Viable versus inactivated lactobacillus strain GG in acute rotavirus diarrhoea

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Abstract
The effect of viable or heat inactivated human Lactobacillus casei strain GG on rotavirus immune responses in patients with rotavirus diarrhoea was assessed. Rotavirus serum IgA enzyme immunoassay antibody responses were higher in infants treated with viable L casei strain GG than in those treated with inactivated L casei strain GG. There was a significant difference at convalescence with rotavirus specific IgA secreting cells found in 10/12 infants receiving viable but only 2/13 infants receiving inactivated L casei strain GG. The results indicate that viable L casei strain GG stimulate rotavirus specific IgA antibody responses, theoretically significant in the prevention of reinfections.

Keywords: rotavirus, diarrhoea, lactobacillus strain GG, diet.

The treatment of acute diarrhoea begins with correction and maintenance of rehydration, but the appropriate diet thereafter is debated.1 It has been suggested that the optimal diet should include fermented milks as they are low in lactose, their proteins are more easily digested, and they seem to have advantageous effects on the immune responses.2 In a previous study, the peroral administration of Lactobacillus casei strain GG during acute diarrhoea was associated with an enhanced immune response to rotavirus as measured by circulating IgM and IgA producing cells at the acute stage of the infection.3 Using measurement of this immune response as a tool, the present randomised double blind two cell clinical trial was designed to address specifically the question whether viable lactobacilli are required for stimulation of rotavirus specific immune responses.

Patients and methods
The inclusion criteria were admission for acute gastroenteritis of less than seven days’ duration and age less than 4 years. During the period of the rotavirus epidemic season, 41 well nourished children (mean age 12.8 months, range 1.3–38.4) were enrolled.

On admission the children were clinically examined, and their treatment followed the usual clinical guidelines of oral rehydration and rapid refeeding.4 The children were weighed daily, and the attending nurses noted the quality (watery, loose, or solid) and number of stools. Together with the rapid refeeding regimen appropriate for age, the patients received in a randomised, double blind fashion twice daily either viable L casei strain GG, 1010–11 colony forming units (cfu) (n = 20, group A), or heat inactivated L casei strain GG (n = 21, group B), each for five days. The patients were discharged according to the judgment of the attending paediatrician. The patients were seen by a physician (MK), who was blinded to the treatment group, at convalescence one month later.

Twenty six of 41 patients fulfilled the inclusion criteria and were rotavirus positive, therefore the final study population was 13 for group A and 13 for group B.

The preparations of L casei strain GG were manufactured by the Research and Development Centre of Valio Ltd, Helsinki, Finland, as follows. L casei strain GG was concentrated, washed with water, and the concentrate divided into two. One half was heated to 85–100°C for 10 min. Saccharose was added as a cryoprotectant into both halves (about 50% of dry matter), and both preparations were lyophilised. The viable half, that was not heat treated, contained 1×1011 cfu/g L casei strain GG, whereas the heat inactivated half did not contain living bacteria. Both preparations were divided into 0.1 g aliquots and stored at −18°C until reconstitution and administration in tap water (about 5 ml). The appearance and taste of these solutions were indistinguishable.

Heparinised blood was drawn for the enzyme linked immunospot (ELISPOT) assay during the acute phase (day 1 after admission) (n = 12 in group A, n = 11 in group B), and at follow up one month later (n = 12 in group A, n = 13 in group B). During diarrhoea measurement of the rotavirus specific response was possible in nine and eight patients, respectively. For rotavirus antibody studies paired sera were available from 11 patients in group A and six patients in group B.

The ELISPOT assays measuring the number of lymphocytes secreting immunoglobulins of isotypes IgM, IgA, and IgG (immunoglobulin secreting cells) and the number of lymphocytes secreting specific antibodies to rotavirus (specific antibody secreting cells) were carried out as described previously.5 Rotavirus IgA and IgG serum antibodies were measured using an enzyme linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA) method, which was a single serum dilution modification of the test described by Midhun et al.5 The antigen was a rhesus human reassortant rotavirus strain D×RRV (a reassortant between D...
Table 1  Clinical description of the patients receiving viable (group A) or inactivated (group B) L. casei strain GG on admission and on discharge; data are mean (SD)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Group A (n=13)</th>
<th>Group B (n=13)</th>
<th>p Value*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>On admission</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Age (months)</td>
<td>12.7 (4.8)</td>
<td>16.2 (8.5)</td>
<td>0.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration of diarrhoea (days)</td>
<td>2.5 (1-4)</td>
<td>2.9 (2-4)</td>
<td>0.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weight (g)</td>
<td>9750 (2340)</td>
<td>10130 (2040)</td>
<td>0.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weight loss (g)</td>
<td>373 (123)</td>
<td>472 (218)</td>
<td>0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serum sodium (mmol/l)</td>
<td>137 (5)</td>
<td>138 (5)</td>
<td>0.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pH</td>
<td>7.35 (0-06)</td>
<td>7.35 (0-07)</td>
<td>0.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>On discharge</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weight (g)</td>
<td>9870 (2100)</td>
<td>10450 (2100)</td>
<td>0.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean (95% CI) duration of diarrhoea (days)</td>
<td>1.5 (1-0 to 2-2)</td>
<td>1.6 (1-1 to 2-3)</td>
<td>0.83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Student's t test.

There was no difference between the patients receiving viable and inactivated L. casei strain GG (table 1).

**IMMUNOLOGICAL OUTCOME**

At the acute stage, the concentrations of immunoglobulin secreting cells of isotypes IgM, IgA, and IgG were high in both treatment groups. There was a tendency to a greater response in group A than in group B, although the difference was not statistically significant. The transient nature of this response was demonstrated by a significant decrease in the number of immunoglobulin secreting cells by convalescence compared with values during diarrhoea; the two treatment groups were alike (data not shown).

During diarrhoea, the mean numbers of specific antibody secreting cells to rotavirus/10^6 cells were similar in both groups (data not shown). The IgM and IgG specific antibody secreting cells to rotavirus could not be detected at convalescence in either treatment group.

Very low numbers of IgA secreting cells to rotavirus were seen during diarrhoea in both treatment groups alike. By convalescence, there was a 5-4-fold increase in the number of these cells in group A compared with group B, with a risk ratio of 5-4 (95% CI from 1.5 to 19.9). Most patients in group A, but not in group B, showed a detectable rotavirus specific antibody secreting cells response at the convalescent stage.

All patients had a detectable ELISA IgA response to rotavirus from the acute to the convalescent stage (table 2). The mean IgA antibody concentrations at the acute stage were low, and similar in the two groups. The infants in group A showed a more vigorous IgA serum antibody response to rotavirus and had higher antibody values at convalescence than infants in group B.

**Discussion**

A recent study showed that even in infants under the age of 6 months, a previously tolerated milk can safely be included in the diet during acute diarrhoea. Moreover, milk fermented with lactic acid bacteria has been shown to shorten the duration of acute diarrhoea. The usefulness of such milks in the diet during diarrhoea can be linked with viability of the lactic acid bacteria, and therefore their ability to survive the gut transit, to adhere to the mucosa, and transiently to colonise the gut. The adherent property is significant in enhancing the local immune response, and in stabilising the mucosal barrier to decrease inadvertent transmission of antigens from the gut. In contrast to the alleged importance of viability, immunomodulation and a beneficial clinical effect have also been demonstrated using a supernatant obtained after centrifugation of lactic acid bacteria.

The most interesting result of the present study is that viable L casei strain GG enhanced

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the rotavirus specific IgA secreting cell response and the serum IgA antibody response to rotavirus. Therefore, using viable *L casei* strain GG as an adjunct in the diet during acute rotavirus diarrhoea may promote development of immunity against reinfections. In this study, clinical recovery from rotavirus diarrhoea was equal in the two groups receiving viable or heat inactivated *L casei* strain GG during the diarrhoea. However, in developing countries using heat inactivated *L casei* strain GG might obviate the need to preserve viability of the bacteria, while maintaining the beneficial clinical effect.

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