INTERACTION OF THE HETEROZYGOUS NUDE GENE WITH THE ASPLENIA TRAIT IN MAMMARY TUMORIGENESIS

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BALB/cCrgl mice are characterized by a low incidence of spontaneous mammary tumors (SMT). Exogenous mouse mammary tumor virus (MMTV) is not found in this murine strain. However, these mice contain one subgenomic-size and two genomic-size MMTV proviruses (1). As previously reported (2), we have developed a colony of immunodeficient BALB/c mice by mating asplenic females with nude males that have been reconstituted with a congenic thymocyte intraperitoneal suspension equivalent to half a normal thymus. With these crossings, we have produced female breeders heterozygous for both nude and asplenia traits. Here, we present evidence indicating that the heterozygous nude trait increases the incidence of SMT. Furthermore, the simultaneous presence of the nude gene and the asplenia trait results in a very high percentage of SMT in BALB/c female breeders. Restriction endonuclease patterns of the liver DNA from normal and immunodeficient mice appear to be identical, with respect to the MMTV provirus copy number and organization. These results suggest that the increased tumorigenicity observed is due to a synergistic action of spleen agenesis with the heterozygous nude condition, during the latency period or at the host immune level.

Materials and Methods

Mice. The description of the development of the nude and asplenic colonies has been previously reported (2). The maintenance of the combined asplenia and heterozygous nude genes in BALB/c mice is accomplished by breeding nu/nu males with the asplenic females heterozygous for both the Dh and nu genes (nu/+ , Dh/+ ). The progeny of such matings produces BALB/c offspring with four different phenotypes segregating equally among: nu/+ and +/+ , of normal phenotype; nu/+ and Dh/+ , characterized by a white coat, skeletal anomalies of the hind limbs, and spleen agenesis; nu/nu and +/+ , nude (hairless) athymic; and nu/nu and Dh/+ , the last mouse, with the combined characteristics of athymia, asplenia, hairlessness, and anomalous hind legs.

The BALB/c background of the various genotypes discussed above has been ascertained by grafting experiments. Skin grafts from mice of +/+ , Dh/+ ; nu/+ , +/+ ; or nu/+ , Dh/+ genotypes were implanted in 2-mo-old BALB/c mice of +/+ , +/+ background.

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The transplanted mice did not reject the skin grafts, indicating that the genetic makeup of the immunodeficient mice is BALB/c.

Nucleic Acid Isolation, Restriction Endonuclease Digestion, and Southern Blotting. DNA isolation, restriction endonuclease digestion, agarose gel electrophoresis, nucleic acid transfer to nitrocellulose, and filter hybridization was performed as previously described (3). α-[32P]-labeled MMTV DNA complementary to 70 S MMTV RNA was prepared as previously reported (4).

Results

Female nu/+, Dh/+ breeder BALB/c mice develop a high number of SMT from an early age. On initial detection, tumors are ~0.5 cm in diameter. They grow rapidly, causing death within 30–45 d. We began a study to compare the relative incidences of SMT in a large number of BALB/c mice of various genotypes relating to the nu and Dh genes. Table I summarizes the results of these analyses. Of 492 normal BALB/c breeders in our colony, only four animals developed SMT. Introduction of the heterozygous Dh gene in BALB/c mice resulted in a small increase of the overall SMT incidence. BALB/c breeders heterozygous for the nu gene had a greater number of SMT before 19 mo. This incidence (23.8%) is significantly (P <0.01) higher than that of the parent BALB/c strain without the nude gene (0.8%), or with the heterozygous Dh gene (5.8%). The asplenic female breeders of genotype nu/+, Dh/+ have the highest incidence of SMT (57.9%) before 19 mo of age. SMT were observed in neither nu/+ nor in nu/+, Dh/+ female virgins up to 16 mo of age. The generally shorter lifespan and difficulty of breeding female mice homozygous for the nu gene has precluded an adequate comparison of the SMT incidence in BALB/c of the nu/nu, +/+ genotype. Likewise, the nu/nu, Dh/+ (lasat) mice live only for 3–4 mo, and are not capable of successful matings.

The age distribution and percentages of SMT are presented in Fig. 1. Immunodeficient BALB/c breeders (nu/+, Dh/+ ) develop SMT as early as 5 mo of age. The maximum incidence occurred between 14 and 19 mo, but high levels of SMT were observed as early as 10 mo of age (21%). Very few BALB/c of the nu/+ genotype developed tumors during the first 15 mo (0.2–6.1%). However, at 19 mo, an incidence of 30.6% could be observed within the remaining 101 breeders of the original 507 experimental animals. These mice usually had one mammary tumor, while the nu/+, Dh/+ siblings often had from two to four SMT.

The germinally-transmitted MMTV proviral DNA was analyzed by restriction endonuclease mapping to determine if the BALB/c immunodeficient mice have

### Table I

**Incidence of SMT in Inbred BALB/c Mice**

| BALB/c genotype | Age at tumor appearance | Total number of mice | Mice with SMT | Overall incidence of SMT |
|-----------------|-------------------------|----------------------|---------------|--------------------------|
| +/+             |                         |                      |               |                          |
| nu/+, +/+       | ≤20                     | 492                  | 4             | 0.8%                     |
| nu/+, Dh/+*     | ≤17                     | 137                  | 8             | 5.8%                     |
| nu/+, +/+       | 5–19                    | 507                  | 133           | 23.8%                    |
| nu/+, Dh/+      | 5–19                    | 615                  | 351           | 57.9%                    |

* Dh/+*: heterozygous for dominant hemimelia.

* nu/+: heterozygous for athymia.
FIGURE 1. Comparison of the incidence and age distribution of SMT in BALB/c mice heterozygous for the nude gene (nu/+, +/+), with that of mice heterozygous for both the nu and Dh genes (nu/+, Dh/+). The total number of mice of the nu/+, Dh/+ genotype is shown on the top of each column as the numerator, while the total number of mice of the nu/+, +/+ genotype is shown as the denominator.

A germ line complement of MMTV DNA identical to the characteristic BALB/c complement (1), or if they are characterized by an additional or altered MMTV germ line complement. In addition, since the immunodeficient genotypes, nu and Dh, had been crossed into BALB/c mice from strain backgrounds that included C3H/He, C57BL/10J, and CBA/CaJ, MMTV maps from these strains are included for comparison. BALB/cCr, C3H/He, C57BL/10J, and CBA/CaJ liver DNA were digested with Eco RI, Bam HI, or Pst I, and restriction fragments containing MMTV DNA were identified by molecular hybridization with an α-[^3P]-probe complementary to 70 S MMTV RNA (4, and Fig. 2). The results demonstrate that MMTV sequences in BALB/c DNA are distinguished from C3H/He and C57BL/10J by Eco RI (Fig. 2) and Hind III (data not shown) digestions, and from CBA/CaJ by Eco RI and Pst I digestions (Fig. 2). Using these enzymes, at least two unique-size MMTV DNA fragments can distinguish between BALB/c DNA and MMTV sequences present in C3H/He, C57BL/10J, and CBA/CaJ genomes. Restriction digestions with Eco RI, Bam HI, Pst I (Fig. 2), and Hind III (data not shown) demonstrated an identical complement of MMTV sequences between BALB/cCr DNA (Fig. 2, lanes 1, 6, and 11) and liver DNA of a nu/+, Dh/+ mouse (Fig. 2, lanes 5, 10, and 15). Therefore, the immunodeficient BALB/c nu/+, Dh/+ strain, as well as the nu/+, +/+; nu/nu, +/+; +/+, Dh/+; and nu/nu, Dh/+ (data not shown) genotypes contained a germ line complement of MMTV DNA identical to the BALB/cCr +/+ strain, which has a low incidence of mammary tumors. That is, all of these immunodeficient BALB/c mice contain a subgenomic MMTV provirus, Unit I or mtv-6, and two genomic MMTV proviruses, Units II and III, or mtv-8 and mtv-9, respectively (1), that have previously (3, 5) been characterized in detail by restriction mapping, and molecular hybridization with cloned subgenomic
FIGURE 2. MMTV proviral DNA in inbred and immunodeficient mouse strains. Total cellular DNA was isolated from liver nuclei of 2-mo-old BALB/cCrgl (lanes 1, 6, and 11), C3H/HeJ (lanes 2, 7, and 12), C57Bl/10J (lanes 3, 8, and 13), CBA/CaJ (lanes 4, 9, and 14), and BALB/c nu/nu, Dh/+ mice (lanes 5, 10, and 15). 10 μg of DNA were digested with Eco RI, lanes 1-5; Bam HI, lanes 6-10; or Pst I, lanes 11-15. Following electrophoresis and transfer, the filter was hybridized with α-[32P]MMTV–complementary DNA. Autoradiography was for 27 h. Phage γ DNA digested with Hind III produced molecular weight references, indicated in the left margin, of 21.8, 9.5, 6.8, 4.3, 2.3, 2.0, and 0.6 kbasepairs.

MMTV probes. Importantly, these data demonstrate that mammary tumors in the immunodeficient BALB/c mice cannot be due to the presence of the C3Hf MMTV Unit V (mtv-1), which is responsible for late mammary tumors in C3Hf strains (6, 7).

Discussion

Our studies demonstrate that the coexistence of the nu and Dh genes in heterozygous form in female breeders of the BALB/c strain is associated with an early and dramatic increase in the incidence of SMT. No such increase in SMT could be observed in animals heterozygous for the Dh gene alone. However, a higher rate of SMT can be detected in female BALB/c breeders heterozygous for the nude gene. This is the first demonstration that the nu/+ genotype, as opposed to the nu/nu genotype, has any important effect on the host. This finding suggests the necessity for caution in interpreting experiments in which nu/+ mice serve as controls for an experimental nu/nu group.

A possible reason for the susceptibility of these mice to mammary tumorigenesis could be genomic acquisition of a provirus from an exogenous source. The
origin of our BALB/c immunodeficient mice includes the C3H background, where a mutation for dominant hemimelia was discovered by Searle (8) among a breeding stock of luxate mice. The Dh mutant is inherited as an autosomal dominant trait characterized by abnormalities that include skeletal anomalies (mainly of the hind limbs), and visceral alterations, in addition to splenic agenesis. Visceral defects in homozygous (Dh/Dh) mice result in death within a few days of birth. Asplenic BALB/c mice were developed by mating female F1 hybrids of C57BL/6J-A^nu^ (Dh/+), female × CBA/Ca (+/+) male for 10 generations. These animals are designated B6CBAF1-Dh (N10). The nude gene, discovered by Flanagan in 1966 (9), is inherited as an autosomal recessive gene and is characterized by congenital athymia in homozygous mice (10). The mice from which our colony originated were maintained on a BALB/c background for several generations. Thus, the origin of our immunodeficient mice includes, in addition to the BALB/c genotype, the possible proviral contributions from the low-SMT-incidence C57BL/10J and CBA/CaJ strains, and from the high-SMT-incidence C3H/H3 strain. However, the results of our restriction endonuclease MMTV mapping showed unequivocally that the germline MMTV sequences in all four classes of immunodeficient mice is identical to that of the BALB/c strain, and therefore rule out the possibility of perpetuation of an extra MMTV provirus that may have been acquired during the development of our animal colony.

Our studies suggest that the nu gene, in the heterozygous state, may influence mammary tumorigenesis in BALB/c mice, by shortening the latency period of oncogenesis, or by some other mechanism, such as altering the host immune response against the tumor. If the latter is the case, the observed effects may have a bearing in the controversial issue of "immune surveillance." Most investigators who have analyzed the incidence of spontaneous tumors in nude mice have used animals in which the nude gene has been backcrossed to the desired background only two or three times. According to Festing (11), five backcrosses are required in order to obtain a coefficient of inbreeding of >95%. Our nude mouse colony has had more than 20 generations of inbreeding. Therefore, effects of other loci on the SMT of nu/+, +/+ are unlikely. In addition, a high incidence of SMT in nu/+, +/+ mice are observed in female breeders up to 19 mo of age, which is consistent with the requirement for hormonally regulated mammary gland development and differentiation for mammary tumorigenesis. The Dh gene per se has only a modest effect on the overall incidence of SMT. However, it appears that the lack of spleen results in a synergistic action with the heterozygous nude gene on SMT incidence in the BALB/c strain. Since spleen agenesis has been associated with alterations of the immune system, we hypothesize that the role of the Dh gene in our model system is one of amplification of the effect of the nu/+ genotype, at the level of host–tumor interactions.

**Summary**

The BALB/c mouse strain has been shown to contain endogenous mouse mammary tumor virus (MMTV) proviral sequences. However, no exogenous MMTV particles have been detected in their tissues. Female BALB/c mice from our colonies exhibit a very low incidence of spontaneous mammary tumors (SMT); <1% at up to 20 mo of age. Immunodeficient BALB/c mice heterozygous
for the nude gene (nu/+, +/+), for the dominant hemimelia gene associated with asplenia (+/+, Dh/+), or for both traits (nu/+, Dh/+). have been examined for SMT incidence and the presence of MMTV proviruses. Based on restriction digestion with Eco RI, Bam HI, and Pst I, the immunodeficient mice have an MMTV provirus copy number and organization identical to the BALB/cCrg1 strain. This MMTV DNA pattern is distinct from the MMTV proviruses in C3H/He, C57BL/6J and CBA/CaJ mice, which were parental strains of the immunodeficient mutants. Normal female BALB/c or BALB/c heterozygous for the asplenic trait do not develop significant numbers of SMT at up to 19 mo of age. In contrast, an incidence of 23.8% and 57.7% SMT was observed in BALB/c nu/+ heterozygotes, and in BALB/c nu/+, Dh/+ heterozygotes, respectively. These results indicate that agenesis of the spleen, concomitant with the presence of the heterozygous nude gene, contribute to a high incidence of SMT in the low-SMT BALB/c mouse strain.

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