

NIH Public Access

Author Manuscript

Published in final edited form as:

Anal Biochem. 2009 May 1; 388(1): 167-169. doi:10.1016/j.ab.2009.02.020.

Preparation of heteroduplex EGFP plasmid for in vivo mismatch repair activity assay

Bisheng Zhou^{1,\$}, Changjiang Huang^{1,\$}, Junhua Yang^{1,2}, Jianxin Lu³, Qiaoxiang Dong^{1,*}, and Lu-Zhe Sun^{1,2,}

1 Institute of Watershed Science and Environmental Ecology, Wenzhou Medical College, Wenzhou 325035, P. R. China

2Department of Cellular and Structural Biology, University of Texas Health Science Center, San Antonio, TX 78229-3900, USA

3 Zhejiang Provincial Key Laboratory of Medical Genetics, Wenzhou Medical College, Wenzhou, 325034, P.R. China

Abstract

Preparation of heteroduplexes in large quantities with high purity is essential for the measurement of DNA mismatch repair (MMR) activity. Here we report a rapid, less labor-intensive method for the preparation of a heteroduplex plasmid that expresses the enhanced green fluorescent protein (EGFP) if the mismatch is correctly repaired. The method involves the use of a wild-type and a mutated EGFP expression plasmid, and a few steps of enzymatic digestion. When the constructed heteroduplex EGFP plasmid was transfected into MMR proficient and deficient cell lines, the number of EGFP-expressing cells was much higher in the MMR proficient cells than in the MMR deficient cells suggesting that the heteroduplex can be used for MMR activity assay in live model systems.

Keywords

DNA mismatch repair; heteroduplex; EGFP; single stranded DNA

DNA mismatch repair (MMR) system is known to participate in maintaining genomic stability [1]. Loss of DNA MMR function can result in the development and progression of certain cancers [2;3]. Various assays have been developed for the measurement of DNA MMR activity in cell extracts or living cells. They all involve the preparation of a heteroduplex DNA with defined mismatched DNA sequences as the substrate for MMR enzymes [4]. A DNA heteroduplex is usually produced by annealing two near complementary synthetic oligonucleotides [5], or by annealing the single-stranded (ss) f1 phage/phagemid DNA to one strand of a linearized plasmid followed by extensive chromatographic purification [6]. Synthesis of a large amount of long oligonucleotides is costly and suffers from contamination with a certain percentage of inaccurate or incomplete oligonucleotide. On the other hand, it is

^{*}Corresponding author Contacts: E-mail: sunl@uthscsa.edu (Lu-Zhe Sun), E-mail: dqxdong@163.com (Qiaoxiang Dong), Mailing address for proofs: Lu-Zhe Sun, Ph.D., Dept. of CSB, MC 7762, University of Texas Health Science Center, 7703 Floyd Curl Drive, San Antonio, TX 77229-3900. The authors wish it to be known that, in their opinion, the first two authors should be regarded as joint first authors.

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technically demanding and time-consuming to prepare circular phage/phagemid ssDNA and to purify heteroduplex substrates with multiple preparation steps, which often result in low yield [7].

Here, we present a strategy for the rapid preparation of a heteroduplex EGFP plasmid with a large quantity and high purity, which can be delivered into live cells for monitoring their MMR activity This method was developed in connection with our ongoing investigation into the role of MMR system during mutagenesis and tumorigenesis. In our previous work, we were the first to report a EGFP-based method to quantitatively measure MMR activity in live cells [8]. In that method, a heteroduplex EGFP substrate containing a G/G or T/G mismatch at the ATG start codon of the EGFP gene was prepared with either synthetic oligonucleotides or a phagemid ssDNA annealed with a linear double stranded (ds) DNA. However, both approaches were tedious, laborious, costly, and inefficient as discussed above. Furthermore, they appear too technically demanding to be widely used by other research laboratories without a welltrained technician. As such, we have adopted an enzyme digestion approach utilizing a newly generated mutant EGFP expression plasmid to more rapidly produce a heteroduplex EGFP plasmid. The mutant EGFP plasmid, named p189, was generated by introducing a premature stop codon (TGG₅₈ \rightarrow TAG) to the EGFP gene in the plasmid pGEM5Z(+)-EGFP, which was created in our earlier study [8]. The mutation was created with a PCR based site-directed mutagenesis method using pGEM5Z(+)-EGFP as template [9]. The creation of this premature stop codon completely eliminated fluorescence property of EGFP (data not shown), much more efficient than the mutation of its start codon, which still allowed a small percent of EGFP expression in a start codon-independent manner as we previously reported [8].

The procedure for the preparation of the heteroduplex EGFP plasmid is depicted in Fig. 1A. First, a circular ssDNA of the coding strand (indicated as "+" and TGG strand in Fig. 1A) of EGFP gene was generated with the nicking enzyme Nb.Bpu10I (Fermentas, Hanover, Germany). Nb.Bpu10I is a site and strand specific endonuclease artificially engineered from restriction enzyme Bpu10I. It has the same recognition site as Bpu10I, but cleaves only one strand of the DNA within its recognition sequence on a double-stranded DNA substrate. Therefore, Nb.Bpu10I can only cut the template strand (indicated as "-" and ACC strand in Fig. 1A) of the EGFP gene to introduce several nicks in pGEM5Z(+)-EGFP. A detailed protocol for the application of Nb.Bpu10I for the preparation of circular ssDNA from supercoiled double-stranded plasmids containing its recognition site can be found on the website of Fermentas at

http://www.fermentas.com/techinfo/modifyingenzymes/protocols/p_singlemol.htm. The nicked strand was then removed with Exonuclease III (Fermentas, Hanover, Germany) digestion. The intact ssDNA of the remaining strand (coding strand) was recovered with phenol/chloroform extraction and ethanol precipitation. Because pGEM5Z(+)-EGFP can be easily obtained from *Escherichia coli*, using this approach we were able to obtain large quantities of circular ssDNA with high purity in less than 2 hours. The yield of the ssDNA is usually about half of the double-stranded plasmid. In contrast, with the f1 phagemid-based ssDNA method we used previously, owing to a low yield of f1 phagemid as well as multiple preparation steps, it would take us at least 2 days to produce about 50 µg circular ssDNA from 200 ml culture of helper phage infected phagemid-producing bacteria. In addition, the circular ssDNA obtained from f1 phagemid, which appeared to be contaminated with double-stranded plasmid due to lysis of the bacteria (Fig. 1B) and sometimes contaminated also with help phage DNA (data not shown).

To generate heteroduplex DNA, we linearized p189 by digesting it with AseI (New England Biolabs, Inc., Beverly, Mass, USA), which cut the plasmid upstream of the CMV promoter and 843 bp away from the mismatched TAG stop codon as indicated in Fig. 1A. The linearized

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p189 was purified with phenol/chloroform extraction and ethanol precipitation, and annealed with the circular ssDNA of pGEM5Z(+)-EGFP (Fig. 1A). After annealing, the mixture was digested with a plasmid-safe ATP-dependent DNase (PSAD) (Epicentre Biotechnologies, Madison, WI, USA) to degrade leftover linearized dsDNA and circular ssDNA. The heteroduplex EGFP plasmid was recovered using a DNA purification kit (Beyotime Biotechnology Co., Shanghai, China) and found to be highly pure with agarose gel electrophoresis analysis as shown in Fig. 1C.

The heteroduplex EGFP plasmid contains both a G/T mismatch and a nick at the template strand, which can act as a strand discrimination signal for MMR assays in vitro [10]. Repair of the G/T mismatch to G/C in the heteroduplex EGFP plasmid should restore the expression of a functional EGFP with green fluorescence property. To demonstrate the usefulness of the heteroduplex EGFP plasmid prepared by this method for monitoring MMR activity in live cells, we transfected it into an MMR-proficient cell line (HeLa) and an MMR-deficient cell line (HCT116) with Lipofectamine (Invitrogen, Carlsbad, CA). The cells were plated in 60mm dishes at a density of 5×10^5 cells/dish. Transfection was performed in the following day according to the manufacturer's protocols. Heteroduplex EGFP plasmid measuring $0.5 \,\mu g$ was co-transfected with 0.5 µg of a red fluorescent protein (RFP) expression plasmid, pDsRed1-N1 (Clontech, Palo Alto, CA). pDsRed1-N1 was used to ascertain that the transfection efficiencies were comparable between the two cell lines. Twenty-four hours after transfection, fluorescent images of the transfected cells were taken with a Nikon fluorescence microscope. The cells were then trypsinized and resuspended in PBS at a concentration of 5×10^5 cells/ml. Twenty thousand cells were measured for their fluorescence intensity at wavelengths of 530 \pm 30 nm for EGFP and above 670nm for RFP using a FACSCalibur flow cytometer (Becton Dickinson). As shown in Fig. 2, while the number of RFP-expressing cells was comparable between Hela and HCT116 indicating similar transfection efficiency, there were significantly more EGFP-expressing Hela cells than HCT116 cells. These results indicate that the heteroduplex EGFP plasmid prepared by this method can efficiently distinguish MMR deficient cells from MMR proficient cells.

In summary, we have developed a simple but efficient method to prepare a DNA heteroduplex with a G/T mismatch using a novel mutant EGFP gene expression plasmid and demonstrated its application in monitoring MMR function. With minor modifications of the EGFP expression plasmid, this strategy should be amenable for generating various kinds of DNA heteroduplex with defined mismatches for the measurement of activities of different MMR enzymes either in vitro or in vivo.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the major project of Science and Technology Department of Zhejiang Province (NO. 2008C03001-2), key project of Natural Science Foundation of Zhejiang Province (NO. Z2080266), key project of Science and Technology Department of Wenzhou (NO. S20060023), 5010 key project of Wenzhou Medical College (NO. XNK06009), and NIH grant R01CA075253.

Abbreviation used

dsDNA	double-stranded DNA
EGFP	enhanced green fluorescent protein
MMR	mismatch repair

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ssDNA

single-stranded DNA

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Figure 1A

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Figure 1B

Figure 1C

Fig. 1.

Preparation of the heteroduplex EGFP plasmid. (A) Flow chart for the preparation of heteroduplex EGFP plasmid. pGEM5Z(+)-EGFP (also named p111) was nicked with Nb.Bpu10I in a 400 µl reaction volume containing 20 µg pGEM5Z(+)-EGFP, 4 µl (20 u) Nb.Bpu10I, 40 μ l 10× Buffer and nuclease-free water at 37°C for 1 hour. After phenol/ chloroform extraction and ethanol precipitation, the nicked plasmid was digested with 1200 u Exonuclease III for about 10 minutes at 30°C to degrade the nicked strand. p189 was linearized with restriction enzyme AseI and mixed with the purified circular ssDNA at a ratio of 1:1.5 (heat at 90°C for 3 minute and cool down to room temperature by leaving the heater block on the bench) to generate a heteroduplex EGFP plasmid containing a G/T mismatch and a nick. The annealing mixture was treated with the plasmid-safe ATP-dependent DNase (PSAD) to degrade leftover ssDNA and linearized plasmid DNA. The heteroduplex EGFP plasmid with high purity was recovered using a DNA clean up kit. (B) Comparison of the ssDNA generated with the enzyme digestion approach described above in A (Lane1), and with a phagemid pGEM5Z(+)-EGFP (4.6kb) using our previously described approach in [8] (Lane2). (C) Electrophoretic analysis of various DNA species: pGEM5Z(+)-EGFP isolated with an alkaline lysis method containing supercoiled (SC), relaxed (R), and nicked circular (N) DNA (Lane 1), Zhou et al.

circular ssDNA(Lane 2), linear form of p189 (4.7 kb) (Lane 3), purified heteroduplex EGFP plasmid with a nick (Lane 4), and DNA ladder (Lane 5).

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Fig. 2.

Repair of heteroduplex EGFP plasmid in live cells. HeLa (MMR-proficient, A, B) and HCT116 cells (MMR-deficient, C, D) co-transfected with the heteroduplex EGFP plasmid and pDsRed1-N1. Flow cytometry results are shown on the right side.