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Regulation of *Cryptococcus neoformans* Capsule Size Is Mediated at the Polymer Level

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The fungal pathogen *Cryptococcus neoformans* regulates its polysaccharide capsule depending on environmental stimuli. To investigate whether capsule polymers change under different growth conditions, we analyzed shed capsules at physiological concentrations without physical perturbation. Our results indicate that regulation of capsule size is mediated at the level of individual polysaccharide molecules.

*Cryptococcus neoformans* is an encapsulated yeast that causes serious opportunistic infections. The major virulence factor of this pathogen is its polysaccharide capsule. This material is antiphagocytic and has immunomodulatory effects (15, 19, 33); it surrounds the cell and is constitutively shed into the surroundings. The major component of cryptococcal capsule is glucuronoxylomannan (GXM), a linear, high-molecular-weight polysaccharide. Imaging studies indicate that the capsule is composed of a meshwork of fibers (25, 29–31) which varies in density with distance from the cell wall (8) and with growth conditions (25). The thickness of the capsule exceeds the calculated length of individual GXM fibers (17).

*C. neoformans* capsule volume responds to environmental factors, including iron levels and CO$_2$ concentrations (9, 14, 32). Although signaling pathways involved in capsule variation have been investigated (1, 5, 12, 35), how the physical changes occur is poorly understood. Factors that contribute to larger capsules are likely to be complex: they may include greater production and/or secretion of polysaccharides, more extensive polysaccharide assembly, decreased capsule shedding, and synthesis of structurally altered or larger polysaccharide molecules. To test the hypothesis that regulation of capsule size is mediated at the level of individual polysaccharide molecules, we investigated shed GXM. We detected this material using a monoclonal antibody to GXM that specifically binds both shed material (described below) and cryptococcal capsules on live cells (8).

We observed that when JEC21 (wild type, serotype D) cells were grown to late stationary phase in rich medium (YPD; 1% yeast extract, 2% peptone, 2% glucose), a subpopulation displayed larger capsules. To test whether the properties of shed GXM changed during this growth, we diluted JEC21 cells from a starter culture into duplicate flasks (50 ml YPD; 10$^6$ cells/ml) and incubated them with shaking at 30°C. At intervals we drew a 0.5-ml sample from each flask, counted cells, and diluted one sample 10-fold with fresh medium (DMEM) plus CO$_2$ (9) for these studies, as it yielded the most-consistent capsule induction for JEC21. A starter culture of JEC21 was grown in YPD, washed in DMEM, re-suspended in DMEM at 10$^6$ cells/ml, and incubated for 14 h in the presence of 5% CO$_2$. The electromobility of the GXM shed from cells grown in this medium was significantly lower than that induced under standard conditions (9).

When the cells were cultured continuously (“continuous culture”) to the starting density, while the cultures were grown to late stationary phase in rich medium (YPD; 1% yeast extract, 2% peptone, 2% glucose), a subpopulation displayed larger capsules. To test whether the properties of shed GXM change under different growth conditions, we analyzed shed capsules at physiological concentrations without physical perturbation. Our results indicate that regulation of capsule size is mediated at the level of individual polysaccharide molecules.

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induced overnight cultures were the GXM concentrations in supernatants from the DMEM–against water or 10 mM EDTA (data not shown). Moreover, migration was not altered by dialysis of the sample considered the possibility that this change represented self-aggregation (24).

The concentrated GXM preparations reported to initiate self-aggregation (24). Our results from JEC21 cells strongly support the hypothesis that modification of GXM molecules plays a central role in determining C. neoformans capsule size. This is a novel explanation for the observed changes in C. neoformans capsule size, although it echoes themes in studies of bacterial and mammalian polysaccharides (26, 34, 36). Further, it is consistent with all of the current models of capsule construction (8, 16, 25, 28).

than that of GXM from any YPD-grown samples (Fig. 2). We considered the possibility that this change represented self-association of GXM, perhaps involving divalent cations (24). However, migration was not altered by dialysis of the sample against water or 10 mM EDTA (data not shown). Moreover, the GXM concentrations in supernatants from the DMEM-induced overnight cultures were <10 μg/ml by enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (23), a value substantially below those of the concentrated GXM preparations reported to initiate self-aggregation (24).

These capsule induction studies supported our observations of the correlation between capsule size and GXM electromobility and further suggested that changes in the latter were not related to high cell density, as cells grow very slowly in DMEM (see Fig. 2 legend). To further investigate the changes in GXM, we next examined capsule-induced cells that were washed and returned to YPD. By 4 h after the medium change, the induced cells were budding daughter cells with small capsules (Fig. 3A, lane 4), and by 8 h those daughter cells began to bud (Fig. 3A, lane 8). By 24 h over 98% of the cells in the culture had small capsules, although a few of the originally induced cells could be observed (Fig. 3A, lane 24; also data not shown). Capsule size distributions for each time point reflect this progression (Fig. 3B). Notably, the migration of shed GXM increased coordinately with the fraction of cells with small capsules (Fig. 3C), further demonstrating the relationship between capsule size and the electromobility of shed GXM. It is striking that in this experiment GXM mobility increased as the culture aged, the reverse of the pattern in Fig. 1. This shows that reduced GXM electromobility is not related to the effects of long-term culture, including increased GXM concentration in the medium, higher cell density, and reduced nutrient availability. All of our studies use minimally processed samples of capsule materials shed in a physiological manner, with GXM concentrations between 0.2 to 200 μg/ml (in the range of those reported in human infections [6]). The results are therefore likely to represent a biologically relevant GXM change. Together, our data suggest that less-encapsulated cells produce a polymer that is fundamentally altered compared to that made by highly encapsulated cells. The simplest hypothesis is that this polymer is of reduced length, but changes in substitution, covalent cross-linking, or other factors could also play a role. The differences we observe in GXM are independent of residence time at the cell surface, as the GXM from mutant cells which shed this polymer but cannot bind it to the cell wall (agsI [27]) migrates like that of the wild type (data not shown). They are also unlikely to reflect noncovalent self-association.

Our results from JEC21 cells strongly support the hypothesis that modification of GXM molecules plays a central role in determining C. neoformans capsule size. This is a novel explanation for the observed changes in C. neoformans capsule size, although it echoes themes in studies of bacterial and mammalian polysaccharides (26, 34, 36). Further, it is consistent with all of the current models of capsule construction (8, 16, 25, 28).

FIG. 1. Electromobility of shed GXM from JEC21 cells changes over time in rich medium. All samples were heated (15 min at 70°C) to denature enzymes, centrifuged (16,000 × g for 3 min) to separate supernatant and cells, and stored at 4°C. Samples (15 μl) of culture supernatants were mixed with 6× DNA loading dye (4), loaded on a 0.6% certified megabase agarose (Bio-Rad) gel, and subjected to electrophoresis (15 h at 25 V) in 0.5× TBE (44.5 mM Tris base, 44.5 mM boric acid, 1 mM EDTA, pH 8.3). Samples containing more GXM (later time points) were diluted in distilled water based on a pilot gel, as sample normalization based on enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay determination of GXM concentration (23) did not yield equal blot intensity. (This may reflect changes over time in GXM antibody reactivity [7, 11, 18] and/or transfer efficiency.) The gel was transferred onto a positively charged nylon membrane and immunoblotted with 1 μg/ml anti-GXM antibody 3C2 as described in the text. Initial sample heating and dilution in distilled water did not alter electrophoretic migration (data not shown). St, starter culture (at 1.6 × 10⁷ cells/ml); arrowhead, well position; arrow, direction of migration; other numbers, sampling time (hours) after the start of the experiment.

![FIG. 1](http://ec.asm.org/Downloaded from)

| Table 1. Cell density and capsule thickness in continuous and diluted cultures |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| **Continuous** | **Diluted** | **Continuous** | **Diluted** |
| **Hour** | **Cell density** | **Capsule thickness** | **Cell density** | **Capsule thickness** |
| ----------------------------- | ----------------- | ----------------- | ----------------- | ----------------- |
| 11 | 9.1 × 10⁷ | 0.80 ± 0.03 | 9.1 × 10⁷ | 0.80 ± 0.03 |
| 24 | 1.5 × 10⁸ | 1.35 ± 0.06 | 8.6 × 10⁷ | 0.90 ± 0.02 |
| 35 | 1.8 × 10⁸ | 1.37 ± 0.07 | 6.4 × 10⁷ | 0.82 ± 0.03 |
| 48 | 2.1 × 10⁸ | 1.60 ± 0.19 | 1.0 × 10⁷ | 1.02 ± 0.05 |
| 75 | 4.3 × 10⁸ | 1.54 ± 0.08 | 1.7 × 10⁸ | 0.93 ± 0.02 |

a Cell density at the indicated time of growth (cells/ml), determined by counting cells on a hemocytometer.
b Capsule thickness of India-ink-stained cells, measured using an Axioskop 2 fluorescence microscope (Carl Zeiss). The averages ± standard errors of the means (μm) of 50 cells for each time point are tabulated.
FIG. 3. Capsule size correlates with the electromobility of shed GXM. Capsule-induced JEC21 cells were washed and resuspended in YPD, and samples were taken at 4, 8, and 24 h after the medium change. (A) Two representative micrographs of cells at each time point, imaged as described in Table 1; scale bar, 10 μm. (B) Capsule thickness of 50 cells was measured as in Table 1, with frequency plotted as a histogram (bin width equals 1 μm with the bin maxima indicated on the abscissa, in decreasing order). (C) Electromobility of shed GXM, as analyzed as described for Fig. 1. Ind, original induced sample; 4, 8, and 24 indicate hours after medium change.

37, 40). Future studies incorporating additional strains and mutants with altered capsule synthesis or binding characteristics (2, 10, 13, 20–22, 27) will further elucidate the relationship between shed and bound GXM and how C. neoformans synthesizes and regulates its polysaccharide capsule.

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