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Full Length Research Paper

The Prevalence of the Selected Genes Involved in Biofilm Formation in *C. Albicans* Isolated From the Oral Cavity

Jolanta Szymańska¹, Agnieszka Kamińska², Anna Malm²

¹Chair and Department of Paedodontics, Medical University of Lublin, Poland

²Chair and Department of Pharmaceutical Microbiology with Laboratory for Microbiological Diagnostics, Medical University of Lublin, Poland

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C. albicans genome sequencing enables investigation of the role of particular genes in biofilm formation involving the yeast-like fungi. The aim of the study was to determine the genotypes of *C. albicans* isolates on the basis of the presence of the selected genes involved in biofilm formation. The study material included *C. albicans* strains isolated from the oral cavity of 654 healthy individuals. The biofilm-forming capacity of the strains was estimated with the MTT assay and menadione. The presence of *HWP1*, *ALS3*, *TUP1*, *NGR1*, *SAM2* and *CYS3* genes was investigated. In total, 15 gene combinations were found, including nine gene combinations for the strains with a confirmed biofilm-forming capacity, 11 – for the strains without this capacity, and five – independently of biofilm-forming capacity. The combination involving all the genes occurred in 72.5% biofilm-forming strains, and in 53.8% strains that do not form biofilm. The genetic material of 14.3% strains not involved in biofilm formation did not contain any of the studied genes. The one of the biofilm-species no analyzed genes were found. The absence of a correlation between the combinations of the studied genes and the biofilm-forming capacity of the studied *C. albicans* strains confirms a multigenetic basis of this structure.

Keywords: yeast, genomics, oral cavity, humans

INTRODUCTION

The key factor decisive for the pathogenicity of *C. albicans* strains is their capacity to form the biofilm. Therefore a lot of research aimed to understand the mechanisms that control biofilm formation already at the molecular level.

Genetic research and studies on *Candida albicans* genome conducted over many years made it possible to

acquire a detailed knowledge of the mechanism of biofilm development and of the process of obtaining a unique phenotype by biofilm in vitro (Finkel and Mitchell 2011; Nobile and Mitchell 2006).

The aim of the study was to determine the genotypes of *C. albicans* isolates on the basis of the presence of the selected genes involved in biofilm formation.

*Corresponding author's Email: szymanska.polska@gmail.com;
Tel: +48 601165205.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The buccal swab samples were collected from 654 individuals of both sexes and different ages. The tested population included the following groups: No. 0: 102 people aged 0-3 years; No. 1: 82 people aged 4-6 years; No. 2: 91 peoples aged 7-14 years; No. 3: 101 people aged 15-18 years; No. 4: 92 people aged 19-25 years; No. 5: 79 people aged 26-45 years; No. 6: 53 people aged 46-65 years; No. 7: 54 peoples aged ≥ 66 .

The study material (buccal swab samples), immediately after sampling, or after placing in transport medium, was inoculated into Sabouraud's medium with chloramphenicol and Chrom Agar Candida. The inoculates were incubated at 35°C for 48 hours.

The initial identification of the yeast-like fungi was based on the macroscopic appearance of the colonies on Sabouraud's medium and the growth of coloured colonies on Chrom Agar Candida.

The isolates that formed cream-coloured colonies, smooth or with slightly corrugated surface, convex, shiny, smelling of yeast and cream-textured, were used in the further study. Yeast-like fungi were isolated on Sabouraud's medium. The inoculates were incubated at 35°C for 48 to 72 hours. The microscopic examination of Gram-stained samples showed Gram-positive thin-walled, spherical, cylindrical or egg-shaped blastospores, 4–6 μm in diameter.

The identification of the most frequently detected *Candida* species was performed with API 20 C AUX microtest from bio Merieux.

The capacity of the studied *C. albicans* isolates to form biofilm *in vitro* were examined in stationary conditions with the MTT assay with menadione, generally used in screening tests.

The selected genes were identified: HWP1, ALS3, TUP1, NGR1, SAM2, and CYS3, involved in biofilm formation by *C. albicans* strains isolated from oral ontocenosis in healthy individuals from different age groups. The PCR reaction was performed in 15 μl of mixture (REDTaq Ready Mix - 7.5 μl ; forward primer - 0.75 μl ; reverse primer - 0.75 μl ; DNA matrix - 1 μl ; water - 5 μl). Its composition differed only in primers, according to the gene we looked for.

The primer sequences for the studied genes were followed:

HWP1

5'-TCAGTTCCACTCATGCAACCA-3'
5'-AGCACCGAAAGTCAATCTCATGT-3'

ALS3

5'-GTGATGCTGGATCTAACGGTATTG-3'
5'-GTCTTAGTTTTGTCGCGGTTAGG-3'

TUP1

5'-GCTTCAGGTAACCCATTGTTGAT-3'

5'-CTTCGGTTCCTTTGAGTTTAGG-3'

NRG1

5'-CACCTCACTTGCAACCCC-3'
5'-GCCCTGGAGATGGTCTGA-3'

SAM2

5'-GGTTCCTTGCCATGGTTGAG-3'
5'-TTGTGTCGACTCTTTTTGGGATAA-3'

CYS3

5'-GTGGTATCGAGTCGTTGATCGA-3'
5'-ACCATTGGCTTCTCTTTCTTCCT-3'

The samples were placed in a thermocycler and set the following amplification program:

- 95°C for 5 minutes – initial denaturation,
- 30 cycles including the following stages:
94°C for 1 minute – denaturation,
60°C for 1 minute – starter annealing,
72°C for 1 minute – elongation,
- 72°C for 10 minutes – final elongation,
- 4°C for 20 hours, if the amplification was set for the night.

The amplified PCR products were electrophoresed in 2% agarose gel with 20 μl of ethidium bromide, in TBE buffer, at the volatage of 120 mV. In each gel, we also separated 1 kb DNA markers (100 bp DNA Ladder): 100, 200, 300, 400, 500, 600, 700, 800, 900, 1000 base pairs. To visualize the PCR product, the gels were placed in a transilluminator and the photographs were archived in the electronic form and as printouts.

RESULTS

The oral cavity ontocenosis in the studied population was colonized mainly by the yeast-like fungi of the *C. albicans* genus; they were found in 160 (24.5%) individuals. Using the MTT assay with menadione we showed that 69 (43%) of the *C. albicans* isolates from oral mucosa in the tested population were capable of forming biofilm. We found 15 gene combinations, nine for the strains with a confirmed biofilm formation capacity, and 11 for the non-biofilm forming strains. It must be noted that the biofilm forming strains and the non-biofilm forming ones had five combinations in common.

The most frequent combination, involving all the studied genes: *HWP1*, *ALS3*, *TUP1*, *NRG1*, *SAM2*, *CYS3* (Figure 1), was found in 50 (72.5%) biofilm forming strains (Table 1). Also gene *SAM2* was relatively frequent; it was found in 8 (11.6%) strains with the confirmed biofilm forming capacity (Table 1) and in 13 (14.3%) of the non-biofilm forming strains (Table 2).

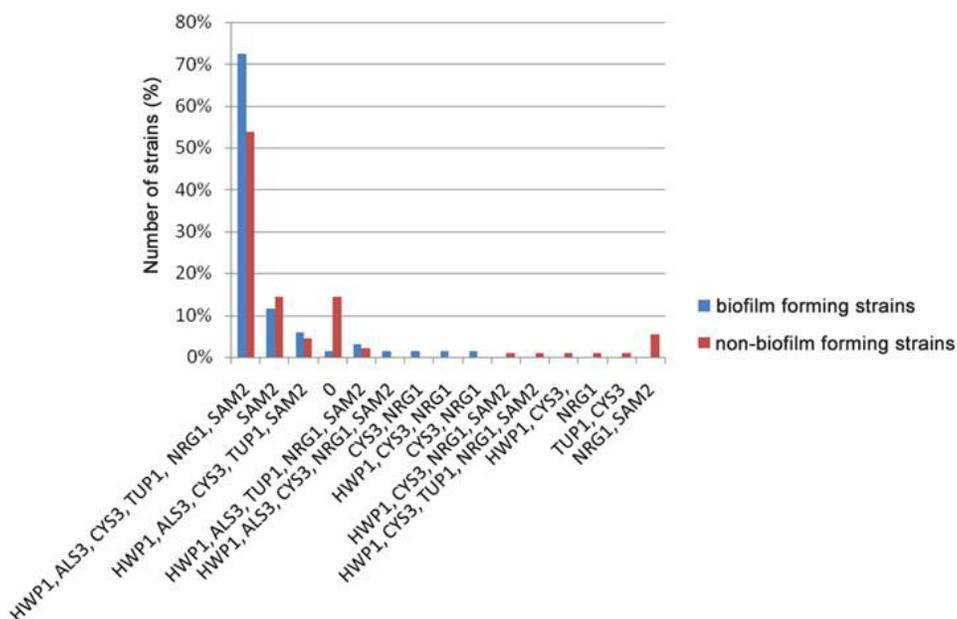


Figure 1. Genes present in *Candida albicans* strains isolated from the oral ontocenosis of healthy individuals from different age

Table 1. The distribution of gene combinations in *Candida albicans* biofilm forming strains isolated from the oral ontocenosis in healthy individuals from different age groups.

| Gene combination | Number of strains in age groups | | | | | | | | | Number (percentage) of strains 69 (100%) |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|------------|--|
| | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | | |
| HWP1, ALS3, CYS3, TUP1, NRG1, SAM2 | 3 | 4 | 6 | 7 | 6 | 9 | 6 | 9 | 50 (72.5%) | |
| SAM2 | 1 | 2 | 2 | | | 3 | | | 8 (11.6%) | |
| HWP1, ALS3, CYS3, TUP1, SAM2 | 1 | | | 1 | 2 | | | | 4 (5.8%) | |
| HWP1, ALS3, CYS3, NRG1, SAM2 | 1 | | | | | | | | 1 (1.45%) | |
| - | | | 1 | | | | | | 1 (1.45%) | |
| CYS3, NRG1 | | | | 1 | | | | | 1 (1.45%) | |
| HWP1, CYS3, NRG1, | | | | 1 | | | | | 1 (1.45%) | |
| HWP1, ALS3, TUP1, NRG1, SAM2 | | | | | | | 1 | 1 | 2 (2.9%) | |
| CYS3 | | | | | | | | 1 | 1 (1.45%) | |

As it is shown in Tables 1 and 2, other combinations were present in very few isolates. It is interesting that the genetic material of 13 (14.3%) the non-biofilm forming strains and one of the biofilm forming strains did not contain any of the studied genes. It should be emphasized that the combination prevailing in the total studied strains

was also most frequent in the strains isolated in different age groups, regardless of their biofilm forming capacity.

The complete list of the genotypes of *Candida albicans* strains isolated from the oral ontocenosis of healthy individuals from different age groups, correlated with the

Table 2. The distribution of gene combinations in *Candida albicans* non-biofilm forming strains isolated from the oral ontocenosis in healthy individuals from different age groups.

| Gene combination | Number of strains in age groups | | | | | | | | Number (percentage) of strains 91 (100%) |
|---|---------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|----|---|---|
| | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | |
| <i>HWP1, ALS3, CYS3, TUP1, NRG1, SAM2</i> | 8 | 5 | 7 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 10 | 7 | 49 (53.8%) |
| <i>SAM2</i> | 2 | 4 | 1 | | 4 | 1 | 1 | | 13 (14.3%) |
| <i>HWP1, ALS3, CYS3, TUP1, SAM2</i> | | 1 | | 3 | | | | | 4 (4.4%) |
| – | | 3 | 3 | 2 | 3 | | | 2 | 13 (14.3%) |
| <i>HWP1, ALS3, TUP1, NRG1, SAM2</i> | | 1 | | | | | 1 | | 2 (2.2%) |
| <i>HWP1, CYS3, NRG1, SAM2</i> | 1 | | | | | | | | 1 (1.1%) |
| <i>HWP1, CYS3, TUP1, NRG1, SAM2</i> | | | 1 | | | | | | 1 (1.1%) |
| <i>HWP1, CYS3,</i> | | | | 1 | | | | | 1 (1.1%) |
| <i>NRG1</i> | | | | 1 | | | | | 1 (1.1%) |
| <i>TUP1, CYS3</i> | | | | | 1 | | | | 1 (1.1%) |
| <i>NRG1, SAM2</i> | | | | | 2 | 3 | | | 5 (5.5%) |

yeast-like fungi biofilm forming capacity, can be obtained from the authors.

DISCUSSION

A large and still growing number of *C. albicans* genes whose products affect, or may affect, biofilm development *in vivo* and/or *n vitro* have been discovered to date. Mutant libraries with deletion of the genes that transcribe individual transcription factors, as the latter play a principal role in life processes regulation, including biofilm formation control (Mnichowska-Polanowska and Giedrys-Kalemba 2009). The analysis of transcription profiles using DNA microarrays points to the presence of genes closely related to biofilm phenotype. All the stages of biofilm formation, including adhesion, are under control of transcription factors, e.g.: Efg1, Cph1, Tec1, Bcr1, and are determined by their activity. A contact of *C. albicans* with a particular surface is a signal activating, among others, MAPK signalling cascade, which activates transcription factors and expression of a specific set of genes for a given phase of biofilm development. After a contact of *C. albicans* with a polystyrene surface, a surprising increase can be observed in the level of transcription of sulphur metabolism genes that encode amino acids: methionine and cysteine, and of *CDR1* and *MDR1* genes that encode the mechanism of

active efflux of drugs through cellular membranes. The formation of biofilm structure is conditioned by the expression of many genes. The most important of them include: *BCR1*, *TEC1*, *ALS3*, *HWP1*, *ALS2* (which encode proteins participating in the adhesion process), *EFG1*, *TEC1*, *SUV3*, *NUP8*, *MDS3*, *KEM3*, *MKC1* (which encode proteins participating in the process), or *CHK1*, *YWP1* (which encode proteins responsible for intercellular communication). Genes such as: *NRG1*, *SAM2*, *CYS3* and *TUP1* also take part in biofilm formation (Li *et al.*, 2007; Mnichowska-Polanowska *et al.* 2009). Genes *HWP1* and *ALS3*, analysed in this study, encode adhesins present on pseudo-hyphae/hyphae. Genes *NRG1* and *TUP1* are negative regulators of the filamentation process, while genes *SAM2* and *CYS3* are involved in a biosynthesis of sulphur amino acids that are important for yeast-like fungi cells in mature biofilm (Ahariz *et al.* 2010; Blankenship and Mitchell 2006; Karkowska-Kuleta *et al.* 2009; Kebaara *et al.* 2008; Nobile and Mitchell 2006; Sordi and Muhlschlegel 2009; Uppuluri *et al.* 2009; Uppuluri *et al.* 2010).

Five common gene combinations were found, regardless of the biofilm formation capacity of the tested isolates. The combination containing all the mentioned genes occurred most frequently; also gene *SAM2* was found relatively often. It is worth noting that a strain of *C. albicans* that did not contain any of the studied genes was also found.

It is known that adhesion is an indispensable stage of biofilm formation. Als proteins (Als1-Als 9), i.e. the products of *ALS* genes family, belong among the basic *C. albicans* adhesins (Chandra et al. 2001; Nobile and Mitchell 2006; Ten Cate et al. 2009). On the surface of pseudo-hyphae/hyphae, additional adhesins, among others Hwp1 protein encoded by gene *HWP1*, can also be found. Genes *ALS* and *HWP1* are expressed during blastospore-to-pseudo-hypha morphogenesis. However, both adhesins: Als 3 and Hwp1, are not always necessary for biofilm formation (Ene and Bennett 2009; Mnichowska-Polanowska et al. 2009; Nobile and Mitchell 2006; Soll 2009; Sordi and Muhlschlegel 2009).

The literature data and the results of the present study suggest that the process of *C. albicans* adhesion is very complex, and many adhesins and particles participate in coadhesion with other oral microbes. In addition, it is known that not all biofilm forming strains of *C. albicans* are capable of blastospore-to-pseudo-hyphae/hyphae transformation, despite the fact that *Candida* are dimorphic fungi, their dimorphism being an important factor of their pathogenicity (Barnett 2008; Wächtler et al. 2011).

The representative results obtained in the present study (due to a large number of healthy individuals at all the age groups and of both sexes) in the aspect of the participation of the selected genes that condition biofilm formation in *C. albicans* in the context of possible pathological conditions.

CONCLUSIONS

1. The absence of correlation between gene combinations *HWP1*, *ALS3*, *TUP1*, *NGR1*, *SAM2* and *CYS3* and biofilm-forming capacity of the studied *C. albicans* strains confirms the multigenetic – and not yet fully known – molecular basis of the formation of this structure. This result corresponds to the data reported by other researchers.

2. The knowledge on the genetic foundations of biofilm formation is still developing and the list of biofilm-related genes has been considerably extended.

3. The research on genes activated or inhibited during biofilm formation is extremely important, because it would enable the development of effective methods to disturb the biofilm forming process at the molecular level. There is a need for such methods in our clinical practice to prevent biofilm formation in the oral cavity.

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