Visualization and colonization studies of a novel bacterium *Lactobacillus thermotolerans* on chicken cecum using fluorescence *in situ* hybridization-confocal laser scanning microscope (FISH-CLSM)

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The direct visualization and colonization studies of *Lactobacillus thermotolerans* in cecal epithelium of chicken was attempted by applying fluorescence *in situ* hybridization in combination with confocal laser scanning microscope (FISH-CLSM) method. Chicken cecum (0.5 cm) as collected from White Leghorn were fixed, washed and then embedded in Tissue-Tek OCT compound. Vertical thin section (20 μm) of the fixed samples was prepared using Cryostat-3000, Leyca. Then the slices were fixed on gelatin-coated microscopic slides, air dried, and dehydrated in a series of increasing concentrations of ethanol followed by fluorescence *in situ* hybridization (FISH) and observed by confocal laser scanning microscope (CLSM). CLSM confirmed that bacteria were located in layers of the cecum tissue. Accordingly, the FISH technique demonstrated that the bacteria consist of cocci. The hybridized cells of target strain were found within the total bacteria on cecum surface, the results clearly demonstrated that *L. thermotolerans* are the inhabitants of chicken microbiota and colonized at a low number in terms of total bacteria.

Key words: *Lactobacillus thermotolerans*, FISH-CLSM method, chicken cecum.

INTRODUCTION

*Lactobacillus thermotolerans* is characterized as facultative anaerobic, Gram-positive, catalyze-negative, non-motile and non-spore-forming rods. The bacterium was isolated from chicken feces collected from Thai chicken (Niamsup et al., 2003). Later, the novel species was detected and monitored by Real Time PCR (Selim et al., 2005) and fluorescence *in situ* hybridization (Selim and Yokota, 2012) in real chicken feces. The bacterium may be a potential probiotic candidate. The use of probiotics to promote health and nutrition in animal production has been attracting a great deal of attention for a long time (Gilliand, 1990) and claims for improvement of growth, feed utilization, disease resistance and reduction of gut shedding of enteropathogenic bacteria (Ehrmann et al., 2002).

FISH has been successfully used in combination with confocal laser scanning microscopy (CLSM) and epifluorescence microscopy for the visualization of initial and mature oral biofilm formed *in situ* (Al-Ahmad et al., 2007, 2009; Dige et al., 2007). Moreover, FISH is a recognized tool for the specific and sensitive identification of target organisms within complex microbial communities (Amman et al., 1995). Confocal Laser Scanning Microscope (CLSM) allows a three-dimensional noninvasive visualization of cells without distortion of their structure. Visualization of FISH labeled cells by CLSM has already been reported (Wimpenny et al., 2002). In combination with the nondestructive sectioning properties of CLSM, the FISH technique enables the visualization of the three-dimensional arrangement of the microbial population as well as the estimation of the quantitative...

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distribution of bacterium (Thurnheer et al., 2004).
Colonization of bacteria is one of the main factors for the microbial balance in the gut. Massive colonization of Lactobacilli in cecum was observed in a trial conducted by Fuller and Turvey (1971), whereas poor colonization was observed in another study conducted by Ehrmann et al. (2002). Overall, the tissue, cell, and molecular specificities of Lactobacillus adherence have remained poorly characterized, and the role of adherence in intestinal colonization by Lactobacillus has remained a controversial topic as reported by Tannock (1999).

Detection of bacterial 16S rRNAs, or the corresponding genes, in the gastrointestinal tracts of humans and different mammals by using PCR amplification or dot blot hybridization with specific probes has been successful for tracking pathogenic or probiotic strains and studying the gut ecology (Kaufmann et al., 1997; Kreader et al., 1995; Lin et al., 1997).

However, the visualization of bacteria using confocal microscope in combination with molecular technique is a new approach for the colonization study of bacterium in chicken intestine.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Chickens and sampling

Chickens used in this study were the progeny of White Leghorn (102 days old). They were obtained from Hokuren Federation of Agricultural Cooperatives, Hokkaido, Japan. The chickens were slaughtered and their cecal were collected by opening the chicken intestine using sterilized scissors. Then the cecum was kept in icebox and transferred to the laboratory for further processing.

Fixation and cryosectioning

The collected cecal (0.5 cm) were treated for 15 min at 37°C using lysozyme at the concentration of 1 mg/ml. Then the tissues were fixed by incubation in paraformaldehyde (4%) in phosphate buffered saline (pH 7.2) at 4°C for 16 h and subsequently washed twice in phosphate buffer. After fixation, the samples were embedded in Tissue-Tek OCT compound and frozen overnight at -20°C. Vertical thin section (20 μm) of the fixed samples was prepared using Cryostat-3000, Leyca. Then the slices were fixed on gelatin-coated microscopic slides, air dried, and dehydrated in a series of increasing concentrations of ethanol 50, 80 and 98%. The flow chart of the cecal sample preparation is shown in Figure 1.

FISH probe

The FISH probe for target bacteria was used according to the method of Selim and Yokota (2012). The probe
sequences were (L. ther) 5'-CCGTCGCCACTCGTTGGGA-3', labeled with Cy3 and FITC. Moreover, EUB 338 probe was used for total bacterium.

**In situ hybridization**

The cecal specimens were hybridized according to the method of Amann et al. (1990) and the specimen was examined with an LSM 410 confocal laser scanning microscope Carl Zeiss-410, equipped with an argon laser (a He Ne laser 543 nm, and a UV laser 488). Images were recorded by using simultaneous excitation of 488 and 543 nm lasers to distinguish the probe-stained cells. All image combination, processing, and analysis were performed with the standard software package provided by Zeiss. Processed images were printed out using the software package Adobe Photoshop, version 5.5.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This is the first investigation of *L. thermotolerans* in the surface of chicken cecum where the FISH and CLSM techniques have been used, which turned out to be a powerful method for visualizing micro-organisms in their natural environment. The method was additionally improved by using CLSM, which allowed optical sectioning, three-dimensional reconstruction and therefore exact localization and observation of the spatial distribution of bacteria in the chicken cecum.

The confocal observations of *L. thermotolerans* in the epithelium of cecal surface and cecal fold are shown in Figure 2A, B, C and D respectively. In this study, *L. thermotolerans* (red color) was successfully visualized in the cecum using its newly designed probe (Selim and Yokota, 2012). The deep green cells indicate total bacteria visualized by EUB 338 probe. The photographs
(Figure 2A, B, C and D) suggest a low number of target strain present in the cecum, compared to those of total bacteria. The results also suggest that L. thermotolerans was colonized both on the cecal surface and in the cecum epithelium. In this study, L. thermotolerans was investigated in cecal surface where the FISH and CLSM techniques were used. Thus, the ecology of Lactobacilli in chicken gastro-intestinal tract can be understood much more effectively by the application of the FISH-CLSM method using various FISH probes for the detection of important species of Lactobacillus found in chicken gastro-intestinal tract.

The confocal observation strongly suggested that L. thermotolerans is a normal member of the chicken microbiota. This is the first successful visualization of the novel bacterium by the combined method of FISH and CLSM. It is quite interesting to visualize a bacterium directly in their original location. Figure 2A, B, C and D also showed that the number of L. thermotolerans is very low on the cecal surface and in the cecal fold as compared to total bacterium. This corresponds to the low percentage of L. thermotolerans that exist in feces and cecum sample as monitored by FISH (Selim and Yokota, 2012) and Real-Time PCR assay (Selim et al., 2005).

By using the EUB 338 probe, the total bacteria was also visualized, which gave confidence to the results obtained, especially when this study's target strain was observed. From Figure 2A, B, C and D, it seems that cells of L. thermotolerans are not localized in a particular position; they are spread on the surface. This study's result is in contrast with that of Ehrmann et al. (2002) who observed poor colonization of Lactobacilli. It is noted here that some strict anaerobic bacteria may not be detected by the FISH technique due to their low metabolic activity and the small number of rRNA copies, resulting in low signal intensity and false negative results (Pia et al., 2003).

In conclusion, direct visualization of bacteria with the FISH-CLSM technique provided additional support to the notion that L. thermotolerans is present in cecal surface with low number in terms of total bacteria. However, the FISH-CLSM method may be used for other similar researches of interest.

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