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Protocol

A qualitative IgG ELISA for detection of SARS-CoV-2-specific antibodies in Syrian hamster serum samples

This protocol describes an indirect enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay for qualitative detection of IgG antibodies against severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) in Syrian hamster serum samples. We describe the preparation of inactivated virus antigens and the negative control antigen and the use of antigen-coated microtiter plates to detect SARS-CoV-2-specific antibodies from SARS-CoV-2-infected hamsters, including the criteria for differentiating positive versus negative reaction. The limited batch-to-batch variability of this assay has been verified with two batches of independently prepared antigens.

Highlights

- Inactivated SARS-CoV-2 whole-virion-based IgG ELISA
- Qualitative detection of anti-SARS-CoV-2 IgG antibody in infected hamster serum samples
- Criteria for determination of cutoff values for the assay
Protocol

A qualitative IgG ELISA for detection of SARS-CoV-2-specific antibodies in Syrian hamster serum samples

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.xpro.2021.100573

SUMMARY
This protocol describes an indirect enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay for qualitative detection of IgG antibodies against severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) in Syrian hamster serum samples. We describe the preparation of inactivated virus antigens and the negative control antigen and the use of antigen-coated microtiter plates to detect SARS-CoV-2-specific antibodies from SARS-CoV-2-infected hamsters, including the criteria for differentiating positive versus negative reaction. The limited batch-to-batch variability of this assay has been verified with two batches of independently prepared antigens.

For complete details on the use and execution of this protocol, please refer to Mohandas et al. (2021).

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Ethics statement
The present protocol was approved by Institutional Animal Ethical Committee of ICMR NIV, Pune and all the experiments involving animals were performed as per guidelines laid down by Committee for the Purpose of Control and Supervision of Experiments on animals, Government of India.

Prepare virus stock antigens, gamma irradiation, and confirm inactivation of the virus stock as described below. Prepare Solutions following the recipes mentioned in the Materials and Equipment section. A complete list of reagents and resources required is given in the Key resources table.

SARS-CoV-2 stock preparation

© Timing: 5 days

1. Maintain African green monkey kidney cell line (Vero CCL-81) in Eagle’s minimum essential medium (MEM) supplemented with 10% fetal bovine serum (FBS), penicillin (100 U/mL), and streptomycin (100 mg/mL)
2. Infect the cells with SARS-CoV-2 isolate (Sarkale et al., 2020). GISAID:EPI_ISL_420545
   a. Infect the Vero CCL-81 cells (at 80%-90% confluency, in 40 mL MEM, cultured in 225 cm² tissue culture flasks) with 1 mL virus isolate with Median Tissue Culture Infectious Dose (TCID₅₀) of 10⁶.₅/mL. Incubate in a CO₂ incubator with 5% CO₂ at 37°C for 4 days (Reed and Muench, 1938).
   b. On day 4 post inoculation, observe for the presence of cytopathic effects (CPE; Figure 1).
   c. Freeze the whole flask in −80°C, and then thaw it and harvest the entire volume of the tissue culture fluid (TCF; the supernatant from the culture)
d. Centrifuge the TCF at 2490 g for 5 min at 4°C

e. After centrifugation, separate and store the clear supernatant at –80°C until further use. This is referred to as virus stock hereafter.
f. Proceed to Gamma irradiation of the stock as described below

3. Preparation of the negative control antigen
   a. Incubate Vero CCL-81 cells in a CO₂ incubator with 5% CO₂ at 37°C for 4 days
   b. Repeat steps 2b–2e to prepare the negative control antigen stock
   c. Proceed to Gamma irradiation of the stock as described below

Gamma irradiation

按时：1 天

4. Gamma inactivation of virus stock and Vero CCL-81 control supernatant.
   a. Thaw the virus or the negative control antigen stock and place it on ice in a biohazard bag in the steel container of the gamma chamber
   b. Use a Co-60 source (Gamma Chamber; GC 5000) with a total radiation dose of 8 kiloGray (kGy) for inactivation of SARS-CoV-2, which can be achieved by exposing to gamma dose rate of 6.89 kGy for 1 h 4 min

Confirmation of inactivation

按时：10 天

5. Inoculate 100 μL of the irradiated virus stock in Vero CCL-81 cells and observe for 5 days (P1 passage). Inoculate 100 μL supernatant of P1 passage in Vero CCL-81 cells and observe for 5 days (P2 passage) to confirm the inactivation of the virus by checking for absence of CPE.

Concentration of the antigen

按时：1 天

6. Add 60 mL of the inactivated antigen in sample reservoir of the Jumbosep centrifugal devices with 30K membrane insert.
7. Centrifuge for 12 min at 177 g at 4°C.
8. After centrifugation discard the filtrate collected in the filtrate receiver.
9. Collect approximately 35 mL of the sample retained (now referred as concentrated antigen) in the sample reservoir in a pre-chilled bottle.
10. Aliquot the concentrated antigen 1 mL/vial and store at −80°C for further use.
11. Similarly, for preparation of concentrated negative control antigen, add 60 mL the control supernatant of Vero CCL-81 cells in separate Jumbosep centrifugal devices with 30K membrane insert and repeat steps 7–10.

**Note:** Estimate the total protein concentration by the Lowry’s method (Lowry et al., 1951).

⚠️ **CRITICAL:** Two separate Jumbosep centrifugal devices should be used for SARS-CoV-2 and negative control antigen preparation, respectively.

### KEY RESOURCES TABLE

| REAGENT or RESOURCE | SOURCE | IDENTIFIER |
|---------------------|--------|------------|
| **Antibodies**      |        |            |
| Goat anti-hamster IgG horseradish peroxidase | Thermo Fisher Scientific | Cat# PA1-29626 |
| **Bacterial and virus strains** |        |            |
| NIV-2020-770        | ICMR-National Institute of Virology, Pune | "GISAID: hCoV-19/India/770/2020[EPI_ISL_420545]" "GISAID: hCoV19/India/2020 770/2020[EPI_ISL_420546]" |
| **Biological samples** |        |            |
| Hamster SARS-CoV-2-positive serum samples | ICMR-National Institute of Virology, Pune | N/A |
| Hamster SARS-CoV-2-negative serum samples | ICMR-National Institute of Virology, Pune | N/A |
| **Chemicals, peptides, and recombinant proteins** |        |            |
| Minimum Essential Medium | Thermo Fisher Scientific | Cat # 11534466 |
| Fetal bovine serum | Sigma, USA | Cat # F9665 |
| Penicillin streptomycin | HiMedia | Cat # A018 |
| Liquid plate sealer | CANDOR Bioscience GmbH, Germany | Cat # 160902-04 |
| PBS | Sigma-Aldrich, USA | Cat #P4417-100TAB |
| Tween-20 | Sigma-Aldrich, USA | Cat #P1379-500ML |
| StabilZyme HRP Conjugate Stabilizer | SurModics, Inc., USA | Cat # SZ02-1000 |
| 3,3',5,5'-Tetramethylbenzidine | Clinical Sciences | Cat# 01016-1-1000 |
| Sample diluent powder (skim milk) | Sigma-Aldrich, USA | Cat# 70166-500G |
| Sulfuric acid | Sigma-Aldrich, USA | Cat # 7664-93-9 |
| **Experimental models: Cell lines** |        |            |
| Vero CCL-81 | ATCC | Cat#ATCC-CCL-81 |
| **Experimental models: Organisms/strains** |        |            |
| Syrian hamster 6–8-week-old female | Indian Council of Medical Research, National Institute of Nutrition, Hyderabad, India | N/A |
| **Others** |        |            |
| ELISA plates | Nunc, Thermo Fisher Scientific, USA | Cat # 469949 |
| Jumbosep Centrifugal Device Membrane Inserts 30K | Pall | Cat # OD030C65 |
| Inverted compound microscope | Olympus | Model: CK2 |
| Biosafety Cabinet | Thermo Scientific | Model: 1376 |
| ELISA reader | Molecular Devices | Model: Versamax microplate reader |
| ELISA microplate washer | Bio-Rad | Model: 1575 |

(Continued on next page)
MATERIALS AND EQUIPMENT

**Alternatives:** In this protocol, an Inverted Compound Microscope with camera attachment was used. However, any inverted compound microscope could be used to record the image.

**Preparation of wash buffer (1× PBST)**

| Reagent       | Final concentration | Amount                  |
|---------------|---------------------|-------------------------|
| PBS tablet    | 0.01M               | One tablet in 200 mL deionized water |
| Tween 20      | 0.1%                | 200 μL                  |

One tablet dissolved in 200 mL of deionized water yields 0.01 M phosphate buffer. Once prepared store for one week at 4°C.

**Preparation of sample diluent (5% skim milk)**

| Reagent      | Final concentration | Amount                   |
|--------------|---------------------|--------------------------|
| Skim milk    | 5%                  | 5 gm of Skim milk in 100 mL 1×PBST |

Prepare freshly do not store

**Preparation of stop solution**

| Reagent          | Final concentration | Amount       |
|------------------|---------------------|--------------|
| Concentrated H₂SO₄ | 2M                  | 7.142 mL     |
| Chilled distilled water | -              | 250 mL      |

Add 7.142 mL of Concentrated H₂SO₄ in 250 mL chilled distilled water. Mix thoroughly and then store for one month at 4°C.

⚠ CRITICAL: Reagents should be used within the expiry. All the reagents should be opened in aseptic conditions. Wear protective gloves, clothing, and eye and face protection. Wash hands thoroughly after handling Sulfuric acid.

**Alternatives:** Conjugate diluent (Stablisyme) can be replaced by the sample diluent at step number 8.

**STEP-BY-STEP METHOD DETAILS**

**Coating of microtiter plates**

© Timing: 1 day

1. Dilute the inactivated SARS-CoV-2 antigen to make a concentration of 2 μg/100 μL with 1× phosphate-buffered saline (PBS) (pH 7.2 to 7.4, 0.01 M).
2. Coat 96-well polystyrene microtiter ELISA plates with 100 μl of the diluted SARS-CoV-2 antigen per well in rows A to D and the negative control antigen in rows E to H.
   a. Keep the antigen-coated plates for 16–18 h at 4°C.
3. After coating, block the wells with liquid plate sealer for two hours at room temperature (25°C–30°C). Aspirate and store the plate at 2°C–8°C.
   a. Wash the plates three times before use with 0.01 M PBS, pH 7.2–7.4 with 0.1% Tween-20 (PBST).

△ CRITICAL: It is important to check the pH of the coating buffer.

Assay protocol

⊙ Timing: 2 h 30 min

4. Prepare positive and negative controls for the assay
   a. Blood collection from hamsters: Anaesthetize the hamsters prior to blood collection using isoflurane. Perform blood collection (0.25 mL) through retroorbital route. Allow the blood sample to clot at room temperature for 30 min and centrifuge the sample at 177 g for 10 min to separate serum. Aliquot the separated serum and store it at −20°C.
   b. Collect positive serum from hamsters infected by SARS-CoV-2 virus and negative control serum from uninfected hamsters. (Mohandas et al., 2021)
5. Dilute hamster IgG positive and negative serum samples to be tested prior to initiating the test.
   a. Dilute the hamster sera to 1:100 with the sample diluent.
6. Add 100 μl of 1:100 diluted serum samples to the coated microtiter plate and incubate at 37°C for one hour.
7. After incubation, wash the plates three times with PBST.
8. Add 100 μl of anti-hamster IgG horseradish peroxidase (HRP; 1:3000 diluted with stabilzyme) per well and incubate the plate for one hour at 37°C.

△ CRITICAL: It is important to confirm the dilutions of the serum samples and conjugated antibodies

9. After incubation, wash the plates three times with PBST.
10. Add 100 μl of 3,3′,5,5′-tetramethylbenzidine (TMB) substrate per well and incubate for 10 min at 25°C–28°C.

Note: Follow the exact incubation time.

11. Stop the reaction using 2M sulfuric acid.
12. Measure the absorbance values at 450 nm using an ELISA reader.
13. Determination of cut-off value for the assay is as follows.
   a. Sample is considered to be positive if optical Density (O.D) of the sample is more than the average O.D of negative control + 0.2 and OD of sample with positive antigen divided by OD of sample with negative antigen. >1.5.
   b. Sample is considered to be negative if O.D of the sample is less than the average O.D of negative control +0.2 and the ratio of OD of sample with positive antigen divided by OD of sample with negative antigen. <1.5.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

This protocol allows qualitative detection of anti-SARS CoV-2 IgG antibodies in hamster serum samples. In our recent paper (Mohandas et al., 2021), we have applied this IgG ELISA for the detection of SARS-CoV-2 specific antibodies in Syrian hamster serum samples. Three vaccine formulations were
evaluated in this study. Serum IgG titers were also determined using this assay by testing 10-fold serial dilutions of each serum sample, starting from 1:100 dilution. Titer values were determined at the highest dilution when the optical density (OD) was more than 0.2 and positive/negative (P/N) ratio above 1.5. Robust anti SARS CoV-2 IgG antibody response was detected in this study against vaccine candidates with an increasing trend of OD of 0.84, 0.97, and 0.91 on 3, 7, and 15 days post infection, respectively (Figure 2).

Reproducibility of the assay has been checked using two different batches of the independently prepared concentrated antigens (Lot 4 vs Lot 7), and the results from the weak positive sera and the negative controls were found to be comparable between these two trials (Figure 3; Table 1).

**QUANTIFICATION AND STATISTICAL ANALYSIS**

1. Average NC is calculated by taking mean OD of two or more negative controls
   a. Avg of NC = [O.D of NC 1 (0.071)+ O.D of NC 2(0.075)]/2 = 0.073
2. P/N is calculated as OD of sample with positive antigen divided by OD of sample with negative antigen.
   a. O.D of Sample with SARS CoV-2 antigen (0.364)/ O.D of sample with negative control antigen (0.081) = 4.49
3. Cut Off OD is determined as 0.2 added to average NC
   a. Cut off= Avg NC (0.073)+0.2 = 0.273
4. Sample is considered positive if both the following criteria are met:

Figure 2. Humoral response in vaccinated hamsters
(A) IgG antibody response during a three-dose vaccine regime in all groups of animals observed from 12, 21 and 48 day post immunization. (B) IgG antibody response at post-infection ( 3, 7 and 15 Days post infection[DPI]) for all groups of animals. (C) Comparison of IgG antibody titers between groups post immunization. (D) Comparison of IgG antibody titers between groups post-infection. The statistical significance was assessed using the Kruskal-Wallis test followed by the two-tailed Mann-Whitney test between the two groups; p values less than 0.05 were considered to be statistically significant.

Source: page 5 of Mohandas et al. (2021).
a. OD of the sample is more than cut off
b. P/N of the sample is more than 1.5.
c. Ham-13 Day-10 is considered as positive as O.D is 0.364 which is > cut off (0.273) and P/N is 4.49 which is >1.5

LIMITATIONS
It is an indirect IgG ELISA. The assay has been validated using the limited number of SARS CoV-2 infected Syrian hamsters (Mohandas et al., 2021). The performance of the assay has not been optimized for visual determination.

We have not tested the assay with other species of hamsters. We speculate that there may not be cross reactivity of the Goat anti-hamster IgG horseradish peroxidase (HRP) to other hamsters than Syrian hamsters.

TROUBLESHOOTING
Problem 1
No color development (steps 7 and 8)

Reason 1: Improper washing of the antigen coated plates before sample addition.
Reason 2: Loss of activity of the conjugate.
Reason 3: Omission of key reagents

Potential solution
Solution 1: Wash the plate three times with wash buffer before sample addition.
Solution 2: In a glass tube, add 20 μL of conjugate and 20 μL of liquid TMB substrate and check for color development.
Solution 3: Check that all reagents have been added in the correct order

Problem 2 (step 12)
Low optical density (OD) value of “Positive control”

Reason: OD taken at incorrect wavelength.
Table 1. Verification of batch-to-batch variability

| OD (450 nm) | Sample details |
|-------------|----------------|
| **Positive antigen** |                       |
| 0.364       | Ham-13 Day-10 PC   |
| 0.071       | Ham-1 Day-3 NC1    |
| 0.075       | Ham-3 Day-3 NC2    |
| 0.1         | Blank BC          |
| **Negative antigen** |                   |
| 0.081       | Ham-13 Day-10 PC   |
| 0.069       | Ham-1 Day-3 NC1    |
| 0.075       | Ham-3 Day-3 NC2    |
| 0.073       | Blank BC          |

| Plate coated date | October 7, 2020 | Feb. 9, 2021 |
| Concentrated supernatant Lot no | 4 | 7 |
| P/N | 4.49 | 5.5 |
|     | 1.02 | 1   |
|     | 1    | 1.06|
|     | 1.36 | 1   |
| Avg NC | 0.073 | 0.065 |
| Cut off | 0.273 | 0.267 |

ELISA plates were coated with two different batches of antigens (concentrated supernatant; lot number 4 and 7). PC: positive control (weak positive hamster sera). NC1 and NC2: negative control sera 1 and 2. BC: blank control.

**Potential solution**
Read OD values at 450 nm.

**Problem 3**
High OD values of “Negative control” (step 7).

Reason: Improper washing of the antigen coated plates before sample addition.

**Potential solution**
Solution 1: Follow the protocol meticulously.
Solution 2: Change micropipette tips while addition of negative and positive control.

**Problem 4**
High background (step 10).

Reason 1: Liquid substrate not properly protected from light.
Reason 2: Contamination of liquid Substrate
Reason 3: Insufficient washing of the plates.
Reason 4: Poor quality of water used for diluting wash buffer concentrate

**Potential solution**
Solution 1: Incubate the plate in dark after addition of substrate.
Solution 2: Check OD value of substrate blank.
Solution 3: Follow wash protocol meticulously.
Solution 4: Glass distilled water is preferred for diluting wash buffer concentrate

**Problem 5**
Poor reproducibility of test (step 1 and 7).

Reason 1: Uneven coating of the plate
Reason 2: Dispensing errors
Reason 3: Improper washing

**Potential solution**

Solution 1: Use proper ELISA plate; check coating and blocking volumes
Solution 2: Calibrate micropipettes. Check other dispensing equipment’s.
Solution 3: If an automated plate washer is used, check all the ports/manifold for uniform flow of wash buffer. If there are blockages, clean the ports

**Problem 6**
Uneven color development (step 7).

Reason: Improper washing of wells

**Potential solution**
Use an automated plate washer, if available.

**RESOURCE AVAILABILITY**

**Lead contact**
Further information and requests for resources and reagents should be directed to and will be fulfilled by the lead contact, Dr Pragya D Yadav (hellopragya22@gmail.com).

**Materials availability**
All the newly generated materials associated with this protocol will be available, on request to Director, ICMR-National Institute of Virology, subject to fulfillment of institutional criteria for sharing.

**Data and code availability**
The datasets supporting the current study have not been deposited in a public repository but are available from the corresponding author on request.

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**
Authors acknowledge the support received from Dr. (Prof.) Priya Abraham, Director, and the laboratory team which includes Mr. Deepak Mali and Mr. Abhimanyu Kumar of ICMR-National Institute of Virology, Pune, for the technical support. Funding support was provided by ICMR-NIV, Pune, India.

**AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS**
P.D.Y., A.S., and S.M. designed the antigen preparation and ELISA protocol. P.D.Y. monitored the virus propagation and gamma inactivation. A.S. and R.J. performed the ELISA optimization and testing of the hamster immune sera.

**DECLARATION OF INTERESTS**
The authors declare no competing interests.

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