DNA Methylation in NFATC1 Gene Promoter is Related to Longevity in Chinese Population

Chunhong Li1,2,4, Bo Xi2,3, Tao Zhang2, You Li1, Jian Wang3, Xue Liang1, Jian Qin1, Wei Chen2 and Zhiyong Zhang1*

1Department of Environmental Health, School of Public Health, Guangxi Medical University, Nanning, Guangxi, China
2Department of Epidemiology, School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA, USA
3Department of Epidemiology, School of Public Health, Shandong University, Jinan, Shandong, China
4Guangxi Colleges and Universities Key Laboratory of Prevention and Control of Highly Prevalent Diseases, Guangxi Medical University, Nanning, China

Abstract

Background: NFATC1 gene is associated with age-related complex traits, including longevity, when it overexpresses, DNA methylation in the NFATC1 gene promoter can downregulate the gene expression. This study aims to examine the association between DNA methylation profile in the NFATC1 promoter and family history of longevity in Chinese population. 

Methods: We recruited 87 individuals in Bama County, Guangxi in China who were grouped into cases with family history of longevity (n=59, mean age=75.6 years) and controls without family history of longevity (n=28, mean age=57.5 years). The DNA methylation profile in the NFATC1 gene promoter was analyzed by pyro sequencing approach.

Results: DNA methylation levels were significantly, positively correlated with age at the sites of 77157888, 77157891, and 77157898 and significantly, negatively correlated with age at the site 77157909. The methylation levels at chromosomal position 77157891 were significantly higher in the case group (β value=0.943) than in the control group (β value=0.911) with p=0.02 for the difference, adjusting for age, gender, smoking, alcohol use and cardiovascular risk factors. DNA methylation levels at site 77157909 were significantly lower in females than in males (p=0.02).

Conclusions: The findings of this study suggest that the DNA methylation profile in NFATC1 gene promoter is associated with family history of longevity in the Chinese population.

Keywords: DNA methylation; NFATC1 gene; Longevity; Case-control study

Introduction

Human lifespan is the outcome of complex interactions of environmental exposures, personal lifestyles and behaviors, and multiple genetic factors [1-3]. A number of longevity-related gene variants have been identified by genome-wide association studies during the past decade [4,5]. DNA methylation, a form of epigenetic modification that controls gene expression, plays an essential role in aging process and longevity [6]. Genome-wide DNA methylation levels declined with ageing in humans although DNA methylation levels at specific CpG sites showed different trends in change over time [7,8]. DNA methylation contributes to transcription silencing when it occurs surrounding the transcription start site [9,10]. Recent studies indicated that some disease-associated genes were depressed after being methylated, resulting in lower incidence of age-related diseases [11,12]. This implies that individuals who carry hyper-methylated disease-associated genes could stay in better health status.

Our longevity study in Bama County population of Guangxi in China has found that longevity was associated with higher global DNA methylation levels as well as in NFATC1 gene [13,14]. It was reported that NFATC1 was highly expressed in hypertension, carcinomas, osteoporosis, and other age-associated diseases [15-18]. It has been shown in an animal study that the hair follicle stem cells of aged mice could maintain cell activity, generate hair and make the hair stay in youth when NFATC1 was inhibited [19]. The bone resorption activity was suppressed, and the age-related osteoporosis was delayed to occur if the NFATC1 gene was down-regulated [20]. These findings suggest that NFATC1 gene is important in ageing process and the development of age-related disease.

This study aims to examine the association between DNA methylation profile in the NFATC1 gene promoter region and family history of longevity in a case-control study conducted in Bama County of Guangxi, China.

Materials and Methods

Study subjects

Cases (n=59, 29 males, 30 females, mean age=75.6 years, including 28 longevity (mean age=94.3 ± 4.1) and 31 their offspring (mean age=58.7 ± 17.8)) and controls (n=28, 14 males, 14 females, mean age=57.5 years) were recruited in a case control study conducted in Bama County in Guangxi, China. The cases were defined as those who had grandparents and/or parents who lived beyond 90 years (positive family history of longevity); controls were defined as those who did not have any grandparents or parents who lived beyond 90 years (negative family history of longevity). Gender was the matching variable. Patients of infectious diseases, carcinomas or using the immune inhibition drugs at interview were excluded. General examinations included weight, height, blood pressure, blood lipids and questionnaire survey on smoking and alcohol use.

All subjects gave a written informed consent. Study protocols were approved by the Institutional Review Board of Guangxi Medical University.

Laboratory analysis

Biological specimen: 2 ml peripheral blood was collected for testing lipids, and another 2 ml peripheral blood was used for extracting DNA.

*Corresponding author: Zhiyong Zhang, MD, PhD, Department of Environmental Health, School of Public Health, Guangxi Medical University, Nanning, China, Tel: +86-771-5535124; Fax: +86-771-5538805; E-mail: rpazz@163.com

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Designing for amplification primers and sequencing primer: The NFATC1 DNA sequence was downloaded from the NCBI web (https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/), the promoter region, transcription start site (TSS) and CpG islands were searched and located online. (http://epd.vital-it.ch/cgi-bin/get_doc?db=hgEpdNew&format=genome&entry=NFATC1_2, http://www.urogene.org/cgi-bin/methprimer/methprimer.cgi). The amplification primers (forward: GGTTTGTGTGTATTAAGATTAGATTAT, reward: ATCTTTCTCAAAATCATTCTTATACC) and sequencing primer (s: AGTTTTTATAAAATATATTTATG) were designed based on the promoter region with PyroMark Assay Design 2.0 software. A 262bp fragment (~2483bp~2222bp) which covered one CpG island (~2436~2335bp) with 6 CpG sites (chromosomal positions were 77157888, 77157891, 77157898, 77157901, 77157905, 77157909) was amplified and sequenced. The +1 represented the TSS, and the CpG sites in the promoter region located in the upstream of TSS.

Pyrosequencing: Fifty nanograms per microliter (no more than 40 µl in total) DNA was transformed by EpiTect Bisulfite Kit (Qiagen Company, German, NO.59104) to change all the unmethylation C to U and then to T in the following PCR amplification (Qiagen Company, German, NO.978703). The amplification primers and sequence primer were synthesized by Beijing Genomics Institution (China). The amplification fragment was sequenced by PyroMark Q96 ID (German) with PyroMark Gold Q96 Reagents (Qiagen Company, German, NO. 972804). The operating was firmly performed by the manuals.

Statistical analysis

The data were analyzed by SPSS 16.0 statistical software. Generalized linear models (GLMs) were used to test the difference in continuous variables between case and control groups. Chi-square test was used to compare the distributions of gender, smokers and drinkers between case and control groups. The association between DNA methylation levels and family history of longevity was examined using GLMs, adjusting for age, gender, smoking, alcohol use, blood pressure, low-density lipoprotein cholesterol (LDL-C), high-density lipoprotein cholesterol (HDL-C), and triglycerides (TG). It was considered statistically significant at p<0.05 in a two-sided test.

Results

Table 1 shows characteristics of the study participants of case and control groups. The mean levels of continuous variables were compared between case and control groups, adjusting for age (except age itself) and gender. There were significant differences in age (case > control), DBP and LDL-C (case < control) between cases and controls. SBP, TG and HDL-C showed marginally significant differences between cases and controls.

Figure 1 shows Signal intensity at 6 CpG sites in the target sequence of the NFATC1 gene by pyrogram analysis of one subject. The grey columns represent DNA methylation levels at 6 CpG sites of 77157888, 77157891, 77157898, 77157901, 77157905, and 77157909. Two CpG sites were fully methylated (100%) at chromosomal positions 77157901 and 77157905 in all participants. The DNA methylation levels at the remaining 4 CpG sites were used for the analyses of the case-control study.

Table 2 presents DNA methylation levels at four CpG sites in case and control groups. The association between DNA methylation levels...
and family history of longevity was examined using GLMs, adjusting for age, gender, smoking, alcohol use, blood pressure, LDL-C, HDL-C, and TG. The DNA methylation level in the position 77157891 was significantly higher in controls than in cases. DNA methylation levels in the positions 77157888, 77157898 and 77157909 did not differ significantly between case and control groups. DNA methylation levels at site 77157909 were significantly lower in females than in males ($p<0.02$).

Figure 2 presents the correlation between the methylation levels at 4 CpG sites and age. The DNA methylation levels were positively, significantly correlated with age in the positions of 77157888, 77157891 and negatively, significantly correlated with age in the position 77157909.

**Discussion**

Cardiovascular disease and age-related chronic diseases are considered as the leading causes of death and disabilities worldwide [21]. Elevated blood pressure and lipids are important cardiovascular risk factors [22-24]. In this study, the family members who have a family history of longevity tend to have lower levels of blood pressure and lipids, suggesting a genetic background of cardiovascular disease which protects the offspring from suffering cardiovascular diseases and thus leads to a longer lifespan. A study in Chinese population reported the association of blood lipids and genetic variants with longevity in Guangxi, China [25]. Another large-scale study in Chinese population also found that family history of longevity was associated with lower prevalence rates of chronic diseases, including cardiovascular disease [26].

The NFATC1 gene codes one of the important nuclear factors of activated T-cell proteins. This gene has two promoters (P1 and P2) which autoregulate gene transcription. P1 is always hyper-methylated [27]. The sequence we analysed in this study is located in the P1 promoter region. The positions of 77157888 and 77157898 are also the SNP sites of rs115468573(A>C) and rs557438298(C>G), respectively ([https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/snp]). Although the function of the two SNP sites is not yet clear, studies indicate that the CpG-SNP conjoint may increase DNA methylation [28,29], suggesting that the SNP on the C of CpG dinucleotide would elevate DNA methylation levels in the NFATC1 gene promoter and downregulate the gene expression.

Some age-related diseases such as type-2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, stroke and Alzheimer’s disease would be delayed to occur and facilitate people to reach longevity if the corresponding key genes were methylated [30]. NFATC1 is such a disease-related gene as the literature describes. Hyper-methylation may block transcription factors from binding to the DNA promoter regions, result in expression downregulation and delay the onset of the NFATC1-induced diseases [27]. We have shown in the current study that DNA methylation level at site 77157891 was higher in individuals who had family history of longevity than those who did not have family history of longevity. Parents and their offspring, the first-degree relatives, share 50% of gene alleles identical by descent.

**Conclusion**

The findings from this study suggest that hyper-methylation in the NFATC1 gene might contribute to longevity in Chinese population. Further investigation is needed regarding the influence of gene variants in the NFATC1 gene promoter region on DNA methylation levels at site 77157891. Of note, DNA methylation levels significantly decreased at site 77157909 and significantly increased at other 3 sites with increasing age in the current study. These age-related trends were consistent with differences in the DNA methylation levels between groups with and without family history of longevity in this case-control study. In addition, we found that DNA methylation levels at site 77157909 were significantly lower in females than in males among the offspring. Zhang et al. reported that females had a longer lifespan than males in a Chinese population from the same province in China [31]. Taken together, the age and gender-related trends and the difference between cases and controls in DNA methylation levels at the site 77157909 noted in the current study suggest that epigenetic modification in this position of the NFATC1 gene might be associated with a longer lifespan.

**Acknowledgments**

The Guangxi Longevity Population Cohort Study is a joint effort of many investigators and staff members whose contribution is gratefully acknowledged. We especially thank the residents in Bama County of Guangxi, China who participated in this study.

**References**


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**Table 2: DNA methylation levels at four CpG sites in case and control groups.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CpG sites</th>
<th>case mean (SD)</th>
<th>control mean (SD)</th>
<th>p-values</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>77157888</td>
<td>0.918 (0.046)</td>
<td>0.900 (0.048)</td>
<td>0.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>77157891</td>
<td>0.943 (0.043)</td>
<td>0.911 (0.035)</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>77157898</td>
<td>0.836 (0.031)</td>
<td>0.822 (0.026)</td>
<td>0.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>77157909</td>
<td>0.561 (0.043)</td>
<td>0.579 (0.034)</td>
<td>0.30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* The CpG site information is based on NCBI human reference genome GRCh 37. p<13 primary assembly.

DNA methylation levels are presented as means (SD).

† Significantly different between female and male offspring ($p<0.02$).