sequences in either the BamHI-Z or -W portion of WZhet DNA were used to detect the PCR product on Southern blots. Oligonucleotides were made with a model 380A DNA synthesizer (Applied Biosystems) using phosphoramidite chemistry. Probes were [γ-32P]ATP end labeled (ICN Radiochemicals) with cloned T4 polynucleotide kinase (U. S. Biochemicals Corp.) (16). Control DNAs were HR-1 cellular clones 5 (het+) and 16 (het−) (21) as well as cytomegalovirus, varicella-zoster virus, and human DNA. Test samples consisted of total cellular DNA extracted from the hairy leukoplakia lesions of 10 patients with acquired immunodeficiency syndrome. All samples were positive for EBV DNA by standard Southern blot hybridization. Analysis of the EBV termini identified abundant arrays of terminal fragments representing linear viral DNA of a highly lytic infection (19). In addition to the standard BamHI-Z, a 1.3-kilobase-pair fragment homologous to BamHI-Z was detected at very low levels in the DNA from 1 of the 10 patient samples, suggesting the presence of a rearranged EBV genome (data not shown).

PCR amplification of 1 μg of total cellular DNA extracted from biopsies of hairy leukoplakia was performed with Thermus aquaticus (Tag) DNA polymerase in a reaction mixture of 100 μl as described in detail elsewhere (15). Samples were boiled for 10 min; heating cycles of 2 min at 45°C, 2 min at 63°C, and 1 min at 90°C were performed 30 times on a DNA Thermal Cycler (Perkin Elmer Cetus Corp.). PCR product (18 μl per well) was electrophoresed on a 3% NuSieve–1% SeaKem agarose gel (FMC Corp.) and transferred to a Nytran membrane (Schleicher & Schuell, Inc.). Blots were prehybridized at 51°C for 3 h in 6× SSC (1× SSC is 0.15 M NaCl plus 0.015 M sodium citrate)-0.2% sodium dodecyl sulfate–5× Denhardt solution with 0.5 mg of denatured calf thymus DNA per ml. Hybridization was performed overnight at 51°C in hybridization fluid containing 32P-labeled probes (106 cpm/ml).

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After DNA amplification, 2 of 10 patient samples (including the one with an anomalous BamHI-Z signal on standard Southern blot) had a PCR product that hybridized to both the BamHI-Z- and BamHI-W-specific oligonucleotide probes, indicating a genomic rearrangement (Fig. 2, lanes 2 and 9). No product could be detected in the remaining eight patient samples or in the negative controls containing irrelevant and het DNA. Amplification of het HR-1 cellular clone 5 yielded two bands 181 and 120 bases in length.

To determine the basis of this size variability, we cloned PCR products from the het+ control and clinical sample 9 (Fig. 2, lanes 11 and 9, respectively). Primers, phosphorylated at their 5' ends, were used in the PCRs from which DNA for cloning was obtained. Phosphorylated PCR products were blunt end ligated into dephosphorylated PvuII-restricted pATX, and the ligation products were used to transform competent MC1061 cells (16, 23). Positive clones were identified by Benton-Davis screening with the Z-specific probe (2). Recombinant DNA was sequenced by the dideoxy-chain termination method with Sequenase (U.S. Biochemicals) and oligonucleotide primers complementary to pATX vector sites (24). On sequence analysis, the cloned PCR product from the clinical sample was 160 bases in length (Fig. 3). Moreover, the point of recombination between BamHI-W and BamHI-Z in the patient het DNA was shifted in relation to the prototype het DNA (13), so that an additional 45 bases of BamHI-W were included. Recombination occurred at a single adenine residue shared by both fragments. This alteration led to the preservation within the wild-type recombinant of the eucaryotic promoter sequence TATAAA contained in BamHI-W but interrupted by recombination of BamHI W and Z fragments in laboratory defective virus (13).

Sequences of all het+ clones agreed with the published sequence of the targeted 181-base segment (Fig. 3, top sequence). When the PCR product was subjected to electrophoresis on a denaturing polyacrylamide gel, the doublet
seen on the agarose gel (Fig. 2) resolved into a single 181-base band, indicating that secondary structure was the cause of this aberrant migration pattern (data not shown).

Ready detection of the W-Z rearrangement by PCR but not by standard blot hybridization techniques suggests that a minimal number of defective virions may be generated. Although defective EBV replicates preferentially to standard virus in tissue culture (17), this advantage may not hold for heterogeneous cell populations in vivo. However, a low copy number does not lessen the potential biologic significance of the defective virus. In contrast to defective interfering particles that inhibit replication by appropriating the viral replicative machinery, the het DNA of defective EBV appears to enhance replication by trans activation of the lytic origin of DNA replication, a mechanism that conceivably would operate if only a single copy of the defective genome were present.

The apparent absence of het DNA in eight clinical samples could be interpreted as evidence that the defective DNA is not causal but rather the occasional by-product of active virus replication. However, in experimental systems with other viruses, in which the introduction of defective virus clearly altered the disease course, isolation of defective interfering particles has proven difficult (1). In our study, the variability in the W-Z junction of wild-type het DNA may further complicate detection of this molecular alteration by PCR when the point of recombination occurs outside the region demarcated by a particular primer set (Fig. 3). Alternatively, single base substitutions in the regions of het DNA recognized by the PCR primers may interfere with primer annealing.

The presence of rearranged genomic EBV DNA in a lesion noted for its abundant replicative virus may represent a novel strategy by which persistent viruses move, by way of recombinational events, from a latent to a replicative stage in their life cycle. Because the ability of viruses to generate defective particles in vitro often depends on the cell type infected (1), the detection of defective EBV molecules in hairy leukoplakia lesions suggests that epithelial cells may be critical for EBV recombinational events. The enhanced susceptibility of the epithelium to this mode of viral pathogenesis may underlie the divergent biology of EBV at lymphoid and epithelial sites.

We thank George Miller (Yale University) for HR-1 clones 5 and 6, Clayton Naive (St. Jude Molecular Resource Center) for the pATX plasmid and synthesis of oligonucleotides, Ruben Donis and Karim Essani for thoughtful discussion and advice, and J. Gilbert for reviewing the manuscript.

Research was supported by Public Health Service grants CA 38877 and CA 21765 (core) from the National Cancer Institute and by a grant from the American Lebanese Syrian Associated Charities.

LITERATURE CITED


