Polymorphisms of Drug-Metabolizing Enzymes in Healthy Nonagenarians and Centenarians: Difference at GSTT1 Locus

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Drug metabolizing enzymes are involved in the detoxification of several drugs, environmental substances, and carcinogenic compounds, and their polymorphisms have been associated with risk for a variety of cancer. In this paper, we compared the frequency of polymorphisms in cytochrome P450-1A1 gene (CYP1A1), a phase 1 gene (oxidation, activation), and of two polymorphisms of glutathione S-transferase enzymes (GSTM1, GSTT1), two phase 2 genes (conjugation, detoxification). Two groups were studied and compared, i.e., 94 nonagenarians and centenarians and 418 control subjects of younger age. A significant difference in the proportion of nonagenarians and centenarians homozygotes for a GSTT1 deletion (28%) was observed in comparison to control subjects (19%, P = 0.03). The distribution of the other gene polymorphisms did not differ in the two groups. These findings on phase 2 drug-metabolizing enzyme gene polymorphisms may help in disentangling gene–environmental interactions which can have a role in successful aging and longevity, as well as in cancer incidence in the oldest old.

Key Words: ageing; longevity; centenarians; genetics of ageing; genetics of longevity; cancer; cancer and ageing; environmental carcinogens.

Human longevity can be regarded as a multifactorial trait, highly dependent on the interaction between genetic and environmental factors. A significant proportion of centenarians are in good health (category A and B, as defined by Franceschi et al., 2000) either from a physical or a cognitive point of view (1). They are the best example of successful aging, and represent a valuable model for studying the genetic factors impinging on survival (risk factors for cancer and other major age-related diseases) (2). In fact, some risk factors for age-related diseases are hypopresented in centenarians (3), whilst others are unexpectedly present in healthy centenarians at equal or even increased frequency, in comparison to controls (4–7). Nevertheless, a number of studies revealed that in centenarians important changes occur in genetic variability of loci which are not risk factors for specific diseases, but are rather responsible for modulating the individual capacity to cope with stress, such as Tyrosine Hydroxilase and mitochondrial DNA (8, 9). In this scenario, enzymes which are involved in the metabolism of potentially dangerous endogenous and exogenous compounds, are likely to play a major role in human longevity. A variety of polymorphisms have been reported in these genes, and have been associated with susceptibility to cancer (10) and other age-related diseases such as Parkinson disease (11). Among these candidate genes, there are Phase 1 (oxidation, activation) and Phase 2 (conjugation, detoxification) drug metabolizing genes, such as cytochrome P450 genes and glutathione S-transferase enzymes (GST). Cytochrome P450 genes are involved in the first step of the metabolism of polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons contained in tobacco smoke, whilst GST genes are involved in the detoxification of several drugs, environmental substances, and carcinogenic compounds. In particular, common polymorphisms leading to complete deletion of the gene cause a loss of GST functional activity. Individuals with such gene deletions exhibit decreased conjugation activity, and are consequently exposed to higher internal doses of potentially toxic intermediary...
metabolites from xenobiotic agents. Data on the frequency of polymorphisms in some phase 1 genes (CYP2E1 (12), CYP2C19 (14), CYP2D6 (13, 14)) and phase 2 genes (NAT2 (13, 14), GSTM1 (13)), as well as other polymorphisms associated with cancer susceptibility, i.e., p53 (15, 16), did not show any difference between centenarians and the general population. In this study, we focussed our attention on other members of phase 1 gene family (CYP1A1), and phase 2 genes (GSTT1 and GSTP1) never studied before in centenarians, as well as on a gene which has been studied in French centenarians with negative results (GSTM1) (13). The hypothesis was that the frequency of the least favorable polymorphisms should be lower in centenarians than that observed in the general population.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Nonagenarians and centenarians in good health, i.e., belonging to category A and B according to Franceschi et al. (1) were identified in Northern Italy (Milan, Modena, Parma, Genoa), as part of an ongoing multicentric study in Italy with the aim of studying the mechanisms responsible for successful aging (1). A total of 94 subjects were included in the present study. The mean age of the group was 100.2 ± 2.1 years (range 95–105 years; median 100 years), 22% of whom were males and 58% females. The male to female ratio was in agreement with the recent data on the nation-wide study on Italian centenarians (1). None was a current smoker. In the rest of the present paper, for simplicity, these very old people are collectively indicated as “centenarians”.

Control subjects were a sample of 418 healthy volunteers of the same ethnic group as the nonagenarians and centenarians, recruited in Northern Italy to study the geographic distribution of drug-metabolizing enzymes polymorphisms. They were recruited among blood donors (n = 98), or health screening programs (n = 320). All the subjects gave informed consent to participate in the study. The mean age of the control subjects was 46.0 ± 11.3 years (range 4–82 years; median 47 years), 46% males and 54% females. As by study design, sex ratio was significantly different in the two groups.

Genomic DNA was extracted from peripheral blood lymphocytes, and polymorphisms were assessed by PCR method, as previously described (17, 18). A multiplex PCR method was used to detect the presence or absence of the GSTM1 and GSTT1 genes in genomic DNA samples. This method uses both GST primer sets (GSTM1, 5’ GAACTCTCGAAAAAGCTAAAGGC 5’ GTTGGGCTCAATATACGTTGG; and GSTT1, 5’ TCCTTACTGTCCTCACATCTC, 5’ TCACC CGATCATTGCGCCAAGCA) in the same PCR and includes a third primer set for albumin (5’ GCCCTCTGCTAACAAGTCCTAC, 5’ GCTCTTAAAGAAATCGCCCAATC), and uses 30 cycles with denaturing at 94°C for 1 min, annealing at 64°C for 1 min, and extension at 72°C for 1 min. For analysis of CYP1A1 the following primers were used: 5’ TTAGGAGCTCTGTCTGAGCCT and 3’ CAGTGAGAGGCTGTAGCCGCT for the analysis of theMsp1 RFLP using PCR conditions as previously described (17).

Nomenclature used: for CYP1A1, the term “wild type” refers to the homozgyotes for the common allele (absence of the restriction site polymorphism), “heterozygous” refers to the presence of the polymorphism on one allele, “homozgyous” refers to the presence of the restriction site on both alleles. For GSTM1 and GSTT1, “null” refers to homozgyotes for deletion allele, while “present” refers to both homozgyotes and heterozygotes (which cannot be distinguished by the experimental procedure).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genes</th>
<th>Genotypes</th>
<th>Centenarians (n = 94)</th>
<th>Control subjects (n = 418)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CYP1A1</td>
<td>Wild type</td>
<td>70 (77)</td>
<td>328 (79)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Heterozygous</td>
<td>20 (22)</td>
<td>81 (19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Homozygous</td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
<td>9 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GSTM1</td>
<td>Null</td>
<td>47 (53)</td>
<td>211 (51)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Present</td>
<td>41 (47)</td>
<td>198 (49)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GSTT1</td>
<td>Null</td>
<td>25 (28)</td>
<td>76 (19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Present</td>
<td>63 (72)</td>
<td>330 (82)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Statistical analysis: CYP1A1, χ² = 0.94, P = 0.68; GSTM1, χ² = 0.10, P = 0.74; GSTT1, χ² = 4.18, P = 0.03.

RESULTS

The frequency of the polymorphisms analyzed in this study is reported in Table 1.

A significant difference in the proportion of centenarians homozygotes for GSTT1 deletion was observed, in comparison to younger subjects (28% vs 19%; χ² = 4.18; P = 0.03). Linear regression analysis confirmed the independent association between age and GSTT1 deletion (F = 4.61, P = 0.032). When the analysis was restricted to control subjects below the age of 60 years (n = 386), the results did not change (data not shown). The distribution of the other gene polymorphisms did not differ in the two groups (CYP1A1*2A: χ² = 0.94, P = 0.68; GSTM1: χ² = 0.10, P = 0.74). When the multiloci genotypes for CYP1A1, GSTM1, and GSTT1 were examined (Table 2), a statistical borderline difference was observed between centenarians and control subjects (χ² = 15.67; P = 0.079). The difference was mainly due to the CYP1A1-GSTM1-GSTT1 combinations 1-0-2 and 1-2-2 (Table 2), both containing the combination of CYP1A1 heterozygotes and GSTT1 deletion genotypes (8% in centenarians vs
type genotypes (x) an increased risk factor in centenarians. Indeed, an
totally surprising and it is not the first description of
tians would be expected. However, this finding is not
crease in frequency of the GSTT1 deletion in centenar-
pounds of environmental origin. Accordingly, a de-
cancer, causing the lack of conjugation of toxic com-
mponents which have never been tested in cen-
report new data for two polymorphisms in drug metab-
In this study we confirm the lack of association be-
men (4, 7, 20) in our centenarian population. In the
ity beneficial effects on survival, by avoiding the
to cardiovascular diseases in the middle aged people (4, 20).
and heterozygotes for the common allele (which cannot be distin-
the allele.
1.5% in control subjects). According to the strong in-
teraction between CYP1A1 and GSTT1, a significant
difference in GSTT1 distribution between centenarians
and control subjects occurred in CYP1A1 heterozygotes
(\(\chi^2 = 11.278; P = 0.003\)), but not in CYP1A1 wild
type genotypes (\(\chi^2 = 1.249; P = 0.26\)).

The frequency of the GSTP1 polymorphism did not
show any difference between centenarians and control
subjects (data not shown).

**DISCUSSION**

In this study we confirm the lack of association be-
tween GSTM1 and longevity, as previously described
in a French population of centenarians (3), and we
report new data for two polymorphisms in drug metab-
olizing enzymes which have never been tested in cen-
tenarians, namely CYP1A1 and GSTT1. We did not
find any difference in the frequency of CYP1A1 in
centenarians, as compared to control subjects of
younger age. A significant increase in the GSTT1 ho-
mozygous deletion in centenarians was observed, and
this is the first report of a significant difference regarding
drug metabolizing enzyme gene polymorphisms in
centenarians. This finding is rather unexpected, as the
deletion of the GST genes is considered a risk factor for
cancer, causing the lack of conjugation of toxic com-
ounds of environmental origin. Accordingly, a de-
crease in frequency of the GSTT1 deletion in cen-
tenarians would be expected. However, this finding is not
totally surprising and it is not the first description of
an increased risk factor in centenarians. Indeed, an

Increased frequency of alleles and genotypes conferring
susceptibility to cardiovascular diseases and thrombo-
sis, such as PAI-1 and ACE, have been reported in
centenarians (4, 7, 20). In order to explain this para-
dox, which emerged from the research on centenarians,
we have proposed a mathematical model suggesting that the over-crossing of the mortality curves at certain ages can explain these phenomena (21, 22). This model assumes that a genetic risk factor can confer an increased risk to die until a certain age, above which its impact is nullified or reversed. This phenomenon may occur because those people who survived at very ad-
vanced ages have been selected by mortality forces,
and thus could benefit from those genetic variants
which are detrimental for younger people. For example,
a profile predisposing to hypercoagulability could be
beneficial at very advanced ages, but could predis-
pose to cardiovascular diseases in the middle aged
people (4, 20). Accordingly, the lack of GSTT1 (or other
phase 2 genes) could be related to deleterious effects in
young age (high risk of cancer) but it could exert long
term beneficial effects on survival, by avoiding the
catabolism of important substances, which have che-
mopreventive effect on cancer and other diseases.

Indeed, a recent study, shows that among subjects con-
suming a diet rich in isothiocyanates (a lung carcinogen inhibitor), those with deletion of GSTM1
and/or GSTT1 have higher levels of this compound in
the urine than subjects with the wild type genotype
(23). Another possibility is that the association be-
tween GSTT1 locus and longevity regards indeed a
proximate locus of unknown nature whose variants are
in linkage disequilibrium with the one we studied.
Further studies are needed to clarify this point.

In conclusion, GSTT1 can be added to the list of
candidate longevity genes which have been identified
so far, and it can open a new perspective on a possible
“pharmacogenetics of longevity”.

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