Expression of the Hepatitis C Virus core-NS3 Fusion Protein on the Surface of Bacterial Ghosts: Prospects for Vaccine Production

Minoosadat Tayebinia 1,2, Sedigheh Sharifzadeh 1,2, Gholamrezah Raiife Diehidi 1, Faraehz Zare 1, Reza Ranjbaran 1, Amir Rahimi 3, Mohammad Reza Mira 4, Mehdi Mirzakhani 5 and Abbas Behzad-Behbahania 1,2

1. Diagnostic Laboratory Sciences and Technology Research Center, School of Paramedical Sciences, Shiraz University of Medical Sciences, Shiraz, Iran
2. Division of Medical Biotechnology, Department of Medical Laboratory Sciences, School of Paramedical Sciences, Shiraz University of Medical Sciences, Shiraz, Iran
3. Bioinfomatics and Computer Science Research Center, Shiraz University of Medical Sciences, Shiraz, Iran
4. The Persian Gulf Marine Biotechnology Research Center, the Persian Gulf Biomedical Sciences Research Institute, Bushehr University of Medical Sciences, Bushehr, Iran
5. Fars Blood Transfusion Organization, Shiraz, Iran

Abstract

Background: Antigen presentation using bacterial surface display systems, on one hand, has the benefits of bacterial carriers, including low-cost production and ease of manipulation. On the other hand, the bacteria can help in stimulating the immune system as an adjuvant. For example, using bacterial surface display technology, we developed a hepatitis C virus (HCV) multiple antigens displaying bacteria's surface and then turned it into a bacterial ghost.

Methods: The HCV core and NS3 proteins' conserved epitopes were cloned into the AIDA gene plasmid as an auto transporter. The recombinant plasmid was then transformed into Escherichia coli (E. coli) B121 (DE3). Recombinant bacteria were then turned into a bacterial ghost, an empty cell envelope. Whole-cell ELISA, flow cytometry, and Western blot techniques were used for monitoring the expression of proteins on the surface of bacteria.

Results: A fusion protein of HCV core-NS3-AIDA was successfully expressed on the E. coli B121 (DE3) surface and confirmed by western blotting, Enzyme-Linked Immunosorbent Assay (ELISA), and flow cytometry detection techniques.

Conclusion: The presence of HCV antigens on non-pathogen bacteria surfaces holds promise for developing safe and cost-benefit-accessible vaccines with optimal intrinsic adjuvant effects and exposure of heterologous antigens to the immune system.

Keywords: Antigen presentation, Epitopes, Flow cytometry, Hepatitis C, Plasmids

Expression of the Hepatitis C Virus Core-Ns3 Fusion Protein

Hepatitis C Virus (HCV) infection is a global public health challenge. The virus affects millions of people worldwide, leading to chronic infection in many cases. A vaccine to prevent HCV infection is under development. The core protein of HCV has been extensively studied in the context of vaccine development. The core protein is small but plays a crucial role in the viral life cycle, being involved in the formation of the viral envelope and packaging of the viral genome. It also plays an important role in the clearance of HCV infection and the induction of immune responses. In this study, we investigated the expression of the HCV Core-Ns3 fusion protein in E. coli using the bacterial cell surface display system (BCSD). The BCSD is an emerging technology that allows the display of proteins on the surface of bacterial cells, enabling the presentation of foreign antigens in a host-specific manner.

Materials and Methods

Bacterial strains, reagents, and culture media

Cloning and plasmid extraction methods were performed using E. coli strain DH5α. E. coli strain BL21 (DE3) was used as a host cell to express foreign proteins on the surface of bacteria. The restriction enzymes SmaI and XbaI were obtained from JenaBioscience (Germany). Pfu DNA polymerase, T4 DNA ligase, and PageRuler™ Prestained Protein Ladder were purchased from Thermo Fisher Scientific (Grand Island, NY). Primers were ordered from Macrogen (South Korea). Gel and plasmid extraction kits were obtained from Qiagen (Hilden, Germany). Ampicillin was obtained from Sigma-Aldrich (USA). Anti-Hepatitis C Virus Core 1b antibodies [C7-50] (ab2740) were purchased from Abcam. The HCV BLOT 3.0 kit was purchased from MP Biomedicals. Luria-Bertani (LB) medium was used for the growth and maintenance of E. coli strains. Surface display experiments were conducted in a minimal sal medium with a sterile glucose solution (500 g l−1) as a carbon supply.

Construction of recombinant AIDA-HCV Core/Ns3 plasmid

The plasmid pMK90 used for surface expression was kindly provided by Dr. I. Benz, (University of Münster, Germany). It is a derivative of pBR322 containing an ampicillin resistance gene under the control of the AIDA promoter. The plasmid consisted of a signal peptide of 49 amino acids, followed by a linker region of 51 amino acids with multiple cloning sites for a recombinant passenger protein followed by the AIDA translocation unit (AIDAc). The DNA fragments encoding HCV Core and NS3 genes were fused using overlap-extension PCR (OE-PCR) as in previous work. The chimeric fragment (Core-NS3) was then amplified by Pfu DNA polymerase using a forward oligonucleotide primer (coreF1) (5'-CCCACAGGACGTCAAGCTC-3') and reverse primer (NS3R1) (5'-CATCTAGAGTGACGACCTCCAGGTCGG-3') at concentrations and thermal cycling program as previously described. Following pMK90 digestion by XbaI and SmaI, the chimeric fragment (HCV Core-NS3) was inserted into the vector's multiple cloning site (pMK90-HCV), and the vector was transformed into E. coli BL21 (DE3) strain using CaCl2 method.

The bacteria culture selected the correct cloned gene on LB agar containing ampicillin (100 mg l−1). According to the manufacturer's instructions, plasmids were then extracted from the transformed bacteria using a plasmid extraction kit (Qiagen, USA). To verify correct nucleotide sequences and gene orientation, restriction enzyme analysis, colony PCR.

Bacterial production with displaying of HCV Core/Ns3 antigen on the surface

E. coli BL21 (DE3) transformed with the corresponding pMK90 HCV (test), and pMK90 (control) derivative was separately cultured at 37°C in shake flasks with 250 ml Luria-Bertani (LB) medium supplemented with 100 µg/ml ampicillin (Amp). After 6-8 hr incubation for the growing bacteria and gene ex-
pression at OD 660 nm=2.5, the cells were pelleted by centrifugation (5000 rpm) at 4°C for 5 min and washed with cold Phosphate-Buffered Saline (PBS).

**Bacterial ghost production**

A phage-derived lytic protein E was expressed in *E. coli* to produce BGs, as previously described 21.

**Whole-cell Elisa**

To investigate the presence of HCV core-NS3 antigens on the surface of transformed *E. coli* BL21 (DE3), the whole-cell ELISA method was performed 24. Briefly, 100 µl of bacterial suspension in PBS (phosphate-buffered saline, pH=7.4) was added to microplate wells and incubated at 37°C overnight. The wells were then blocked using 200 µl of 3% (w/v) skimmed milk in PBS for 1 hr incubation at 37°C. After 4 times washing with 350 µl PBS, 100 µl (1:1000 in PBS) of anti-HCV core 1b antibody (Abcam, USA) was added to each well and incubated at 37°C for 1 hr. Following 3 times of washing with 350 µl PBS, 100 µl (1:1000) PBS was added to each well, incubated at 37°C for 1 hr, followed by the addition of goat anti-mouse antibodies. After washing three times with PBS, 50 µl of 3,3’,5,5’-tetramethylbenzidine (TMB) as substrate was added to each well and incubated in the dark for 15 min. To stop the reaction, 50 µl of 2 M sulfuric acid was added to each well. The absorbance of the wells was measured at 405 nm for 15 and 30 min.

**Isolation and purification of the outer membrane protein (OMP)**

The OMP was obtained as previously described with some modification 22. Briefly, the cells of 250 ml culture were harvested by centrifugation, washed with buffer A (50 mm Tris/HCl pH=7.5), and disrupted by sonication (6x3 s, frequency of 30 kHz). After ultracentrifugation (36000 g for 40 min), the whole membrane fractions were collected and washed with buffer A. After washing with 0.1% sarcosyl in buffer A for 1 hr at 4°C, the membrane pellet was collected by ultracentrifugation. The protein fractions were obtained in the remaining pellet by dissolving in 7.5 ml of buffer A contained 5 mM EDTA and 1% (v/v) Triton X-100. The resultant membrane protein samples were stored at -20°C before analysis.

**SDS-PAGE and western blot analysis**

SDS-PAGE and western blot analysis identified fractions containing OMP. Briefly, the samples loaded directly or after incubation at 100°C for 5 min after mixing with loading buffer on 12% acrylamide gels. Using Coomassie Brilliant Blue, the bands of protein were visualized. Proteins were transferred from polyacrylamide gels to PVDF membrane (Amersham, USA) by the semi-dry blot technique (Trans-Blot® SD Semi-Dry Transfer Cell, Bio-Rad). The transfer was achieved at a current of 0.8 mA/cm² for 1 hr at room temperature. The membrane was blocked by incubation in PBS with 5% milk powder at 4°C after the transfer of proteins. According to the manufacturer's instructions the remaining steps were accomplished based on the MP Diagnostics HCV BLOT 3.0 kit.

**Flow cytometry assay**

*E. coli* BL21 (DE3) harboring pMK90HCV (test) and pMK90 (control) were used for the experiment. Briefly, *E. coli* was incubated overnight at 37°C in LB/Amp broth and then sub-cultured in fresh LB/Amp medium for approximately an hour. The subculture was grown to reach 4x10⁸ CFU/ml, with an optical density between 0.5 and 0.6 at 600 nm (path length 1 cm). Aerate orbital shaking at 200 rev min⁻¹ was used to aerate all broth cultures grown at 37°C. The cells were treated with 100 µl of a solution containing anti-hepatitis C Virus Core 1b monoclonal antibody (diluted 1:100 in PBS) and incubated for 1 hr at room temperature. Cells were washed three times with 500 µl of PBS. The second incubation step was conducted with 100 µl of goat anti-mouse IgG conjugated with FITC (diluted 1:50 in PBS) and the cells were incubated for 1 hr at room temperature in a dark place. Following three times of washing with PBS, the cell pellet was suspended in 500 µl of PBS and analyzed by flow cytometry (Becton Dickinson, Sydney, Australia).

**Results**

**Construction, identification, and sequencing of recombinant AIDA-HCV Core/NS3 plasmid**

After enzymatic digestion with SmaI and XbaI, Core/NS3 fragment in 585 bp length and pMK90 linear fragment containing AIDA fragment in 1320 bp were obtainable in prediction (Figure 1). Sanger sequencing was performed to verify recombinant plasmid. The vector harboured a natural AIDA promoter, AIDA signal sequence, Core-NS3 in the passenger part, a linker

**Figure 1. Electrophoresis of the enzymatic digest of the PMK90 plasmid vector using the restriction enzymes SmaI and XbaI. A) plasmid vector digested with SmaI, B) plasmid vector digested with XbaI, C) gel electrophoresis of the chimeric core-NS3 fragment digested with XbaI.**
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region, and finally, the translocation unit (AIDAC) sequence. No mutation was observed due to the misincorporation of DNA polymerase. The resultant Core-NS3 fusion protein consists of 585 bp (accession number: GenBank ON128514), which was equivalent to 195 aa with a molecular mass of 21.4 kDa. Cleavage of the N-terminal signal peptide results in a protein of 560 amino acids (74.87 kDa) (Figure 2).

Expression of HCV Core-NS3 fusion protein on the surface of E. coli

To determine the potential role of AIDA transmembrane protein to transport HCV Core/NS3 antigens on the surface of bacteria, E. coli BL21 (DE3) as an OmpT-negative strain was transformed with the surface display vector pMK90HCV (Figure 2). Recombinant E. coli harboring HCV Core/NS3 sequences were cultivated, and the expression of proteins on the surface of the cells was analyzed by SDS-PAGE and western blotting (Figure 3). The HCV core/NS3 linked to the AIDA protein was detected in both the lysate and outer membrane fractions of E. coli cells harboring pMK90HCV. Overall, the chimeric Core/NS3-AIDAC protein’s molecular weight was approximately 75 kDa (i.e., 21.4 kDa for Core-NS3 fusion protein and 53.5 kDa for AIDAC protein, respectively).

Production of bacterial ghosts

A lysis protein E was expressed in E. coli BL21 (DE3) to produce BG. The bacterial cells were then cultured below the recommended temperature (28°C control) to suppress the lytic gene activity. A temperature increase of 42°C triggered the activation of protein E for 30 min before adding 0.2 M MgSO4. The entire process was completed in around 90 min. By adding antibiotics (1% Pen-Strep (Invitrogen), the bacteria that were not able to become BG were inactivated.

The BG was centrifuged and cultured in LB medium containing antibiotics chloramphenicol (33 g/ml) to determine the purity of the BG. During 48 hr, no live bacteria were detected (colonies).

Whole-cell ELISA assay

Using the optimal E. coli concentration, the expression level of HCV Core/NS3 epitopes on the bacterial surface of E. coli BL21 (DE3)/pMK90HCV was determined by whole-cell ELISA. E. coli BL21 (DE3)/pMK90 and E. coli BL21 (DE3) were used as the negative controls. E. coli BL21 (DE3)/pMK90 and E. coli BL21 (DE3) were coated in an ELISA plate. The Core/NS3 surface-exposed protein was detected by using the anti-hepatitis C virus core 1b antibody. A strong yellow color formed in wells containing the BL21 (DE3)/pMK90HCV confirmed the presence of Core/NS3 epitopes on the surface of bacteria by the findings from the Western blot analysis (Figure 4).

Evaluation of the surface display by FACS analysis

To study HCV antigens, display efficiency on the bacterial surface both transformed bacteria with pMK90HCV (test group) and pMK90 (control group) were labeled with primary anti-HCV Core 1b mouse monoclonal antibody coupled to secondary goat anti-mouse IgG-FITC antibody. Data analysis indicated that the fluorescence intensity of bacteria expressing the Core/NS3 fusion protein was shifted to a higher intensity than the control cells treated as the test group (Fig-
The Core protein sequence in the HCV virus is one of the most conserved parts in the virus's genome of various genotypes. Several epitopes have been identified by B and T cells in the core protein of HCV, and serum antibodies against core immunogenic epitopes included amino acids 7-31, 21-49, 45-63, and 99-113. In addition, the amino acids 18-181 were selected from a core protein, with epitopes for CTL in different HLAs, 11 epitopes for antibody production in mice and humans, and 11 epitopes for helper T-cells.

The significant challenge for exporting a protein to the bacterial surface is translocating the desired gene product from a cell periplasm to the external cell surface. In the present study, we employed the AIDA gene, one of the autotransporter proteins whose primary sequence contains all the information needed to cross target protein to the outer membrane of bacteria. The N terminus of AIDA contains a signal peptide responsible for exporting the target protein through the inner membrane, followed by the AIDA gene's passenger sequence within the PMK90 vector. The passenger sequence was removed by restriction enzymes and replaced by the target sequence. Finally, the C-terminal of the AIDA gene contains the translocator sequence responsible for displaying the target protein on the Bl21 (DE3) bacterium's surface.

Due to the location of the core and NS3 regions within the genome which contain epitopes that facilitate a cell-mediated immune response, as well as a humoral immune response. As an alternative to restriction digestion and ligation, two HCV Core and NS3 genes were attached by PCR SOEing. The chimeric product did not exhibit nucleotide misincorporation, as indicated by DNA analysis. The orientation of the core-NS3 sequence was designed from 5' to 3' because the 5' region is located outward the outer membrane lipid and readily exposes to the immune system and stimulates antibody production.

By whole-bacterial cell ELISA assay, we found that marked reactivity with anti-HCV core 1b antibody, suggesting that the HCV proteins on the bacterial surface could fold into the three-dimensional structure in such a way that at least the linear epitopes were exposed on the protein surface. The results were further supported by Western blot and flow cytometry analysis. When immunoreactivities of the recombinant E. coli were tested using five different HCV patients’ sera (data not presented), all reacted with the surface antigens compared with the control group (non-modified bacteria).

Recently, the E. coli BL21 (DE3) bacterial surface display system was used to express rotavirus virus protein 8 (VP8*) as a ligand to detect Histo-Blood Group Antigens (HBGAs) receptors, which play an important role in rotavirus infection. Western blot and ELISA evaluated the function of the bacterial cell surface display system as well.
Conclusion
Our analyses of cell surface display systems and producing BGs using HCV core-NS3 proteins indicated that the technology might be useful in producing a whole-cell killed vaccine harboring HCV antigens. Since E. coli, as gram-negative bacteria, contain LPS, it acts as a potent adjuvant in vaccine administration. However, this technology can be applied to any bacterium for different applications.

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Conflict of Interest
None. The authors certify that there is no conflict of interest with any financial organization regarding the material discussed in the manuscript.

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