Toxic factors of *Vibrio* strains pathogenic to shrimp

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**Abstract.** Vibriosis is a major disease problem in shrimp aquaculture. ‘Syndrome 93’ is a seasonal juvenile vibriosis caused by *Vibrio penaeicida* which affects *Litopenaeus stylirostris* in grow-out ponds in New Caledonia. This study assessed the toxic activities of extracellular products (ECPs) from *V. penaeicida*, *V. alginolyticus* and *V. nigripulchritudo* using in vivo injections in healthy juvenile *L. stylirostris* and in vitro assays on shrimp primary cell cultures and the fish cell line epithelioma papulosum cyprini (EPC). Toxic effects of ECPs were demonstrated for all pathogenic *Vibrio* strains tested both in vivo and in vitro, but for shrimp only; no effect was observed on the fish cell line. ECP toxicity for New Caledonian *V. penaeicida* was found only after cultivation at low temperature (20°C) and not at higher temperature (30°C). This points to the fact that ‘Syndrome 93’ episodes are triggered by temperature drops. The assays used here demonstrate the usefulness of primary shrimp cell cultures to study virulence mechanisms of shrimp pathogenic bacteria.

**Key Words:** Vibrio · *Vibrio penaeicida* · Shrimp · Extracellular products · Temperature

**Introduction**

Vibriosis is a major disease problem in shrimp aquaculture (Lightner 1988, Brock & Lea-Master 1992, Mohney et al. 1994). ‘Syndrome 93’ is a seasonal vibriosis caused by *Vibrio penaeicida* which affects juvenile *Litopenaeus stylirostris* (= *Penaeus stylirostris*) in grow-out ponds in New Caledonia. Little is known about virulence factors of *Vibrio* strains pathogenic to shrimp, despite extensive studies on other *Vibrio* species, including species pathogenic to humans and some species pathogenic to fish or shellfish (Brown & Roland 1984, Nottage & Birkbeck 1986, 1987, Fouz et al. 1994, Pedersen et al. 1997). As exotoxins often play a major role in the pathogenesis of bacterial diseases (Finlay & Falkow 1997), this study was aimed at assessing the toxic activities of extracellular products (ECPs) of *V. alginolyticus*, *V. penaeicida* and *V. nigripulchritudo* strains pathogenic to shrimp, using in vivo injections in healthy juvenile *L. stylirostris*, and in vitro assays on shrimp primary cell cultures and the fish cell line epithelioma papulosum cyprini (EPC).

**Material and Methods**

Bacterial strains, culture conditions and preparation of toxic extracts. *Vibrio alginolyticus* strain SF 5, *V. penaeicida* strain AM 101 and *V. nigripulchritudo* strain AM 102 (Costa et al. 1998) were used in this study. Each strain was cultured in brain heart infusion (Bio-Mérieux, France) because this rich medium has been shown to promote the expression of exotoxins in some *Vibrio* strains (Nishibuchi & Seidler 1983). Salinity of the culture medium was adjusted to 25 ppt by the addition of artificial seawater salt (Instant Ocean®). Cultures were carried out in 8 ml of medium placed in sloped 25 ml screw-capped culture tubes for 48 h at different temperatures (usually 25°C, see below) under continuous shaking (preliminary trials showed that 2 d old cultures had the most toxic supernatant fluids). The

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ECPs were prepared by filtration through 0.22 μm pore size filters (Sartorius) of culture supernatants after centrifugation at 5000 × g for 10 min at 4°C, according to Newman & Feng (1982). Control preparations were prepared using the same protocol with sterile culture medium. Sterility of all preparations was checked by spreading 100 μl of each preparation onto marine agar (2216 E, Difco) petri dishes and incubating this for 48 h at 30 ± 0.5°C.

Effect of temperature on *Vibrio penaeicida* ECPs. Sudden temperature drops are known to trigger Syndrome 93 episodes in New Caledonia. Therefore the toxicity of ECPs from New Caledonian *V. penaeicida* AM 101 was evaluated for cultures incubated at high (30 ± 0.5°C) and low (20 ± 1°C) temperatures. ECPs from *V. penaeicida* AM 101 cultured for 48 h at 20 and 30°C, and 22 h at 30°C were prepared as described above.

Enzymatic activities associated with ECPs. Enzymatic activities of ECPs were evaluated using API-zym test kits (Bio Mérieux, France). Each strip was filled with 65 μl of the ECP to be tested. The strip was then incubated for 4.5 h at 30°C. Readings were performed according to the manufacturer’s instructions.

Cell lines. The fish cell line EPC, originating from carp epidermal herpes virus-induced hyperplastic lesions, was provided by CNEVA (Laboratoire de Pathologie des Animaux aquatiques, Brest, France). Shrimp cells were prepared from 15 juvenile (10 to 15 g) female penaeid shrimp *Litopenaeus stylirostris* supplied by IFREMER-COP (Tahiti, French Polynesia).

The culture media consisted of (1) fish cells: Eagle’s minimal essential medium (MEM, Sigma) buffered by 0.16 M Tris-HCl, pH 7.4 and supplemented with 10% foetal bovine serum (FBS) plus 200 i.u. penicillin and 200 μg streptomycin ml⁻¹; (2) shrimp cells: M 199 Medium (Sigma). All media (1×) in powder were reconstituted with 0.1 M NaCl and 0.01 M Tris buffer and pH was adjusted to 8.0 with HCl. The routine holding media (HM) consisted of 1 × M 199 medium with 1% of antibiotic-antimycotic solution (Sigma) containing 10⁴ units ml⁻¹ penicillin, 10 mg ml⁻¹ streptomycin, 25 μg ml⁻¹ amphoteracin and supplemented with 10% FBS (Sigma). All heat-stable salt solutions were sterilized by autoclaving for 30 min at 121°C. Heat-labile media were filter sterilized using sterile 0.22 μm pore size filters (OSI, France).

Cell isolation and primary cultures. Primary cell cultures of ovary cells and haemocytes from *Litopenaeus stylirostris* were obtained as previously described (Le Groumellec et al. 1995). Briefly, shrimp were anesthetized by being dipped in cold 5% hypochloride solution for 5 min. The haemolymph (100 to 500 μl) was withdrawn from the ventral sinus using a 1 ml syringe, 26 gauge needle, containing an equal volume of anti-coagulant solution (30 mM sodium citrate, 100 mM glucose, 350 mM NaCl, and 10 mM EDTA; pH 7). Ovaries were dissected out, washed twice in sterile medium (1×) with antibiotics (4 or 10×) during 1 h and then minced into pieces less than 1 mm in diameter with Pascheff scissors. Ovary fragments were directly transferred to 35 × 10 mm culture dishes (Nuncio Delta) containing 1.5 ml HM. Cultures were incubated at 26 ± 1°C and observed with a Leitz DMIL inverted microscope. Cell viability was determined using the trypan blue (1%) dye exclusion test.

In vitro assays for detection of toxic activities. The effect of the ECPs of the different *Vibrio* strains was assayed in vitro on shrimp ovarian and haemocyte primary cell cultures and EPC cell line cultures. Before determining the cytopathic effects of ECPs to primary cell cultures, the culture medium was replaced with fresh HM supplemented with antibiotics and FBS. Either an ECP preparation or control medium (5 μl) was then added to the cell culture dishes (1.5 ml). After 20 h of incubation for shrimp cells and 48 h for EPC cells, the cultures were fixed and stained using Giemsa’s stain (30 s). The preparations were then observed for cytopathic effects using normal light microscopy. Each test was performed with 3 replicates.

In vivo assays for detection of toxic activities. Healthy juvenile *Litopenaeus stylirostris* (10 to 20 g mean weight) originating from the experimental Station d’Aquaticulture de Saint Vincent (IFREMER, New Caledonia) were injected intramuscularly with 50 μl of either an ECP preparation or control medium. Between 5 and 7 injected shrimp were placed in 30 l aquaria filled with filtered seawater (25 ± 2°C; 35 ± 2 ppt salinity). Each experiment was conducted in at least 3 aquaria (i.e. 15 to 21 shrimp). Mortality was recorded over a 3 d period. Total haemocyte counts (THC) were performed as described by Le Mouillac et al. (1997) on surviving C-stage animals at the end of this 3 d period. When mortality was excessive, a similar assessment of THC was conducted after a shorter period post injection.

Results of both mortality and THC measurements were analysed using StatView® software.

**RESULTS**

*In vivo assays*

With *Vibrio* strains cultured at 25°C

Survivals of ECP-injected shrimp are presented in Fig. 1. The ECPs from *Vibrio nigr pulschrutudo* AM 102 was lethal to *Litopenaeus stylirostris*; all injected shrimp died within a 24 h period following injection (χ² = 56.46; p < 0.001). Lethal toxicity was not demonstrated in vivo
for *V. penaeicida* AM 101 ($\chi^2 = 3.37; p = 0.12$) and *V. alginolyticus* SF 5 ($\chi^2 = 0.08; p = 0.78$) cultured at 25°C. Total haemocyte counts did not demonstrate any toxic activity for *V. penaeicida* AM 101 and *V. alginolyticus* SF 5 supernatants ($F = 0.10; p = 0.91$). The THC from control and *V. nigripulchritudo* ECP-injected animals are presented in Fig. 2. A significant decrease in THC was observed in *V. nigripulchritudo* ECP-injected shrimp 3 h after injection ($t = 5.14; p < 0.01$). At the end of the experiment, the surviving shrimp showed a 3-fold decrease in THC compared to control shrimp ($t = 3.52; p < 0.01$). This result suggested the possible presence of haemocytolytic activity in the ECPs from *V. nigripulchritudo* AM 102.

With *Vibrio penaeicida* cultured at 20 or 30°C

The effect of culture temperature on *Vibrio penaeicida* AM 101 ECP toxicity is shown in Table 1. Cultures
Table 1. Survival of *Litopenaeus stylirostris* injected with ECPs from *Vibrio penaeicida* AM 101 cultured at different temperatures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Culture temperature (°C)</th>
<th>Initial cell concentration (CFU ml⁻¹) (culture duration [h])</th>
<th>No. of injected shrimp (no. of aquaria)</th>
<th>Survival of ECP-injected shrimp (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>10⁷ ² (48 h)</td>
<td>42 (6)</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>10⁷ ⁹ (22 h)</td>
<td>42 (6)</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>10⁷ ⁹ (48 h)</td>
<td>42 (6)</td>
<td>0*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>21 (6)</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Median time to death: 12.5 h*

Table 2. Cytopathological effects on cell cultures incubated with ECPs of shrimp-pathogenic *Vibrio* strains that were cultured at 25°C (Giemsa's stain). EPC: epithelioma papulosum cyprini

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ECP origin</th>
<th>Fish cell line EPC</th>
<th><em>Litopenaeus stylirostris</em> ovary cells</th>
<th><em>Litopenaeus stylirostris</em> haemocytes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>V. penaeicida</em> AM 101</td>
<td>Normal</td>
<td>Altered cell structure, naked nuclei, karyorrhexis</td>
<td>Obliteration of cellular boundaries, karyorrhexis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>V. nigripulchritudo</em> AM 102</td>
<td>Normal</td>
<td>Fragmented cytoplasm, karyorrhexis and marginted chromatin</td>
<td>Naked nuclei and fragmented cytoplasm, obliteration of cellular boundaries, flocculated cytoplasm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>V. alginolyticus</em> SF 5</td>
<td>Normal</td>
<td>Cells surrounded by lipid drops</td>
<td>Fragmented cytoplasm and marginted chromatin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control (no ECPs)</td>
<td>Normal</td>
<td>Normal</td>
<td>Normal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In vitro assays

None of the ECPs of *Vibrio* strains pathogenic to shrimp were cytotoxic for the fish cell line EPC. By contrast, cytopathic effects caused by ECPs from *Vibrio* strains pathogenic to shrimp were observed in cell monolayers derived from haemocytes and ovarian tissue (Fig. 3). All ECPs induced cytopathic effects in haemocyte primary cell cultures. Obliteration of cellular boundaries, karyorrhectic nuclei and marginted chromatin were noticed after Giemsa staining (Fig. 3, Table 2). In primary cultures of ovarian cells, the most significant cytopathic effects were induced by ECPs from *V. penaeicida* AM 101 and *V. nigripulchritudo* AM 102; ECPs from *V. alginolyticus* SF 5 induced much less of a cytopathic effect in these cultures (Fig. 3, Table 2).

DISCUSSION

Toxicity of ECPs was demonstrated for shrimp-pathogenic *Vibrio* strains by *in vitro* assays. The inevitable...
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contamination of the ECPs by some lipopolysaccharide (LPS) might be responsible for some of the alterations observed in haemocyte primary cell cultures, possibly via activation of the prophenoloxidase system (Söderhäll & Häll 1984). On the other hand, the cytopathic effects observed in ovarian cells were most probably due to the toxic effect of other components of the ECPs, even though some haemocytes were inevitably present in these cultures. Using in vivo assays, ECP toxicity was demonstrated only for the very pathogenic V. nigripulchritudo AM 102 and for V. penaeicida AM 101 cultured at cooler temperatures (20°C). Their ECPs were lethal for shrimp. The toxic factor present in V. penaeicida AM 101 was demonstrated to be heat-labile and might correspond to an exotoxin since LPSs are relatively heat-stable. Haemolysins have been demonstrated in various Vibrio strains (Rodrigues et al. 1993), including strains pathogenic to fish (Torranzo et al. 1983) and shellfish (Nottage & Birkbeck 1987), and have frequently been correlated with virulence (Kreger 1984, Fouz et al. 1993, Chakraborty et al. 1997, Fiore et al. 1997). Proteases have also been implicated as virulence factors in various Vibrio strains pathogenic to fish (Norqvist et al. 1990) or shrimp (Lee et al. 1997, Liu & Lee 1999). The toxic activities we describe here seem to be specific, as no cytopathic effect of Vibrio strains pathogenic to shrimp was noted with the fish cell line tested. These in vitro assays demonstrate the usefulness of primary cell cultures from penaeid shrimp in the study of virulence mechanisms and especially the cytotoxic factors of shrimp bacterial pathogens. Thus, in vitro assays appear more sensitive than in vivo assays. A wide range of enzymatic activities were demonstrated in the ECPs but it was not possible to link one specific enzymatic pattern with the toxic activity. Though most of these exoenzymes are considered as putative virulence factors by some authors (Borrego et al. 1996), their presence in culture supernatants could not be related to virulence in the present study.

The excretion of exotoxins has been demonstrated to be phase-dependent in various bacterial species or isolates, including Pseudomonas aeruginosa (Liu 1957) and Vibrio vulnificus (Kreger & Lockwood 1981). We also found that ECP toxicity for some V. penaeicida clones was phase- or temperature-dependent. Temperature is often associated with regulation of virulence factors in bacterial pathogens (Finlay & Falkow 1997). However, virulence often increases when the temperature increases. In this study, ECP virulence was observed when the temperature decreased. The physiological significance of this phenomenon remains to be studied, but could correspond to an adaptive response to cold temperatures, as demonstrated in V. vulnificus by Bryan et al. (1999). It was not possible here to determine whether V. penaeicida AM 101 ECP toxic factors were not produced at higher temperatures or whether they were simply degraded in the culture broth by an exoenzyme excreted (or active) at higher temperatures. However, the occurrence of ECP toxicity in cultures incubated at low temperatures seems to correlate with the occurrence of Syndrome 93 episodes after temperature drops.

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