A POSSIBLE CORRELATION BETWEEN THE GROWTH RATE AND THE EXTENT OF DNA DAMAGE INDUCED BY RADIODECAY IN MOUSE LYMPHOMA CELLS

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Received February 1, 1985

The extent of DNA single strand breaks resulting from the beta radiodecay of incorporated $^3$H]thymidine in DNA of mouse lymphoma cells appears to be related to the degree of growth inhibition. The extents of damage to DNA and inhibition of growth seem to be functions of the concentration of radioactivity as well as the specific activity of the radiolabeled precursor in the medium. The differences in both concentration ($\mu$Ci/ml) and in the specific activity of radiolabeled precursors, may help to explain the different responses encountered when using $^3$H] and $^{14}$C]thymidine. When cells exposed to $^3$H] TdR are transferred to fresh medium, the DNA damage can be repaired. The repair is followed by an increase in the cell number with the rate of growth being similar to that of unexposed cells. Cells exposed continuously to $^3$H] TdR in the medium can accommodate to the radioactive stressor by repairing the DNA damage and maintaining this repair capability throughout the exposure.

Radiolabeled precursors of DNA such as tritiated thymidine have been extensively used as valuable tools in cell biological research. However, in the majority of cases, the possible damage caused by radiodecay of such incorporated precursors per se has not been assessed. This possibility takes on more significance when one realizes that radiolabeled DNA is used in a number of different genotoxicity assays. In this case, one should establish if radiodecay of the incorporated radiolabeled precursors contributes to the genotoxicity especially when working in conjunction with other potential genotoxic compounds.

In 1958, Painter et al. (1) were the first to report growth inhibition of cultures attributed to the presence of high levels of tritiated thymidine in the medium. Since 1958, a number of papers report a range of deleterious effects resulting from the incorporation of $^3$H [TdT] including single strand breaks in DNA (2, 3), decreased survival of cells (4, 5), inactivation of transforming DNA
perturbation of the cell cycle (7, 8) and aberrations of chromosomes (9, 10, 11).

In view of these studies, a direct causal relationship between the extent of DNA damage and the effect on cell growth has largely been inferred and not directly shown. In this paper, we have shown, using a eucaryotic cell line (12) that the repair of the initial DNA damage could be closely followed by a return to the normal growth pattern of these exposed cells.

**METHODS**

**Culture Conditions**

Mouse lymphoma cells type L5178Y/Tk+/- (obtained from Dr. David Clive, Burroughs Wellcome Co., Research Triangle Park, N.C.) were grown in modified Fischer's media according to the procedure of Turner et al. (12). The suspension cultures were grown in a Psychotherm shaker incubator (New Brunswick Scientific Co., Inc., New Brunswick, N.J.) at 37°C at 120 rpm. Cells were counted by Coulter counter and by trypan blue exclusion assay.

**Exposure Conditions**

For each experiment, cells obtained from a culture in log phase were inoculated into separate glass screw cap erlenmeyer flasks to densities ranging from 7 x 10^4 to 1 x 10^5 cells/ml. After a 15 minute acclimatization, aliquots of radiolabeled thymidine ([methyl-3H]thymidine specific activity, 52 Ci/mmol; New England Nuclear Corp.) or [methyl-14C] thymidine (specific activity, 59 mCi/mmol; Amersham Corp.) were added to each suspension culture to achieve concentrations ranging from 0.5 µCi - 2 µCi/ml for ^3H[TdR] and 0.5-1.0 µCi/ml for [14C]TdR.

A volume of cell suspension containing approximately 2 x 10^6 cells was taken from each flask at both the onset and end of the exposure period and harvested by centrifuging at 5000 rpm for 10 min at 40°C. The cells were then washed twice with cold Ca2+/Mg2+-free PBS, pH 7.4 and the cell pellets were used for DNA sedimentation studies.

**Sedimentation of DNA through sucrose gradients**

The cell pellet (approximate cell number 2 x 10^6) was resuspended in 2 ml of 10 mM Tris-HCl/4 mM EDTA pH 8.0. For the analysis in alkaline sucrose gradients, 0.5 ml sample of each suspension was lysed and layered on a 5-20% sucrose gradient in 0.1 N NaOH-0.9 M NaCl according to the procedure of Mitra and Bernstein (13). For analyses in neutral gradients, cells were lysed with sodium lauryl sulfate and layered on a 5-20% sucrose gradient in 1 M NaCl-0.01 M Tris-HCl, pH 7.5 (13). The gradients were run in a Beckman L8-80 ultracentrifuge using a SW 41.1 rotor at 28000 rpm for two hours at 20°C. After centrifugation, the contents of each tube were fractioned by collecting drops through the bottom of the tube.

Portions (0.1 ml) from each fraction were applied to paper strips (Whatman 3 MM), dried, and washed batchwise with three changes of cold 7% TCA and then two changes of cold 95% ethanol. When dry, each paper strip was placed in a vial with 5 ml of scintillation fluid (5.5 g Permablend I per liter of toluene) and assayed for radioactivity in a Packard Tricarb Liquid Scintillation Spectro-
meter. Alkaline sucrose gradient fractions obtained from cells grown in the absence of any radiolabeled TdR were analyzed for DNA content by the fluorometric method of Zubroff and Sarma (14).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In earlier, seemingly unrelated experiments (data not shown), we found that lymphoma cells after exposure to 1 μM Cd²⁺ in the medium, for 3 hr which inhibited their growth, recovered when placed in fresh Cd²⁺-free medium as seen by an increase in their rate of growth after an initial lag period. However, when this experiment was repeated with cells whose DNA was prelabeled overnight with [³H]TdR (2 μCi/ml) prior to the cadmium exposure, this recovery was not noted. Upon closer inspection, we found that cell growth was severely inhibited during the prelabeling period by as much as 50%. On the other hand when [¹⁴C] TdR (0.5 μCi/ml) was used as the label, cells grew at a rate similar to that of cells grown in the absence of radiolabeled precursor.

Preliminary experiments showed that the inhibition of growth was indeed a result of the presence of [³H]TdR in the medium and was exclusive of any other components such as alcohol or unlabeled thymidine present in the [³H] TdR stock solution. It was noted that increases in both the incidence of single strand breaks in DNA and the inhibition of growth seemed to correlate in a dose dependent manner with increasing concentrations of [³H]TdR present in the medium (Fig. 1). Since these sedimentation profiles lacked an appropriate control, it could not be assumed that cells exposed to 0.5 μCi/ml [³H]TdR had not experienced DNA damage. Although extensive single strand breakage was seen, no detectable double strand breakage in DNA occurred as assayed using neutral sucrose density gradients (data not shown).

The question still remained as to whether the much more pronounced inhibition of growth resulting from [³H]TdR as opposed to [¹⁴C]TdR was a function of the concentration of the TdR in the medium, the specific activity of the radiolabeled compound or the path length of the decay particle. The tritium labeled compounds generally used have been usually on the order of 1000 times greater in specific activity than the [¹⁴C] compounds. Therefore, in the case of [³H]TdR,
Figure 1. Effects of different concentrations of labeled thymidine on single strand breaks in DNA. The cells were exposed to 0.5 μCi/ml (-----), 1.0 μCi/ml (-----) and 2 μCi/ml (-0-O) of [3H] TdR for 4 hrs. The cells were harvested, washed, lysed and were subjected to alkaline sucrose density gradient centrifugation. The insert in figure 1 shows the growth of cells when exposed to different concentrations of [3H] TdR. At different intervals, the number of cells were determined by a Coulter counter. Cells grown in media free of radiolabeled precursor served as the control (-0-O); [3H] TdR was added to achieve the concentrations of 0.5 μCi/ml (-0-0), 1.0 μCi/ml (-----) and 2 μCi/ml (-0-O).

the extent of incorporation of the hot precursor per unit length of DNA molecule would be much higher than that of [14C]TdR. In an attempt to answer this question, an experiment was designed to use the same concentration and specific activity of both [14C] and [3H] TdR. An exposure of 4 hr to either radiolabeled compound produced no differences in the alkaline sucrose density sedimentation profiles (Fig. 2). These data suggest that the differences seen in the effects imposed by [3H] TdR and [14C] TdR are at least partially attributable to the different specific activities and the concentrations of the precursors in the medium.

In an experiment designed to study the effects of prolonged exposure to [3H] TdR, it was noted that DNA single strand breaks were evident as early as four hours after the addition of [3H] TdR to the medium. A more important observation was that the DNA of exposed cells which seemed to be comprised of
small fragments at four hours, did indeed begin to increase in size as the exposure was continued in the presence of [3H]TdR (data not shown). This phenomenon may be considered as a result of an accommodative response (15) by the cells to the radioactive stressor. The apparent accommodative response by the cells to such DNA damage may involve an inducible repair mechanism which was maintained at a much higher level in the presence of [3H]TdR.

To prove that this increase in the molecular weight of DNA during the continuous exposure was indeed the result of DNA repair, cells were grown in medium containing [3H]TdR for 4 hrs after which an excess of unlabeled TdR was added to the medium. Cells were collected for the analysis of the size of DNA at various times following this addition. The results indicated (Fig. 3) that the increase in the size of the DNA fragments in the exposed cells was indeed a result of repair. Along with this repair of DNA strand breaks, a concomitant
Figure 3. Repair of single strand breaks in DNA in cells exposed to labeled thymidine. Cells were exposed to 1.0 μCi of [3H] TdR per ml for 4 hrs (— O— O—). After that period, a 500 fold excess of nonradioactive thymidine was added to the medium and aliquots at 5 hrs of post addition (— O— O—) and 20 hrs of post addition (— O— O—) were withdrawn for the analysis of size of DNA in alkaline sucrose gradients. Cells labeled with [14C] TdR (0.5 μCi/ml for 20 hrs) were used as the control (— — — —). Cells grown in media free of radiolabeled precursor also serving as control (— ▲— ▲—) were identically processed. DNA content in each fraction was estimated fluorometrically. The insert in the figure shows the recovery of cell growth during the repair of DNA in cells exposed to [3H] TdR (— — O— O—). Cells exposed to [14C] TdR were used as the control (— O— O—). The number of cells were determined by trypan blue exclusion assay using a hemocytometer.

return of the rate of growth to that of unexposed cells was observed. Within the first 5 hrs after the addition of nonradioactive thymidine, the DNA repair was essentially complete. Longer incubation resulted in a much larger product which sedimented to the bottom of the gradient. On the other hand, no significant differences in either the rates of growth or DNA sedimentation profiles were exhibited (Figure 3) when cells grown in medium containing [14C] TdR (0.5 μCi/ml) were compared to cells grown in the absence of radiolabeled precursors. This suggests that at least at the concentration employed, 14C did not cause inhibition of growth or damage to the DNA.

In summary, the inhibition of growth exhibited by cells exposed to [3H]TdR can be attributed to the DNA damage produced by the beta radiodecay of the incorporated radiolabeled precursor. This damage seems to be related to both
the concentration of radioactivity and the specific activity of the precursors used. The extent of such damage can be minimized if both of these parameters are kept to a minimum. During the recovery of cells from the radiotoxic effects, the repair of the DNA damage seems to be followed closely by a return of the rates of growth to those of unexposed cells. This accommodative mechanism must be considered when one uses radiolabeled cells to assess DNA damage or the repair of such damage by other genotoxic agents.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors are grateful to Prof. I. A. Bernstein for his support, advice and encouragement, and are also indebted to Mr. Kirk Tarlo for all of his assistance with the culturing of the cells used in our studies.

REFERENCES