AN 4414 AN 4414

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Mutation Research, 242 (1990) 265–270
Elsevier

MUTGEN 01602

DE VCM MUTAGENICITY) MAN (CHROMOSOME ABERRATION

TI = # Mutagenicity of vinyl chloride in man: comparison of chromosome aberrations with micronucleus and sister-chromatid exchange frequencies

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(Received 22 February 1990)
(Revision received 1 June 1990)
(Accepted 11 June 1990)

Keywords: Vinyl chloride; Micronucleus assay; Chromosome aberration assay; Sister-chromatid exchanges; Smokers'/non-smokers' human lymphocytes

Summary

ABS = The mutagenic effects of vinyl chloride monomer in man were studied in the lymphocyte culture with 3 methods: the chromosome aberration assay, the micronucleus assay and the sister-chromatid exchange method. Compared with control, values obtained by these tests are increased in workers occupationally exposed to vinyl chloride. In relation to non-smokers, smokers exposed to vinyl chloride show significant increases in sister-chromatid exchange frequencies. The problem of correlating the results of the chromosome aberration assay with micronucleus and sister-chromatid exchange frequencies is discussed.

Vinyl chloride monomer (VCM) is a well-known carcinogenic and mutagenic substance (Anderson et al., 1980, 1981; Purchase et al., 1976, 1978; Hansteen et al., 1978; Green and Hathway, 1978; Maltoni and Lefemine, 1975; Ducatman et al., 1975; Funes-Cravioto et al., 1975). During the past 20 years, the accumulated knowledge about hazards for people employed in the plastic industry has made it necessary to develop a technology with closed systems which even use robots. In the most developed countries these workers now run much the same risk as the entire population of coming into contact with VCM through polluted air, food or water. The mutagenic activity of VCM is unfortunately still a matter of extreme interest, because there are a great number of factories with old technology that provide no real protection for employees.

Vinyl chloride monomer is a substance that requires activation by metabolic enzymes in the liver (Bartsch and Montesano, 1975). Its metabolites, chlorethyleneoxide and chloracetaldehyde, as alkylating agents, react with amino acids and DNA (Green and Hathway, 1978; Osterman-Golkar et al., 1977).

In order to show and compare the consequences of the action of VCM on lymphocyte chromosomes in workers exposed to VCM in our study we used three methods: the chromosome aberration assay, the micronucleus assay and the sister-chromatid exchange method. The influence of smoking on the mutagenic activity of VCM was also investigated.

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Material and methods

Nineteen workers from the plastic industry were chosen for cytogenetic examination. As a control group we chose 20 male subjects from the general population, 40–50 years old. The examined workers had been employed in the polyvinyl chloride plant for 15 years on average. Those with recent X-ray exposure and drug treatment were excluded from the study. Exact measurements of exposure to VCM were performed continuously. The VCM concentration in the working environment was 50 ppm. Due to the technological process the concentration could periodically reach 2000 ppm for a short period of time.

The chromosome aberration assay was carried out on cultures of phytohemagglutinin-stimulated blood lymphocytes. Into 0.5-ml samples of whole blood 8 ml of F-10 medium (Gibco) containing 20% of calf serum was added. Lymphocytes were incubated at 37 °C for 48 h. After 45 h colchicine was added. Fixation of the cultures and preparation of slides were carried out according to conventional methods (IAEA, 1986). Two hundred well-spread and complete metaphases were analyzed for every person and results are presented as percentages.

For micronucleus preparations cytochalasin B at a final concentration of 3 μg/ml was added after 44 h to the lymphocyte cultures according to the method of Fenech and Morley (1985). Micronucleus slides were made by fixation in methanol:acetic acid (3 : 1) without hypotonic treatment. In the micronucleus test 1000 binucleated cells per person were analyzed. Results are presented as the distribution of the percentage of cells with 1, 2, 3 and more micronuclei per cell.

Bromodeoxyuridine in a concentration of 10 μg/ml was added to the culture medium for sister-chromatid exchange preparations. The cultures were harvested at 72 h. The sister-chromatid exchanges were compared with the percentage of chromosomal breakage and the micronucleus frequency from the same blood sample. Smoking habits of the individuals were examined.

The results are statistically compared by Student's *t*-test (Pavlić, 1970).

Results

We examined 19 workers from the plastic industry and 20 control individuals from the general population. The individual and mean group results are presented in Tables 1 and 2. The values of chromosome aberrations, micronuclei and sister-chromatid exchange frequencies in workers exposed to VCM show statistically significant increases compared with the control group ($P < 0.001$). The mean group value for micronuclei is 12.2% with a range of 2.1–26.9%. With increasing numbers of micronuclei per binucleated cell the number of cells with more than one micronucleus increases.

The mean group value for chromosome aberrations is 8.5%. Chromatid breaks are the predominant type of aberration and they represent 61.2% of all breaks. Chromosome breaks, dicentric chro-

TABLE 2

VINYL CHLORIDE EXPOSURE AND SISTER-CHROMATID EXCHANGE FREQUENCIES IN SMOKING AND NON-SMOKING SUBJECTS

Subject	Cigarettes/ day	Employment (years)	SCE/cell	Range
Smokers				
1	20	12	9.1	5–17
2	30	15	11	5–23
3	20	12	11.1	5–23
4	20	16	8.1	4–14
5	20	9	12.3	4–26
6	20	15	13.1	4–24
7	20	15	11.5	5–27
8	15	25	10	4–20
9	30	15	10.7	4–14
10	15	15	9.3	4–14
Mean for smokers			10.6 ± 1.4	4–27
Non-smokers				
1	0	10	9	4–14
2	0	1.5	7.6	4–15
3	0	12	8.5	5–13
4	0	25	6.4	4–11
5	0	3	8.6	4–14
6	0	15	6.3	4–10
7	0	22	6.3	4–13
8	0	15	8.9	4–16
9	0	22	8	4–15
Mean for non-smokers			7.8 ± 1.07	4–16

knowledge suggests that the mechanisms of formation of sister-chromatid exchanges and aberrations are different (Wolf, 1982), and hence, sister-chromatid exchange frequencies and chromosome aberrations cannot be correlated. The conclusion from our results is that sister-chromatid exchanges and chromosome aberrations cannot be used to predict one from the other, moreover such findings are in agreement with some other authors (Galloway et al., 1986; Hansteen et al., 1978).

Comparing the results of sister-chromatid exchange frequencies and the micronucleus assay, it could be observed that values differ. This phenomenon has already been described by some authors (Madle et al., 1986; Lin-Lee et al., 1984) and it is explained by different mechanisms in the formation of genetic alterations.

The adverse health effects of smoking have been documented in hundreds of studies during the last decades. The exact mechanism by which cigarette smoking leads to the formation of cancer is still unknown. The variety of biologically active compounds inhaled during smoking obviously provides an inductive agent for both initiating and promoting steps of malignant growth. It is also interesting that VCM is present in the cigarette smoke (Antweiler, 1976). The present data show increased sister-chromatid exchange frequencies in lymphocytes of smoking subjects compared with non-smokers. The mean group and individual values of sister-chromatid exchanges are lower in non-smokers than in smokers. Duration of employment has no influence on the results.

Our data confirm the findings of previous studies that humans professionally exposed to high concentrations of VCM during several years of employment demonstrate increased values of chromosome aberrations, increased numbers of micronuclei and high frequencies of sister-chromatid exchanges. Sister-chromatid exchanges per cell are even more elevated in subjects who smoke. The positive correlation between the results of the micronucleus and the chromosome aberration assays documents that they are good indicators of exposure to chemical agents and that the results of the micronucleus assay, which is a cheaper and simpler method, can be used for screening purposes.

It is our duty to use those data to improve the working conditions of people employed in the plastic industry, since cytogenetic monitoring studies have shown that no biologically significant increases in the frequencies of chromosomal aberrations are found in workers in plants where modern technology is used compared with control populations.

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