Detection of Mycoplasma genitalium-Reactive Cervicovaginal Antibodies among Infected Women

Stefanie L. Iverson-Cabral,1,2* Lisa E. Manhart,3 and Patricia A. Totten1,2

Departments of Global Health, Pathobiology Interdisciplinary Program,1 Medicine, Division of Infectious Diseases,2 and Epidemiology,3 University of Washington, Seattle, Washington

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Mycoplasma genitalium is a sexually transmitted pathogen associated with urethritis in men and various inflammatory conditions in women, including cervicitis (reviewed in references 10 and 20). Additionally, M. genitalium is associated with chronic infection, as highlighted by retrospective longitudinal studies of urethritis (7) and cervicitis (3). Such persistence may aggravate the risk of adverse reproductive outcomes, including tubal-factor infertility and preterm birth, conditions associated with this organism (2, 6, 18). Circulating antibodies have been detected in the serum of men with M. genitalium-associated urethritis (19) and women with tubal-factor infertility (2, 18); however, the local antibody response in the lower genital tract remains uncharacterized. To better understand the immunopathogenesis of M. genitalium, we investigated the cervicovaginal antibody response at the initial site of infection.

To detect M. genitalium-reactive antibodies in the lower genital tract by immunoblotting, we used cervical and vaginal samples. These specimens were originally collected in our institution for M. genitalium DNA detection by TMA-negative for M. genitalium DNA in the urine and vagina. Among cases, 64% were IgA positive in the cervix and vagina and 36% in the cervix alone. Among controls, 50% were IgG positive in the cervix and vagina, 25% in the cervix alone, and 25% in the vagina alone.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Immunoglobulin isotype</th>
<th>Sample site</th>
<th>No. (%) with reactivity (n = 27)</th>
<th>P value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Casesa</td>
<td>Controlsb</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IgG</td>
<td>Cervix</td>
<td>19 (70.4) 4 (14.8)</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Vagina</td>
<td>12 (44.4) 3 (11.1)</td>
<td>0.014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Either sitec</td>
<td>19 (70.4) 5 (18.5)</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IgA</td>
<td>Cervix</td>
<td>14 (51.9) 6 (22.2)</td>
<td>0.047</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Vagina</td>
<td>9 (33.3) 0 (0.0)</td>
<td>0.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Either sitec</td>
<td>14 (51.9) 6 (22.2)</td>
<td>0.047</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a Women with M. genitalium DNA detected in both urine and vagina by TMA.
b Women who were TMA-negative for M. genitalium DNA in the urine and vagina.
c P values calculated by Fisher’s exact two-tailed test.
d Among cases, 63% were IgG positive in the cervix and vagina and 37% in the cervix alone. Among controls, 50% were IgG positive in the cervix and vagina, 25% in the cervix alone, and 25% in the vagina alone.
e Among cases, 64% were IgA positive in the cervix and vagina and 36% in the cervix alone. All of the controls were IgA positive in the cervix only.

* Corresponding author. Mailing address: Department of Medicine, Harborview Medical Center R&T Building, 325 9th Avenue, Box 359779, Seattle, WA 98104. Phone: (206) 897-5352. E-mail: slic@u.washington.edu.

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Infected women exhibited a cervicovaginal anti-*M. genitalium* response. *M. genitalium*-positive women were more likely to exhibit *M. genitalium*-reactive IgG and IgA than uninfected controls (\(P < 0.001\) and 0.047, respectively) (Table 1). While we were unable to identify *M. genitalium*-reactive IgM in cases or controls (data not shown), the IgG and IgA responses were pronounced (Fig. 1). The concordance for these isotypes among cases was relatively high, with both IgG and IgA detected in 74% and 50% of immunoblot-positive cervical and vaginal samples, respectively. To characterize the IgG response further, we isotyped a subset of the strongly IgG-positive specimens for which adequate sample volume was available: 11 (57.9%) and 7 (36.8%) of the 19 cervical and 3 (37.5%) and 1 (12.5%) of the eight vaginal samples tested were positive for IgG1 and IgG3, respectively (Fig. 2). Beyond the nonspecific binding of the IgG2 secondary antibody (Fig. 2), there was no evidence of an IgG2 or IgG4 response.

Although various *M. genitalium* proteins were antigenic (Fig. 1), antibodies against the 140-kDa MgpB and 110-kDa MgpC proteins were predominantly detected. These observations are consistent with previous immunologic studies of circulating antibodies in *M. genitalium*-infected individuals (2, 18, 19). Immunoblotting against lysates of *mgpB* and *mgpC* deletion mutants confirmed that these antigens were indeed MgpB and MgpC (Fig. 3). Among all immunoblot-positive women (including cases and controls), 92.3% (24/26) and 69.2% (18/26) had antibodies that recognized MgpB and MgpC, respectively; in fact, only two cervical samples from control women failed to react with MgpB and instead contained antibodies that targeted other, unknown *M. genitalium* antigens (participants 108 and 182) (Fig. 1). More detailed data regarding the antigenicity of MgpB and MgpC by sample site and antibody isotype are shown in Fig. 4.

To our knowledge, this is the first documentation of the...
antibody response to *M. genitalium* in the lower genital tract. Our observations indicate that *M. genitalium* infection elicits a cervicovaginal IgA and IgG response, including IgG1 and IgG3 subtypes, with the MgpB and MgpC proteins immunogenic. Furthermore, the association between *M. genitalium* infection and the detection of IgG and IgA was significant. Differences in antibody response among infected women may reflect the site or duration of infection, previous exposure to this pathogen, or hormonal influences (12). The reactivity of some control specimens is likely due to prior *M. genitalium* infection or to nonspecific or cross-reactive antibodies, as likely observed with participants 108 and 182 (Fig. 2).

The biologic activity of *M. genitalium*-specific antibodies remains unknown. The isotypes identified in this study suggest that cervicovaginal antibodies may be involved in attachment-inhibition, complement-mediated killing, and/or opsonophagocytosis. IgG and IgA play an important role in mucosal defense and have different effector functions that work in concert to protect the host from infection. IgA serves as a first line of defense by preventing binding (17), interfering with motility, and enhancing opsonization through agglutination (21). The dominant isotype in cervicovaginal secretions is IgG (12, 14). Of the four isotypes, IgG1 and IgG3 are the most biologically active and proinflammatory through complement activation (15). These subtypes help control bacterial infections with opsonization and enhanced phagocytosis via the Fc receptor (4). In contrast, IgG4 lacks such effector functions (16), and IgG2 has low levels of complement activation (17), which is interesting given our negative results with these subtypes. We also failed to detect an IgM response, which may be explained by the low levels of IgM in genital secretions (14). Alternatively, these observations could be influenced by the timing of sample collection in the course of infection, as IgM is a short-lived isotype typically produced early in infection (17). Testing specimens collected closer to the onset of infection or selectively removing potentially interfering IgG from the sample may allow the detection of cervicovaginal IgM antibodies in future experiments.

Despite the induction of an antibody response at the initial site of infection, *M. genitalium* persists (3, 7), suggesting that this organism may have a mechanism(s) of immune evasion. It is noteworthy that the dominant antigens, MgpB and MgpC, are encoded by genes that exhibit extensive sequence diversity. Portions of *mgpB* and *mgpC* vary over time within *M. genitalium* G37 cultured *in vitro* and in samples collected longitudinally from individuals chronically infected with a single strain (8, 9, 13). We hypothesize that the evolution of sequence heterogeneity corresponds to changes in MgpB and MgpC antigenicity, allowing bacteria to escape the biologic activity of antibodies elicited by infection. Future studies are needed to characterize the biologic role of *M. genitalium*-specific antibodies and to correlate the development of antigenic diversity with the induction of these antibodies.

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REFERENCES


