



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Clinical Microbiology and Infection

journal homepage: www.clinicalmicrobiologyandinfection.com

Review

Speculations on the clinical significance of asymptomatic viral infections

G. Gentile*, A. Micozzi

Department of Cellular Biotechnologies and Haematology, Sapienza University, Rome, Italy

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online xxx

Keywords:
Asymptomatic viral infections
chronic infections
herpesviruses
microbiome
virome

ABSTRACT

A detailed understanding of asymptomatic chronic viral infections is critical to analyse their pathogenesis, assess the severity and burden of disease and, where required, optimize public health control measures. Recent studies on herpesviruses showed that the host–virus interactions are modulated by co-infections, emphasizing the relevance of co-infections in determining the clinical expression (from asymptomatic to symptomatic infections) and the severity of herpesvirus-associated diseases (either neoplastic or infectious diseases). To demonstrate causality between viruses (virome) and diseases, Koch's postulates should be adapted adding new knowledge on host–microbe relationship and microbial interactions. In the present review we aim to provide an update on asymptomatic chronic infections and criteria for causality and on the virological, immunological and host–virus interactions in asymptomatic chronic infections in human hosts, focusing on herpetic infections. **G. Gentile, CMI 2016;■:1**

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Introduction

Asymptomatic, chronic viral infections occur in a large portion of humanity. It has been estimated that on average every human being can be concurrently infected with 8–12 chronic viral infections, caused either by DNA or RNA viruses [1]. Viruses considered to be commensal and opportunistic pathogens are widespread, especially in adults, and include members of the herpesvirus, adenovirus, papillomavirus, anellovirus, polyomavirus and circovirus families [2,3]. Conversely, viruses associated with high morbidity and mortality such as hepatitis C virus, hepatitis B virus and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) chronically infect millions of individuals [4].

Until a few years ago, the approaches applied to studying host immunity and viral virulence were mainly based on the analysis of symptomatic acute infections, and evaluated virus shedding and serological evidence of infection, together with the analysis of the immune responses of the host. Studies of acute infections have been relevant for analysing viral virulence and host immunity; however, the mechanisms that establish and perpetuate chronic

viral infections are still not well known [1]. These mechanisms can be analysed taking into account the behaviour of a component of the microbiome, the virome. The microbiome, defined as all the microorganisms (viruses, bacteria, parasites and fungi) living within a human host, is a component of human physiology [5], while the virome is part of the microbiome of healthy humans, and includes the viruses (pathogenic and non-pathogenic) that infect the eukaryotic cells of the host, those that replicate in bacteria (bacteriophages or phages) and the endogenous viral elements [6]. A new and emerging concept includes the view that viruses may have deleterious or beneficial immunomodulatory effects other than affecting the adaptive and innate immune response [7,8]. For instance, recent studies on herpesviruses clearly evidenced that the host–virus interactions are modulated by co-infections (reviewed in refs [9–11]), emphasizing the relevance of co-infections in determining the clinical expression (from asymptomatic to symptomatic infections) and the severity of herpesvirus-associated diseases (either neoplastic or infectious diseases), such as those induced by Epstein–Barr virus (EBV) and human herpesvirus 8 (HHV-8) [9,11].

For two centuries, Koch's postulates were the landmark for establishing causation in infectious diseases. In recent years, Koch's postulates have been modified to take into account new knowledge of the host–microbe relationship and microbial interactions by means of genome sequencing. Therefore, it has been proposed to

* Corresponding author. G. Gentile, Department of Cellular Biotechnologies and Haematology, 'Sapienza' University, Via Benevento, 6, 00161, Rome, Italy.
E-mail address: gentile@bce.uniroma1.it (G. Gentile).

dynamically adapt Koch's postulates taking into account the new advances in technology [12].

An understanding of asymptomatic chronic viral infections, defined as infections without any sign or symptom, is important for understanding the pathogenesis of viral infections, assessing their severity and the burden of disease and, where required, for optimizing public health control measures. It is important to recognize that the study of asymptomatic chronic viral infections is an emerging field, and part of our discussion will necessarily be speculative. Specifically, our goal is to provide an update on asymptomatic chronic infections and criteria for causality and about the virological, immunological and host–virus interactions in asymptomatic chronic infections in human hosts, focusing on herpetic infections. Due to space constraints, we will focus our review mainly on EBV and HHV-8 infections because, in our opinion, they represent the paradigm of chronic asymptomatic infections. They are well-known viruses, but recent studies showed that the host–virus interactions are modulated by some co-infections, greatly expanding our knowledge in the general field of chronic viral infections.

Asymptomatic chronic infections and criteria for causality

The criteria commonly used to assign causality in medical research, especially by infectious diseases physicians, are the Koch postulates [13]. The criteria were partially redefined by Jacob Henle in 1840 [14] and later expanded and referred to as the Henle–Koch postulates [15]. These postulates state that: (a) the organism is always present in every case of the disease in question and under circumstances that can account for the pathological changes and clinical course of the disease; (b) the organism is not found with any other disease or as a colonizer without disease; (c) after being isolated from the body and repeatedly grown in pure culture, the organism reproduces the disease again in another susceptible host. The main problem concerning the application of the Henle–Koch postulates is linked to the impossibility of applying them to the majority of pathogens and in particular to viruses. As obligate cellular parasites, viruses cannot be formally evaluated in pure culture; for example cells that become cancer cells due to viral infections are non-permissive for viral replication, and therefore virions are not identifiable, and in these conditions Koch's postulates are not applicable.

The culture-dependent approaches could not demonstrate the role of the association between infectious agents, mainly viruses, and chronic or neoplastic diseases. Two significant examples show the long latency period between a primary viral infection (often asymptomatic or subclinical) and the occurrence of a disease: human T lymphotropic virus-1-associated myelopathy/tropical spastic paraparesis or T-cell leukaemia following T-lymphotropic virus type 1 decades after the primary infection (reviewed in ref. [16]) and Kaposi sarcoma (KS) following Kaposi's sarcoma-associated herpesvirus (KSHV, also called HHV-8) (reviewed in ref. [16]).

Hill's criteria (strength of association, consistency, specificity, temporality, biological gradient, plausibility, coherence, experiment, analogy) are now used to determine causality for infectious microorganisms in chronic or neoplastic diseases [17]. However, again the strict application of Hill's criteria or Henle–Koch postulates may not be able to identify the causal role of viruses in the aetiology of infectious diseases or tumours [18,19]. The high-throughput deep sequencing assays, together with bioinformatics systems, have revolutionized the studies on microbial communities, providing useful tools for assigning causality between microorganisms and infectious diseases. At present two main methods are applied: (a) the bacterial 16S ribosomal gene profile analysis, used to study bacterial phylogeny and taxonomy, which

allows determination of the relative abundance of each species in a given sample; (b) the next-generation sequencing or 'shotgun' metagenomic sequencing, which uses a direct sequencing of total DNA and examines also viral sequences, allowing the detection of a broad range of both cultivable and non-cultivable DNA viruses [20,21]. Metagenomic studies applied to viruses provide a significant insight into identification and characterization of new viruses, on viruses associated with diseases of unknown aetiology, molecular epidemiology, molecular pathogenesis, genome characterization, gene discovery with genetic diversity, and on dynamics of microbial populations, focusing primarily on the interaction between viruses and host immune system [22,23]. However, a present limitation of the metagenomic studies applied to viruses is that the detection of DNA viral sequences in a given sample does not formally demonstrate that the viruses found are replicating. Therefore, future studies should be focused on active viral infections by assessing, for instance, cell-free virus particles and on analyses and sequencing of RNA viruses [6]. With the intention of avoiding a reductionist methodological approach it will be important to perform, in addition to the metagenomic studies, also metatranscriptomic (analyses of messenger viral RNA) together with metaproteomic (analyses of expressed proteins) studies [24], allowing a better comprehension of the pathways and community interactions of the viruses and their role in the asymptomatic and symptomatic infections.

Herpesviruses: paradigm of chronic asymptomatic infections

Herpesviruses are ubiquitous viruses, infect a high number of subjects with a variable worldwide distribution, and it is estimated that >90% of humans are infected with at least one herpesvirus [1]. For example, primary cytomegalovirus (CMV), human herpesvirus-6 and EBV infections usually occur more frequently during the first two decades of life as asymptomatic infections or symptomatic mononucleosis-like syndrome [25–27]. Herpesviruses may also cause several forms of diseases in humans, and in particular, HHV-8 and EBV are associated with several tumours: HHV-8 with KS and lymphoproliferative diseases [16], and EBV with lymphomas and nasopharyngeal carcinomas [16].

Reactivation of herpesviruses from latency is required for the viruses to persist and to spread among cells and host. Environmental conditions induce herpesviruses to switch from latency to lytic phases [28], but the mechanisms by which these stimuli function *in vivo* have not been elucidated. Short-chain and medium-chain fatty acids found in the diet or produced by human microbiota may modulate the balance between the latent and lytic phases of both EBV and HHV-8, showing that an interaction between bacteria and virome may affect herpesvirus activation [29]. Epigenetic alterations may stimulate lytic reactivation, productions of virions and spread of herpesviruses [30]. In particular, HHV-8 and EBV are probably regulated by epigenetic modifications induced by bacteria [31,32] and it is possible to speculate that bacterium–virus interactions might contribute to the pathogenesis of cancers such as KS and gastric cancers associated with *Helicobacter pylori* and EBV [30].

Chronic herpesviruses infections induce a modulation of the host immune defences, which in turn promote immune suppression and a greater susceptibility to infections. For example, asymptomatic chronic infections with CMV and human herpesvirus-6 are able to reduce or to alter the immune response through various mechanisms and in specific clinical settings, such as solid organ or haematopoietic stem cell transplants. These chronic infections may be associated with the development of secondary clinically relevant infections due to fungi, bacteria and/or other viruses other than allograft rejection and with decreased

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