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Published in:
Journal of Hospital Infection

DOI:
10.1016/j.jhin.2019.06.006

Published: 30/09/2019

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

Candida auris exhibits resilient biofilm characteristics *in vitro*: implications for environmental persistence

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Running title: Phenotypic survival strategies of *Candida auris*

Key words: *Candida auris*, disinfection, surface, biofilm

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Abstract

Surfaces within healthcare play a key role in the transmission of drug-resistant pathogens. *Candida auris* is an emerging multi-drug resistant yeast which has the ability to survive for prolonged periods on environmental surfaces. Here we show that the ability to form cellular aggregates increases survival after 14 days, which coincides with the upregulation of biofilm-associated genes. Additionally, the aggregating strain demonstrated tolerance to clinical concentrations of sodium hypochlorite and remain viable 14 days' post treatment. The ability of *C. auris* to adhere and persist on environmental surfaces emphasises our need to better understand the biology of this fungal pathogen.

Introduction

Since its discovery in 2009, *Candida auris* has quickly emerged as a prolific nosocomial pathogen, responsible for a number of simultaneous outbreaks globally [1]. It is of considerable interest given the difficulties associated with identifying and treating this organism and its association with life-threatening infections and high mortality rates.

A key attribute of its pathogenic repertoire is its ability to survive and persist in the environment, yet the methods employed by this multi-drug resistant pathogen to disseminate throughout healthcare environments are still not fully understood. This has profound implications for decontamination and infection control protocols. Therefore, understanding the mechanisms of spread and survival in the hospital environment is critical, particularly as it is able to persist on hospital fomites, extensively colonise individuals and also survive as biofilms [2, 3]. Although traditionally biofilms are associated with formation on an indwelling medical device or on a mucosal substrate, recent investigations have suggested that these communities can facilitate residence and survival upon surfaces within a clinical setting [4].

Despite the obvious lack of nutrients, these communities adapt to survive and display increased tolerance to both heat and conventional disinfection treatments compared to a free floating, equivalent cell [5]. *C. auris* has been shown to readily transmit between hospital equipment such as reusable temperature probes and patients suggesting limitations of current infection control strategies (ref). Commonly used disinfectants have been shown to be highly effective when tested in suspension, yet our previous data indicates that adherent *C. auris* cells can selectively tolerate biocides including sodium hypochlorite and peracetic acid, in a substrate dependent manner [2].

Given the lack of knowledge of survival strategies utilised by *C. auris*, we herein investigated the potential of phenotypic traits of biofilm formation and cellular aggregation that may aid environmental persistence and survival.

Material and Methods

Microbial growth and standardisation

C. auris clinical isolates NCPF 8973 (single cells) and NCPF 8978 (aggregates) were used throughout this study, with phenotypes determined visually using microscopy as previously described [6]. For survival experiments, *Candida glabrata* ATCC 2001 and *Candida parapsilosis* NCPF 8334 were used as reference species. All strains were stored and maintained on Sabouraud dextrose (SAB) agar (Oxoid, Hampshire, UK) at 4˚C prior to propagation in yeast peptone dextrose (YPD; Sigma-Aldrich, Dorset, UK) medium overnight at 30˚C. Cells were washed by centrifugation in phosphate buffered saline (PBS; Sigma-Aldrich), and standardised to desired concentration in selected media after counting using a haemocytometer.

Fungal survival assay

To assess the persistence of *Candida* species on dry, non-porous substrates methods were adapted from Welsh *et al* (2017) with slight modifications [7]. To simulate microbial spillages within the nosocomial environment, various growth conditions were used: PBS, artificial saliva (AS) and 10% fetal calf serum (FCS; Sigma-Aldrich, Dorset, UK). Cells were grown and standardised as described above to $1x10^8$ cells/mL in selected media. Standardised cell suspensions were added to Thermanox™ cover slips (Fisher Scientific, Loughborough, UK) and allowed to adhere for 90 minutes before removing media and washing to remove non-adherent cells. Following washing, biomass was subsequently removed from the cover slips via sonication in 1mL PBS in an ultrasonic water bath (Fisher Scientific, Loughborough, UK) at 35kHz for 10 minutes, defined as Day 0. In addition, cells were also maintained at ambient temperature for a period of 14 days after initial adherence. Following growth and sonication, biomass was serially diluted for viable cell quantification using the miles and misra colony counting technique.

Fluorescent Imaging

For microscopic analysis, dry biofilms were prepared for 14 days as described above. Following incubation, biofilms were stained with FUN-1 dye (20µM [ThermoScientific, Loughborough, UK]). The dye was added to the biofilms and

incubated in the dark at 37˚C for 30 minutes. Following staining, biofilms were washed 3 times with PBS, before images were captured and processed using an EVOS fluorescent microscope (ThermoScientific, Loughborough, UK).

Transcriptional analysis

C. auris cells were grown as described above and RNA was extracted as described previously [8]. In brief, cells were removed from substrates by sonication, before being homogenized using a bead beater and RNA extracted using the TRIzol™ method. Following clean up with the RNeasy minikit (Qiagen, Crawley, UK), cDNA was synthesized using the High Capacity RNA to cDNA kit (Life Technologies, Paisley, UK) as per the manufacturer's instructions. All primer sequences used for quantitative polymerase chain reaction (qPCR) are shown in supplementary Table 1. The following PCR thermal profiles were used: holding stage at 50˚C for 2 minutes, followed by denaturation stage at 95˚C for 10 minutes and then 40 cycles of 95˚C for 3 seconds and 60˚C for 15 seconds. Expression levels of each gene of interest were calculated using the ΔΔCt method, with expression normalised to the housekeeping gene *ACT*.

Disinfection susceptibility testing

For disinfection experiments, *C. auris* cells were standardised and prepared as described above in 10% FCS. Following the adhesion phase, non-adherent cells were removed through washing with PBS, before substrates were challenged with NaOCl at 1000 ppm (0.1%) for 5 and 10 minutes or 10000 ppm (1%) for 5 minutes, with NaOCl diluted to working concentration in sterile water. Active agents were neutralised with 5% sodium thiosulphate (Fisher Scientific, Loughborough, UK) for 10 minutes, which has previously been shown to have no detrimental effects on *C. auris* viability [2]. Viable cells were both quantified immediately (Day 0) after neutralisation and 14 days after treatment using the colony counting technique as described above.

Statistical analysis

Data distribution, statistical analysis and graph production was performed using GraphPad Prism (version 8; La Jolla, CA, USA). A Kruskal-Wallis with post-hoc

Dunns test was used to compare viable cell counts following desiccation. Student t-tests were used to compare cell recoveries following treatment. All experiments were performed in triplicate with differences in means were deemed significant if $p<0.05$.

Results

Biofilm formation is typically associated with treatment failure and the recurrence of chronic infections, however recent studies have suggested that it may also be employed as an environmental survival strategy of nosocomial pathogens. To test the theory of biofilm formation being employed as an endurance strategy of *C. auris*, we performed survival studies using two phenotypically distinct isolates based on their ability to form cellular aggregates. Similar to previous findings [7], *C. auris* was found to remain viable for at least two weeks within a dry environment, regardless of the organic material it was suspended in (Fig 1A). It was shown that aggregating cells survived considerably greater than their single-cell counter parts in PBS (>2.5 log CFU/mL; $P < 0.001$) and 10% FCS (>4 log CFU/mL; $P < 0.01$). Although not deemed statistically significant, the aggregating isolate was shown to recover over 2-log CFU/mL more viable cells than the single-celled isolate when suspended in artificial saliva. These findings were reinforced microscopically (Fig 1B), where aggregates of viable *C. auris* cells (red fluorescence) could be seen after 14 days following suspension in 10% FBS, compared to a sparsely populated surface with single cells which were not viable (green fluorescence). When compared to *C. glabrata* and *C. parapsilosis*, the single celled *C. auris* isolate was shown to yield significantly less viable cells than *C. glabrata* in both PBS ($p<0.001$) and AS ($p<0.001$). In addition, recovery of this isolate was also significantly less than that of *C. parapsilosis* in AS ($P < 0.01$). The aggregative *C. auris* isolate also yielded significantly less viable cells than *C. glabrata* in AS ($p<0.01$), however $>1 \times 10^4$ CFU/mL were recovered.

Given these observed differences between singled celled and aggregating strains of *C. auris*, we then assessed the potential role biofilm characteristics to confer these findings. Using transcriptional analysis of a panel of biofilm associated genes including genes involved in drug resistance (*Cdr1* and *Mdr2*), adhesion (*Als5* and *Hyr3*) and extracellular matrix (*Kre6* and *Exg*) were shown to be up-regulated in the aggregating *C. auris* phenotype (Fig 1C). Following 14 days of starvation, both drug resistance genes were up-regulated by 1.6 and 2.6 $\log_2$ fold change (*Cdr1* and *Mdr1* respectively) in the aggregative *C. auris* strain. In addition, the adhesin *Als5* (2.8 $\log_2$ fold change) and the glucan production protein *Kre6* (2.4 $\log_2$ fold change) also demonstrated increased expression in the aggregating strain compared to the single celled isolate.

Given the propensity of *C. auris* to survive for prolonged periods, we next tested the survival ability of the organism post disinfection treatment. Quantification immediately after NaOCl treatment revealed that viable *C. auris* cells were recovered regardless of exposure time or concentration, with the aggregating strain consistently yielding significantly more viable quantities irrespective of treatment condition (Fig 2). Interestingly, despite previously exposure to 1000ppm NaOCl for 5 min, greater than 1×10^3 CFU/mL of aggregating cells were recovered 14 days after treatment, compared to no recovery of viable single-celled equivalents (Fig 2A). However, following an increase in exposure time to 10 minutes (Fig 2B) or increase in NaOCl concentration to 10000ppm (Fig 2C), no viable *C. auris* cells were detected following 14 days' incubation.

Discussion

Microorganisms employ various survival strategies to adapt and aid persistence in various ecological niches, enhancing the likelihood of effectively establishing transmission of infection. Here we show that cellular aggregation and expression of biofilm like characteristics of *C. auris* can facilitate prolonged survival after disinfection processes.

Biofilm formation is typically associated with treatment failure and the recurrence of chronic infections, however recent studies have suggested that it may also be employed as an environmental survival strategy of nosocomial pathogens. It has been previously shown that *C. auris* can survive and persist on various substrates including steel and plastic for up to four weeks [7]. In accordance with previous studies, we have demonstrated that viable *C. auris* cells can be recovered 14 days after inoculation across a number of biologically relevant soiling agents. The aggregating strain of *C. auris* was shown to have comparable survival properties to *C. glabrata* and *C. parapsilosis* in PBS, with *C. glabrata* recovering more viable cells in AS, likely due to the fact that *C. glabrata* is a commensal of the oral microbiota.

The aggregation phenomena were first described by Borman *et al* (2016), and was shown to be to less virulent *in vivo* in comparison to a single celled isolate, likely due to an inability of these isolates to disseminate in host [6]. These phenotypes were initially hypothesised to be related with their associated genetic clade, however more recently, the ability to aggregate has been shown to be an inducible trait, with exposure to triazoles and echinocandins triggering single-celled isolates to form aggregates [9]. Although it is not as virulent, we have shown that an aggregative isolate has an enhanced survival capacity compared to a single-celled isolate and can continually persist for at least 2 weeks after exposure to clinical concentrations of NaOCl. The effect of the reversible switch in *C. auris* with regards to disinfection remains unknown, it could however be speculated that induction of aggregate formation from the single celled phenotype could be employed as a mechanism to facilitate environmental survival.

A recent study from Ledwoch and Maillard (2019) assessed the ability of a *C. auris* dry biofilm to withstand a panel of different disinfectants such as peracetic acid and chlorine dioxide [10]. In support with this and our previous study [2], they showed that adherent *C. auris* cells could selectively tolerate various different biocides, as well as significant levels of transferability post-treatment. The authors model used the *C. auris* type strain DSMZ 20192, which using traditional methodologies produces single cells, minimal levels of biofilm biomass and is susceptible to fluconazole (unpublished data). Therefore, it could be speculated that clinical isolates of this organism which can form more robust biofilms and have the capacity to aggregate, may have enhanced implications for both tolerance and transferability to treatment.

To confirm a role for biofilms in facilitating environmental persistence, a panel of biofilm associated genes, chosen based upon our group's previous transcriptional characterisation of *C. auris* biofilms were assessed [8]. These genes were highly expressed across both phenotypes, however comparative analysis revealed increased expression of approximately 2-fold of several of these genes which are involved in adhesion, extracellular matrix (ECM) production and efflux pumps. ECM production is a well-documented resistance mechanism in pathogenic fungal biofilms such as *C. albicans*. Increasing ECM production could provide the necessary protection for *C. auris* to survive extended periods of desiccation and retain viability following terminal disinfection.

In conclusion, this study reveals a survival mechanism employed by this emerging pathogenic yeast which can facilitate its environmental persistence, even after being challenged with NaOCl. Further studies understanding the underlying biology associated with the aggregative phenotype and dry surface biofilms will allow the development of more effective infection, prevention and control measures to control *C. auris* within the nosocomial environment.

Acknowledgments

This study has been funded by a research grant in 2017 by the European Society of Clinical Microbiology and Infectious Diseases (ESCMID) to L.S.

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Figure 1. *C. auris* cellular aggregates display biofilm characteristics to aid environmental survival

The ability of *C. auris* to survive for prolonged periods of time was compared to *Candida glabrata* and *Candida parapsilosis* (A). Fungal cells were allowed to adhere to plastic coverslips for 90 minutes in PBS, Artificial Saliva (AS) and 10% FCS before removing non adherent cells and media. Viable cells were quantified after 14 days using the miles and misra technique. *C. auris* communities initially adhered in 10% FBS and left for 14 days were imaged following staining with FUN-1 dye (B). Gene expression profiles of dry *C. auris* cells on day 0 and 14 was used to confirm up-regulation of biofilm associated genes following survival. (C). Positive fold changes indicate more up-regulation in aggregating cells and genes more highly up-regulated in single-celled *C. auris* are represented by negative fold changes.

Figure 2. Cellular aggregates of *C. auris* can survive for prolonged periods following NaOCl disinfection.

Survival was also monitored after a 14-day period following disinfection challenge with NaOCl. Viable cells of aggregating and single-celled *C. auris* strains were enumerated by CFU quantification following treatments with NaOCl at 1000ppm for 5 (A) and 10 minutes (B) and at 10000ppm for 5 minutes (C). Experiments were performed in triplicate on three separate occasions (*, $P < 0.05$ **, $P < 0.01$ comparing day 0; ###, $P < 0.0001$ comparing day 14), ND – not detected.