Effect of Oral Administration of Enterococcus faecium Ef1 on Innate Immunity of Sucking Piglets

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ARTICLE HISTORY
Received: June 21, 2012
Revised: July 24, 2012
Accepted: August 4, 2012

Key words:
Cytokine
Enterococcus faecium
Piglets
Toll-like receptors

ABSTRACT
The objective of this study was to evaluate the effect of orally administered Enterococcus faecium EF1 on innate immune responses of jejunal mucosa in newborn piglets. Twenty-four commercial crossbred healthy newborn piglets were randomly divided into two groups, control (T0) and treatment (T1) group. Each group consists of 12 piglets. T1 was administered sterilized skim milk 2 ml piglet⁻¹ day⁻¹ with addition of E. faecium EF1 (5~6×10⁸ cfu/ml) by oral gavage on alternative odd days (1st, 3rd and 5th) after birth. T0 fed with the same volume of sterilized skim milk without probiotics. The merciful killing of piglets at the 25th day after birth was performed to collect the samples of jejunal mucosa to measure the innate cytokine responses and the Toll-like receptors gene expression by quantitative real time PCR. The results showed that TGF-β and TNF-α concentrations increased and mRNA expression levels also improved significantly in T1 as compared to T0. While, the production of IFN-γ and IL-8 decreased significantly in T1 and gene expression modification was not observed. In addition, TLR (Toll-like receptor) 2 and TLR 9 transcription levels were up-regulated in treatment (T1) group. These findings revealed that oral administration of E. faecium EF1 was effective to activate innate immunity and could modulate the TLRs expression in jejunal mucosa of piglets.

INTRODUCTION
The small intestinal mucosal surface is a primary barrier of host defense against unwelcome microorganisms (Kingma et al., 2011). Simultaneously, this surface is a complex and dynamic ecosystem comprising an alliance among the epithelial barrier, immune mediators and a myriad of microbial species (McCracken and Lorenz, 2001). Intestinal epithelium cells also play a central role in the discrimination between harmful and beneficial antigens (Dogi et al., 2010). They sense the microbes or their components through pattern recognition receptors and lead to the subsequent innate and adaptive immune responses. Toll-like receptor (TLR), a type of pattern-recognition receptor, can recognize a wide variety of microbial compounds and then elicit different immune responses. The innate receptors play a vital role in the balance between the induction and reduction of inflammation in the host (Wen et al., 2009).

A constant TLR stimulation may be necessary for maintaining intestinal health (Rakoff-Nahoum et al., 2004). The specific components of the intestinal flora seem to be critical for the maintenance of intestinal immune homeostasis and the prevention of inflammation (Schiffrin and Blum, 2002). Enterococcus faecium is one of lactic acid bacteria widely used as probiotics due to their functioning ability to exhibit a growth-enhancing effect, improve intestinal microbial balance, and prevention from diarrhea in animals (Masucci et al., 2011). Moreover, it could significantly stimulate intestinal IgA production in mice (Benyacoub et al., 2005), modulate the composition of blood lymphocyte populations in cats (Veir et al., 2007), and reduce levels of total IgG and cytotoxic T cells in the jejunal epithelium of piglets (Scharek et al., 2005). The strain E. faecium EF1 used in our study has also been reported to effectively improve the growth performance, augment antioxidant ability of the treated piglets and enhance specific and non-
specific immunity function of weaning piglets (Wen et al., 2011). In a recent study, we determined that oral administration of *E. faecium* EF1 induced favorable changes in the composition of intestinal microflora and reduced the incidence of diarrhea (Huang et al., 2012a), and modulated intestinal cytokines and chemokines production in sucking pigs (Huang et al., 2012b). Based on these observations, the present study was designed to further examine the effect of oral administration of *E. faecium* EF1 on the cytokines production in jejunal mucosa and modulation of gene expressions of TLRs in the innate response of sucking piglets.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

**Bacterial strains and growth conditions:** Probiotic *E. faecium* EF1 used for experiment was isolated from pig intestines and identified by the Institute of Feed Science, Zhejiang University. The bacterial strain was grown in de Man, Rogosa, and Sharpe broth (Oxoid, England) at 30°C for 16 h before use. The bacterial cells were separated using centrifugation (5000 g, 10 min) and then washed twice with sterile PBS (pH 7.4) and re-suspended in 10% sterilized skim milk to a final concentration of 5~6×10^8 cfu/ml, following methods described by Huang et al. (2012a).

**Animals:** The experiment was carried out at the Tongfushuangfeng Farming Cooperative in Tongxiang, China. After farrowing, neonatal piglets (half male and half female) (adjusted for body weight) were randomly divided into two groups. The control group (T₀, n=12), and probiotic-treated group (T₁, n=12). Piglets of control group were administered 10% sterilized skim milk 2 ml piglet⁻¹ day⁻¹ by oral gavage, and the treatment group received 10% sterilized skim milk 2 ml piglet⁻¹ day⁻¹ with addition of viable *E. faecium* EF1 (5~6×10^8 cfu/ml) on the alternative odd days 1st, 3rd and 5th day post partum. From day 12 onward, all piglets had unlimited access to pre-starter feed and water. The feeding trial was conducted for 25 days.

**Feeding Design:** Twenty-four newborn piglets (half male and half female) (adjusted for body weight) were randomly divided into two groups. The control group (T₀, n=12), and probiotic-treated group (T₁, n=12). Piglets of control group were administered 10% sterilized skim milk 2 ml piglet⁻¹ day⁻¹ by oral gavage, and the treatment group received 10% sterilized skim milk 2 ml piglet⁻¹ day⁻¹ with addition of viable *E. faecium* EF1 (5~6×10^8 cfu/ml) on the alternative odd days 1st, 3rd and 5th day post partum. From day 12 onward, all piglets had unlimited access to pre-starter feed and water. The feeding trial was conducted for 25 days.

**Sample collection:** At 25 days of age, randomly 6 piglets (three males and three females) from each group were sacrificed according to the animal welfare instructions of Animal Care Committee of Animal Science College, Zhejiang University. In brief, a combination intramuscular injection of xylazine (1.5 mg/kg) and ketamine (11 mg/kg) was used for sedation and minimize stress and then followed by chemical euthanasia with an overdose of intravenous pentobarbital via a catheterized ear vein. The segments of mid-jejunum were collected immediately and rinsed with PBS (pH 7.4). The mucosa of jejunum were placed in liquid nitrogen and finally frozen at -70°C to proceed for further analysis by ELISA and qRT-PCR.

**Determination of cytokines by ELISA:** The mucosa samples were diluted 1:2 in sterile saline solution and centrifuged at 2500 g for 20 min. Supernatants were collected for determination of the concentrations of transforming growth factor-beta 1 (TGF-β1), tumor necrosis factor-alpha (TNF-α), interferon-gamma (IFN-γ) and interleukin-8 (IL-8) using the porcine Enzyme-Linked Immunosorbent Assay Kit (ELISA Kit; R&D Systems, Inc.) according to the manufacturer’s instructions (Li et al., 2012).

**Quantitative real-time PCR studies:** Total RNA was extracted from preserved mucosa samples using TRIZol reagent (Invitrogen, Karlsruhe, Germany) and purified using RNeasy® MinElute™ (Qiagen, Hilden, Germany) according to the manufacturer’s protocol. The amount of total RNA was quantified by optical density using a NanoDrop spectrophotometer (Thermo Fisher Scientific, Wilmington, Delaware USA). cDNA was synthesized from 2 μg total RNA using the SuperScript™ First-Strand Synthesis System for RT-PCR (Invitrogen, Karlsruhe, Germany) with oligo-dT primers (HyTest Ltd, Turku, Finland) following the manufacturer’s instructions. The RT-PCR reaction was carried out at 42°C for 1 h, and inactivation of the enzyme was achieved at 70°C for 15 min. qRT-PCR was performed and analyzed with Rotor-Gene 3000 real-time PCR analyzer (Corbett Life Sciences; Sydney, Australia) with 1μl of cDNA. The program was used: (i) 95°C for 5 min; (ii) amplification including 40 cycles of 3 steps consisting of denaturation at 95°C for 10 sec, 59°C for 15 sec, and extension at 72°C for 20 sec. The primer sequences used for qRT-PCR are described in Table 1. At least 3 independent experiments performed in triplicate. Expression of the target genes was normalized by comparison of GAPDH concentration in each sample.

**Statistical analysis:** Values were expressed as mean ± SD. Data were analyzed using the one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) procedure of SPSS 16.0 for Windows. Differences between treatments were detected with unpaired t-test. Differences were considered statistically significant at P<0.05.

**RESULTS**

**Cytokines in the mucosa of jejunum:** The results showed that the concentration of the anti-inflammatory cytokine TGF-β1 was significantly higher in T₁ compared with T₀ group. The pro-inflammatory cytokine TNF-α level was also observed higher in T₁ group (P<0.05) whereas the production of pro-inflammatory cytokine IFN-γ and IL-8 was found significantly lower in treatment group as compared to control (Table 2).

**mRNA expression of different cytokines and TLRs in the mucosa of jejunum:** Probiotic *E. faecium* EF1 induced a strong response of TGF-β1 and TNF-α at the mRNA levels in treatment (T₁) group (P<0.05), whereas no significant changes were detected on the mRNA expression of IFN-γ and IL-8 (Fig. 1).
mRNA expression of TLRs was determined by qRT-PCR whether TLR2, TLR6, TLR8 and TLR9 were stimulated by *E. faecium* EF1 in cytokine production. The results (Fig. 2) showed that TLR2 and TLR9 mRNA expressions were significantly enhanced in jejunal mucosa of the *T*1 group while no change was found in TLR6 and TLR8 mRNA expressions levels as compared to *T*0.

### Table 1: Sequences of forward and reverse primers, gene bank numbers and size used for qRT-PCR

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Target</th>
<th>GeneBank number</th>
<th>Primer sequence</th>
<th>Size (bp)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GAPDH</td>
<td></td>
<td>F:5’ATGGTGAAAGTCGGAGGTGAAA3'</td>
<td>235</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TNF-α</td>
<td>NM_214022.1</td>
<td>R:5’CTGCTGCTGCGAGATGCTGG3’</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IFN-γ</td>
<td>NM_213948.1</td>
<td>F:5’GGGACCAATGTGCTCCTCTCA3’</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TGF-β1</td>
<td>NM_214015.1</td>
<td>R:5’GGGACCAATGTGCTCCTCTCA3’</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IL-8</td>
<td>NM_213867.1</td>
<td>F:5’GAGCCAAATTGTCTCCTTCA3’</td>
<td>251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TLR2</td>
<td>NM_21761.1</td>
<td>R:5’GGGTCCGATGCTGGTCTTTAT3’</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TLR6</td>
<td>NM_213760.1</td>
<td>F:5’TCTGCTGACGTTCCGCTGTT3’</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TLR8</td>
<td>NM_21487.1</td>
<td>R:5’GCAAGTCACCTTTATGTTATTC3’</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TLR9</td>
<td>NM_213958.1</td>
<td>F:5’GCCACACGACGCGCAAG3’</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
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</table>

### Table 2: Effect of oral administration of *E. faecium* EF1 on the production of TGF-β1, TNF-α, IFN-γ and IL-8 in the mucosa of jejunum in control and probiotic-fed piglets

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parameter</th>
<th>Control (<em>T</em>0)</th>
<th>Probiotics (<em>T</em>1)</th>
<th>Probiotics (<em>T</em>1)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TGF-β1 (mg/L)</td>
<td>74.59±1.89a</td>
<td>29.75±3.15a</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TNF-α (pg/mL)</td>
<td>48.7±5.88a</td>
<td>73.00±4.38b</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IFN-γ (pg/mL)</td>
<td>1335.5±125.33b</td>
<td>73.00±4.38b</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IL-8 (pg/mL)</td>
<td>14957±434.41a</td>
<td>11259±1324.54b</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data were expressed as mean ± SD. Different letters indicate significant difference between groups for each cytokine (*P*<0.05).

### DISCUSSION

It is well known that TNF-α is a potent pro-inflammatory cytokine which can elicit inflammatory responses (Li et al., 2012). In contrast, TGF-β1 is an anti-inflammatory cytokine which can reduce inflammatory immune responses (Powie et al., 1994). In this study, oral administration of *E. faecium* EF1 increased both the mRNA expression levels and concentrations of TNF-α and TGF-β1 in jejunal mucosa of piglets. The findings of TNF-α production suggests that *E. faecium* EF1 may promote an early activation of the intestinal immune system. It has been reported that *Lactobacillus plantarum* could induce a strong up-regulation of TNF-α by a monocytic cell line, THP-1 (Cammarota et al., 2009). Zoumpopoulou et al. (2008) also showed that *L. plantarum* could induce the secretion of TNF-α by human peripheral blood mononuclear cells and TNF-α producing cells were also enhanced in the small intestine of mice fed with fermented milk containing several LAB strains (de Moreno de LeBlanc et al., 2008).

TGF-β1, an immunosuppressive mediator, plays a critical role in maintaining epithelial cell homeostasis to commensal enteric bacteria (Clavel and Haller, 2007). Our results suggest that *E. faecium* EF1 could trigger a potent anti-inflammatory response in jejunal mucosa of piglets. Previously, it was found that *E. faecalis* could up-regulate of TGF-β secretion and down-regulation of IL-8 in human intestinal cell lines HCT116 (Wang et al., 2008). Di Giacinto et al. (2005) demonstrated that, daily administration of the probiotic (VSL#3) to mice ameliorated the recurrent of colitis by inducing an immuno-regulatory response involving TGF-β1 bearing regulatory cells. Keeping in view the findings, it could be concluded that *E. faecium* EF1 may differentially stimulate innate immunity exerting opposite immunomodulatory properties, which contributed to the regulation of intestinal innate immunity.

IL-8 is pivotal to the progress of most local intestinal inflammations. Several strains of LAB could suppress synthesis of IL-8 by the intestinal epithelial cells (Wallace...
mediated immune responses (Hong et al., 2003). Furthermore, in the presence of probiotic Bacillus licheniformis, secretion of IL-8 stimulated by pathogenic was also inhibited (Skjolaas et al., 2007). It may suggest that inhibition of IL-8 production when there is already a background of inflammation may be part of the mechanism by which probiotics impart their welfare to the gut (Nemeth et al., 2006; Vizoso Pinto et al., 2009). In our study, a decreased response in IFN-γ and IL-8 production in jejunal mucosa were found in probiotic-treated group. These findings suggest that E. faecium EF1 possesses remarkable immunomodulatory activity in intestinal mucosa by suppressing synthesis of the pro-inflammatory cytokines. Furthermore, this might implicate that, as an autolichonous bacterium in swine, an inflammation suppressive function of E. faecium seems to be possible (Scharek et al., 2009).

IFN-γ and IL-8 are pro-inflammatory cytokines which might be harmful when there is already a background of inflammation. In the present study, we found a discrepancy between mRNA levels and concentrations of IFN-γ and IL-8. Compared with control piglets, IFN-γ and IL-8 concentrations were lower in piglets fed with E. faecium EF1, whereas no changes were observed at the mRNA expression levels. These results are different to a previous study which showed that two probiotic strains could increase the number of IFN-γ producing cells and synthesis of IFN-γ in the small intestine of mice (Paturi et al., 2007). This might be explained by strain-specific effects of probiotics and the differences in health status between animals. Additionally, the discrepancies between mRNA and concentrations of IFN-γ and IL-8 may probably due to differences in mRNA and protein turnover rates, as well as the posttranscriptional regulation.

In the present findings, TLR2 and TLR9 transcription levels measured by qRT-PCR were up-regulated in the jejunal mucosa of piglets treated with E. faecium EF1. Our results are in line with the findings of Vizoso Pinto et al. (2009) who reported that, TLR2 and TLR9 mRNA expression in HT29-cells was stimulated by lactobacilli. It is known that TLR2 recognizes the components of LAB cell-wall, such as peptidoglycan and lipoteichoic acid and TLR9 is another pattern recognition receptor involved in the recognition of unmethylated CpG motifs in bacterial DNA. Our results indicated that compounds of E. faecium EF1 cell-wall could act as adjuvants of the mucosal immune response and E. faecium EF1 DNA is a main component of the E. faecium-mediated activation. In addition, TLR2 up-regulation may indicate that E. faecium EF1 keeps the host in a state of vigilance for pathogens. Dogi et al. (2008) showed that lactobacilli induced activation of immune cells through TLR2 in intestinal lamina propria of mice. A certified probiotic, L. paracasei F19 caused a significant up-regulation of TLR2 expression in a monocytic cell line, THP-1 (Cammarota et al., 2009). LAB isolated from kefir grains influenced the secretion of TNF-α through TLR2 which would potentially have beneficial effects on promotion of cell-mediated immune responses (Hong et al., 2009). TLR9 is essential in mediating the anti-inflammatory effect of probiotics in murine experimental colitis (Rachmilewitz et al., 2004). However, there may be other TLRs (e.g., TLR1, TLR4, and TLR7) involved in the activation of innate response, which need to be further investigated.

Conclusion: The data provide a case for the modulation of jejunal mucosal immunity in which specific strains of E. faecium EF1 have uniquely evolved to stimulate the innate immune response, exhibit both pro-inflammatory and anti-inflammatory activities, and modulate the TLRs expression in the innate response of suckling piglets.

Acknowledgement: This study was jointly supported by the 948 Project of the Ministry of Agriculture, China (Grant No. 2011-G7) and Key Science and Technology Program of Zhejiang Province, China (Grant No. 2006C12086).

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