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Author
Korolik, Victoria, Friendship, D., Reduru-Hewa, T., Alfredson, David, Fry, B., Coloe, P.

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Specific identification, grouping and differentiation of *Campylobacter jejuni* among thermophilic campylobacters using multiplex PCR

V. KOROLIK*, D. T. FRIENDSHIP#, T. PEDURU-HEWA#, D. A. ALFREDSON1, B. N. FRY# AND P. J. COLOE#

1 School of Health Science, Griffith University Gold Coast, QLD, Australia and # Applied Biology and Environmental Biology, RMIT University, Melbourne, VIC, Australia

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**SUMMARY**

*Campylobacter* species such as *C. jejuni* and *C. coli* are recognized as major causes of acute gastroenteritis world-wide. Although *C. jejuni* and *C. coli* are usually non-pathogenic in birds and animals, they cause enteric disease in humans and the source of infection is often the consumption of contaminated foodstuffs. In this paper we report on the development and use of a multiplex PCR of *C. jejuni* genomic DNA which yielded a PCR product with a unique polymorphic site that can be used to quickly and accurately identify and group *C. jejuni* isolates from any source including DNA, cell culture, skin washings and faecal samples. The test is simple and sensitive and can detect purified DNA from a single bacterium $10^9$ cells from crude lysates, $10^7$ cells in seeded faeces and 120 cells/ml of washing of 1 cm$^2$ skin fragments of chicken skin.

**INTRODUCTION**

Thermophilic *Campylobacter* species such as *C. jejuni* and *C. coli* are recognized as major causes of acute gastroenteritis world-wide in man and animals. Although *C. jejuni* and *C. coli* are usually non-pathogenic in birds and animals, the processing of poultry and other animal food products often leads to contamination of the end product, and the exposure of consumers to food poisoning organisms. This exposure, coupled with inadequate hygiene procedures that enable post-cooking contamination of products and/or the consumption of undercooked meats, can lead to the transfer of campylobacter disease to humans [1–3].

We have previously reported on the use of a specific DNA probe to differentiate between *Campylobacter* strains isolated from animals and humans by identification of a unique restriction endonuclease *Cla*I polymorphic site. The presence of this *Cla*I site in *C. jejuni* is characteristic of the majority of isolates from chickens, but is normally absent from human isolates [4]. In this study, a 747 bp sequence containing the polymorphic *Cla*I site, was utilized in combination with a sequence that identifies thermophilic campylobacters for the development of a rapid multiplex PCR based test. This test can simultaneously identify the medically important campylobacters, *C. jejuni* and *C. coli* differentiate between the two and also group the majority of *C. jejuni* strains into polymorphic groups. This PCR assay has been used to screen campylobacter isolates from human patients in Australia.

**METHODS**

**Bacterial strains and culture**

Bacterial strains used to assay the multiplex PCR method were: from ACTC and NCTC culture collection: *Campylobacter hyointi* CCUG 33450$^r$,
**RESULTS**

**Cloning and sequencing of the ClaI polymorphic region**

A total of 1800 bp of *C. jejuni* DNA surrounding the ClaI polymorphic site was sequenced and potential PCR primer sites were selected with respect to the position of the polymorphic ClaI site and the G+C...
Multiplex PCR to identify C. jejuni

AGGCATTACA CAAATTTACC TAGTTCAAGTT TCAACGCAA ACAATGATGC TGAATAGTG TTC CAGGACA TGCCCAAACG GACTAGATA GTTTTTAAAA

TGGTGCCAAAT TTTAGAATCG CAAATCTTAT ATGATTGTGCAA TCTCTAGG CTACAGTGC AAAAACACAC TGATATGAA TACAGATGAA

CTCCACAAC ATGTGGGTTA AGATGTGTTTT TTTGGAGTGG AAAATACAGCC AATCOCATC GCGAATTTTG TATTTAAGG CGTGTCGAC GTATTGGAA

AATTGAAAAA AGGTCTTTGA GGTATGAAAA AAGGATGTTGA CAAAGCGAA AAAATGGGAG GGTGAGAATCT TCCCTAAATC ATCAGATAAG

GGGCACTTTAAA AAAGTTAGCG ATCTCAGTGA TGAACACTCG CAAACACTCAG ATAGCTCTACA AGCTTAACAA AAAATSCTTA GAAATTTCTTA AGCATTATTTA

GTGGTTATTA ATATCGCAAG TAAAAATTC ATCTCTTTAAA TAAAATTTCTAAGCATTT TGAAGAAGCT GCAAACAGGC TATAGCTGAA TTGGATTAT TCGACCTAC GGCT

CATACTGCTCCT TTTACCTTTAC CTATTTTATTT ATGATTGAGTT GGAATTTTATA GGAATTTTTA GGAATTTTTT AGATCTTTTT GCTCTCAAT CATCAATCA AGAATTATA AAAGGCAAGG CCTCCTGTA TGCCTGTCACA AAAA

GCTACG GCTCTAAAA ATAAAAGGTTT ATCTTGGTTGTTG TTATTTTAC GGAACCTTTT TAAACCTTTT TATTTTCAAA TTTAAAAAGCC CTGCA

ATAGCATTAAAT ACAATTTT CCACTGCTAT

Fig. 1. DNA sequence containing putative Clal polymorphic site. Forward and reverse arrows indicate PCR primer sites.

Fig. 2. Agarose gel showing 747 bp product amplified from the DNA of randomly selected C. jejuni strains.

content in that genomic region (Fig. 1). The two primers selected were: the forward primer Cjej1 (5’-GAG CAA TGC CCA AAC TGG AC -3’) and the reverse primer Cjej2 (5’-TCA GGA GCA AAA GAT GAG GG -3’). These were then used as described in Materials and Methods to amplify genomic DNA across the Clal polymorphic region in C. jejuni strains.

The PCR reaction resulted in amplification of ~740 bp DNA fragment in all C. jejuni strains tested (Fig. 2 shows a selection of ~300 tested strains). The amplified DNA fragment could be cleaved using Clai to produce a two band pattern in strains carrying the polymorphism (Fig. 3).

Specificity and sensitivity of the PCR reaction

The specificity of the PCR reaction was initially tested against enteric bacteria including E. coli and Salmonella spp as well other Campylobacter spp. described in Methods. Further, 10 different C. coli strains from identified sources (5 from humans and 5 from chickens) and 10 C. coli strains chosen randomly among Australian, Japanese and USA isolates as well as 20 clinical isolates were tested to ascertain specificity of the PCR assay. The DNA from other Campylobacter spp was not amplified using the same PCR test. As an internal control 23S RNA sequence primers which identified all thermophilic campylobacters by producing a single known PCR product of 103 bp were included (Methods). This ensures that if a negative result occurs, it is due to the lack of appropriate sequences (ie. strain is not C. jejuni) rather than any problem with the PCR reaction. Only C. jejuni strains produced the expected amplified DNA product of ~740 bp with the C. jejuni specific primers and the product could be cleaved with Clai in strains carrying the polymorphic site (Fig. 4).

The specificity and sensitivity of the PCR test were also determined for crude cell lysates of C. jejuni, seeded faecal samples and chicken skin with surface contamination by C. jejuni. Chicken skin was obtained from chickens available to the public through retail outlets.

The sensitivity of the PCR test was as follows: Purified DNA could be detected at 1 x 10^{-9} g, which was equivalent to 120 cfu/ml as determined by viable bacterial count). The total bacterial count to give a concentration of DNA at 1 x 10^{-9} (calculated) was equal to 500 bacteria/ml. When the control primer was omitted from the reaction mix the detection was of even greater sensitivity with the level of detection reduced to 1 x 10^{-10} g, which was equivalent to 1 bacteria/2 ml.

When crude bacterial cell lysate was used, the sensitivity of detection was 3 x 10^{4} cells/ml and for seeded faeces the level of sensitivity was 1 x 10^{5}.
cells/gm. For cells present on chicken skin – 120 cells/1ml of washing from a 1 cm² skin fragment could be detected. The PCR reaction contained 2 µl of the sample which shows that the detection level in absolute numbers with respect of total number of bacteria detected was: 1 x 10² cells for crude lysates, 1 x 10³ cells in seeded faeces and 120 cells for chicken skin.

Screening of campylobacter isolates from Victoria and Queensland in Australia

Campylobacter isolates from human faeces from cases of campylobacter enteritis were screened using the PCR assay as described. All strains identified as Campylobacter spp other then C. jejuni, were further classified using the hippurate hydrolysis test. Of 129 strains from human patients from Victoria, 5 were identified as C. jejuni which had been misclassified as C. coli, 70% were of a single fragment (human type) polymorphism and 30% were of double fragment (chicken type) polymorphism. Of 91 strains from human patients from Queensland, 78 were C. jejuni of which 77% were of a single fragment (human type) polymorphism and 23% were of double fragment (chicken type) polymorphism. The remaining 13 strains did not react with C. jejuni specific primers, but did show amplified campylobacter control fragment and were subsequently identified as C. coli using hipurate hydrolysis test.

DISCUSSION

In this paper we report on the use of a multiplex PCR amplification of C. jejuni genomic DNA to yield a PCR product with a unique polymorphic site that can be used to quickly and accurately identify and group C. jejuni isolates from purified DNA, cell culture, skin washings and faecal samples. The test could be applied in diagnostic laboratories and can also be used in chicken flocks to detect and type colonizing Campylobacter spp prior to processing. The test can also be used for differentiation of C. jejuni from other campylobacters. The test is simple and sensitive and can detect purified DNA from a single bacterium, 10² C. jejuni cells from crude lysates, 10³ C. jejuni cells in seeded faeces and 120 cells for washings from chicken skin.

A variety of methods have been reported for identification of thermophilic campylobacters using rRNA gene sequences [11–14], multiplex PCR with gyrA and pflA genes or the cadF gene [15, 16]. These methods can all identify C. coli and C. jejuni and in some cases differentiate between these two related species. However, these tests have no power to differentiate types of C. jejuni strains. Other methods such as AFLP genotyping using fla genes or randomly primed DNA restriction fragments [5, 17, 18] offer great power to genotype and establish levels of relatedness of different strains for epidemiology. However these methods are unable to group or differentiate isolates from animals and humans. The
multiplex PCR assay using the \textit{C. jejuni} ClaI polymorphic region described in this paper is a single test that can be used to identify thermophilic campylobacters using purified DNA, cultured cells, faecal material or chicken skin and can also be used to group the majority of strains with respect to human-type or chicken-type polymorphism.

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**REFERENCES**