Detection of DNA of ‘Candidatus Mycoplasma haemominutum’ and Spiroplasma sp. in Unfed Ticks Collected from Vegetation in Japan

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ABSTRACT: DNA fragments of ‘Candidatus Mycoplasma haemominutum’, a feline hemobartonella pathogen, were detected from unfed Ixodes ovatus collected from vegetation in Hokkaido, Fukushima and Yamaguchi Prefectures, and unfed Haemaphysalis flava in Yamaguchi Prefecture. This finding suggests that ixodid tick is a possible vector of ‘C. Mycoplasma haemominutum’. Spiroplasma DNA was also detected from unfed I. ovatus in Hokkaido, Fukushima and Yamaguchi Prefectures. The analysis of nucleotides sequence suggested that this Spiroplasma was distinct from registered species.

KEY WORDS: ‘Candidatus Mycoplasma haemominutum’, Spiroplasma sp., tick.

The feline hemoplasmas, Mycoplasma haemofelis and ‘Candidatus Mycoplasma haemominutum’, were previously ascribed to Haemobartonella felis strains Ohio-Florida and California-Birmingham, respectively [11–13], which cause hemolytic anemia, thrombocytopenia, fever and jaundice [3, 4, 6]. Both species have been found in cats in Japan [9]. Transmission of feline hemoplasma has not been clearly demonstrated yet. It is thought that transmission may occur via cat-bite wounds [3]. Transmission of feline hemoplasma by blood-sucking arthropods is also considered by many to be the primary mode of transmission in cats [3], although such transmission has not been established experimentally. A canine hemoplasma, M. haemocanis, has been confirmed to be transmitted by Rhipicephalus sanguineus [14]; however, there have been no reports on the relationship between feline hemoplasma and ticks. The aim of the present study was to clarify the epidemiology of feline hemoplasma infection in Japan using tick samples. Accordingly, detection of M. haemofelis and ‘C. M. haemominutum’ from unfed-ticks recovered from vegetation in Japan was attempted using a species-specific nested PCR. Additionally, DNA of Spiroplasma sp., a potential zoonotic bacterium was also detected from Ixodid ticks in this study.

Unfed-adult ticks were collected from vegetation by flagging in Hokkaido, Fukushima and Yamaguchi Prefectures, Japan in March to June 2003. A total of 76 Ixodes ovatus, 10 Haemaphysalis yeni, 10 Haemaphysalis flava and 8 Haemaphysalis longicornis were subjected to DNA extraction. After identification, 5 to 16 ticks from vegetation were pooled for the further analysis (Table 1). Total DNA was extracted from each tick pool using a QIAamp DNA Mini Kit (QIAGEN GmbH, Hilden, Germany), adjusted to be 200 µl of TE buffer and stored at minus 20°C until further use. The successfullness of DNA extraction was confirmed by PCR with the primers 28SF and 28SR to detect the 28S rRNA gene of ticks as described previously [8]. The first PCR was performed in a 25-µl reaction mixture containing 5 µl of each DNA template with a primer set consisting of universal-fD1 [17] and Hemo-513R (5’ ACG CCC AAT AAA TCC GAA TAA 3’), which were designed to amplify the 16S rRNA gene of hemoplasma and related species, including Mycoplasma, Spiroplasma, Acholoplasma and Ureaplasma. The amplification procedure was performed as reported previously [7]. The first PCR product from each sample was diluted 1 to 10 or 1 to 100 with distilled water and 5 µl of each dilution was used as the template for the second PCR in a final volume of 25 µl. For the second PCR, M. haemofelis-specific primers OH/FL-F (5’ GGA TCT TGG TTT CCG CCA AG 3’) and Hemo-457R (5’ CAT AGT TTT CTC TCA TTT ATT C 3’), and ‘C. Mycoplasma haemominutum’-specific primers CA/BM-F (5’ GAA CGA AGA GGG TTT ACT 3’) and CA/BM-R (5’ AAC CCA CAA TCT CTA 3’) were used. The amplification products were visualized on a 2% agarose gel after electrophoretic migration. To confirm the nested PCR results, the products with a positive reaction were purified using a QIAPCR purification kit (QIAGEN) and subjected to direct sequence analysis with a Perkin-Elmer ABI Prism 377 automated DNA sequencer at the DNA Core Facility of the Center for Gene Research, Yamaguchi University, as described previously. When a sample showed positive for the first PCR and negative for the second PCR, the first PCR product was also analyzed for sequence. The sequence data of the PCR products in both screening and confirmation were analyzed by the BLAST program at NCBI for homology. The GenBank accession numbers of 16S rRNA gene sequences used to analyze the percent identities and to construct a phylogenetic tree were as follows: M. haemofelis: U88563, ‘Candidatus Mycoplasma haemominutum’: AF271154, ‘Candidatus Mycoplasma haemoparvum’: AY383241, M. haemocanis: AF197337, M.

A total of 11 pools of unfed ticks from vegetation were examined for hemoplasma infection (Table 1). Among 8 pools of I. ovatus, 3 were positive for ‘C. Mycoplasma haemominutum’, but none for M. haemofelis. A female pool of I. ovatus in Hokkaido (Hokkaido IO-2) was positive, while another male pool in Fukushima (Fukushima IO-1) also showed positive. It is possible that both males and females may carry ‘C. Mycoplasma haemominutum’. This hemoplasma was also detected in pools from I. ovatus (Yamaguchi IO-1) and H. flava (Yamaguchi HF-1) in Yamaguchi. Both I. ovatus and H. flava are common tick species of feline hosts in Japan [15]. Results of the nested PCR were confirmed by subsequent sequence analysis. The nucleotide sequences of the PCR products showed 99.8 to 100% homology with ‘C. Mycoplasma haemominutum’ (Fig. 1).

The present data suggest that these common tick species found in Japan are possible vectors of feline hemoplasma. As all the ticks examined in this study were adult stage, the ixodid ticks might be infected with hemoplasma by feeding blood from animals infected with the pathogen at nymphal stage. Thus it was thought that transstadial transmission can be occurred among ixodid ticks. This is the first detection of feline hemoplasma in unfed ticks; however, more direct evidence, including experimental transmission, will be required in the future to confirm these findings.

Other four pools, Hokkaido IO-1, Fukushima IO-1 and 2, and Yamaguchi IO-2 showed positive reaction in the screening PCR, but negative for the hemoplasma specific-PCR. Analysis of the partial 16S rRNA gene indicated that the organism was closely related to Spiroplasma spp. found in insects and ticks (Fig. 1). However, Spiroplasma sp. detected in this study showed a distinct clade from other species with higher bootstrap values. The partial 16S rRNA gene sequences of the PCR products showed 97.5 to 98.1% homology with that of Spiroplasma ixodetis, that was isolated from Ixodes pacificus in the U.S.A. [16]. These findings suggest that Spiroplasma sp. detected in this study might be distinct from known species. More studies including isolation and gene analysis to characterize this organism are required. Spiroplasmas are symbiotic bacteria associated with insects, ticks, and plant, but some species are known to be pathogenic for their hosts; for example, sex ratio trait of Drosophila melanogaster is affected by spiroplasmas [1]. Recently, spiroplasmas were also reported to be pathogenic to both human and animals. They are related with diseases such as cataract, Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease and scrapie [2, 10]. At this moment, the effects of spiroplasmas on ticks and animals are not known at all.

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REFERENCES

Table 1. Detection of hemoplasma and Spiroplasma from unfed-ticks collected from vegetation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pool ID</th>
<th>Tick species</th>
<th>Numbers of ticks</th>
<th>Results of PCR and sequences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hokkaido IO-1</td>
<td>Ixodes ovatus</td>
<td>6 Male, 0 Female</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hokkaido IO-2</td>
<td>Ixodes ovatus</td>
<td>0 Male, 11 Female</td>
<td>Spiroplasma sp.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fukushima IO-1</td>
<td>Ixodes ovatus</td>
<td>7 Male, 0 Female</td>
<td>‘C. M. haemominutum’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fukushima IO-2</td>
<td>Ixodes ovatus</td>
<td>0 Male, 9 Female</td>
<td>Spiroplasma sp.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fukushima IO-3</td>
<td>Ixodes ovatus</td>
<td>7 Male, 0 Female</td>
<td>Spiroplasma sp.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fukushima IO-4</td>
<td>Ixodes ovatus</td>
<td>0 Male, 16 Female</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yamaguchi IO-1</td>
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<td>2 Male, 2 Female</td>
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</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Yamaguchi HF-1</td>
<td>Haemaphysalis flava</td>
<td>4 Male, 6 Female</td>
<td>‘C. M. haemominutum’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yamaguchi HL-1</td>
<td>Haemaphysalis longicornis</td>
<td>0 Male, 8 Female</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

HEMOPLASMA AND SPIROPLASMA IN TICKS

Fig. 1. Phylogenetic relationship of various hemoplasmas, spiroplasmas and related species based on partial sequences of the 16S rRNA gene. The neighbor-joining method was used to construct the phylogenetic tree with the Clustal W program. The scale bar represents 10% divergence. The numbers at nodes are the proportions of 100 bootstraps resamplings that support the topology shown.