Sequence Comparison of the N Genes of Five Strains of the Coronavirus Mouse Hepatitis Virus Suggests a Three Domain Structure for the Nucleocapsid Protein

MONICA M. PARKER AND PAUL S. MASTERS

Wadsworth Center for Laboratories and Research, New York State Department of Health, Albany, New York 12201–0509

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To obtain information about the structure and evolution of the nucleocapsid (N) protein of the coronavirus mouse hepatitis virus (MHV), we determined the entire nucleotide sequences of the N genes of MHV-A59, MHV-3, MHV-S, and MHV-1 from cDNA clones. At the nucleotide level, the N gene sequences of these viral strains, and that of MHV-JHM, were more than 92% conserved overall. Even higher nucleotide sequence identity was found in the 3' untranslated regions (3' UTRs) of the five strains, which may reflect the role of the 3' UTR in negative-strand RNA synthesis. All five N genes were found to encode markedly basic proteins of 454 or 455 residues having at least 94% sequence identity in pairwise comparisons. However, amino acid sequence divergences were found to be clustered in two short segments of N, putative spacer regions that, together, constituted only 11% of the molecule. Thus, the data suggest that the MHV N protein is composed of three highly conserved structural domains connected to each other by regions that have much less constraint on their amino acid sequences. The first two conserved domains contain most of the excess of basic amino acid residues; by contrast, the carboxy-terminal domain is acidic. Finally, we noted that four of the five N genes contain an internal open reading frame that potentially encodes a protein of 207 amino acids having a large proportion of basic and hydrophobic residues.

Coronaviruses are a family of enveloped, single-stranded, positive-sense RNA viruses that are important respiratory, neurologic, and enteric pathogens for humans and domestic animals (1). Having the largest genomic coding capacities among RNA viruses (at least 27 kb) as well as a unique strategy of RNA replication, coronaviruses represent very unusual and interesting molecular biological entities (2, 3). To gain insight into the roles played by the coronavirus nucleocapsid (N) protein during viral infection, we have been characterizing this protein in the well-studied coronavirus mouse hepatitis virus (MHV).

One approach to understanding protein structure and function is to chart evolutionarily permissible changes among closely related proteins. To this end, we have cloned and sequenced the N genes of four strains of MHV: MHV-A59, MHV-3, MHV-S, and MHV-1. Although closely related, these viruses have distinct histories, most notably, separate times and geographic loci of isolation and different mouse strains of origin (4–7). As well, the N proteins of these MHV strains exhibit considerable electrophoretic mobility variation on sodium dodecyl sulfate–polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis (SDS–PAGE) (data not shown; Refs. (8–10)), suggesting differences in protein size or amino acid composition.

Multiple cDNA clones, prepared from poly(A)-containing RNA from infected mouse 17 clone 1 cells, were used to determine the nucleotide sequences of the N genes of MHV-A69, MHV-1, MHV-3, and MHV-S. MHV-A59 was taken as our reference strain because its sequence had been previously reported (11, 12) and because our heat-stable variant of this strain is the parent of a number of temperature-sensitive mutants that we plan to characterize in future work (L. S. Sturman et al., manuscript in preparation). With the exception of the final 71 nt of the 3' untranslated region (3' UTR, see Fig. 1), the entire sequence of this N gene was determined in both directions at least once. At all positions where differences occurred between our sequence and the previously reported sequence (nt 441, 784, 1317, 1399, and 1481–1483), we verified the difference on at least two additional independent cDNA clones.

Similarly, the entire N gene sequences of MHV-1, MHV-3, and MHV-S were determined in both directions at least once. At all positions where a difference occurred with respect to our prototypic MHV-A59 sequence (Fig. 1), this change was verified on at least two additional independent cDNA clones. All cDNA clones were in agreement at all positions examined with the following exceptions: nt 1317 of MHV-A59, for which
which diverge by no more than 3 nt over a total span of
the construction of the cDNA clones.

T was read on four clones and A on one clone; nt 1279
of MHV-3, T on five clones and C on one clone; nt 293
of MHV-S, C on three clones and T on one clone;
nt 416 of MHV-S, C on three clones and T on one clone;
nt 638 of MHV-S, A on four clones and G on one clone;
and nt 134 of MHV-1, G on two clones and T on one
clon. Thus, for these seven nucleotides, the bases
given in Fig. 1 represent consensus sequences. The
apparent disagreements at these positions most likely
reflect the error rate either of the MHV RNA-dependent
RNA polymerase, which generated the original tran-
scripts, or of reverse transcriptase, which was used in
the construction of the cDNA clones.

An alignment of the four determined MHV nucleotide
sequences, together with the previously reported N
gene sequence of MHV-JHM (16), is presented in Fig.
1. All five N genes are more than 92% homologous. In
pairwise comparisons, the two most similar sequences
are those of MHV-A59 and MHV-3: the most distant
are those of MHV-1 and either MHV-A59 or MHV-3 (Ta-
ble 1). The greatest densities of nucleotide differences
among the N genes are in two regions corresponding
to nt 414–486 and nt 1141–1214 of the MHV-A59 se-
quence. For the most distant strains, 50% of the nucle-
otide differences are clustered in these segments,
which, combined, represent less than 8% of either se-
quen. By contrast, the most conserved portion of the
N genes occurs in the 3' untranslated regions (UTRs),
which diverge by no more than 3 nt over a total span of
301 nt. This degree of sequence identity, which ex-
ceeds that of any portion of the N gene coding region,
may reflect some functional constraint on the 3' UTR,
which presumably acts as a recognition site for the viral
RNA polymerase during negative-strand RNA syn-
thesis.

An alignment of the deduced amino acid sequences
of the N proteins of the five MHV strains is shown in

![Fig. 1. Nucleotide sequence comparison of the N genes of five strains of MHV. The heat-stable strain of MHV-A59 used in this study was
obtained from Dr. Lawrence Sturman, Wadsworth Center for Laboratories and Research. MHV-3 was from Dr. Kathryn Holmes, Uniformed
Services University of the Health Sciences, and, in turn, had been obtained from Dr. Abigail Smith, Yale University. MHV-S and MHV-1 were
originally from Dr. John Parker, Microbiological Associates. Libraries of cDNA clones were generated from poly(A)-containing infected cell RNA
carried out by a variation of the dideoxy chain termination method of Sanger et al. (15) using modified T7 DNA polymerase (Sequenase, U.S.
Biochemical). The synthetic oligodeoxynucleotide primers used for sequencing corresponded to nt 77–93, 328–345, 577–597, 827–847,
vectors (Promega), and sequencing was primed with oligodeoxynucleotides corresponding to the SP6 or T7 RNA polymerase promoters. The
MHV-A59, -3, -S, and -1 sequences were determined in this work, except for nt 1596–1666 of MHV-A59, which is taken from Armstrong et al.
(17). The MHV-JHM N sequence is from Skinner and Siddell (16). Spaces indicate positions for which the nucleotide is identical to that of MHV-
A59. Nucleotides are numbered from the first base of the N gene coding region; 3' polyadenylate tails are omitted. Hyphens indicate gaps
introduced to maximize the alignment of sequences. The N protein initiation and termination codons are double-underlined. The initiation and
termination codons of the major internal open reading frame are single-underlined.

<table>
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<th>TABLE 1</th>
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<td><strong>N Gene Nucleotide and Amino Acid Sequence Differences</strong></td>
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<sup>a</sup> Gaps in the sequence alignments are counted as differences.

Fig. 2. All five N genes encode proteins of 454 or 455 residues, having molecular weights ranging from 49.6 to 49.7 kDa. Thus, the apparent size differences observed among them (data not shown; Refs. (8–10)) probably reflect differences in amounts of bound SDS or residual secondary structure under the conditions of SDS–PAGE. Alternatively, the variation in electrophoretic mobilities may indicate different types or extents of post-translational modification.

All five N proteins possess at least 94% sequence identity in pairwise comparisons (Table 1). All have the salient features noted previously for N of MHV-A59 and MHV-JHM: a large excess of basic residues over acidic residues (calculated pl's of 10.4–10.6); numerous serine residues, some of which are potential phosphorylation targets (17, 18); and an acidic carboxy terminus, in contrast to the rest of the molecule (11, 16).

As with the nucleotide sequences, the divergences among the amino acid sequences are clustered in two regions, corresponding to amino acids 140–162 and
MHV-A59 MSFVPGQENA QGRSSSVNRA QGNILKKTTH ADQTEROPPN QNRGRRHQPQ QTATTTQNSG 60
MHV-3 G
MHV-S S
MHV-1 AS S
MHV-JHM AG

MHV-A59 SSVPHYSWS GI'TQFQK6KE FQFAEGQ6VP IAN7PASEQ KGKHYRHRR SFKTPDQQK 120
MHV-3 VQ
MHV-S Q
MHV-1 Q
MHV-JHM Q

MHV-A59 LLPRHYYY LGTOPHAGAS YGDSIEGQFQ VNSQADTN RSDIVEROPS SHEAPTRFA 180
MHV-3
MHV-S
MHV-1
MHV-JHM

MHV-A59 PGTVLPQFY YEGSRSAPA SRSQSRQSR GPNNRASSS NQRQPASTVK PDMAELAAL 240
MHV-3
MHV-S
MHV-1
MHV-JHM

MHV-A59 VLAKLGKDAG QPKQVTKOSA KEVROKILNK PROKRTPNKP CPVCQCFGKR GPNQNFGGSE 300
MHV-3
MHV-S
MHV-1
MHV-JHM

MHV-A59 MLKLQTSDPQ FPILAEAPLT VQAFFGSKL ELYKENSQGA DEPTKDVYEL QYSGARFDS 360
MHV-3
MHV-S
MHV-1
MHV-JHM

MHV-A59 TLPGPETIMK VLNENLNAO K-DQGADVVS PKPQKRGGRO AQEKKDEVQ VSVKPKSSV 419
MHV-3 419
MHV-S 419
MHV-1 420
MHV-JHM 420

MHV-A59 QRNVSRELTP EDRSLLAQIL DQGVPPQGLE QDSN V 454
MHV-3 454
MHV-S 455
MHV-1 455
MHV-JHM 455

FIG. 2. Amino acid sequence comparison of the N proteins of five strains of MHV. The deduced MHV-A59, -3, -S, and -1 N sequences are from this work. The deduced MHV-JHM N sequence is taken from Skinner and Siddell (16). Spaces indicate positions for which the amino acid is identical to that of MHV-A59. The hyphen indicates a gap introduced to maximize the alignment of sequences. The two clustered regions of amino acid differences are boxed.

381–405 of the MHV-A59 sequence. For the most divergent pair of proteins, those of MHV-A59 and MHV-JHM, 63% of the amino acid differences are concentrated in these two portions of N, which together make up only 11% of the molecule. This distribution of residue changes, shown graphically in Fig. 3, suggests a model for the MHV N protein in which three conserved structural domains (basic, basic, and acidic) are tethered to each other by two regions of variable amino acid composition (designated A and B). We suggest that A and B have less constraint on their amino acid sequences and principally serve as spacers connecting the three conserved domains. In contradistinction, domains I, II, and III appear to tolerate few amino acid changes, implying that most changes in these regions impair the functioning of the molecule. This model is supported by two further observations. First, we have characterized a temperature-sensitive N protein mutant of MHV-A59 that has a deletion almost exactly coincident with spacer B, indicating that, at least at the permissive temperature, the presence of this region is not absolutely required for N protein function (C. A. Koetzner et al., unpublished results). Second, in an in vitro assay system, domains I and III were found to be dispensable for the binding of N protein to RNA, suggesting that the RNA-binding characteristic of N resides in domain II (P. S. Masters, manuscript in preparation). Thus, the domains inferred from our amino acid sequence comparison may be functionally separable as well as structurally distinct.

It is noteworthy that the nonconserved residues in spacers A and B tend to vary among a limited set of
two or three alternatives (Fig. 2). This might have suggested that these two regions are required to vary coordinately: i.e., an “A59-like” spacer A must always pair with an A69-like spacer B and a “JHM-like” spacer A must always pair with a JHM-like spacer B. However, the N protein of MHV-S clearly rules out this possibility, since this N protein has a JHM-like spacer A and an A59-like spacer B (Figs. 2 and 3). Thus, the MHV-S N gene is likely to have arisen from a recombination event between two ancestral viruses: one having an N gene more similar to MHV-A59 and MHV-3 and the other having an N gene more similar to MHV-1 and MHV-JHM. RNA recombination among murine coronaviruses has been shown to occur both in tissue culture and in the brains of doubly infected animals (19, 20). All five N gene sequences compared here, then, appear to be accounted for by either drift or recombination plus drift from two prototype genes.

Four of the five MHV genes in Fig. 1 contain a potentially significant internal open reading frame (ORF) in the +1 reading frame relative to the N protein ORF, beginning at nt 65 and terminating at nt 688. In each case, the protein encoded by this ORF is 207 residues in length (22.6–22.9 kDa) and is distinguished by a large excess of basic residues (calculated pl’s of 10.6–11.1) as well as a relatively high (17%) leucine content (Fig. 4). The MHV-JHM N gene contains a very similar ORF in the same position, but this is interrupted by a stop codon following the 16th amino acid residue. For all of the N genes, the start codon for the internal ORF occurs in a strong context for translation initiation, whereas the N protein start codon (nt 1–3) and an intervening start codon (nt 26–28) both fall in suboptimal contexts. Thus, it is possible that the internal ORF may be translated by means of a “leaky scanning” mechanism (21). Leucine-rich internal ORFs also have been noted within the N genes of bovine coronavirus (22) and human coronavirus 229E (23). The significance of these potential polypeptides awaits determination of
whether any of them are actually synthesized in coronavirus-infected cells.

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REFERENCES