Duplex PCR for Simultaneous and Unambiguous Detection of *Streptococcus iniae* and *Streptococcus agalactiae* associated with Streptococcosis of Cultured Tilapia in Thailand

Channarong Rodkhum1* Pattanapon Kayansamruaj1 Nopadon Pirarat2 Janenuj Wongtawatchai3

Abstract

Warm-water streptococcosis outbreaks in Thai cultured tilapia are caused by *Streptococcus iniae* and *S. agalactiae*. However, distinguishing between these two species of streptococcus are very difficult due to their similar microbiological appearance and clinical signs of infected fish. In this study, we proposed a new duplex-PCR based method for simultaneous detection of these pathogens. The duplex-PCR amplified partial *lctO* and 16s rRNA gene of *S. iniae* and *S. agalactiae* at 870 bp and 220 bp, respectively. This technique gave 100% specificity while sensitivity of reaction was 100 fg of each bacterial genomic DNA. Detection limit of duplex-PCR applicable to clinical specimens is also evaluated as 10⁵ bacterial cells per gram of fish tissue. This study suggested that this duplex-PCR based method might be a good candidate for easy, sensitive, specific and rapid detection of *S. iniae* and *S. agalactiae* associated with warm-water streptococcosis of cultured tilapia in Thailand.

Keywords: duplex PCR, *Streptococcus iniae*, *Streptococcus agalactiae*, Tilapia

1Department of Veterinary Microbiology, Faculty of Veterinary Science, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok 10330 Thailand
2Department of Veterinary Pathology, Faculty of Veterinary Science, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok 10330, Thailand
3Department of Veterinary Medicine, Faculty of Veterinary Science, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok 10330, Thailand
*Corresponding author: E-mail: Channarong.R@chula.ac.th

Introduction

Warm-water streptococcosis is now recognized as highly important infectious disease in several aquatic animal species which associated with significant morbidity and mortality in farmed fish. More than 50% of mortality can be found in diseased outbreak fish farm (Yanong and Francis-Floyd, 2002). Nowadays, several species of aquaculture have been found susceptible to streptococcosis, including salmon, mullet, golden shiner, pinfish, eel, sea trout, and tilapia, which outbreaks were reported in various country such as Kuwait, Israel, Brazil, Japan and Thailand (Perera et al., 1994; Bachrach et al., 2001; Duremdez et al., 2004; Agnew and Barnes, 2007; Suanyuk et al., 2008; Mian et al., 2009). Causative agent associated with fish streptococcosis worldwide are Lactococcus garvieae, Streptococcus agalactiae, S. dysgalactiae, S. phocaenae, and S. iniae. For Nile tilapia (Oreochromis niloticus) cultured in Thailand, S. iniae and S. agalactiae were the major causes of streptococcosis (Maisak et al., 2008; Suanyuk et al., 2008; Suanyuk et al., 2010). It is difficult to differential diagnosis of streptococcosis in tilapia caused by S. iniae and S. agalactiae because the clinical signs of tilapia infected with S. iniae are similar to S. agalactiae.

Therefore, a definitive diagnosis of the causative agent should be based on the microbiological investigations of diseased tilapia. The pathogens can be identified by culture-based methods and biochemical tests, but they are the time-consuming and laborious. Although the phenotypic and biochemical characteristics of S. iniae and S. agalactiae are well characterized, the laboratory identification of the bacterium from diseased fish can still be difficult and mistakenly identified, especially when using the commercial identification systems, because currently available commercial identification system does not include S. iniae in its database (Mata et al., 2004). In order to solve any diagnostic problems of warm-water streptococcosis in Thailand, the genotypic-based identifications such as single individual PCR assays have been developed and used for identification of the fish pathogens associated with streptococcosis. However, the previous single individual PCR assays can used to detect only either S. iniae or S. agalactiae per one PCR reaction, which can be time-consuming and relatively costly. In order to develop easier and more rapid technique, a multiplex PCR was proposed as an effective method for simultaneous detection of several streptococci species (Mata et al., 2004). Fortunately, application of this technique in Thailand and nearby region might...
Bacterial strains and culture conditions: A total of 20 S. iniae strains and 15 S. agalactiae strains and 30 other related bacterial strains were used in this study as shown in Table 1. S. iniae ATCC 29178 and S. agalactiae ATCC 13813 were used as positive controls. Bacterial strains were cultured at 37°C in Tryptic soy broth (TSB) and/or in Tryptic soy agar (TSA) (Difco, USA) with 5% sheep blood.


Materials and Methods

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Isolation of bacterial DNA: Genomic DNA of bacteria was prepared by standard phenol-chloroform method (Ausubel et al., 2003). DNA was dissolved in 100 μl of distilled water and stored at -20°C until use.

Duplex-PCR oligonucleotide primers: Duplex-PCR identification on the streptococcal DNA used S. iniae lactate oxidase genes (loxC) specific primers (Mata et al., 2004) and S. agalactiae 16S rRNA gene specific primers (Martinez et al., 2001). The primer sequences and expected sizes of amplicons for each PCR assay are described in Table 2.

Duplex-PCR amplification condition: The duplex -PCR reaction mixture was prepared in a PCR thermal cycler with 200 μl microcentrifuge tubes. Purified genomic DNA from all bacterial species was used as DNA template for duplex -PCR. The duplex-PCR was carried out in a 25 μl reaction mixture containing 2 μl of bacterial genomic DNA, 200 nM LOX-1 and LOX-2 primer, 400 nM F1 and IMOD primer, 250 μM of each deoxynucleoside triphosphate (dNTP), 1x Taq buffer with MgCl2 and 0.75 Unit of Taq DNA polymerase. The appropriate annealing temperature, which did not interfere with the annealing of any of the primers, was 52°C. The PCR thermocycling was one cycle of initial denaturation at 95°C for 5 min, followed by 30 cycles of 95°C for 1 min, 52°C for 1 min, and 72°C for 1 min, and subsequently extended by one cycle of 72°C for 7 min.

Visualization of PCR products: After amplification, 3 μl of each reaction mixture was separated by electrophoresis on a 1.5% agarose gel containing 0.4 μg of ethidium bromide per ml. The gel was run in 1x Tris-Borate-EDTA (TBE) buffer at 100 V with standard DNA size markers for 25 min and visualized with a densitometer.

Sensitivity of duplex-PCR: The DNA concentration S. iniae ATCC 29178 and S. agalactiae ATCC 13813 were quantified by measuring the optical density at wave length 260 nm (A260 value) using spectrophotometer. The DNA template was added to each PCR reaction mixture by varying the DNA template concentration from 1μg to 1 fg/μl with 10-fold serial dilution in distilled water. Only the reaction which can be amplified all of 2 target DNA products was counted in positive.

Duplex-PCR for direct detection of DNA from clinical specimens: The duplex -PCR was applied to the direct detection of S. iniae and S. agalactiae from tilapia clinical samples. The direct detection was performed by using mixed DNA extracted from spleen, liver and kidney of tilapia with S. iniae and S. agalactiae. The tissues were isolated aseptically from freshly dead Nile tilapia and homogenized in sterile phosphate buffer saline (PBS) pH 7.4 with tissue mortar. The spleen, liver and kidney were pooled and mixed with bacteria approximately 105, 106, 107, 108, 109 or 1010 cells of each bacterial specie per gram of tissues. Then, 5 μl of lysozyme (10 mg/ml) was added to 50 μl of tissue mixture and incubated at 37°C for 30 min prior to genomic DNA extraction by using High pure PCR template preparation kit (Roche, Germany). The DNA in each tube was used as a template for duplex-PCR. The detection limit was calculated by comparison with the bacterial cells present in 1 gram of tissue.

Table 1 Bacterial strains used in duplex-PCR.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bacterial species</th>
<th>Collection code</th>
<th>Source of isolation</th>
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</table>
| S. iniae         | ATCC 29178      | Amazon freshwater dolphin, Inia Geoffrensis, Buffalo, NY. |}
| S. iniae         | J1-J2           | Diseased fish, Japan |
| S. iniae         | CUCR1-CUCR17    | Diseased tilapia, Thailand |
| S. agalactiae    | ATCC 13813      | - |
| S. agalactiae    | CUCR1-CUCR14    | Diseased tilapia, Thailand |
| Streptococcus dysgalactiae | CU Vet Micro 1-5 | Mastitis cow, Thailand |
| Streptococcus uberis | CU Vet Micro 1-4 | Mastitis cow, Thailand |
| Streptococcus parauberis | CU Vet Micro 1   | Mastitis cow, Thailand |
| Streptococcus suis | CU Vet Micro 1-5 | Pig tonsil, Thailand |
| Streptococcus canis | CUCR1           | Canine skin, Thailand |
| Enterococcus faecium | CU Vet Micro 1 | Chicken, Thailand |
| Staphylococcus aureus | CUCR1-CUCR5 | Canine skin, Thailand |
| Lactococcus garviae | J1             | Diseased fish, Japan |
| Flavobacterium sp. | CU Vet Micro 1 | Diseased tilapia, Thailand |
| Aeromonas hydrophila | CUCR1-CUCR3 | Diseased fish, Thailand |
| Aeromonas caviae | CUCR1-CUCR2     | Diseased goldfish, Thailand |
| Edwardsiella tardar | CUCR1           | Diseased goldfish, Thailand |
Table 2 Primer names, oligonucleotide sequences and size of amplicons.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Target gene</th>
<th>Primer name</th>
<th>Oligonucleotide primer sequence</th>
<th>Size of Amplicon</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lactate oxidase</td>
<td>LOX-1</td>
<td>5'-AAG GGG AAA TCG CAA GTG CC-3'</td>
<td>870 bp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>LOX-2</td>
<td>5'-ATA TCT GAT TGG GCC GTC TAA-3'</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16S rRNA/IMOD</td>
<td>F1</td>
<td>5'-GAG TTT GAT CAT GGC TCA G-3'</td>
<td>220 bp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>IMOD</td>
<td>5'-ACC AAC ATG TGT TAA TTA CTC-3'</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results

Sensitivity and specificity of duplex-PCR: Target amplicons of PCR amplification from positive control of bacterial DNA were presented as expected (870 and 220 bp for S. iniae and S. agalactiae, respectively). Even in PCR reaction containing both S. iniae and S. agalactiae DNA, the positive amplicons band were still clearly seen, no difference in DNA band intensities from individual detection of each pathogens species as shown in Figure 1. For specificity of this assay, this duplex-PCR could specifically detect lctO gene and 16s rRNA gene in all isolates of S. iniae (n=20) and S. agalactiae (n=15), respectively. The assay did not produce any targeted amplicons when tested against other related bacterial species (n=30). The results revealed that the specificity of this duplex-PCR is 100%. For the sensitivity of the assay, this duplex-PCR was successful in the amplification lctO gene and 16S rRNA gene in the reaction contained as little as 100 fg of each bacterial genomic DNA template per reaction.

Detection of bacterial pathogens in clinical specimens: Artificially inoculated tilapia tissues with bacterial pathogens were applied in this duplex-PCR to determine sensitivity and specificity of the assay in clinical specimens. Amplification of bacterial targeted DNA in tissue homogenate was successful in the reaction containing at least 10⁶ CFU/g of fish tissue for both streptococcus species as shown in Figure 2.

Discussion

In Thailand, S. agalactiae is a majority cause of warm-water streptococcosis in cultured tilapia. However, streptococcosis by S. iniae was sporadically reported in some region (Suanyuk et al., 2010). Differentiation between these two streptococcal species is mainly based on conventional microbiological method, i.e. bacterial isolation and biochemical investigation, which is laborious and time-consuming. It might be difficult to confirm streptococcus species by this conventional method considering from previous scientific studies which suggested that variation of some biochemical test results could occur among bacterial strains (Agnew and Barnes, 2007; Evans et al., 2008). In this work, a novel duplex-PCR for simultaneous and unambiguous detection of S. iniae and S. agalactiae was developed.

Each primer pair targeted on lctO and 16s rRNA gene of both S. iniae and S. agalactiae was referred to studies of Mata and Martinez, respectively (Martinez et al., 2001; Mata et al., 2004). In those original studies, a single PCR was tested for specificity with various species of streptococcus and other related bacterial genus. A 100% specificity in this duplex-PCR assay had no difference regardless of individual single PCR. While the intensity of amplicons from duplex-PCR contained separated or mixed streptococcal genomic DNA also show similarity (Fig 1). This result suggested that each
mixed streptococcal genomic DNA also show similarity (Fig 1). This result suggested that each primer pairs and amplification products have no deleterious effect when apply in duplex-PCR assay.

Detection of bacterial pathogens by duplex-PCR is still effective even in clinical specimens. The detection limits are as little as 10⁶ CFU/g of fish tissue, this sensitivity of the assay is highly enough to detect bacterial target in diseased fish since distribution of S. agalactiae in experimental infected fish tissue was higher than 10⁶ CFU/g (unpublished data) and 10⁵ CFU/g for S. iniae (Lahav et al., 2004). For the application to disease diagnostic purpose, we suggested that brain, kidney, or liver tissue are appropriate due to the fact that streptococcus is overwhelmed in those tissues (Lahav et al., 2004).

Various species of bacteria are associated with warm-water streptococcosis in fish and previously developed duplex-PCR for detection of major causative agent of streptococcosis includes 4 species of related pathogens, i.e. S. iniae, S. difficilis, S. parauberis, and L. garvieae (Mata et al., 2004). Specific primer targeting S. difficilis also success to amplified S. agalactiae genomic DNA. This was expected since S. difficilis was reclassified as a synonym of S. agalactiae (Kawamura et al., 2005). In our novel duplex-PCR assay, we tried a different pair of primer for S. agalactiae detection which referred to the previous study (Martinez et al., 2001). The original article suggested that F1/IMOD primer was specified to several serotype of S. agalactiae including type I, II, III, IV, V and non-typable from both human and bovine isolate. Our duplex-PCR assay should be appropriate for simultaneous and unambiguous detection of streptococcosis in cultured tilapia in Thailand since S. iniae and S. agalactiae (serotype Ia and III) were occupied among cultured tilapia in Thailand (Suanyuk et al., 2008; Suanyuk et al., 2010). Additionally, reports of S. parauberis and L. garvieae associated with streptococcosis aquaculture have not been available in Thailand. Thus, limitation on target species for duplex-PCR detection, only S. iniae and S. agalactiae, should be enough and appropriate for detection of causative agents of streptococcosis in Thai cultured tilapia in order to reduce the PCR cost and simplify the method of the detection.

In conclusion, duplex-PCR developed in this study can be a rapid, sensitive, and specific method for simultaneous and unambiguous detection of S. iniae and S. agalactiae from pure cultures and fish clinical samples. Therefore, it can be a good PCR method candidate which applied for detection of S. iniae and S. agalactiae associated with streptococcosis in cultured tilapia in Thailand.

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References


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