Aspergillus fumigatus Antigen Detection in Sera from Patients at Risk for Invasive Aspergillosis

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We have developed an inhibition enzyme immunoassay (inhibition-EIA) to monitor for the occurrence of invasive aspergillosis (IA) in sera from 45 immunocompromised (IC) patients. The test uses rabbit polyclonal antibodies and a mixture of components from Aspergillus fumigatus, containing three predominant antigens with molecular weights of 18,000, 33,000, and 56,000. Circulating antigens were found in five of seven proven cases of IA due to A. fumigatus. In two of the five positive cases, antigenemia was detected with inhibition-EIA earlier than with X ray or other biological methods. No antigens were detected in the sera from two patients with proven IA due to Aspergillus flavus and Aspergillus terreus nor in the sera from four patients with probable IA. Circulating antigens were not detected in the control group, composed of 30 healthy adult blood donors. Four of the 32 at-risk patients examined, though they displayed no definite evidence of IA, gave a positive result in this test. The sensitivity, specificity, and positive predictive value of inhibition-EIA were 71.4, 94.4, and 71.2%, respectively. The data were compared with those obtained by a latex agglutination assay of galactomannan (GM) that was positive in only one patient with probable IA. The higher sensitivity obtained by inhibition-EIA may well be due to its ability to detect circulating antigens other than GM in the sera of IC patients with IA. Detecting these antigens may improve the diagnosis of IA, as they may serve as markers of this infection.

Invasive aspergillosis (IA) has been a significant cause of life-threatening opportunistic infections in immunosuppressed hosts (9). The incidence of IA, which is the second most common cause of fungal infection in this type of patient, varies from 0.5 to 25% (10, 17, 30, 38, 42). The reported mortality mainly varies from 50% to nearly 100% (9, 10, 22, 24, 38). The diagnosis is consequential, since an early diagnosis combined with adequate therapy may improve the clinical outcome in immunosuppressed patients (1, 6). However, establishing the diagnosis continues to be a major problem for the clinician, since the clinical symptoms of IA are not pathognomonic of the disease, while histological and culture confirmations are often difficult to obtain antemortem (8, 15). Moreover, the efficient techniques of imaging do not always allow adequate discrimination among the different etiologies involved in this type of symptoms. Furthermore, the typical form of serological evidence, that is, increased antibody levels, is usually not revealed in this type of patient. The detection of circulating Aspergillus antigens and detection of Aspergillus DNA (35, 44) are two of the most promising tools to diagnose IA in at-risk patients. Many studies report the detection of circulating antigens (11, 12, 14, 21, 29, 34–37, 41, 43, 46). A commercially available test, Pastorex Aspergillus (Sanofi Diagnostic Pasteur, Marnes-la-Coquette, France), can be very specific but appears to be relatively insensitive (45). In this study, we did not systematically use the Platelia Aspergillus kit, since it is more sensitive but less specific than the Pastorex system (5, 39, 40). Moreover, a recent study has suggested that heat-resistant galactomannan (GM) is not eliminated by the processes of food sterilization and may reach the circulation through damaged intestinal mucosa and cause false-positive results in tests to detect antigenemia (25). Therefore, in an effort to improve the diagnosis of IA, an inhibition enzyme immunoassay (inhibition-EIA) developed in our laboratory was selected for investigation. This system, which is thought to mainly detect antigens with Mr's of 18,000, 33,000, and 56,000, was compared to the Pastorex Aspergillus test for the detection of GM. The results obtained in each case were related to the clinical data.

Case definitions. IA, associated with an immunodebilitated condition (i.e., prolonged neutropenia for at least 10 days within the previous 2 months, immunosuppressive therapy within the last month, or a previous episode of fungal infection) and with persistent fever (>38°C) for at least 3 days, despite a broad-spectrum antibiotherapy, was diagnosed mainly by direct isolation and culture of the organism from broncho-pulmonary specimens and biopsies obtained by a sterile procedure (15). Additional diagnostic criteria included radiological disturbances (i.e., abnormal characteristic signs on chest radiography consistent with infection) obtained by the effective techniques of imaging or computed tomography.

Group I. In the context defined above, proven IA was diagnosed by histologic evidence of the presence of hyphae in tissue specimens and in vitro growth of Aspergillus species in culture.

Group II. Probable IA cases were defined as demonstrating at least one criterion from the context section and one major or two minor clinical criteria from an abnormal site consistent with infection and as presenting one of the following criteria: hyphae in fiber-endoscopic samples, positive Aspergillus culture

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from bronchoalveolar lavage fluid or bronchial aspirates, and testing positive for antigenemia with Pastorex *Aspergillus*.

**Group III.** Patients who were at risk for IA had only clinical evidence of infection. Possible IA cases were defined as meeting at least one criterion from the context section and one microbiological or clinical criterion of infection as cited above. In the present study, tests positive for antigenemia which were obtained by using inhibition-EIA were not considered in classifying patients, since this method was under evaluation.

**Patients.** Group I contained nine patients (three women and six men, ranging from 26 to 60 years of age) with proven IA (Table 1). Group II contained four patients (all men, ranging from 62 to 72 years of age) infected by *A. fumigatus*, with probable IA (Table 1). Group III contained 32 patients (16 women and 16 men, ranging from 10 to 76 years of age) at risk for IA (in this group, 26 patients had hematological disorders, six men, ranging from 26 to 60 years of age) with proven IA (Table 1) and 6 patients with proven IA (Table 1). Group III contained 32 patients (16 women and 16 men, ranging from 62 to 72 years of age) infected by *A. fumigatus*, with probable IA (Table 1). Group III contained 32 patients (16 women and 16 men, ranging from 62 to 72 years of age) infected by *A. fumigatus*, with probable IA (Table 1). Group III contained 32 patients (16 women and 16 men, ranging from 62 to 72 years of age) infected by *A. fumigatus*, with probable IA (Table 1). Group III contained 32 patients (16 women and 16 men, ranging from 62 to 72 years of age) infected by *A. fumigatus*, with probable IA (Table 1). Group III contained 32 patients (16 women and 16 men, ranging from 62 to 72 years of age) infected by *A. fumigatus*, with probable IA (Table 1). Group III contained 32 patients (16 women and 16 men, ranging from 62 to 72 years of age) infected by *A. fumigatus*, with probable IA (Table 1).

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and the reaction was stopped with 2NH₂SO₄. Circulating-human sera from control group “c”.

Positive and negative rabbit sera in the presence of the pool of was heated at 80°C for 30 min while the other aliquot remained 1:5 in 145 mM PBS containing 5% nonfat milk, 0.01% Triton m

Higher than the following cutoffs were considered positive: 0.44 (EIA), 1:80 (IFAT), and two arcs of precipitation (CIE).

The inhibition cutoff values of 22.9% and 34.9%, for heated and unheated sera were again incubated at 37°C for 30 min. After a new cycle of washing, absorbance at 492 nm (A492) was measured following incubation for 10 min in a solution of ortho-phenylenediamine–2HCl (3 mg/ml) and H₂O₂ (0.08%) in citrate buffer (pH 5.15), and the reaction was stopped with 2 N H₂SO₄. Circulating-antigen levels were estimated from a standard calibration curve plotting percentage of inhibition of antibody binding (% inh) versus amount of CF37 (0, 4, 40, 400, and 4,000 ng/ml). The inhibition cutoff values of 22.9% and 34.9%, for heated and unheated human sera, respectively, were determined from the A₄₉₂ of samples from the control group by using the average reading plus twice the standard deviation. The % inh was calculated by using the following equation: % inh = (1−Ax/Ac) × 100, where Ax is the difference in A₄₉₂ between the positive and negative rabbit sera in the presence of the test human serum “x” and Ac is the difference in A₄₉₂ between the positive and negative rabbit sera in the presence of the pool of human sera from control group “c”.

To detect circulating antigens of A. fumigatus, the parameters of inhibition-EIA were established by titration of CF37 antigen, goat anti-rabbit IgG peroxidase conjugate, and rabbit hyperimmune serum to CF27, CF37, and CF42 in the presence of a known amount of added antigen (Fig. 1). Optimal results were obtained with CF37 for coating the plates at 2 μg/ml, the peroxidase conjugate at 1:1,500, and the anti-CF27 rabbit serum at 1:1,000.

SDS-PAGE and Western blotting were carried out in order to determine which antigens were detected by inhibition-EIA. The mixture of antigens used for coating the plates contained major antigens with the following Mr: 62,000, 56,000, 50,000, 42,000, 33,000, and 18,000 (Table 2). The anti-CF27 rabbit serum used in the inhibition-EIA mainly recognized Mr of 56,000, 33,000, and 18,000. It is therefore probable that the inhibition-EIA, as used in this study, mainly detected these three antigens.

The antigens of A. fumigatus used for coating the plates in inhibition-EIA were positive in the Pastorex Aspergillus test at a 1:64 dilution. If the highest sensitivity of this test is assumed to occur (2), this dilution contains approximately 15 ng of GM per ml.

Circulating antigens of A. fumigatus were detected by inhibition-EIA only when heated serum samples from patients were used (Table 3). It is interesting to note that in the six samples obtained from patient number 1, negative inhibitions of 18 to 41.5% were observed when unheated sera were tested. In positive cases (Table 3), the antigen detection usually gave fluctuating levels of antigenemia in sera from immunodebilitated patients with IA (Fig. 2). However, in patients 3 and 8, all six samples were positive with a % inh between 27.4 and 40.3%. In two cases, antigen detection was earlier than with X ray or biological methods (Fig. 2). However, one case was diagnosed 10 days later, and the other two were diagnosed at the same time. In addition, the % inh due to circulating antigens varied from 24.9% to 40.3% (110 to 180 ng/ml) when unheated sera were tested. However, in patients 3 and 8, all six samples were positive with a % inh between 27.4 and 40.3%. In two cases, antigen detection was earlier than with X ray or biological methods (Fig. 2). However, one case was diagnosed 10 days later, and the other two were diagnosed at the same time. In addition, the % inh due to circulating antigens varied from 24.9% to 40.3% (110 to 180 ng/ml) when unheated sera were tested.

### Table 2. Mr of A. fumigatus antigens used in inhibition-EIA

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<th>Mr</th>
<th>Rabbit serum Anti-CF42⁺</th>
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<th>Control rabbit serum</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>62,000</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56,000</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50,000</td>
<td>±</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>±</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42,000</td>
<td>±</td>
<td>±</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33,000</td>
<td>±</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18,000</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>±</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
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</table>

⁺⁺, very positive band; ++, positive band; ±, slightly positive band; –, absent band.

Rabbit antisera to A. fumigatus culture fluid antigens used at a dilution of 1:100. CF37 is composed of these six antigens and GM detected by latex agglutination assay. Rabbit serum anti-CF27 recognized mainly three fractions. Inhibition-EIA that used CF37 and anti-CF27 detected mainly antigens with Mr of 56,000, 33,000, and 18,000.
were 0% and 25% [\(n = 4\)], respectively. In all other cases, this last test failed to detect any circulating antigens in patients' sera.

In group III, of the four cases positive by inhibition-EIA (Table 3), two were related to the transient presence of \textit{A. fumigatus} in the trachea and in the bronchoalveolar lavage. In the third case, the patient had significant variations in the levels of antibodies to \textit{A. fumigatus}. In the fourth case, the fungus was not found either on direct examination or in cultures. Therefore, the two first cases may be considered as possible IA, although only minor pathology was observed.

\textit{Aspergillus} antigens were not detected by inhibition-EIA in the sera of patients with proven IA who were infected with \textit{Aspergillus terreus} and \textit{Aspergillus flavus}.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>No. of patients</th>
<th>CAG (^a)</th>
<th>H-EIA</th>
<th>LA</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I(^b)</td>
<td>9(^d)</td>
<td>5(^f)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II(^b)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III(^c)</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>4(^g)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
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\(^a\) Group I, nine patients (44 serum samples) with proven IA.
\(^b\) Group II, four patients (9 serum samples) with probable IA.
\(^c\) Group III, 32 patients (62 serum samples) at risk for IA.
\(^d\) One patient was infected with \textit{A. flavus} and another one with \textit{A. terreus}. The other seven were infected with \textit{A. fumigatus}.
\(^e\) CAG, circulating antigen of \textit{A. fumigatus}; H-EIA, inhibition-EIA on heating sera; LA, latex agglutination assay (Pastorex \textit{Aspergillus}).
\(^f\) Seventeen positive serum samples.
\(^g\) Eight positive serum samples from four patients. Two of these patients may be classified as possible IA cases.

No false positive cases were obtained with the Pastorex \textit{Aspergillus} test in any group.

In the present study, antigenemia detection by inhibition-EIA could be used as a method to diagnose and monitor IA in patients at risk for aspergillosis. This is supported by the data obtained from proven and suspected IA cases. However, other methods can be used in other instances to diagnose the disorder more quickly, as mortality may be reduced with adequate, timely therapy. In probable cases of IA, antigenemia was not detected by inhibition EIA, and this could be an inconvenience of this method. In group III, inhibition EIA may be useful, since it may aid in the diagnosis and monitoring of possible cases of IA after antigenemia is detected in suspected patients, as was the case for two patients in our study with transient presence of \textit{A. fumigatus} in the trachea and in the bronchoalveolar lavage.

In this study, circulating antigens of \textit{A. fumigatus} detected by inhibition-EIA were most likely those with \(M_r\) of 56,000, 33,000, and 18,000, since rabbit serum anti-CF27 mainly recognized these three components on Western blots. Therefore, EIA with CF37 and anti-CF27 may detect antigens with \(M_r\) of 56,000, 33,000, and 18,000. The 56,000-\(M_r\) antigen of CF37 may be the same as the one described by Framatico and Buckley (13) who found that sera from patients with IA reacted against an antigen with an \(M_r\) of 58,000. In that study, Framatico and Buckley noted that this antigen may also be found in culture medium. In addition, Reichard et al. (33) characterized an extracellular serine proteinase from \textit{A. fumigatus} with an \(M_r\) of 32,000 to 33,000 which might be one of the components used for coating the plates in the present study. Moreover, Haynes et al. (18) detected two major antigens with \(M_r\)s of 18,000 and 11,000 in serial urine samples from patients who developed IA. Latgé et al. (23) described the antigen with an \(M_r\) of 18,000 as...
being secreted and present in the urine of patients with IA. In
the present study, Mc determination suggests that this antigen
with an Mc of 18,000 may also be part of the antigens detected
by inhibition-EIA. Thus, this test may detect several antigens
at the same time, which might explain the greater sensitivity of
the test compared to the latex agglutination assay based solely
on GM detection.

Theoretically, anti-CF37 seemed the most appropriate re-
agent for our test, but this proved not to be the case. This
discrepancy may be due to the immunological or cytotoxic (3, 26)
properties of the CF37 antigen which was involved in down-
regulation of anti-CF37 levels in rabbits after the last boost
data not shown). Moreover, this antigen is rich in chymotryp-
sin and catalase (data not shown). In addition, GM is also a
component of CF37, as demonstrated by the PastorexAspergil-
lus test but not by Western blotting, since this method can
detect proteins or glycoproteins. Even if GM is a component of
CF37, the inhibition-EIA plates were coated with approximately
1 ng of this macromolecule per ml, which is the limit of
detection of a sensitive EIA (5, 39, 40). As CF37 is composed
of several major antigens, GM is unlikely to be detected by
the inhibition-EIA. This hypothesis is supported by the fact that
the one serum sample which was positive in the PastorexAs-
pergillus test was negative by inhibition-EIA.

In all of the other proven IA cases, only inhibition-EIA gave
a positive result. In order to confirm the absence of GM from
the sera of these patients, a sensitive EIA (Platelia) was used
retrospectively in serum samples from five cases of proven IA,
and only one serum sample was found to be positive by this test
data not shown). The fact that inhibition-EIA was more sen-
titive than GM detection may be explained by the multiple
targets and by the fact that GM antigens are rapidly removed
from circulation by the formation of immune complexes and by
receptor-mediated endocytosis by Kupffer’s cells in the liver
(4). The low level of antigen detection is also thought to be due
to fluctuating levels of antigenemia (35, 39, 40). These fluctu-
ations have also been observed in the present study with CF37
antigens of A. fumigatus.

In the present study, the sensitivity of the assay is good
enough, given that IA was diagnosed despite the heteroge-
neous underlying diseases of these patients. However, serum
components and immune complexes can interfere with the
detection of circulating antigens by inhibition-EIA, since anti-
gens were detected in the samples only after heat treatment.
Many laboratories use only heated serum for detecting these
antigens (11, 29, 35, 39, 41, 44, 46). This may indicate that
heat-sensitive molecules present in human sera are responsible
for this phenomenon. The relationship between circulating
antigens and these molecules may be specific, e.g., like specific
antibodies, or not specific, e.g., like protein-protein interactions.
The test used in this study appears to be more specific for A.
fumigatus, since it did not recognize antigens in the serum
samples from group I patients infected with A. flavus and A.
terreus. This might be regarded both as an inconvenience and
as an advantage in diagnosing IA, since the most prevalent
species is A. fumigatus.

In the present study, antigenemia was detected the earliest
in two cases of proven IA, but the antigenemia was transient in
these patients at that time, and its detection required the
testing of several samples. The sensitivity of this test may
increase when heated serum is used. However, in IA diagnosis,
the antigen sensitivity may also be improved by determining
the presence of antigenemia (2), by detecting antigens in cere-
brospinal fluid (32), or by combining other methods (6, 16, 20,
27, 32, 39, 40). Yet, given the diversity of circulating antigens,
the different methods seem to be complementary for diagnos-
ing IA in immunocompromised patients. However, improving
the sequencing of purified antigens and the identification of
epitopes with high specificity for IA diagnosis is the next step
in optimizing the method. Finally, even though the detection of
a wide variety of antigens in patients’ sera is not always proof
of IA, as was indicated by the data of group III, the antigen
data should be taken into account in the monitoring of patients
at risk for IA.

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