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The abundant class of nemis repeats provides RNA substrates for ribonuclease III in Neisseriae

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Abstract

About 2% of the Neisseria meningitidis genome is made up by nemis, short DNA sequences which feature long terminal inverted repeats (TIRs). Most nemis are interspersed with single-copy DNA and are found at close distance from cellular genes. In this work, we demonstrate than RNAs spanning nemis of different length and sequence compositions are specifically cleaved at hairpins formed by nemis termini by total cellular lysates derived from both Escherichia coli and Neisseria lactamica strains. The use of cellular extracts from E. coli strains impaired in the activity of known ribonucleases let to establish that cleavage at nemis TIRs is specifically mediated by the endoribonuclease RNase III. Data set the base for the identification of all of the neisserial genes that are regulated by RNase III because of their physical association with nemis DNA. © 2002 Published by Elsevier Science B.V.

Keywords: Repeated DNA family; Terminal inverted repeat; Pathogenic bacteria; RNA hairpin; RNA processing

1. Introduction

Neisseria meningitidis (or meningococcus) and Neisseria gonorrhoeae (or gonococcus) are two strictly human pathogens which belong to the same genospecies. Though closely related, the two bacterial species colonize different epithelia and cause notably different diseases. N. gonorrhoeae is generally responsible for localized inflammation of the urogenital tract, N. meningitidis for meningitis and septicaemia. To rapidly identify potential vaccine candidates, the whole genome sequences of N. meningitidis A and B serogroup strains have been recently determined [1,2]. The sequence of a pathogenic N. gonorrhoeae strain has also been recently determined (http://dna1.chem.ou.edu/gono.html). Whole genome data provided insights on the unique organization of genetic material in Neisseriae. The meningococcus hosts an extraordinary number of different repeated DNA sequences. Of these, many are variously combined in intergenic repeat arrays plausibly involved in recombination processes frequently occurring in Neisseriae [1]. Other DNA repeats, as the so-called Correia [3] or nemis [4] sequences, are predominantly found as individual units. Nemis are miniature DNA insertion sequences (80–160 bp), which feature 26–27 bp long terminal inverted repeats (TIRs). The presence of target site duplications at nemis ends, and the identification in sequenced strains of homologous chromosomal regions containing or lacking nemis DNA, both indicate that nemis are (or have been) mobile genetic elements [4]. Both transposition and recombination events contributed to the genomic spread of this unusual class of DNA repeat family, which is organized in a few major structural subsets and includes, both in A and B serogroup meningococci, ~ 300 members. Of these, about two-thirds are interspersed with single-copy DNA, and inserted at close distance from coding regions [4]. Both the abundance and the peculiar pattern of interspersion suggest that nemis may have regulatory functions. The hypothesis that these repeats may influence gene expression is supported by the finding that in 7/7 N. meningitidis genes analyzed, the 5′ termini of the gene transcripts lye within flanking nemis sequences [4].

In this work, we provide evidence that nemis TIRs fold into hairpin structures, and RNAs encompassing nemis sequences are invariably cleaved by cellular lysates from

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Abbreviations: bp, base pairs; nt, nucleotide(s); cpm, counts per minute
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either *Escherichia coli* or *Neisseria lactamica* strains at hairpins formed by folding of *nemis* TIRs. Cleavage is specifically mediated by RNase III.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Bacterial strains and extracts

The *E. coli* strains FB1 (ΔhisGDCBHAFI-gnd, rhaA), HT115 (rnc14::DTn10), SK5006 (thr, leu, pDK39, Cm′ rnb500) and SK5695 (rne1) are described in Ref. [5]. The *N. lactamica* strain 4627 was obtained from the Pasteur Institute. Cellular extracts (S30 and S100) were prepared according to Zubay [6]. *E. coli* strains were grown in LB medium, the *N. lactamica* strain 4627 in GC broth supplemented with 1% Polyvitox (Bio-Merieux).

2.2. Plasmid construction

Plasmids pGEM-378 and pGEM-417 contain *Neisseria* DNA flanking a full-length and an internally rearranged *nemis*, respectively. The pGEM-378 and pGEM-417 inserts are homologous to the intervals 1796373 to 1796751 and 383037 to 383420 of the *N. meningitidis* serogroup B strain MC58 [2], respectively. DNA inserts, obtained by amplifying genomic DNA from the *N. meningitidis* 1055 strain via PCR by using appropriate oligonucleotides as primers, were cloned in the *Sma*I site of the vector pGEM4Z to obtain complementary RNA transcripts, since the vector carries Sp6 and T7 promoters next to the cloning region. Clones were checked by DNA sequencing [7].

2.3. RNA substrates and in vitro cleavage analyses

Uniformly 32P-labeled RNAs were obtained by transcribing in vitro linearized pGEM-378 and pGEM-417 DNAs with either T7 or SP6 RNA polymerase, in reaction mixtures containing ATP, CTP, UTP (500 μM each), and GTP (250 μM) and 25 μCi (alpha-32P)-UTP (400 Ci mmol−1). Samples aliquots (25,000–30,000 cpm) were incubated with either S30 or S100 bacterial extracts as previously described [5]. Primer extension assays were performed essentially as described [8]. The sequences of the oligomers used as primers in the experiments reported in Fig. 4 are given below:

oligomer bo 5′-GCCTTAGCTCAAAGAGAACGATTC-TCTAAG-3′
oligomer fo 5′-CAGACAGTACAGACAGATAGTACG-GAACCG-3′
oligomer lo 5′-GGACAGGAAACACACAGCGTTTT-CATCTGA-3′

3. Results

3.1. Transcripts encompassing *nemis* sequences are cleaved *E. coli* cellular lysates at specific sites

The DNA fragment cloned in the plasmid pGEM-378 spans the 5′ end region of the *N. meningitidis* gene encoding the orf NM1970 [1] and a flanking, full-length *nemis* element (Fig. 1). The plasmid was used as template to obtain in vitro radiolabeled RNAs of known length directed by either the Sp6 or the T7 polymerase. The incubation of both T7- and Sp6-driven transcripts with *E. coli* S30 cellular extracts resulted in the accumulation of three major classes of RNAs (Fig. 1, lanes 2 to 5). Cleaved RNA species resulted quite stable over incubation times from 20 to 60 min at 37 °C (data not shown). The sizes of the bands marked a to f in Fig. 1 nicely fit with the hypothesis, stemming from RNA extension analyses carried out in vivo [4], that transcripts encompassing *nemis* are cleaved at RNA hairpins formed by *nemis* TIRs. The cleavage pattern was due to soluble activities present in the lysate, since *E. coli*
S100 cellular extracts produced the same RNA species shown in Fig. 1 (data not shown). Subsequent experiments were therefore carried out with S100 cellular fractions.

The full-length nemis cloned in pGEM-378 features 26-bp-long TIRs. Several nemis are rearranged because of the loss of a 50-bp-long internal segment. Moreover, elements featuring 27 bp long TIRs, which partly differ in sequence from 26 bp long TIRs, also occur [4]. Different members of the nemis family could generate alternative RNA structure, and RNA cleavage could be influenced by either the sequence content of nemis and/or the distance between TIRs. To verify the issue, transcripts from pGEM-417, a plasmid which contains an internally rearranged, 81 bp long nemis featuring 27 bp long TIRs, were also challenged with the E. coli cellular extracts. Bands marked g to i and l to n in Fig. 2 have the size expected for RNA moieties produced by cleavage of the pGEM-417 substrate at nemis TIRs. We also set up competition experiments in which radiolabeled pGEM-378 transcripts were challenged with cellular lysates in the presence of two to five hundred-fold excesses of cold RNA. Cleavage of radiolabeled pGEM-417 transcripts was competed at comparable levels by cold excess of pGEM-417 and pGEM-378 transcripts (data not shown). On the whole, data indicate that transcripts encompassing nemis elements, which differ either in size or sequence content, are processed, at least in vitro, with the same efficiency.

3.2. A cellular lysate derived from N. lactamica cleaves nemis RNA

Challenging pGEM-378 transcripts with cellular extracts from a wild type strain of the apathogenic N. lactamica species gave essentially the same cleavage pattern produced by the E. coli extracts (Fig. 3). The size of the RNA species measured in the experiments shown in Figs. 1–3 is not definitive proof that cleavages occur at nemis inverted repeats. Such hypothesis was confirmed by primer extension analyses shown in Fig. 4. The experiments were performed by incubating first cold nemis RNAs (either pGEM-378 or pGEM-417) with either E. coli or N. lactamica cellular lysates. Specific oligonucleotides were subsequently annealed to the in vitro processed b (bo oligomer) f (fo oligomer), l and n+l (lo oligomer) RNA species (see also Fig. 1), and extended with the reverse transcriptase to map cleavage sites. Products of extensions on pGEM-378 transcripts, driven by either the T7 (bands I, panel A, top) or the Sp6 promoter (bands II, panel A, bottom), were obtained in separate experiments. In panel B, bands III and IV denote...
the elongation products obtained with processed pGEM-417 transcripts driven by the T7 promoter. The additional bands in lanes 1 and 2 of panel B of Fig. 4 may denote either premature stops of the reverse transcriptase or elongation products of minor processed species of pGEM-417 RNA. Slight differences in the cleavage specificity of the *E. coli* and *N. lactamica* processing activities are highlighted in Fig. 4.

3.3. Nemis RNA hairpins are targeted by RNase III

Radiolabeled pGEM-378 transcripts were incubated with S100 cellular extracts derived from *E. coli* strains harboring mutant alleles for specific ribonucleases. Only extracts from HT115, a strain carrying a *rnc* allele encoding an inactive endoribonuclease RNase III [9], were totally unable to cleave the RNA substrate (Fig. 5, lane 5). The prominent band immediately below the input RNA band in lane 5 of Fig. 5 likely corresponds to uncleaved substrate moieties in which the formation of secondary structures caused a block to 3′ exonuclease activities. This conclusion is supported by the finding that the same RNA species is relatively less abundant in samples incubated with cellular extracts from the strain SK5003, in which a mutation in the *pnp* gene inactivates the 3′ exonuclease activity of the phosphonucleotide phosphorylase (Fig. 5, lanes 3 and 4). It is of interest to note that the mRNA-specific RNase E has no role in the process of cleaving nemis RNA (Fig. 5, lanes 6 and 7).

4. Discussion

Bacterial cells possess several endoribonuclease activities, which function both in the processing of stable RNAs and the mRNA decay [10–14]. Intergenic sequences may play an important role in the control of RNA enzymatic decay. Both in *E. coli* and *S. typhimurium* REPs, short DNA repeats inserted within operons, protect mRNAs from 3′–5′ exonuclease decay, by forming stem-loop structures able to suppress the action of 3′ endonucleases [15–17]. Nemis, an abundant class of DNA repeats uniquely found in *Neisseriae*, represent an additional example of intergenic sequences which may influence the expression of neighbouring genes by acting at the RNA level. We recently reported that the 5′ end termini of several *N. meningitidis* transcripts mapped within nemis TIRs [4]. Here, we showed...
that cellular lysates from either *E. coli* or *N. lactamica* strains specifically cleave transcripts encompassing *nemis* sequences at hairpins formed by complementary *nemis* TIRs (Figs. 1–3). Double helical RNA structures formed by the folding of *nemis* termini are cleaved at either site, the location of scissile bonds varying in hairpins of different sequence composition (Fig. 4). Cleaved RNA species are rather stable. Plausibly, processed RNA moieties are still kept by hydrogen bonds in robust secondary structures, and hence are protected by exonucleolytic attack. By assaying extracts from *E. coli* strains carrying mutant alleles of genes encoding specific ribonucleases, we settled that the process-ing activity corresponds to RNase III (Fig. 5).

The presence/absence of *nemis* at specific chromosomal locations might as well account for differences in the intracellular levels of specific mRNAs among pathogenic and non-pathogenic meningococcal strains, and future investigations are aimed at clarifying this important issue.

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**References**


