Transcript variants and expression profiles analysis of Mitf gene in minipigs

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Abstract

Object: To identify transcript variants and expression patterns of porcine Mitf.
Materials and methods: A pairwise BLAST search at NCBI database was performed to deduce the structure of porcine Mitf gene. Subsequently, 5'RACE and fluorescent quantitative RT-PCR were used to analyze the expression pattern of porcine Mitf in different tissues.
Results: Four transcript variants of porcine Mitf, MITF-A, MITF-H, MITF-M and MITF-SUS were identified, all sharing high homology with those in humans, except Mitf-SUS.
Conclusion: The sequence of porcine Mitf appear highly homologous to human MITF. However, only 4 transcript variants of porcine Mitf were identified in these minipigs, less than the 9 transcript variants in human MITF.

Keywords: Minipigs; MITF/Mitf gene; Transcript variants

1. Introduction

Microphthalmia-associated transcription factor (MITF) plays significant roles in the proliferation, development and differentiation of neural crest-derived melanocytes and the formation of melanin (Fuse et al., 1999; Hornyak et al., 2001). However, as a key regulator gene for melanocyte survival, the regulation mechanism of MITF/Mitf still remains unclear. Recently, an increasing number of studies have found that mutations of Mitf in minipigs can lead to a variety of coat color phenotypes, hereditary hearing loss and primary melanoma (Tachibana et al., 1996; Nishimura et al., 2005). Considering its proximity with humans in evolution, the minipig becomes an ideal animal model in study human diseases (Guo et al., 2015a,b). To establish a suitable animal model for further studies into MITF/Mitf functions, the current study aims to identify alternatively spliced transcript variants of porcine Mitf and analyze their expression in different tissues.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Animals

Minipigs were obtained from China Agricultural University (CAU), Zhuozhou, Hebei Province, China.

2.2. Gene annotation of porcine Mitf

As already reported, human MITF expresses several isoforms, but the transcript profile of porcine Mitf has not been described explicitly. To characterize the structure of porcine Mitf, we compared the sequence of porcine Mitf (obtained from the NCBI UniGene database) with the sequence of human MITF (obtained from the Genbank database). The
structure characterization of porcine Mitf loci and the distribution among coding sequence were demonstrated by performing a pairwise BLAST search at the gene annotation database of NCBI.

2.3. Isoform-specific reverse transcription-polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR)

To detect porcine Mitf expression, primers for isoform-specific RT-PCR were designed using the Primer Premier 5.0. The key principles in primer designing were followed, i.e. 1) sequences of primers and templates must be strictly complementary; 2) complementarity must not exit in primer itself and between primers to avoid formation of primer dimers and hairpin structures; and 3) mispairing must not happen at target sites of DNA templates. In our study, the forward primers located at upstream of specific isoforms M, H, and A, respectively. Primer sequences for porcine Mitf isoforms are listed in Table 1.

2.4. 5′ Rapid amplification of cDNA ends (5′ RACE)

Total RNA was extracted from the inner ear and skin tissues of normal minipigs, which was used to generate cDNA with reverse transcriptase. Subsequently, the cDNA was synthesized to analyze the expression of each isoform by 5′ RACE according to the manufacturers’ instructions.

3. Results

3.1. Characterization of porcine Mitf cDNA coding sequence

The whole porcine Mitf sequence was scanned to deduce the homologous regions of MITF exons using BLAST at the NCBI database. All the 15 exons reported in human MITF were found in homologous regions in porcine Mitf with similar lengths and above 95% similarity. Longer than the 229 kb length of human MITF, the porcine Mitf gene spanned 310 kb and located at chr.13:56308861-56618423. The indentified 15 exons, arranging differently from human, were Exon1A, Exon1O, Exon1C, Exon1H, Exon6, Exon5, Exon4, Exon3, Exon3X, Exon2, Exon1M, Exon9, Exon1B, Exon7 and Exon8 successively. However, the sequences of 8 exons coded reversely and 16 gaps were found in the 310 kb-sequence, which might have resulted from splicing errors. The details for structural characterization of the MITF/Mitf coding sequence are showed in Table 2.

3.2. Identification of alternative splice variants of porcine Mitf

Since multiple transcript variants, differing in their initial exons spliced onto the later part, are common both in human and in murine MITF/Mitf, primers specific to the widest expressed variants in human, including Transcript4 (NM_000248.3), Transcript3 (NM_006722.2), Transcript1 (NM_198159.2) and Transcript2 (NM_198177.2), were designed to identify putative corresponding variants in minipigs.

RT-PCR was performed to amplify transcript variants expressed in cDNA isolated from skin and inner ear tissues.

Table 1
Primer sequences for porcine Mitf isoforms.

| Primer | Sequence | Location |
|--------|----------|----------|
| E1F1   | cacagctccaaagtaagaacagag | Exon 1A |
| E1F2   | agagcccaaaacttattacgaact | Exon 1A |
| E4F1   | cttgcagaacaccttaaaggaaaa | Exon 1H |
| E4F2   | tgccagaactaactttgactttca | Exon 1H |
| E6R1   | gtgatgtcatactggaggagctta | Exon 1B |
| E6R2   | tagcaagatgcgtgatgtcatact | Exon 1B |
| E6R1   | cgatttgtagactggcatagagaa | Exon 1M |
| E6R2   | caatgagaaatggtggactattca | Exon 1M |
| CDS1F  | ggtctgttttgttcttcaaactta | Exon 3  |
| CDS2R  | tctgtctgttttcaagctcttttg | Exon 8  |

Table 2
Structural characterization of MITF/Mitf coding sequence.

| Exon No. | Sus scrofa (Pigs) | Homo sapiens (Human) |
|----------|-------------------|----------------------|
|          | Length | Ori | Chr. | Start | End     | Length | Ori | Chr. | Start | End     |
| Exon1A   | 268    | +   | 13   | 56308861 | 56309128 | 267    | +   | 3   | 69788586 | 69788852 |
| Exon1O   | 138    | +   | 13   | 56331501 | 56331638 | 137    | +   | 3   | 69812707 | 69812843 |
| Exon1C   | 134    | +   | 13   | 56331751 | 56331884 | 132    | +   | 3   | 69812962 | 69813093 |
| Exon1H   | 125    | +   | 13   | 56442743 | 56442867 | 123    | +   | 3   | 69915375 | 69915497 |
| Exon1B   | 248    | +   | 13   | 56596334 | 56596581 | 250    | +   | 3   | 69928285 | 69928334 |
| Exon1M   | 153    | −   | 13   | 56475071 | 56475223 | 156    | +   | 3   | 69985751 | 69985906 |
| Exon2    | 231    | −   | 13   | 56473795 | 56474025 | 228    | +   | 3   | 69986973 | 69987200 |
| Exon3X   | 708    | −   | 13   | 56472778 | 56473485 | 714    | +   | 3   | 69987503 | 69988216 |
| Exon3    | 86     | −   | 13   | 56472662 | 56472747 | 84     | +   | 3   | 69988249 | 69988332 |
| Exon4    | 99     | −   | 13   | 56470136 | 56470234 | 96     | +   | 3   | 69990387 | 69990482 |
| Exon5    | 112    | −   | 13   | 56462127 | 56462238 | 118    | +   | 3   | 69982902 | 69983199 |
| Exon6    | 58     | −   | 13   | 56459059 | 56459116 | 57     | +   | 3   | 70000981 | 70001037 |
| Exon7    | 76     | −   | 13   | 56614705 | 56614780 | 76     | +   | 3   | 70005606 | 70005681 |
| Exon8    | 149    | +   | 13   | 56618275 | 56618423 | 148    | +   | 3   | 70008424 | 70008571 |
| Exon9    | 3586   | −   | 13   | 56590670 | 56594255 | 3491   | +   | 3   | 70013998 | 70014888 |
Only 4 transcript variants were detected by the four primer pairs: E1F1+CDS1R, E1F2+CDS1R, E4F1+CDS1R, E4F2+CDS1R (Fig.1).

Subsequently, the amplifications were recycled and cloned into DH5α E. coli. After sequencing the plasmid DNA extracted from the E. coli, we detected three homologous isoforms, corresponding to human MITF-A, MITF-H and MITF-M, respectively.

3.3. Isoform-specific expression patterns of porcine Mitf

5’ RACE was used to determine if there were any alternative transcription initiation sites. The results proved that no exons existed in upstream of the determined first exons. Furthermore, a novel truncated porcine Mitf isoform was detected, which started from Exon6 and was spliced to Exon7 and Exon8. As this has never been reported and is first found in minipigs, this truncated transcript is recorded as Mitf-SUS.

In total, four porcine Mitf isoforms were found in our study, sharing high level homology with those of humans, except Mitf-SUS. Their expression patterns are described in Fig.2.

3.4. Expression of porcine Mitf isoforms in different tissues

Via fluorescent quantitative RT-PCR, expression of Mitf-A and Mitf-M isoforms in the heart, kidney, skeletal muscle, skin and inner ear was analyzed with GAPDH as an equal loading control. The expression of two isoforms varied with one accord in these tissues and both of them expressed at the highest level in skin and at the lowest level in kidney. Notably, Mitf-M in skin expressed two magnitudes higher than in other tissues, which might have resulted from the great amount of melanocytes in skin and hair follicles. Otherwise, Mitf-A expressed at a similar level in heart, skeletal muscle and skin (see Fig.3).
4. Discussion

Based on the pig genome database (Sus 10.2), only four exons of porcine *Mitf* have been described with no experimental evidence. In our study, a pairwise BLAST search against the human cDNA at NCBI databases was performed to complement the analysis of porcine *Mitf*. Consequently, the structures and expression patterns of porcine *Mitf* were demonstrated in details.

According to previous studies, human *MITF* gene is expressed as a series of isoforms differing in their specific promoters and first exons. So far, at least nine transcript variants has been described, which start with specific promoters and initial exons and then are spliced to the common exons2–9 (Hershey and Fisher, 2005; Widlund and Fisher, 2003). At GenBank database, 8 transcript variants (NM_000248.3, NM_001184968.1, NM_006722.2, NM_198158.2, NM_198159.2, NM_198177.2, NM_198178.2, NM_001184967.1) are found and comprise of 15 exons. All these 15 exons are found in homologous regions in porcine *Mitf* with proximate length and above 95% similarity via the BLAST search, thus 15 exons of the porcine *Mitf* gene have been deduced.

To our knowledge, isoforms MITF-A, MITF-H and MITF-B express in all cell lines, MITF-M expresses only in melanocytes, while MITF-C expresses in all cell lines but melanocytes in human (Widlund et al., 2002; Udono et al., 2000). As there is no previous experimental evidence or report on the expression of porcine *Mitf*, the expression pattern in tissues of minipigs was described in our study by performing fluorescent quantitative RT-PCR, from which a porcine *Mitf* gene database was established.

Acknowledgments

This work was supported by grants from the Major State Basic Research Development Program of China (973 Program) (#2011CBA01000), the National Basic Research Program of China (973 Program) (#2012CB967900), and the National Natural Science Foundation of China (81400472).

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