miRBase: tools for microRNA genomics

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ABSTRACT

miRBase is the central online repository for microRNA (miRNA) nomenclature, sequence data, annotation and target prediction. The current release (10.0) contains 5071 miRNA loci from 58 species, expressing 5922 distinct mature miRNA sequences: a growth of over 2000 sequences in the past 2 years. miRBase provides a range of data to facilitate studies of miRNA genomics: all miRNAs are mapped to their genomic coordinates. Clusters of miRNA sequences in the genome are highlighted, and can be defined and retrieved with any inter-miRNA distance. The overlap of miRNA sequences with annotated transcripts, both protein- and non-coding, are described. Finally, graphical views of the locations of a wide range of genomic features in model organisms allow for the first time the prediction of the likely boundaries of many miRNA primary transcripts. miRBase is available at http://microrna.sanger.ac.uk/.

INTRODUCTION

MicroRNAs (miRNAs) are short RNA sequences expressed from longer transcripts encoded in animal, plant and virus genomes, and recently discovered in a single-celled eukaryote (1,2). miRNAs regulate the expression of target genes by binding to complementary sites in their transcripts to cause translational repression or transcript degradation (3). Translational repression is thought to be the primary mechanism for imperfect target duplexes in animals, with transcript degradation the dominant mechanism for largely perfect matches found throughout plant target transcripts. miRNAs have been implicated in processes and pathways such as development, cell proliferation, apoptosis, metabolism and morphogenesis, and in diseases including cancer (4,5).

miRBase is the primary repository and database resource for miRNA data. The database has three main functions:

(i) miRBase::Registry provides a confidential service for the independent assignment of names to novel miRNA genes prior to their publication in peer-reviewed journals. Over 70 publications describing novel miRNA genes have made use of this service, and registration is a requirement of many journals.

(ii) miRBase::Sequences provides miRNA sequence data, annotation, references and links to other resources for all published miRNAs. The database (release 10.0) contains over 5000 sequences from 58 species.

(iii) miRBase::Targets provides an automated pipeline for the prediction of targets for all published animal miRNAs. The current release of the database (v5) predicts targets in over 500,000 transcripts for all miRNAs in 24 species. The target prediction pipeline and algorithms have been described elsewhere (6,7).

The miRNA nomenclature scheme has been presented and discussed previously (6,8,9). Novel miRNAs require cloning or expression evidence, and should be submitted only after a manuscript describing their identification is accepted for publication. Assigned names should then be incorporated into the final version of the manuscript prior to publication. Obvious homologues of miRNAs validated in closely related species need not be experimentally verified and may be submitted at any time. Primary features of the nomenclature scheme are:

(i) The miRNA name contains a three or four letter species prefix and a numeric suffix (e.g. hsa-mir-212).

(ii) A mature miRNA sequence may be predicted to be expressed from more than one hairpin precursor locus, denoted with further numeric suffixes (e.g. dme-mir-6-1 and dme-mir-6-2).

(iii) Related hairpin loci expressing related mature miRNA sequences have lettered suffixes (e.g. mmu-mir-181a and mmu-mir-181b).

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(iv) Plant miRNA genes are given names of the form ath-MIR166a. Lettered suffixes describe distinct loci expressing all related mature miRNAs; numeric suffixes are not used.

(v) Viral miRNA names conventionally relate to the locus from which the miRNA derives (e.g. ebv-mir-BART1 from the Epstein Barr virus BART locus).

However, it is important to note that a short name cannot always encode complex information such as orthology and paralogy relationships. In some cases, the short name is a pragmatic choice that is the most consistent of conflicting representations of these sequence relationships. While the names provide a guide of family and function, they should not therefore be relied upon to confer any complex meaning. Instead, dedicated fields in the database provide information about gene and mature miRNA sequence families.

The published miRNA literature is huge. Readers are referred to a number of comprehensive reviews of miRNA structure, biogenesis and function (4,10–12). Here, we focus on specific issues and points of interest with respect to the provision of miRNA data in the miRBase database.

miRBase DATA AND UPDATES

How many miRNA genes?

The number of miRNA hairpin loci in the miRBase database continues to grow rapidly, from 2909 in 36 genomes (June 2005, release 7.0) to 5071 in 58 genomes (August 2007, release 10.0) in the past 2 years. The number of miRNAs in a genome has been the subject of much discussion in the literature. Early estimates of the number of miRNAs in the worm and human genomes were put at 123 and 255, respectively (13,14). However, these estimates were based largely on conservation studies. It is now clear that many miRNAs may be clade- or even organism-specific. A number of recent large-scale studies have lifted the number of miRNA loci known in human to 533 (Table 1) (15–17), around 60% of which are obviously conserved in mouse (miRBase release 10.0).

miR and miR* sequences

The 5071 miRNA hairpin loci in the database express 4922 dominant mature miRNA (miR) products (Table 1). In many cases, deep sequencing technologies have detected large numbers of miR sequences—biogenesis byproducts that are often detected at very low levels and are likely non-functional. Starting in miRBase release 10.0, mature miR and miR* sequences are better distinguished in the database, and distributed in separate release files. In many cases, mature miRNAs from both 5’ and 3’ arms of the hairpin precursor are frequently identified, suggesting that both may be functional, or there is insufficient data to determine the predominant product. Such miRNAs are given names of the form hsa-miR-140-5p and hsa-miR-140-3p, and both are retained in the miR set. Often, subsequent improved data allow one product to be chosen and annotated as the dominant miR. Recent data updates have occasionally caused the annotation of a miR and miR* pair to be reversed.

Variable ends

Increasingly deep and comprehensive cloning and sequencing studies identify many mature miRNAs with variable 3’ (and, to a lesser extent, 5’) ends [see for example (17)]. The miRNAs in the database currently represent the consensus of the most dominantly expressed sequence. As more data become available, the ends of mature miRNAs in the database will be adjusted to reflect the most up-to-date consensus information. We also aim to provide specific data on the distribution of ends in future releases. All changes in name and sequence between releases are specifically described in the diff file on the FTP site, along with all data from previous releases.

Experimental support

Usually the only available experimental data supports the mature miRNAs—hairpin precursors are very rarely experimentally validated. Rather, the precursors are the result of computational prediction of hairpin structures that include the mature miRNA. When a number of loci include the same mature miRNA, we cannot usually say with confidence which loci are actually expressed. In addition, the extents of the hairpins depicted in the database are somewhat arbitrary—the approximate extent of the predicted hairpin structure is shown. Formally, this includes the true precursor (the product of DROSHA cleavage) and a

| Organism                  | Hairpin precursor loci | Mature miR sequences* |
|---------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|
|                           | Total number | Clustered ≤10kb from another miRNA | Overlap annotated transcripts | Distinct forms | Experimentally verified |
| Homo sapiens              | 533         | 190 (36%) | 267 (50%) |
| Mus musculus              | 442         | 199 (45%) | 174 (39%) |
| Danio rerio               | 337         | 151 (34%) | 41 (12%) |
| Caenorhabditis elegans    | 135         | 34 (25%) | 23 (17%) |
| Drosophila melanogaster   | 93          | 34 (36%) | 36 (39%) |
| Arabidopsis thaliana      | 184         | 19 (10%) | 16 (9%) |
| Populus trichocarpa       | 215         | 42 (20%) | 9 (4%) |

*miR* sequences are excluded from the mature miRNA count.
small amount of flanking sequence. Future develop-
mments will include the provision to retrieve the precursor
with user-defined lengths of flanking sequence. About
3685 of 5922 mature miRNA products in the database
are validated experimentally in the originating organ-
ism—the remainders are obvious homologues of
validated miRNAs from a related species (Table 1).
The ‘evidence’ field describes the origin of each sequence
in the database.

miRBase::Targets
The miRBase::Targets database uses the miRanda
algorithm (7) to predict targets in untranslated regions
(UTRs) of 37 animal genomes from Ensembl (18). The
quality of the predictions has recently benefited from
significantly improved 3'UTR information, based on
DITAG and 5'CAGE data, available from Ensembl. The
number of human and mouse transcripts without an
experimentally supported 3'UTR (for which we search a
region 2 kb downstream) has therefore dropped signifi-
cantly in the latest release (v5). A number of validated
miR/target pairs are shown to have mismatches in the so-
called ‘seed’ region (19). The miRBase/miRanda pipeline
is therefore not constrained by the requirement for exact
‘seed’ matches. Recent papers have also highlighted the
importance of secondary features for miRNA/target
recognition, such as sequence accessibility, AU bias and
UTR position (20,21). We intend to incorporate these
features into the miRBase::Target prediction pipeline over
the coming 12 months. In addition, links are provided
to other target prediction sites and algorithms, and to
the TarBase database of experimentally supported
targets (22).

miRBase GENOMICS
Recently, we have focused on the provision of tools to
distribute miRNA genomic information.

Genomic coordinates
Where an assembled genome sequence is available, coor-
dinates of all miRNAs are provided: in
summary tables for each organism and miRNA family,
on each miRNA entry page, and for bulk download in
GFF format. Links are provided from each coordinate to
the appropriate genome browsers.

miRNA gene context
40–70% of vertebrate miRNAs appear to be expressed
from introns of protein- and non-coding transcripts
(Table 1) (23). In worms and flies, intronic miRNAs are
less common (15% and 39%, respectively, in protein-
coding genes), and only 5–10% of Arabidopsis miRNAs
overlap annotated transcripts. For all animals with
Ensembl-annotated genome assemblies, we provide a list
of transcripts overlapping each miRNA, with overlap
type (intron, exon and UTR), and sense (forward and
reverse strands).

Clustered miRNAs
miRNAs are often clustered close together in the
genome. This clustering has been suggested as evidence
that >1 miRNA may be expressed from the same
primary miRNA transcript (pri-miRNA). Furthermore,
known ‘polycistronic’ miRNA transcripts are shown to
be long: up to tens of kilobases in mammals. Over 40% of human miRNAs, over 30% of worm and
fly miRNAs and only around 10% of Arabidopsis
miRNAs are within 10 kb of another miRNA (Table 1).
miRBase provides a list of clustered miRNAs on
each applicable entry page. In addition, a new search
facility allows the user to retrieve clusters of miRNAs in
any organism separated by any choice of distance.

Genomic features
While the mapping of mature and hairpin miRNA
sequences to assembled genomes is readily available
in miRBase, the extents of only very few primary
miRNA transcripts (pri-miRNA) are determined and
annotated. For intronic miRNAs, the pri-miRNA is
assumed to be the protein- (or non-)coding host tran-
script. Information about the extents of intergenic pri-
miRNAs can be inferred from collective analysis of
genomic features such as transcription start sites
(TSS), CpG islands, EST and cDNA overlap, DITAG
and 5'CAGE data, transcription factor binding sites
(TFBS) and polyadenylation site predictions (polyA).
A detailed analysis of these data suggest that pri-
miRNA transcripts vary in length from a few hundreds
of bases up to tens of kilobases (24). We have recently
developed a tool to visualize the relative positions of these
predictions and mappings with respect to annotated
miRNA genes and clusters. Careful inspection of these
data allows the prediction of the 5' and 3' boundaries of a
significant number of putative pri-miRNAs. For
example, Figure 1 shows TSSs, CpG island, ESTs,
cDNAs, DITAG (172B22 and 172B221) and polyA site
predictions surrounding mmu-mir-135b on mouse chro-
some 1, which support a primary transcript of length
around 15 kb with 5' and 3' ends ~7–8 kb upstream
and downstream of the miRNA. Links from each
miRNA entry page provide a tabulated list of features
overlapping flanking regions of the miRNA with their
corresponding coordinates and scores, and a graphical
view of the features present in the miRNA gene
neighbourhood (as in Figure 1). These views are currently
available for human, mouse, rat, worm and fly miRNAs,
and will be extended to other organisms in the future.
For human, mouse and rat genomes, TSSs are predicted
using the Eponine-TSS software (25) at a threshold of
0.990. Drosophila TSS predictions, together with CpG
islands, ESTs, cDNAs, repeats and DITAGs for all
species are obtained from Ensembl. TFBSs in the flanking
regions of human miRNAs are obtained from the
conserved TFBS track of the UCSC genome browser
(26). Other TFBS data are imported from the regulatory
features track of Ensembl. PolyA signals are predicted
in-house using the Dnafsminer method (27) with a
cutoff score of 0.6. The ‘Genomics’ section of the
miRBase site allows the user to specify flanking and clustering distances, and the range of features desired.

**AVAILABILITY**

miRBase is available on the web at http://microrna.sanger.ac.uk/. All data are available for download from the FTP site (ftp://ftp.sanger.ac.uk/pub/mirbase/) in a variety of formats including FASTA sequences and MYSQL relational database dumps.

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