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Equally High Prevalences of Infection with cagA-Positive *Helicobacter pylori* in Chinese Patients with Peptic Ulcer Disease and Those with Chronic Gastritis-Associated Dyspepsia

ZHI-JUN PAN,1,2 RENÉ W. M. VAN DER HULST,3 MONIQUE FELLER,1 SHU-DONG XIAO,2 GUIDO N. J. TYTGAT,3 JACOB DANKERT,3 AND ARIE VAN DER ENDE1,6

Departments of Medical Microbiology1 and Gastroenterology,3 Academic Medical Center, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, and Shanghai Institute of Digestive Disease, Shanghai Second Medical University, Shanghai, People’s Republic of China2

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Approximately 60% of *Helicobacter pylori* isolates in the Western world possess the cytotoxin-associated gene A (cagA). cagA-positive *H. pylori* is found to be associated with peptic ulcer disease (PUD) and gastric adenocarcinoma. To investigate the cagA status of *H. pylori* isolates from Chinese patients with PUD and chronic gastritis (CG), *H. pylori* populations from 83 patients, 48 with PUD and 35 with CG, were assessed by two different cagA-specific PCRs, Southern blotting, and colony hybridization. The combined results from PCR, Southern blotting, and colony hybridization indicate a prevalence of cagA-positive *H. pylori* isolates of 98% (47 of 48) among Chinese PUD patients and 100% (35 of 35) among Chinese CG patients. Amplification with primer sets 1 and 2 yielded 52 and 95% of the 82 cagA-positive Chinese *H. pylori*, respectively. In contrast, the sensitivity of cagA-specific PCR for cagA-positive *H. pylori* isolates from Dutch patients with primer set 1 was 92% (112 of 122) and that with primer set 2 was 91% (50 of 55). The prevalence of cagA-positive *H. pylori* populations in Chinese patients with PUD and CG is almost universally high. Therefore, cagA cannot be used as a marker for the presence of PUD in Chinese patients. Our data further suggest that allelic variation in cagA may exist and that distinct *H. pylori* genotypes may circulate in China and Western Europe.

Since the initial identification and successful culture of *Helicobacter pylori* from human gastric biopsy specimens by Marshall and Warren (11, 12), it has become accepted that this gram-negative spiral bacterium is a major cause of gastroduodenal diseases (7, 9, 25, 27). Although nearly all *H. pylori*-infected persons develop gastritis (8, 20), it remains unclear whether bacterial, host, or dietary factors determine the differences in the extent of the mucosal lesions induced by *H. pylori* among them. Only a proportion of *H. pylori*-colonized subjects develop peptic ulceration, and few of them have an increased risk of developing gastric cancer. Differences among bacterial strains may induce the divergent clinical or pathologic effects of *H. pylori* infection. Two phenotypic characteristics among *H. pylori* strains, the vacuolating cytotoxin (3) and the high-molecular-weight protein (6) encoded by the cytotoxin-associated gene A (cagA), have been found to be associated with distinct gastroduodenal disorders. The cagA gene has been cloned and its sequence has been determined (2, 23). Although the gene encoding the vacuolating toxin is present in nearly all strains, the activity of this cytotoxin is found in only 40 to 60% of the *H. pylori* strains (3, 26). A total of 40 to 60% of the *H. pylori* strains from patients with peptic ulcer disease (PUD) and 30% of the strains from patients with chronic gastritis are cytotoxin positive (21, 26). About 60 to 80% of *H. pylori* strains express the 120- to 140-kDa CagA protein (1, 6).

Various studies in the United States (3), Great Britain (6), Italy (2), and The Netherlands (26) have demonstrated a strong association between the presence of antibodies to CagA and PUD. An association between infection with cagA-positive *H. pylori* and PUD was also observed (26). In contrast, only in 50 to 60% of patients with chronic superficial gastritis were antibodies to CagA found (3). However, the data about the correlation between cagA and the cytotoxicity of *H. pylori* and gastroduodenal disease are mainly obtained from the North American and Western European populations (4, 19, 22, 26). China is one of the countries with a high prevalence of *H. pylori* infection and a high incidence of gastroduodenal diseases. In China about 40% of children have acquired infection with *H. pylori* by 10 years of age, and the prevalence rises with age to about 70% in those over 30 years old (18, 28). In a previous study that used the Western immunoblot technique to determine the antibody response to *H. pylori* in 167 Chinese patients with gastric cancer, PUD, or chronic gastritis (CG), we showed that 97% of them had antibodies against a 138-kDa protein band, most probably the CagA protein (17). However, the characteristics of the infecting *H. pylori* strains remained unknown and the nature of this protein could not be assessed. Therefore, in the study described in this report we determined the prevalence of cagA-positive *H. pylori* strains among Chinese patients in relation to the occurrence of PUD and CG. The results of a study about the vacuolating cytotoxic properties of these strains will be dealt with in another report.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

**Patient population.** Strains were obtained from 83 consecutive *H. pylori*-infected adults derived from a group of *H. pylori*-positive patients who had undergone gastroduodenoscopy in two hospitals of Shanghai, China, because of dyspeptic complaints. Strains from patients who had a history of gastric surgery, were receiving steroids, had an active infection requiring current antimicrobial therapy, had taken antimicrobial agents within 2 weeks prior to endoscopy, or had active gastrointestinal bleeding were not included in the study. The patient population consisted of 48 males and 35 females with a mean age of 41.0 ± 8.7 years (age range, 27 to 72 years). The patients were classified by endoscopic examination as having duodenal ulcers (*n* = 32), gastric ulcers (*n* = 3), both...
duodenal and gastric ulcers ($n = 9$), or no evidence of mucosal ulceration but with CG as diagnosed by histopathological examination ($n = 35$). Four patients had no ulceration at the time of endoscopy but had a history of endoscopically diagnosed duodenal ulcers; thus, 48 patients were considered to have PUD and 35 patients were considered to have CG.

Endoscopy, histopathology, and *H. pylori* cultures. During each endoscopic procedure, two antral and two corpus mucosal biopsy specimens were obtained by use of biopsy forceps, which were cleansed with a detergent, disinfected with 70% ethanol, and rinsed with sterile water after each examination. One antrum and one corpus biopsy specimen were placed in 2 ml of normal saline at 4°C and used for bacteriological culturing. The other two specimens were fixed in 10% formalin for histopathological examination. Bacteriological and histological assessments of the mucosal biopsy specimens were carried out as described previously (24). Cultures were prepared by smearing biopsy specimens on the surface of horse blood agar plates (7% defibrinated horse blood in Columbia agar base; Oxoid CM 331; Unipath, Basingstoke, England) and horse blood agar plates containing Skirrow supplement (Unipath). *H. pylori* organisms were identified on the basis of typical colony morphology, characteristic appearance on Gram staining, and positive urease, oxidase, and catalase tests. The *H. pylori* isolates that grew on the primary culture plates of each of the antrum and corpus biopsy specimens were collected with swabs to obtain separately *H. pylori* populations from the antrum and the corpus. Each swab was shaken in 1.5 ml of 8% glycerol peptone, and the suspension was stored at −70°C. This bacterial suspension is designated the frozen primary culture. For analysis, an aliquot of the frozen primary culture suspension was thawed and cultured on horse blood agar plates.

The *H. pylori* populations isolated either from the antrum or the corpus biopsy specimens from the 83 patients were assessed for their cagA status.

Preparation of genomic DNA for PCR. After thawing of an aliquot of the frozen primary cultures, bacterial suspensions were inoculated on horse blood agar plates and cultured at 37°C for 3 days in a microaerophilic environment. The bacterial suspensions were harvested, and genomic DNA was extracted by using the InstaGene Matrix (Bio-Rad Laboratories, Hercules, Calif.) according to the manufacturer’s instructions.

PCR amplification of cagA. Two primer sets of design were based on the published sequence (2). Primer set 1 consists of primer caga1 (5′-GATAT ATTCTAATCCACCG-3′; positions 1239 to 1270) (26) and primer caga2 (5′-GGAAA TCTTTTAATCTCGG-3′; positions 1797 to 1819). Set 2 includes primer caga3 (5′-GGCAA TGGTG GTCTCCGAACTGACCC-3′; positions 1495 to 1519) and primer caga2. These two primer sets were used in a standard PCR mixture to produce products calculated to be 570 and 324 bp, respectively. Briefly, 10 ng of DNA was used in a PCR mixture of 25 μl containing 10 mM Tris-HCl (pH 8.8), 50 mM KCL, 30 mM MgCl₂, and 0.1 μg of bovine serum albumin per ml. The incubation conditions with primer set 1 were as follows: 40 cycles of 1 min at 95°C, 1 min at 55°C, and 1.5 min at 72°C and a final 5-min incubation at 72°C. When primer set 2 was used the number of cycles was 35 and the annealing temperature was 60°C. The PCR products were analyzed by horizontal agarose (1.5%) gel electrophoresis with ethidium bromide staining as described previously (15). Two Dutch *H. pylori* strains with laboratory numbers 15 and 628 were used as the positive and negative controls for cagA, respectively (26). Negative and positive control amplifications were performed in every experiment. The genomic DNA from the bacterial species *Helicobacter fennelliae* Sweden E6, *Campylobacter fetus* Sweden 7473, *Campylobacter coli* Liest L46.7.1, *Helicobacter jejuni* L2, *Haemophilus influenzae* HI 804, *Neisseria meningitidis* McAZ 4027 and McB 902506 ET 26, *Borrelia burgdorferi* B31, and *Helicobacter pylori* strains were fixed in 10% formalin and tested as negative controls.

Southern blotting. To test the sensitivity and the specificity of PCR with primer set 2, all PCR-negative and 20 PCR-positive *H. pylori* populations were analyzed by Southern blotting. The genomic DNA of *H. pylori* was prepared as described previously (10). After digesting the DNA with HindIII, the fragments were separated by electrophoresis on a 9.7% agarose gel and transferred to Zeta- Probe Blotting Membranes (Bio-Rad Laboratories) as described by Sambrook et al. (21). The probe used to detect cagA was made by PCR amplification with primer set 2 (caga5-caga2). The PCR products obtained from four *H. pylori* populations were pooled and run on a 1.5% agarose gel. After electrophoresis, the 324-bp PCR product was excised from the gel and extracted from the agarose by using Qiaex (Qiagen GmbH, Hilden, Germany). The probe was labelled with digoxigenin (DIG)-dUTP by using the random primed labelling kit (Boehringer Mannheim GmbH, Mannheim, Germany). Hybridization conditions were as described previously (26), except that the hybridization temperature was 68°C. Probes were detected with anti-DIG antibodies conjugated to alkaline phosphatase and stained according to the instructions of the manufacturer.

Colony hybridization. An aliquot from each of the frozen primary culture suspensions yielding approximately 200 to 400 colonies was grown on horse blood agar plates for 3 days. Colonies from the primary cultures were transferred onto a nylon membrane (Hybond-N; Amersham Life Science, Little Chalfont, England) by replica plating. The colonies were lysed and denatured, and then hybridization for cagA was done as described previously (26). The probe used to detect cagA in the colony hybridization assay was identical to that used in the Southern blotting mentioned above.

Statistical analysis. Statistical analysis was performed by using the two-tailed Fisher’s exact probability test. A *P* value of <0.05 was considered statistically significant.

RESULTS

Specificity of PCR assay. The specificity of PCR with either primer set 1 (caga1-caga2) or primer set 2 (caga5-caga2) targeting cagA was determined by testing bacterial strains, including *H. fennelliae*, various *Campylobacter* species, and bacterial species which are studied in our laboratory and which may occur as contaminants in our detection system. Only the cagA-positive control *H. pylori* strain amplified the expected 570- and 324-bp fragments in the cagA PCRs with primer set 1 and primer set 2, respectively. For the cagA-negative control *H. pylori* strain as well as any of the other bacterial species tested, the cagA PCR never yielded an amplification product (data not shown).

Sensitivity of cagA-specific PCR. The cagA-specific PCR with primer set 1 detected 112 of 122 cagA-positive *H. pylori* isolates from Dutch patients (26). So, the sensitivity of this PCR was 92%. This primer set was initially used to assess cagA in 10 *H. pylori* isolates from Chinese patients. Only 3 of 10 isolates appeared to be cagA positive. However, when assessed by Southern blotting and colony hybridization, all 10 isolates appeared to be cagA positive. Therefore, primer set 2 was designed. Assessment of 55 cagA-positive *H. pylori* isolates from Dutch patients by this PCR (primer set 2) yielded cagA in 50 isolates (sensitivity, 91%). In order to determine the sensitivity of the PCR with these primers for Chinese strains, confirmation was done by Southern blotting and colony hybridization. PCR amplification yielded the expected 324-bp PCR product in 78 of 83 *H. pylori* strains from Chinese patients (Fig. 1). Four of these five *H. pylori* populations that were cagA negative by PCR were positive by Southern blotting and colony hybridization. PCR amplification yielded the expected 324-bp PCR product in 78 of 83 *H. pylori* strains from Chinese patients (Fig. 1). Moreover, 30 *H. pylori* populations from Chinese patients cagA positive by PCR were also found to be cagA positive when assessed by colony hybridization. So, the sensitivity of this PCR with primer set 2 was 95% (78 of 82). In contrast, assessment of the 82 cagA-positive *H. pylori* isolates from Chinese patients by

![FIG. 1. Agarose gel (1.5%) electrophoresis with ethidium bromide staining of a 324-bp PCR amplicon of the cagA gene with primer set 2 (A) and a 570-bp PCR product with primer set 1 (B). Lanes 1 to 5, Chinese *H. pylori* isolates; lane 6 and lane 7, cagA-positive and cagA-negative *H. pylori* controls; lane M, 100-bp ladder.](image-url)

**FIG. 1.** Agarose gel (1.5%) electrophoresis with ethidium bromide staining of a 324-bp PCR amplicon of the cagA gene with primer set 2 (A) and a 570-bp PCR product with primer set 1 (B). Lanes 1 to 5, Chinese *H. pylori* isolates; lane 6 and lane 7, cagA-positive and cagA-negative *H. pylori* controls; lane M, 100-bp ladder.
cagA strains were Together, by using these methods, 82 of 83 (99%) strain (data not shown), being consistent with the results ob-
United States, the prevalence of (17). In previous studies with populations from Europe and the
consistent with our previous study in which 97% of serum samples
Chinese patients with PUD and CG is almost completely con-
hybridization. The expression of the CagA protein was also
populations from Chinese patients and those from Dutch pa-
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This high prevalence of cagA-positive H. pylori (99%) among Chinese patients with PUD and CG is almost completely con-
several studies. Using combined serological and genetic
detection methods, Cover et al. (4) found a strong correlation
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The association between cagA-positive H. pylori and clinical gastrointestinal disorders, especially PUD, has been shown in a
number of studies. Using combined serological and genetic
detection methods, Cover et al. (4) found a strong correlation
between the presence of antibodies to CagA in serum and the
is associated with PUD (26). However, our
PCR with primer set 1 yielded only 43 cagA-positive H. pylori
strains (sensitivity, 52%). These results indicate sequence vari-
Prevalence of cagA and relation with clinical outcome. The
combined results from PCR, Southern blotting, and colony
hybridization indicated an overall prevalence of cagA-positive
H. pylori isolates of 99% (82 of 83) from Chinese patients with
PUD or CG. cagA was detected in 47 of 48 (98%) H. pylori
populations isolated from patients with current or previous
PUD (of whom 36 had duodenal ulcer, 3 had gastric ulcer, and
9 had both duodenal and gastric ulcers) and in 35 (100%) H.
pylori populations isolated from patients with CG. There was
no significant difference between the prevalence of cagA-positive
H. pylori isolates from the subgroups of patients with
 distinct clinical manifestations (P = 1.0).

**DISCUSSION**

The aim of this study was to determine the prevalence of
cagA among H. pylori isolates and its relationship with PUD
and CG in 83 Chinese patients. The specificity of the cagA
PCR was certified by using DNAs from a cagA-positive and a
cagA-negative control H. pylori strain and various other bacte-
rial species as templates in the PCR amplification. By PCR
with primer set 2, our results indicated that 78 Chinese H. py-
lori populations possessed cagA. Four of five strains cagA neg-
ave by PCR were found to be positive when assessed by
Southern blotting and colony hybridization with the cagA-
specific probe under stringent conditions. In addition, 20 H. py-
lori strains positive for cagA by PCR were confirmed to be
positive by Southern blotting and 30 H. pylori strains positive
for cagA by PCR were confirmed to be positive by colony
hybridization. The expression of the CagA protein was also
assessed in 20 cagA-positive and 1 cagA-negative H. pylori
populations by the Western blotting (immunoblotting) tech-
nique with anti-CagA-positive serum. The results indicated
that the CagA protein was expressed by the 20 cagA-positive
H. pylori strains tested and not by the cagA-negative H. pylori
strain (data not shown), being consistent with the results ob-
tained by PCR, Southern blotting, and colony hybridization.
Together, by using these methods, 82 of 83 (99%) H. pylori
strains were cagA positive.

This high prevalence of cagA-positive H. pylori (99%) among
Chinese patients with PUD and CG is almost completely con-
sistent with our previous study in which 97% of serum samples
from 167 Chinese patients with CG, PUD, and gastric cancer
had antibodies against a 138-kDa protein, most probably CagA
(17). In previous studies with populations from Europe and the
United States, the prevalence of cagA-positive H. pylori varied
between 69 and 79% (4, 16, 26). Thus, the prevalence of
cagA-positive H. pylori among Chinese patients with PUD or
CG is much higher than that among North American and
European H. pylori-infected patients. The only other study
regarding a population outside Europe and the United States
showed a similarly high prevalence of cagA-positive H. pylori
isolates among H. pylori-infected patients (13). Recently,
Miehlke et al. (13) found that cagA could be identified in 98%
(59 of 60) of H. pylori isolates from Korean patients with
duodenal ulcer and gastric carcinoma. On the other hand, the
prevalence of cagA-positive H. pylori isolates from 16 patients
of Moroccan ethnicity (most of whom emigrated to Belgium 20
to 30 years ago and who are currently living there) was signif-
ically lower (31.3%) than that among 57 Belgian patients
(73.6%) or 23 non-Belgian, non-Moroccan patients (82.6%)
(4). One possible explanation for the difference between the
prevalence of cagA may be that a specific genotype may exist
within a particular geographic area or within a particular eth-
nic group.

The association between cagA-positive H. pylori and clinical
gastrointestinal disorders, especially PUD, has been shown in a
number of studies. Using combined serological and genetic
detection methods, Cover et al. (4) found a strong correlation
between the presence of antibodies to CagA in serum and the
isolation of a cagA-positive strain from a patient. In addition,
the prevalence of cagA-positive H. pylori was higher among
patients with duodenal ulcer disease than among patients with
nonulcer dyspepsia. Evidence of the association of cagA-posi-
tive H. pylori with peptic ulceration has been provided by
reverse transcription PCR applied to stomach biopsy speci-
mens (19). Recently, studying 155 H. pylori-infected Dutch
patients, we found that the occurrence of cagA-positive H. py-
lori among 76 (93%) patients with PUD was higher than that
among 79 (65%) patients with functional dyspepsia, also indi-
cating that cagA is associated with PUD (26). However, our
present study together with previous results (17) indicated that
almost all of the H. pylori populations (99%) isolated from
Chinese patients possessed cagA, whereas the prevalence of
cagA-positive H. pylori isolates from patients with PUD and
CG was similar. Therefore, cagA cannot be used as a marker
for PUD in H. pylori-infected Chinese patients. This is consis-
tent with a recent report by Mitchell et al. (14), in which the
seroprevalence of anti-CagA antibodies among Chinese H.
pylori-infected gastric cancer patients and H. pylori-infected
asymptomatic subjects was examined by Western blotting. An
equally high prevalence of antibodies to CagA in both groups
(83 versus 86%) was observed. On the other hand, because
cagA and its product, the 128- to 140-kDa protein, exist in
almost all H. pylori populations from Chinese patients with
symptoms of dyspepsia and because of its strong immunogene-
icity, the CagA protein may be used as an antigen for the
serodiagnosis of H. pylori infection and the candidate antigen
for immunization against H. pylori in Chinese patients instead
of being a marker for PUD.

When primer set 1 (caga1-caga2) was used to detect cagA by
PCR amplification, the expected 570-bp product was observed
in only 52% of cagA-positive H. pylori populations from
Chinese patients. In contrast, 92% (112 of 122) of the cagA-
positive H. pylori populations were cagA positive by PCR am-
plification with this primer set when a collection of 155 H. py-
lori populations from Dutch patients with PUD and functional
dyspepsia was assessed (26). Assessment of the prevalence of
cagA among 55 Dutch cagA-positive H. pylori populations by
PCR with primer set 2 yielded an equally high sensitivity (91%;
50 of 55). The difference in the detection between H. pylori
populations from Chinese patients and those from Dutch pa-
tients with primer set 1 was highly significant \((P < 0.001)\). These results indicate that the sequence of \(cagA\) differs between Dutch and Chinese \(H. pylori\) isolates, at least at the site complementary to primer caga1. However, sequencing of \(cagA\) is necessary for full elucidation of this observation. If it is true and if it is confirmed, it would indicate that allelic variation of the \(cagA\) gene of \(H. pylori\) strains from Chinese patients and \(H. pylori\) strains from Dutch patients has occurred.

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