The Correlation between NaCl Adaptation and Heat Sensitivity of *Listeria monocytogenes*, a Foodborne Pathogen through Fresh and Processed Meat

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between NaCl sensitivity and stress response of *Listeria monocytogenes*. Nine strains of *L. monocytogenes* (NCCP10805, NCCP10806, NCCP10807, NCCP10808, NCCP10810, NCCP10811, NCCP10920 and NCCP10943) were exposed to 0%, 1%, 2% and 4% NaCl, and then incubated at 60°C for 60 min to select strains that were heat-sensitized (HS) and non-sensitized (NS) by NaCl exposure. After heat challenge, *L. monocytogenes* strains were categorized as HS (NCCP 10805, NCCP10806, NCCP10807, NCCP10810, NCCP10811 and NCCP10920) or NS (NCCP10808, NCCP10809 and NCCP10943). Total mRNA was extracted from a HS strain (NCCP10811) and two NS strains (NCCP10808 and NCCP10809), and then cDNA was prepared to analyze the expression of genes (*inlA*, *inlB*, *opuC*, *betL*, *gbuB*, *osmC* and *ctc*) that may be altered in response to NaCl stress, by qRT-PCR. The expression levels of two invasion-related genes (*inlA* and *inlB*) and two stress response genes (*opuC* and *ctc*) were increased (*p < 0.05*) in NS strains after NaCl exposure in an NaCl concentration-dependent manner. However, only *betL* expression was increased (*p < 0.05*) in the HS strains. These results indicate that the effect of NaCl on heat sensitization of *L. monocytogenes* is strain dependent and that *opuC* and *ctc* may prevent NS *L. monocytogenes* strains from being heat sensitized by NaCl. Moreover, NaCl also increases the expression of invasion-related genes (*inlA* and *inlB*).

Keywords: *Listeria monocytogenes*, NaCl, heat sensitivity, transcriptome, invasion gene

Received May 9, 2016; Revised June 21, 2016; Accepted June 27, 2016

Introduction

*Listeria monocytogenes* is a gram-positive, facultative anaerobic bacterium that can proliferate at low temperatures (Walker et al., 1990) and survive in diverse environments, including NaCl concentrations up to 10% (McClure et al., 1989) and under acidic conditions (Cole et al., 1990). *L. monocytogenes* is an invasive bacterium, which is able to invade the human epithelial cells (Galdiero et al., 1997). In addition, *L. monocytogenes* is a pathogen that causes listeriosis, which is associated with sepsisemia, stillbirth, abortion, etc. (Gillespie et al., 2006). Listeriosis is usually linked to the consumption of raw milk, soft cheeses made from raw milk, smoked fish, and processed meat products (fermented sausages etc.), which are formulated with NaCl (Muhterem-Uyar et al., 2015; Samelis and Metaxopoulos, 1999).

NaCl is used to improve the flavor of processed products and to preserve food products by damaging the contaminating bacterial cells (Breslin and Beauchamp, 1997; Sofos, 1984). However, the NaCl concentrations used in foods may not be sufficient to inactivate pathogenic bacteria, and thus contributes to increased pathogenicity and resistance of bacteria to various stresses such as salt, acid, and heat (Bae et al., 2012; Garner et al., 2006; Jo et al., 2014). Phan-Thanh et al. (2000) found that *L. monocytogenes* adapted to an acidic environment (pH 5.2) for 2 h became resistant to heat and salt. In addition, NaCl-exposed *E. coli* O157:H7 NCCP11142 was heat resistant, and could survive at 50°C (Lee et al., 2015). Also, Yoon et al. (2013) showed that heat resistance in *Salmonella*
Typhimurium exposed to high NaCl concentration was increased.

Quantitative reverse transcription-PCR (qRT-PCR) was used to quantify the certain gene expression level (Livak and Schmittgen, 2001), and this method can be used to quantify gene expression levels by NaCl. For instance, Staphylococcus aureus upregulated the expression of genes related to biofilm formation when grown under high NaCl conditions (Rode et al., 2007).

To identify the invasive capability of L. monocytogenes, invasion assay using various human epithelial cell lines was usually performed, and the invasion efficiency was influenced by several stresses (Garner et al., 2006; Lee et al., 2013). Yoon et al. (2013) demonstrated that S. Typhimurium exposed to high NaCl concentration increased invasion efficiency into Caco-2 cells. In addition, Olesen et al. (2010) found that NaCl influences the invasiveness of L. monocytogenes.

Therefore, the objective of this study was to evaluate the effect of NaCl on the heat sensitivity of L. monocytogenes and to identify the genes expressed relatively in heat-sensitive (HS) and non-sensitized (NS) strains to elucidate the correlation between NaCl and heat sensitivity in L. monocytogenes.

Materials and Methods

Preparation of inocula

Nine L. monocytogenes strains (NCCP10805, NCCP 10806, NCCP10807, NCCP10808, NCCP10809, NCCP 10810, NCCP10811, NCCP10920, and NCCP10943), listed in Table 1 were individually cultured in 10 mL of tryptic soy broth containing 0.6% yeast extract (TSBYE; Becton, Dickinson, and Company, USA) at 30°C for 24 h. Then, 0.1-mL aliquots of the cultures were transferred into 10 mL of fresh TSBYE and incubated at 30°C for 24 h. The cultures were centrifuged (1,912 ×g, 15 min, 4°C), and the cells were washed twice with phosphate-buffered saline (PBS, pH 7.4; 0.2 g of KH₂PO₄, 1.5 g of Na₂HPO₄·7H₂O, 8.0 g of NaCl, and 0.2 g of KCl in 1 L of distilled water) and then diluted with PBS to obtain 4 Log CFU/mL.

Heat challenge

An aliquot (100 μL) of the inoculum was inoculated into 10 mL of TSBYE containing 0%, 1%, 2%, and 4% NaCl, and incubated at 25°C for 24-48 h. The cells were then plated on tryptic soy agar plus 0.6% yeast extract (TSAYE; Becton, Dickinson, and Company, USA) supplemented with 0%, 1%, 2%, and 4% NaCl and incubated at 25°C for 48 h. After incubation, non-habituated L. monocytogenes (control) and NaCl-habituated L. monocytogenes cells (1-4%) growing on the plates were collected with a sterile bent glass rod, washed twice with PBS, and diluted with PBS to OD₆₂₅=0.1. Then, 1 mL aliquots of the L. monocytogenes strains were inoculated into 9 mL of TSBYE preheated to 60°C in a water bath. To enumerate L. monocytogenes survival at 0, 20, 40 and 60 min, samples were removed at each time point, serially diluted with 0.1% buffered peptone water (BPW; Becton, Dickinson, and Company, USA), and plated on TSAYE. The plates were incubated at 30°C for 48 h. L. monocytogenes survival was expressed as Log(Y/Y₀), where Y₀ is the initial cell count (Log CFU/mL) at time t and Y is the cell count (Log CFU/mL) at time t₀.

Table 1. General information of Listeria monocytogenes strains used in this study

| Strain Origin Serotype | Strain Origin Serotype |
|------------------------|------------------------|
| L. monocytogenes NCCP 10805 Poultry 1 |
| L. monocytogenes NCCP 10806 Spinal fluid of man 2 |
| L. monocytogenes NCCP 10807 Human 3a |
| L. monocytogenes NCCP 10808 Animal, Tissue (ruminant brain) 4a |
| L. monocytogenes NCCP 10809 Human 4b |
| L. monocytogenes NCCP 10810 Chicken 4c |
| L. monocytogenes NCCP 10811 Chicken 4e |
| L. monocytogenes NCCP 10920 Unknown 1/2a |
| L. monocytogenes NCCP 10943 Rabbit 1/2a |

To determine the relative expression levels of genes that were related to virulence, and osmotic and general stresses (inLA, inLB, opuC, betL, gbuB, osmC and ctc; Table 2) after exposure to NaCl, 0.4 mL of HS and NS L. monocytogenes inocula were inoculated into 40 mL of TSBYE and incubated at 25°C to an OD₆₂₅=0.6. After incubation, 9-mL aliquots of the cultures were exposed to TSBYE plus 0%, 1%, 2% and 4% NaCl for 20 min. Then, 1.5-mL aliquots of the cultures were placed in microtubes and centrifuged at 5,000 g for 5 min. Then, 0.1 mL of lysozyme (10 mg/mL; Wako Pure Chemical Industries, Ltd., Japan) was added to the cell pellets and mixed vigorously. The mixture was incubated at 37°C for 15 min. After incubation, mRNA was extracted using the Qiagen RNeasy Mini Kit (Qiagen, Germany) and RNase-free DNase Set (Qiagen) and then diluted with PBS to obtain 4 Log CFU/mL.

Transcriptional analysis and invasion assay

To determine the relative expression levels of genes that were related to virulence, and osmotic and general stresses (inLA, inLB, opuC, betL, gbuB, osmC and ctc; Table 2) after exposure to NaCl, 0.4 mL of HS and NS L. monocytogenes inocula were inoculated into 40 mL of TSBYE and incubated at 25°C to an OD₆₂₅=0.6. After incubation, 9-mL aliquots of the cultures were exposed to TSBYE plus 0%, 1%, 2% and 4% NaCl for 20 min. Then, 1.5-mL aliquots of the cultures were placed in microtubes and centrifuged at 5,000 g for 5 min. Then, 0.1 mL of lysozyme (10 mg/mL; Wako Pure Chemical Industries, Ltd., Japan) was added to the cell pellets and mixed vigorously. The mixture was incubated at 37°C for 15 min. After incubation, mRNA was extracted using the Qiagen RNeasy Mini Kit (Qiagen, Germany) and RNase-free DNase Set (Qiagen).
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...according to the manufacturer’s instruction. Total mRNA was quantified by using an Epoch™ Microplate Spectrophotometer (BioTek Instruments, Inc., USA). The relative expression levels of virulence-, osmotic stress-, and general stress-related genes were measured by qRT-PCR. cDNA was synthesized from the extracted mRNA by using the QuantiTect Reverse Transcription Kit (Qiagen) according to the manufacturer’s instructions. The reaction mixture [24 µL; containing 12.5 µL of master mix, 6.5 µL of dH₂O, and 2.5 µL of forward and reverse primers (10 pmol/µL)] was prepared by using the Rotor-Gene SYBR Green PCR Kit (Qiagen) according to the manufacturer’s protocol. Then, 1 µL of cDNA and 24 µL of the reaction mixture were added to a PCR strip. To determine the relative expression levels of the target genes, the data was analyzed using Rotor-Gene Q software (Qiagen). The mean threshold cycle \((C_T)\) values were used for the transcriptional analysis, and 16s rRNA was used as the reference gene to determine relative gene expression levels.

A Caco-2 cell invasion assay was performed to compare the invasion efficiency of the HS and NS *L. monocytogenes* strains according to the method by Lee et al. (2012).

**Results and Discussion**

After heat challenge of the nine *L. monocytogenes* strains that were exposed to various NaCl concentrations, the strains were categorized in Table 3 as HS (NCCP10805, NCCP10806, NCCP10807, NCCP10810, NCCP10811, and NCCP10920) or NS (NCCP10808, NCCP10809, and NCCP10943). This result indicates that the cross-protective effect of NaCl on *L. monocytogenes* against heat is strain dependent. Therefore, it was necessary to find out what caused this strain variation. Palumbo et al. (1995) also showed that the survivability of *L. monocytogenes* in liquid egg yolk increased when 10% and 20% salt were added, because the \(D\)-value was higher as the temperature of the liquid egg yolk increased. In addition, the \(D\)-value of *Salmonella* spp. grown in liquid egg yolk containing 10% salt was higher than that in plain egg yolk (Palumbo et al., 1995). Lee et al. (2012) demonstrated that a mixture of 10 *L. monocytogenes* strains habituated by NaCl showed heat resistance, especially when they were exposed to sequentially higher NaCl concentrations (0%, 2%, 4%, and 6%). Kotrola and Conner (1997) showed that NaCl exposure increased the \(D\)-value of *E. coli* O157:H7 when grown at 52°C, 55°C, 57°C, and 60°C, indicating the increased survival of the bacterium. However, these studies did not identify the genes related to the cross-protection effect. Thus, we sought to analyze the gene expression levels of *L. monocytogenes* strains, exhibiting NaCl cross-protection to heat stress.

In the HS strain NCCP10811, the relative expression levels of osmotic stress- and general stress-related genes
(inlA, inlB, opuC and ctc) were not significantly increased by increasing NaCl concentrations (p>0.05) (Table 4; Fig. 1). Conversely, the relative expression levels of betL, gbuB and osmc, osmotic stress-related gene, increased as NaCl concentration increased (p<0.05) (Table 4; Fig. 1). However, in two of the NS strains (NCCP10808 and NCCP 10809), the relative expression levels of analyzed genes (inlA, inlB, opuC and ctc) were increased as the concentration of NaCl increased (p<0.05) (Table 4; Fig. 2). Osmotic-stress related genes are expressed as a response to osmotic stress conditions. In particular, inlA and inlB expression levels were much higher in the NS strains (p<0.05) than in the HS strain as the NaCl concentration increased. Therefore, the invasiveness of L. monocytogenes exposed to a high concentration of NaCl would likely increase. However, the invasion efficiency of the NS and HS L. monocytogenes strains in Caco-2 cells was not different (data not shown). Lee et al. (2012) also showed that exposure to NaCl did not affect human epithelial cell invasion of L. monocytogenes. These results indicate that there may be a threshold for inlA and inlB gene expression required for efficient L. monocytogenes invasion, and

| L. monocytogenes strains | Heating time (min) | NaCl concentration (%) |
|--------------------------|--------------------|------------------------|
|                          | 0                  | 1                      | 2                      | 4                      |
| NCCP 10805               |                    |                       |                        |                        |
| 20                       | -3.0±0.1A           | -3.5±0.3A              | -3.5±0.3A              | -3.8±0.2A              |
| 40                       | -3.6±0.2A           | -4.1±0.3A              | -4.1±0.3A              | -4.5±0.5A              |
| 60                       | -4.1±0.3A           | -4.9±0.6A              | -4.1±0.7A              | -4.5±0.6A              |
| NCCP 10806               |                    |                       |                        |                        |
| 0                        | 0.0±0.0A            | 0.0±0.0A               | 0.0±0.0A               | 0.0±0.0A               |
| 20                       | -2.7±0.3A           | -3.0±0.1A              | -3.1±0.3A              | -3.3±0.2A              |
| 40                       | -3.3±0.3A           | -3.5±0.3A              | -3.5±0.3A              | -3.9±0.1A              |
| 60                       | -3.8±0.2A           | -4.5±0.3A              | -4.5±0.3A              | -4.3±0.3A              |
| NCCP 10807               |                    |                       |                        |                        |
| 0                        | 0.0±0.0A            | 0.0±0.0A               | 0.0±0.0A               | 0.0±0.0A               |
| 20                       | -3.1±0.2A           | -3.4±0.2A              | -3.6±0.2B              | -3.3±0.4B              |
| 40                       | -3.8±0.4A           | -3.9±0.2A              | -3.9±0.2A              | -4.4±0.3B              |
| 60                       | -4.5±0.5A           | -4.9±0.4A              | -4.7±0.3B              | -5.1±0.4B              |
| NCCP 10810               |                    |                       |                        |                        |
| 0                        | 0.0±0.0A            | 0.0±0.0A               | 0.0±0.0A               | 0.0±0.0A               |
| 20                       | -2.9±0.2A           | -3.0±0.2A              | -3.2±0.1B              | -3.4±0.3B              |
| 40                       | -3.5±0.2A           | -4.0±0.2B              | -3.6±0.4A              | -3.9±0.2A              |
| 60                       | -4.1±0.2A           | -4.3±0.2A              | -4.0±0.3A              | -4.8±0.4B              |
| NCCP 10811               |                    |                       |                        |                        |
| 0                        | 0.0±0.0A            | 0.0±0.0A               | 0.0±0.0A               | 0.0±0.0A               |
| 20                       | -3.2±0.5B           | -2.8±0.1A              | -3.5±0.7B              | -3.6±0.3B              |
| 40                       | -3.7±0.6B           | -3.3±0.3A              | -3.9±0.7B              | -4.3±0.4B              |
| 60                       | -4.4±0.7A           | -4.0±0.4A              | -4.6±0.8A              | -5.2±0.3B              |
| NCCP 10920               |                    |                       |                        |                        |
| 0                        | 0.0±0.0A            | 0.0±0.0A               | 0.0±0.0A               | 0.0±0.0A               |
| 20                       | -3.0±0.2A           | -3.1±0.2A              | -3.0±0.2A              | -3.3±0.1A              |
| 40                       | -3.5±0.3A           | -3.4±0.2A              | -3.9±0.5B              | -3.7±0.3B              |
| 60                       | -3.7±0.2A           | -3.9±0.3A              | -4.5±0.6B              | -4.6±0.6B              |
| NCCP 10808               |                    |                       |                        |                        |
| 0                        | 0.0±0.0A            | 0.0±0.0A               | 0.0±0.0A               | 0.0±0.0A               |
| 20                       | -3.1±0.2A           | -3.0±0.1A              | -3.2±0.4A              | -3.4±0.5B              |
| 40                       | -3.8±0.2B           | -3.5±0.2A              | -4.2±0.1B              | -3.9±0.4B              |
| 60                       | -4.0±0.2A           | -4.2±0.7A              | -4.3±0.1A              | -4.2±0.3B              |
| NCCP 10809               |                    |                       |                        |                        |
| 0                        | 0.0±0.0A            | 0.0±0.0A               | 0.0±0.0A               | 0.0±0.0A               |
| 20                       | -4.1±0.2A           | -3.9±0.1A              | -3.6±0.7B              | -3.8±0.4B              |
| 40                       | -4.3±0.3A           | -4.4±0.3A              | -4.1±0.7B              | -4.1±0.2A              |
| 60                       | -5.1±0.3A           | -4.7±0.2A              | -5.1±0.8A              | -4.9±0.2B              |
| NCCP 10943               |                    |                       |                        |                        |
| 0                        | 0.0±0.0A            | 0.0±0.0A               | 0.0±0.0A               | 0.0±0.0A               |
| 20                       | -3.0±0.3B           | -3.0±0.1A              | -2.9±0.2A              | -3.2±0.1B              |
| 40                       | -3.5±0.2A           | -3.5±0.3A              | -3.5±0.2A              | -4.0±0.1B              |
| 60                       | -4.2±0.3A           | -4.4±0.3A              | -4.1±0.3A              | -4.3±0.3A              |

A-B Different letters in a same row mean significantly different at p<0.05.
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invasion efficiency may not be affected by inlA and inlB expression above the threshold. In other studies, the expression levels of betL, gbu and the opuC operon were increased as an adaptation to osmotic stress (Angelidis and Smith, 2003; Ko and Smith, 1999). Bae et al. (2012) showed that several transporters associated with the uptake of glycine and betaine were upregulated at 1.2% NaCl, which is a salt concentration commonly used in many RTE foods. In addition, the accumulation of inlA, opuC and opuA increased within 5 min when L. monocytogenes was exposed to osmotic stress when compared to the levels in the control, which was not exposed to osmotic stress (Sue et al., 2004). A study by Gardan et al. (2003) showed that ctc, a L. monocytogenes gene related to general stress, was expressed at higher levels under high osmolarity conditions when there were no osmoprotectants, including glycine and betaine. Duche et al. (2002) showed that salt shock proteins (Ssp) in L. monocytogenes rapidly increased after exposure to salt stress, and Ssp overexpression was retained several hours after shifting back to normal conditions.

In conclusion, the effect of NaCl on heat-sensitization of L. monocytogenes is strain-dependent, and opuC and ctc

### Table 4. The relative gene expression levels (mean±SD) of Listeria monocytogenes adapted NaCl 1%, 2% and 4%

| Genes | NaCl (%) | NCCP 10808 | NCCP 10809 | NCCP 10811 |
|-------|----------|------------|------------|------------|
| inlA  | 0        | 1.00±0.00B | 1.00±0.00B | 1.00±0.00A |
|       | 1        | 1.14±0.42B | 1.45±0.40B | 1.49±0.57A |
|       | 2        | 3.28±0.64B | 4.12±1.24A | 1.40±0.03A |
|       | 4        | 6.54±2.87A | 4.29±1.36A | 1.85±0.64A |
| inlB  | 0        | 1.00±0.00B | 1.00±0.00B | 1.00±0.00A |
|       | 1        | 4.05±3.36BC| 1.52±0.60BC| 1.09±0.03A |
|       | 2        | 7.21±3.31B | 5.06±1.12A | 1.50±0.10A |
|       | 4        | 14.08±1.85A| 4.70±1.11AB| 1.50±0.52A |
| opuC  | 0        | 1.00±0.00B | 1.00±0.00B | 1.00±0.00A |
|       | 1        | 2.55±1.08B | 1.51±0.17B | 1.56±0.28A |
|       | 2        | 3.89±0.61B | 4.02±0.08A | 2.08±0.23A |
|       | 4        | 7.37±0.92A | 3.67±1.46A | 2.27±0.08A |
| betL  | 0        | 1.00±0.00B | 1.00±0.00B | 1.00±0.00A |
|       | 1        | 1.56±0.08B | 1.60±0.08B | 1.52±0.06B |
|       | 2        | 1.83±0.66AB| 4.01±0.73A | 3.46±0.33A |
|       | 4        | 3.45±2.20A | 3.77±0.30A | 4.09±1.14A |
| gbuB  | 0        | 1.00±0.00A | 1.00±0.00A | 1.00±0.00A |
|       | 1        | 1.66±0.49A | 2.25±0.43AB| 1.78±0.01B |
|       | 2        | 1.72±0.36A | 2.91±0.83A | 2.71±0.43A |
|       | 4        | 1.51±0.13A | 1.64±0.25BC| 1.74±0.19B |
| osmC  | 0        | 1.00±0.00A | 1.00±0.00A | 1.00±0.00A |
|       | 1        | 1.13±0.04A | 1.27±0.19RC| 1.39±0.09B |
|       | 2        | 1.37±0.93A | 1.81±0.00AB| 2.15±0.07A |
|       | 4        | 1.46±0.62A | 2.14±0.11A | 2.46±0.10A |
| ctc   | 0        | 1.00±0.00B | 1.00±0.00B | 1.00±0.00A |
|       | 1        | 1.73±0.48B | 1.72±0.53C | 0.99±0.23A |
|       | 2        | 2.47±0.24B | 4.97±2.16A | 1.72±0.24A |
|       | 4        | 6.74±3.13A | 8.85±2.69A | 2.08±0.28A |

Different letters in a same column mean significantly different at p<0.05.
may play a role in preventing heat-sensitization by NaCl in NS \textit{L. monocytogenes} strains. In addition, NaCl exposure also increased the expression of invasion-related genes (\textit{inlA} and \textit{inlB}) in NS \textit{L. monocytogenes}.

**Acknowledgements**

This paper was supported by Wonkwang University in 2015.

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