Detection of Aerolysin and Hemolysin Genes in Aeromonas spp. Isolated from Environmental and Shellfish Sources by Polymerase Chain Reaction

Yousr, A.H., Napis, S., Rusul, G.R.A. and Son, R.

1Department of Cell and Molecular Biology
Faculty of Biotechnology and Biomolecular Sciences
2National Food Safety Research Centre, Faculty of Food Science and Technology,
Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia
3School of Industrial Technology, Universiti Sains Malaysia,
11800 USM, Penang, Malaysia

Abstract: Polymerase chain reaction (PCR) technique was used to assay for the detection of specific genes in the genomes of the Aeromonas spp. isolated from environmental and shellfish sources, particularly aero and hlyA genes, responsible for aerolysin and hemolysin toxins production in this genus. The results showed that: (i) the 1500 bp amplicon of the hlyA gene was detected in 20/38 of the Aeromonas hydrophila, 13/38 of the A. caviae and 6/9 of the A. veronii biovar sobria isolates; (ii) the 690 bp amplicon of the aero gene was detected in 20/38 of A. hydrophila, 17/38 of A. caviae and 6/9 of A. veronii biovar sobria isolates; (iii) the nucleotide blast results of aerolysin gene sequences of the representative strains of A. hydrophila, A. caviae and A. veronii biovar sobria revealed a high homology of 94%, 95% and 95% with published sequences, respectively and ; (iv) the protein blast showed 97%, 94% and 96% homology when compared to the published sequences, respectively. The finding of A. hydrophila virulence genes in other members of the genus Aeromonas, may give a new perspective to the significance of these results. The method described here may be a useful detection tool to assist in further investigation of aero and hlyA genes in the genus Aeromonas, especially for food microbiologist.

Keywords: Aeromonas, PCR, hemolysin, aerolysin, sequencing

INTRODUCTION

Aeromonas spp. are Gram-negative, rod shaped, mainly motile, facultative anaerobic, oxidase positive and glucose fermenting bacteria (Nordmann and Poirel, 2002). They have recently been transferred from Vibrionaceae to their own family Aeromonadaceae (Ormen et al., 2005). Aeromonas spp. has been involved in wound infections, sepsis, outbreaks of water- and food-borne gastroenteritis (Guadalupe et al., 2005). Three species, A. hydrophila, A. caviae and A. veronii biovar sobria have been suggested as the causes of human gastroenteritis. A variety of potential virulence factors and toxins have been characterised (Biscardi et al., 2002). Some strains are reported to be invasive to epithelial cells and one of the major virulence factors in gastroenteritis is aerolysin (Chu and Lu, 2005). The difficulty in recognizing potentially significant Aeromonas strains in foods poses a dilemma for the public health authorities (Kirov, 1993). The conventional microbiological procedures for isolating and

* Corresponding Author
E-mail: son@putra.upm.edu.my
identifying Aeromonas spp. from food are both laborious and time consuming (ICMSF, 1996). Some novel approaches like polymerase chain reaction (PCR) (Kingombe et al., 1999; Wang et al., 2003), outer membrane protein based immunoassays (Sachan and Agarwal, 2002), DNA/RNA probes (Dorsch et al., 1994) and flow cytometry (Diaper et al., 1992) have been used for the detection and/or identification of the Aeromonas spp. from food and environmental or clinical samples.

Two haemolytic toxins, haemolysin and aerolysin have been described in A. hydrophila. In this study, a search was made for the presence of the A. hydrophila virulence genes hlyA and aero, described by Xia et al. (2003) and Hosin Ali (personal communication) in the genomes of A. hydrophila, A. caviae and A. veronii biovar sobria strains by using the polymerase chain reaction method.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

**Bacterial Strains and DNA Extraction**

The eighty five isolates of the A. hydrophila (n=38), A. caviae (n=38) and A. veronii biovar sobria (n=9) which were isolated from the fresh water and seafood from different locations in Malaysia using the method as described elsewhere (Son et al., 2003) were used and the control strains of A. hydrophila, A. caviae, and A. veronii biovar sobri were grown in the LB broth with shaking at 120 rpm for 18-24 hours at 37°C. Using a 1.5 ml micro centrifuge tube, 1 ml of the cell culture from overnight grown culture in the LB broth was spun at 10 000 rpm for 5 min. The supernatant was discarded and 1 ml of sterile distilled water was added to re-suspend the cell pellet before it was re-centrifuged again at 10 000 rpm for 5 min. Next, the supernatant was discarded and 1 ml of sterile distilled water was added. The suspension was boiled for 10 min at 99°C to allow cell lyses and release of the DNA. After that, the tube was immediately placed in ice for 10 min. The cell lysates were centrifuged again and the clear supernatant was transferred to a new tube. The supernatant containing bacterial template DNA was used directly in the specific-PCR for the detection of aerolysin (aero) and hemolysin (hly) genes.

**PCR Protocol**

A. hydrophila, A. caviae, and A. veronii biovar sobria strains isolated from food and the environment in this study were examined by the use of the specific PCR to determine the presence of aerolysin (Aero) gene and hemolysin (hly) gene. The primers used to detect the targeted genes were:

(i) Aero 1, 5'-ATGCTGCGAGAATGATGATGAATGCAAGCTTGCCCCATA and Aero 2, 5'-ATGCAGAAATGATGAATGCAAGCTTGCCCCATA for the aerolysin gene (Hosin Ali, personal communication) and

(ii) Hly 1, 5'-CTATGAAAAAACTAAAATAACTG-3' and Hly 2, 5'-CAGTATAAGTGGGGAATGGAAG-3' for the hemolysin gene (Xia et al., 2003). The PCR assay was carried out in 0.5 ml micro centrifuge tubes, with 20.0 µl of reaction mixture consisting of 11.9 µl sterile distilled water, 2.0 µl 10x PCR buffer, 1.6 µl 25 mM MgCl2, 0.8 µl 2.5 mM deoxyribonucleotide phosphate (dNTP), 10 pmol of each of the primers (1.0 µl each) and 0.5 U of Taq DNA polymerase (0.5 µl) and template DNA 1.2 µl. The A. hydrophila, A. caviae, and A. veronii biovar sobria strains obtained from the Institute for Medical Research, Kuala Lumpur were used as the positive controls for the detection of Aero and hly genes. The solution mixtures were placed in the PTC 100 thermocycler (M.J. Research, Watertown, M.A, USA) and subjected to 35 cycles.

**Agarose Gel Electrophoresis**

For the detection and confirmation of the PCR products by the gel electrophoresis, 10 µl of the amplification product mixture was subjected to electrophoresis through 1.5% agarose gel. The amplified DNA fragments of specific sizes were visualized by UV fluorescence after being stained with ethidium bromide and recorded using the gel documentation system (Syngene).
Detection of Aerolysin and Hemolysin Genes in Aeromonas spp. Isolated from Environmental and Shellfish Sources

Sequencing of the Aero and hlyA Genes
After gel electrophoresis, the amplicons from representative strains of the Aeromonas spp. were purified using the QIAquick™ gel extraction kit (Qiagen®, Germany) and was subjected to the DNA sequencing analysis. The primer for the aerolysin gene that was designed by our colleague (Hosin Ali, personal communication) was used to analyse the specificity and confirm the PCR product on an ABI PRISM 377 DNA automated sequencer (Applied Biosystem, USA) at First Base Laboratories Sdn. Bhd. (Malaysia). The BLAST program (Basic Local Alignment Search Tool) accessed through the Internet (http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/) was used to analyse the sequence. The alignment of the sequences with several closely related genes was done using the CLUSTAW program from the BioEdit version 6.0.7 released on 19th May 2004.

RESULTS
The specific-PCR was performed using the primers H1, H2 and Aero1 and Aero 2 to determine whether a 1500 bp or 690 bp of the hlyA gene or aero gene fragment, respectively, could be detected among the 85 Aeromonas isolates. The PCR analysis for the detection of aerolysin (Aer) and hemolysin (hly) showed that 45.9% of the isolates carried hemolysin (hly) gene and 50.5% of the isolates contained aerolysin (Aer) gene. Out of the 85 strains, 20/38 of A. hydrophila (Figure 1), 13/38 of A. caviae (data not shown) and 6/9 of A. veronii biovar sobria (Figure 2) isolates were PCR positive for the hlyA gene. On the other hand, 20/38 of A. hydrophila (Figure 3) 17/38 of A. caviae (Figure 4) and 6/9 of A. veronii biovar sobria (data not shown) isolates were PCR positive for the aeroA gene. The purified aeroA gene PCR products using the QIAquick® gel extraction kit (Qiagen®, Germany) were subjected to direct DNA sequencing. The sequencing result of the Aero gene was compared to the Genbank database of the National Center for Biotechnology Information (NCBI) by using the BLASTN program (http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/). The nucleotide blast results of the aerolysin gene sequences of representative A. hydrophila, A. caviae and A. veronii biovar sobria revealed high homology of 94%, 95% and 95% with published sequences (data not shown), respectively. The representative protein blast A. hydrophila, A. caviae and A. veronii biovar sobria showed homology of 97%, 94% and 96% (data not shown), respectively, when compared to the published sequences in the Genbank database of the National Centre for Biotechnology Information (NCBI).

DISCUSSION
Little is known about the virulence of the possible enterotoxins of Aeromonas spp. There is no doubt that at least three different species of Aeromonas have been involved in food poisoning (A. hydrophila, A. caviae and A. veronii biovar sobria) (Kirov, 1997) but there is no documentation of which enterotoxin(s) is responsible. The two potential candidates have been characterized after cloning (Chopra et al., 1993), but these do not exclude other enterotoxins. Several papers have pointed towards a haemolysin as a good candidate for the main enterotoxin and it has been claimed that this might be a modified aerolysin. Granum et al. (1998), however, showed that aerolysin without the modification as described by Chopra et al. (1993) is cytotoxic to Caco-2 cells, and it is responsible for at least most of the cytotoxic activity. It is not unlikely that more than one enterotoxin may be involved in the food poisoning of humans, but addressing this question needs much more research, preferably on strains that have been involved in food poisoning. Although the involvement of Aeromonas spp. in food poisoning is still controversial, an increasing number of research reports point in the direction of direct involvement. The number of potential enterotoxins that has been suggested over the last years (Ormen et al., 2005) may show the diversity of the different Aeromonas strains. They are pathogenic to a
Figure 1: Representatives of the detection of hemolysin gene in *A. hydrophila* on 1.5% agarose gel. Lanes: 1, Control positive; 2, Control negative; 3, UH1; 4, UH2; 5, UH3; 6, UH4; 7, UH5; 8, UH6; 9, UH7; 10, UH8; 11, UH9; 12, UH10; 13, UH11; 14, MH12; 15, MH13; 16, MH14; 17, MH15; 18, MH16; 19, MH17

Figure 2: Representatives of the detection of hemolysin gene in *A. veronii* biovar *sobria* on 1.5% agarose gel. Lanes: 1, Control positive; 2, Control negative; 3, US1; 4, US2; 5, US3; 6, FS4; 7, SS5; 8, SS6; 9, SS7; 10, SS8; 11, SS9

Figure 3: Representatives of the detection of aerolysin gene in *A. hydrophila* on 1.5% agarose gel. Lanes: 1, Control positive; 2, Control negative; 3, UH1; 4, UH2; 5, UH3; 6, UH4; 7, UH5; 8, UH6; 9, UH7; 10, UH8; 11, UH9; 12, UH10; 13, UH11; 14, MH12; 15, MH13; 16, MH14; 17, MH15; 18, MH16; 19, MH17
Detection of Aerolysin and Hemolysin Genes in Aeromonas spp. Isolated from Environmental and Shellfish Sources 119

variety of different animal species living under very different conditions (from fish to man). It is also not unlikely that the different virulence factors are important under the different conditions (Ormen et al., 2005).

The two haemolytic toxins, haemolysin and aerolysin (Howard et al., 1987) have been described in A. hydrophila. When the PCR was performed to detect aerolysin gene (aerA), we found that aerA were mainly associated with A. veronii biovar sobria (66.6%), while 52.6% and 44.7% of A. hydrophila and A. caviae harbored aerA. It was interesting to note that primers designed from the aerA gene sequence of the A. hydrophila were found to give the expected size of the amplicon with A. caviae and A. veronii biovar sobria isolates. In vitro toxicity may suggest that there is also a probable pathogenicity in vivo, although information about the lowest dose to cause infection is still unclear. This hypothesis could be correlated with many studies which associated Aeromonas with various diseases: gastroenteritis (Chopra et al., 1999), endocarditis (Brouqui and Raoult, 2001), wound infection (Ouderkirk et al., 2004), acute supplicative cholangitis (Chan et al., 2000), cellulites (Grobusch, 2001), abscess (Halley and Mattano, 1999), peritonitis (Cordoba Lopez et al., 1999), septic arthritis (Janda and Abbott, 1998), pneumonitis (Goncalves et al., 1997), appendicitis (Dionisio et al., 1997), osteomyelitis (Karam et al., 1983), corneal ulcer (Carta et al., 1994), meningitis (Lin and Cheng, 1998), septicemia (Chang et al., 1997), myonecrosis (Moses et al., 1995), and bacterial empyema (Wang et al., 2003).

The presence and frequency of the aerolysin (aerA) gene in the Aeromonas strains in this study was in broad agreement with an earlier PCR survey (Husslein et al., 1991) that detected the aerA in all strains belonging to A. hydrophila and A. veronii biotype sobria species but in only half of A. caviae strains tested. In this study, the aerA gene was widespread in A. veronii biotype sobria and A. hydrophila, but less so in A. caviae. In contrast, the studies of Pollard et al. (1990) and Lior and Johnson (1990) showed that the aerA gene was only detected in hemolytic, cytotoxic and enterotoxigenic strains of A. hydrophila but not in A. veronii biotype sobria and A. caviae. Primer design divergences and limited numbers of strains, together with a lack of confirmatory Southern analyses on the PCR negative strains, may explain this anomaly.

When the genotypes of known virulent strains as defined in Wong et al. (1996) were compared, it was apparent that all the A. hydrophila isolates with the hlyA and aerA genotype were virulent in the suckling mouse model. These isolates also demonstrated α-hemolytic and cytotoxic activities. Due to the fact that the aerA and hemolysin genes were found in the vast majority of the diarrhoeal isolates from this species (Michelle et al., 1999),

**Figure 4:** Representatives of the detection of aerolysin gene in A. caviae on 1.5% agarose gel.

Lanes: 1, Control positive; 2, Control negative; 3, MC20; 4, FC21; 5, FC22; 6, FC23; 7, FC24; 8, FC25; 9, FC26; 10, FC27; 11, SC28; 12, SC29; 13, SC30; 15, SC31; 16, SC32; 17, SC33; 18, SC34; 19, SC35.
it is possible that these strains may possess other hemolytic/cytotoxic factors related to virulence that have not yet been described. The possibility of detecting the Aeromonas virulence gene followed by its characterization into the three main groups of the virulence markers (i.e. aerolysins, hemolysins, and enterotoxins) during a single PCR amplification from clinical, environmental or food isolates was promoted by Kingombe et al. (1999). In this study, the application of this method for the detection of Aeromonas virulence genes in food and environmental samples has proved to offer an interesting alternative for the rapid screening of potentially virulent aeromonads in food and the environment.

The nucleotide blast results of the aerolysin gene sequences representative of the A. hydrophila, A. caviae and A. veronii biovar sobria have shown that high sequence homologies exist between the aerolysin gene and GenBank database, thus confirming clearly the high level of DNA relatedness of the Aeromonas spp. virulence factors. In practice, the determination of the pathogenicity among Aeromonas food isolates is mostly based on the biological assays assessing the cytotoxicity or adherence to human or animal cell lines (Handfield et al., 1996; Kirov et al., 1984). Unfortunately, the majority of these systems are not always suitable for use on a routine basis. Although not linked to a biological assay, a positive reaction in our PCR-based detection method can be considered as an indication of the potential pathogenicity of the Aeromonas isolate under study. Furthermore, the PCR results obtained either by using the BLAST search of the GenBank database or by the alignment of the amplicon to the reference sequence (Chopra et al., 1993; GenBank accession no. M8470) allowed the determination of the identity and sequence similarity of a given amplicon and to the complete collection of the Aeromonas virulence markers in the GenBank.

In conclusion, these observations suggest that an evaluation of the Aeromonas virulence requires the assessment of virulence phenotypes and complete virulence gene set. Screening of specific cytotoxin and hemolysin genes appeared to be the most effective way of detecting and characterizing Aeromonas virulence factors. The high throughput and cost-effective specific-PCR system used in this study could provide a powerful supplement to the conventional methods for a more accurate risk assessment and monitoring of Aeromonas species in the food and environment.

REFERENCES


of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America, 96: 15330–15335.


