The Effect of Capsular Size of *C. neoformans* on Pathogenicity and Pathological Changes in Experimentally Infected Mice

1Kawkab A. Ahmed, 2Heidy Abo El Yazeed, 3Hosam Kotb, 4Mona Elshabrawy, 5Randa Alarousy and 2Mohamed Refai

1Department of Pathology, Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, Cairo University, Giza, Egypt
2Department of Microbiology, Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, Cairo University, Giza, Egypt
3Department of Reproductive Diseases, Animal Reproduction Research Institute
4Department of Microbiology and Immunology, National Research Centre, Giza, Egypt

*ran达尔ousi@yahoo.com*

Abstract: The present work was carried out to study the correlation of capsular size and pathogenicity of *C. neoformans* in experimentally infected mice. Various capsular sizes were induced by growing the standard strain of *C. neoformans* on media containing rosemary or thyme oil. Experimental infection of mice with the different phenotypes revealed that phenotype R with the large capsule caused signs of depression, loss of appetite and weight and the P. M. findings in this group of animals showed congested brain, haemorrhagic liver, congested lungs and spleenomegaly. when the mice were injected with cinnamon extract 24 hours post infection with the R phenotype. All mice showed normal activity, normal P. M. findings and clean histopathological profile for internal organs.


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Key words: *C. neoformans*, Experimental infection, Pathological findings

1. Introduction

The polysaccharide capsule is a major virulence factor of *C. neoformans*. The effect of the *C. neoformans* polysaccharide capsule on the host cells can be summarized as follows: it interferes with phagocytosis, blocks the recruitment of inflammatory cells, increases co-stimulatory molecules, suppresses the delayed-type-hypersensitivity response, and reduces the antibody production in response to fungal infection (Vecchiarelli, 2003).

The capsule, as well as the soluble polysaccharide released from the yeast cells during infection, plays a significant role in pathogenicity, because it protects the yeast cells from phagocytosis and from cytokines induced by the phagocytic process and suppresses both cellular and humoral immunity (Drouhet and Segretain, 1951; McGaw and Kozel, 1979 and Kozel and Gotschlich, 1982). A large capsule can block the opsonic effect of complement and anticyclococcal antibodies. It can limit production of nitric oxide (which is an inhibitor of cryptococcal cells) and interferes with the antigen presentation process (Murphy, 1996).

Studies on the role of the capsule in the interaction between *C. neoformans* and macrophages resulted in compelling findings, which were described by Harrison and Levitz (2002). Once it is internalized by macrophages, *C. neoformans* may grow and eventually lyse the macrophage, be killed by the macrophage, or live within the macrophage in equilibrium for an undetermined amount of time. In the lungs, all three outcomes are possible. Interestingly, the capsule plays an important role not only in the inhibition of phagocytosis but also in the inhibition of killing by macrophages.

Acapsular cryptococcal strains are not pathogenic (Chang and Kwon-Chung, 1994). On the other hand, although other cryptococcal species produce a similar capsule, they also are not pathogenic (De Baets et al., 2002). This suggested that the capsule is necessary but not sufficient for fungal cells to cause disease and that its ability to aid infection is enhanced by other virulence factors. This hypothesis was supported by reports showing that during human cryptococcosis, acapsular or poorly encapsulated strains can be isolated. Other cases of isolation of *C. neoformans* acapsular or small-capsule strains from patients with cryptococcosis have been reported (Harding et al., 1979; Ro et al., 1987 and Salkowski and Balish, 1991).

The aim of the present work was to study the correlation of capsular size and pathogenicity of *C. neoformans* in experimentally infected mice.

2. Materials and methods

**Strains:**

The standard strains of *C. neoformans* var. *grubii* serotypes A and var. *gattii* serotype C (Reg. no. 2041) were obtained from Kotb's collection.

Local strain (K 18) was kindly supplied by...
veterinarian Shimaa Yousef Abou-Elmagd. The strain was a pink – pigmented colony isolated from chicken droppings and confirmed in Animal Reproduction Researches Institute (ARRI), Giza, Egypt. This strain was examined as (P- phenotype).

**Oil agar media: (Alarousy, 2004)**

Dextrose 40.0 g  
Peptone 10.0 g  
Agar 20.0 g  
Chloramphenicol 50.0 g  
Distilled water up to 1000.0 ml  
Agar base was sterilized by autoclaving at 121 ° C, 15 lb / in ² for 20 min.  
Rosemary oil or thyme oil was sterilized by filtration before it had been added to the medium in a final concentration of 10%.

**Experimental animals (mice):**  
Seventy male mice weighing 80 g each were housed and supplied with a marketed ration and water. They were kept under observation for 1 week before starting the experiment.

**Material for histopathological examination:**  
- Formalin 10% (adwic) : absolute was diluted to 10% concentration by means of distilled water  
- Ethyl alcohol 70% -80% -90% -100% (Adwic) : absolute ethanol was diluted to 70% 80% and 90% concentration by means of distilled water  
- Xylene solution (Adwic).  
- Paraffin  
- Hematoxylen and eosin (H&E) stain  
- Gomori Silver stain (GMS).  
- Egg albumin

**Preparation of C. neoformans phenotypes**

- The original phenotype (O) was obtained by growing the reference strain (2041) on Sabouraud Dextrose agar medium with chloramphenicol.
- The large sized capsular phenotype (R) was obtained by growing the reference strain (2041) on rosemary oil / SDA medium with chloramphenicol.
- The small sized capsular phenotype (T) was obtained by growing the reference strain (2041) on thyme oil / SDA medium with chloramphenicol.
- Acapsular hyphal form phenotype (H) was obtained by prolonged preservation of the original reference strain (2041) (serotype A) in lyophilized form.
- The pink-coloured phenotype (P) was obtained by growing the isolated strain on SDA medium with chloramphenicol.

**Experimental infection:**

Seven groups of male mice, weighing about 80 gram each were used; each group of them contained 10 mice. Six groups were used for the proper experimental infection and the seventh group was kept as a control. Yeast concentrations were adjusted using the haemocytometer to count the yeast cells (1×10⁻⁵ - 1×10⁻⁷ / ml) in order to equalize the injected yeast cells rather than the capsule size.

Each mice of the first 4 groups was injected with 200 μl yeast cells suspension (I / V) of the respective phenotype (O, R , T and H). The fifth group (R’) was injected with 200 μl of cinnamon bark extract 24 hour post infection with the (R) phenotype and the sixth was injected with 200 μl of (P) suspension (pink colony phenotype). The last group was injected with sterile normal saline solution (I/V) and kept as a control.

**Clinical and P. M. examinations**

All the mice were observed to detect any abnormal clinical or behavioral signs as depression, off food or loss of appetite, over activity, nervous manifestations, weight loss or emaciation or swelling or edema in head.

Mice were observed daily for any sign of disease or abnormalities. Activity, weight loss or any clinical abnormalities appeared on mice were recorded. There were no deaths among mice. All mice from all groups were euthanized by the elapse of the second week post infection and their organs; brain, liver, spleen and lung were extracted for histopathological examination, and post mortem abnormalities of the extracted organs were recorded.

**Histopathological studies**

Specimens from brain, liver, spleen and lung were taken immediately after sacrification from all groups. Specimens were fixed in 10% buffered neutral formalin solution. The fixed specimens were then trimmed, washed and dehydrated in ascending grade of alcohol cleaned in Xylene embedded in paraffin sectioned (4-6 microliter thickness) and stained with Gomori silver stain (GMS), hematoxylen and eosin as routine stain

**3. Results**

P. M. findings of experimentally infected mice:
All mice remained alive during the 2 weeks of observation. The animals also infected with phenotype O strain showed normal activity, while those infected with phenotype R showed signs of depression, loss of appetite and weight.

The P. M examination revealed pale liver containing pus sac in mice infected with phenotype O (Photo 1), only slight deviations from the normal were seen in brain and lung as well as moderate enlargement of the spleen.

All mice of group R showed congested brain, haemorrhagic liver, congested lungs and moderate spleenomegally (Photos 2 & 3 & 4).

All mice of R/ group injected with cinnamon extract 24 hours post infection with yeast cells showed normal activity, normal P. M. findings and clear histopathological profile for internal organs.

The mice of group T showed signs of depression, loss of appetite and weight. The brain was congested; liver showed slight enlargement and dull appearance; lungs were slightly oedematous with mucoid material and spleen showed severe enlargement of the spleen (Photo 5) and liver. Mice of groups P and H showed normal activity. P. M. findings were mainly moderate to severe spleenomegally.

Microscopical appearance of Cryptococcus neoformans in the tissue:

In H&E stained tissue sections, the yeast cells of Cryptococcus neoformans stain pale blue to pink and ranged from 2 – 20 μm in diameter. They have relatively thin walls and are very pleomorphic, appearing round, oval, elliptical and crescent or cup – shaped cells of many shapes and sizes often are present in a single microscopic field.

The capsule of poorly encapsulated cells (as in phenotype T) may not be seen. The mucopolysaccharide capsules where obvious, appears as smoothly contoured, clear, unstained space or —halo surrounding the yeast cells. It does not stain with H&E.
The stained capsules may have a spinous or scalloped appearance as the result of the irregular contraction of the capsular material during formalin fixation. Cryptococci are also well demonstrated with the special fungus stains that colour the entire fungal cells. The number and distribution of fungal cells and the tissue response that they elicit vary from case to case.

Liver:
Microscopically, liver of control mice revealed the normal histological structure of hepatic lobule. Meanwhile, liver of mice from group (T) showed vacuolar degeneration of hepatocytes and perivascular leucocytic cells infiltration mainly macrophages and epithelial cells (Photo 6). Moreover, liver of mice from group (O) showed vacuolar degeneration of hepatocytes, focal area of hepatic necrosis associated with leucytic cells infiltration and focal hepatic hemorrhage dispersed the hepatocytes from each other. Liver of mice from group (R) showed focal area of hepatic necrosis associated with leucocytic cells infiltration. However, liver of mice from group (R') showed only vacuolization of hepatocytes. By GMS stain, black stained wide capsule of yeast like Cryptococcus in the hepatic tissue of mice from group (R) could be demonstrated (Photo 7).

Lung:
Microscopically, lung of control mice revealed no histopathological changes. Meanwhile, lung of mice from group (T) showed vacuolation of epithelial lining bronchiole, thickening of interstitial tissue with mononuclear inflammatory cells, desquamation of epithelial lining bronchiole with intraluminal soap – bubble yeast like Cryptococcus as well as focal infiltration with mononuclear inflammatory cells. Moreover, lung of mice from group (O) revealed soap – bubble appearance of Cryptococcus in the lumen of the bronchiole (Photo 8), pulmonary hemorrhage and hemosiderosis. Examined lung of mice from group (R) revealed hyperplasia of epithelial lining bronchiole associated with desquamation of epithelium and intraluminal soap – bubble appearance due to masses of Cryptococcus. Meanwhile, lung of mice from group (R') showed apparent normal lung tissue. By GMS stain, can demonstrate Cryptococcus yeasts of all phenotypes which vary in size and shape (rounded and crescentic) with black stained wide capsule in the alveoli (Photo 9).

Spleen:
Microscopically. Spleen of control mice
revealed no histological changes. Meanwhile, spleen of mice from group (T) showed deposition of eosinophilic protein material in the red pulp of the spleen. However, some examined spleen of mice from group (O) revealed no histological changes, while presence of multiple of megakaryocytes was noticed in examined spleen sections from the same previous group (O). No histological changes were noticed from spleen of mice from groups (R & R').

Brain:

Microscopically, brain of control mice revealed no histological changes. Meanwhile, brain of mice from group (T) showed neuronal degeneration, neuronophagia and focal gliosis (focal proliferation of glia cells). On the other hand, brain of mice from group (O) revealed pyknosis of neurons, perivascular cuffing with mononuclear cells, as well as marked cerebral hemorrhage. However, examined sections from group (R) showed pyknosis of neurons, cerebral hemorrhage and hemorrhage in Virchow Rubin space. Meanwhile, brain of mice from group (R') showed improvement in the histological picture as the brain sections showed only pyknosis of some neurons. By GMS stain we can demonstrate the yeast like *Cryptococcus* with black stained wide capsule (Photo 10).

Photo (10): Brain of mice from group (O) showing black stained wide capsule of *Cryptococcus neoformans* (GMS stain X1000)

4. Discussion

Although the tissue reaction in cryptococcosis varied considerably from organ to organ and from case to case, generally the difference was minimal. Frequently, only tissue macrophages were found, but in rare cases there might many giant cells and dense infiltration of plasma cells and lymphocytes. The livers of mice infected with phenotype (T) showed granulomatous tissue reaction which was composed of histocytes, giant cells, lymphocytes, some fibroblastic activity and yeast cells which were few and found within giant cells and histocytes. Another tissue reaction pattern, gelatinous one was also observed in the lungs of mice infected with original and large capsule size phenotypes (O) and (R) phenotypes respectively, gelatinous pattern was composed of masses of yeast cells, mucoid degeneration of the invaded tissue giving the appearance of soap – like appearance, while yeast cells in this pattern were found freely in the tissue (*Small et al., 1986*). During experimental infection done in the current study, there weren’t any mortality among the infected mice and this was explained by *Small et al. (1986)* as the capsule is necessary but not sufficient for fungal cells to cause disease, as its ability to aid infection is enhanced by other factors. Because *C. neoformans* varies greatly in size and shape, and its encapsulated forms are not always prominent, cryptococcosis should be considered in the histologic differential diagnosis of virtually any yeast infection. Generally, poorly encapsulated intracellular cryptococci stimulate a granulomatous inflammatory reaction (*Farmer and Komorowski, 1973*). Cryptococcal granulomas are composed of varying numbers of histocytes, giant cells, lymphocytes, plasma cells, neutrophils and fibroblasts. The tissue response to cryptococci is typically non suppurative. So, Neural generation was observed in brains of infected mice and their livers. Focal proliferation of glia cells (focal gliosis) was seen in brains, livers and lungs of mice infected with phenotype (T).

These features were not only observed in organs of mice infected with phenotype (T), but they were also seen in organs of those infected with phenotypes (P) and (H).

No haemorrhage was observed in organs of mice infected with phenotypes (T), (P) and (H), while in phenotypes (O) and (R) it was seen clearly. Necrosis was seen in most of infected cases and pyknosis of neurons due to cell death was seen in phenotypes (O) and (R). Beside pyknosis, vacuolar degeneration, hyperplasia associated with desquamation of epithelial lining of bronchioles were observed in these phenotypes – infected groups (O&R) and intraluminal soap – bubble appearance due to profuse masses of *Cryptococcus neoformans* was detected in all the examined tissues beside, perivascular leucocytic cell infiltration was seen in all examined organs.

According to Blackstock and Murphy (1997) and Blackstock *et al.* (1999), although the strain with reduced virulence was not able to increase its capsule size in the presence of CO2 as a factor aid in increasing the capsule size. That strain elicited a rapid inflammatory response in the host and was efficiently cleared from the lungs. Since many reports provided strong evidence that capsule
modulation is a process that plays an important role during infection. Several studies had found, however, that inducing infection with modulated strain with a large capsule gives no correlations with virulence (Littman and Tsubura, 1959; Dykstra et al., 1977 and Clancy et al., 2006). This lack of correlation is most probably due to the fact that capsule size does not predict the degree of encapsulation of a strain during infection. Furthermore, C. neoformans has multiple virulence factors that contribute to the overall virulent phenotype and it is possible that differences in non – capsule virulence factors expression affects the overall virulence potential to obscure a correlation with capsule size (MacClelland et al., 2006).

In addition, capsule size during infection varies according to the infected organ, the lung being the place where higher capsule size is found, which indicates that micro environments during infection have a great impact on the capsule size (Rivera et al., 1998).

Finally, the results obtained in the present study confirmed the fungicidal effect of cinnamon park extract and thus we may nominate cinnamon as commercial fungicidal agent and this is substantiated by the work of Hammer - Schmidt et al. (1993) and Hili et al., 1997).

Corresponding author
Randa Alarousy
Department of Microbiology and Immunology,
National Research Centre, Giza, Egypt
randaarousi@yahoo.com

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