

Review

# Cell Culture Models of Human Norovirus: the End of the Beginning?

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Received: June 6, 2017 / Accepted: June 7, 2017

**Human norovirus (hNoV) infection accounts for the vast majority of virus-mediated gastroenteritis cases worldwide. It causes self-limiting acute illnesses in healthy individuals lasting for a few days, however, in immunocompromised patients, hNoV can establish chronic and potentially fatal infections. Since its discovery in 1968, much effort had been made to develop cell culture and animal infection models to no avail. Only recently, some promising breakthroughs in the development of in vitro infection models have been made. Here, we will contrast and compare those models and discuss what further needs to be done to develop a reliable and robust cell culture model.**

**Keywords:** Human norovirus, cell culture model, human intestinal enteroid

## Introduction

Noroviruses are small non-enveloped viruses belonging to Caliciviridae family [1] with single-stranded, positive-sense non-segmented ribonucleic acid (RNA) genome [2]. HNoV was first discovered in an elementary school in Norwalk, Ohio in 1968 by its association with a disease outbreak of “winter vomiting” and the gastroenteritis was confirmed to have a viral etiology using immunoelectron microscopy in 1972 [3, 4]. Norovirus genome is organized into three open reading frames (ORF1, 2 and 3) with the exception of that of murine norovirus (four ORFs). Non-structural proteins are encoded by ORF1 while two structural proteins (VP1 and VP2) are

encoded by ORF2 and ORF3, respectively [5]. VP1 is the major capsid protein and forms a shell protecting the RNA genome while VP2 is a small basic protein associated with VP1.

HNoV is responsible for diarrhea worldwide affecting people of all age groups [6]. It is remarkably stable in the environment and extraordinarily contagious as it was claimed that less than scores of virus particles are enough to establish a successful infection [7]. Moreover, viral shedding has been reported to continue for several weeks even after the abatement of disease symptoms [8]. HNoVs account for more than half the outbreaks and up to 40% of sporadic cases of acute gastroenteritis worldwide [9]. Recent estimation argues that in developed countries, roughly a million of clinic visits and 64,000 cases of inpatient hospitalization of the young are related with hNoV infections annually while in developing countries hNoV infection is responsible for 200,000

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deaths of children <5 years of age mainly due to their inaccessibility to proper hydration and clinical care [10]. Gastroenteritis symptoms last for 24 to 72 hours and people usually recover without any serious long-term problems [11, 12]. However, norovirus illness can become serious for the young and the old, and especially immunocompromised patients [13]. Person-to-person transmission seems to be the major route (roughly 90%) of viral spreads in norovirus-related gastroenteritis outbreaks [14, 15] as well as sporadic cases [16, 17] and the transmission mode can be both fecal-oral and vomit-oral.

Prior to the recent advent of *in vitro* norovirus replication systems [18, 19] and the cloning of hNoV genome [20], mechanisms of hNoV-mediated pathogenesis with emphasis on virus-host interactions have been sought by analyzing immunological parameters of human patients or volunteers or the surrogate murine norovirus (MuNoV)-infected animals [21–26]. Historically, much effort had been made to establish susceptible cell lines for hNoVs, however, no cell lines, of human and other species, demonstrated signs of infection *in vitro*. And as such lack of cell culture models has imposed the main barrier to detailed delineation of hNoV replication strategies in infected cells.

### Conventional *in vitro* cell culture systems

Since its discovery nearly 50 years ago, many laboratory efforts have been made to develop an *in vitro* infection model for hNoVs in cultured cell lines [27–30]. A large number of human cell lines of intestinal origin, such as I-407, HT-29, Caco-2, AGS, Kato-3, HCT-8, Detroit 562, HuTu-80, and of other tissues, including but not limited to A549, CCD-18, Detroit 551, Hep-2, HEC, HeLa, RD, and 293, were tested with different supplements (insulin, DMSO, and butyric acid) under various culture conditions to examine if they supported hNoV infection, however, no clear indications of infection were evident [27, 31–41]. The unavailability of an hNoV culture model has made the MuNoV an attractive surrogate model virus for the study of hNoV pathogenesis as the MuNoV is the only norovirus that can replicate efficiently *in vitro* in cell lines of macrophage and dendritic cell origin and is competent to establish either acute or chronic infections in mice depending on the viral genotype by penetrating the intestinal epithelial barrier

through microfold (M) cells [42–46]. However, it is not clear yet whether hNoV has the same tropism *in vivo* and *in vitro* as no cell lines of the cell lineage are capable of supporting hNoV infection and/or replication as the MuNoV does [28].

### 3-dimensional cell culture model

A large number of previous studies have demonstrated the application of 3-dimensional (3D) models for studying the pathogenesis of a variety of microbes, including gastroenteritis pathogens [47–52]. It is reasonable to construe that cellular behavior *in vitro* in a two-dimensional (2-D) culture is very different from that of *in vivo*, and thus it is not surprising to see that conventional routine 2-D cultures in a cell monolayer could not recapitulate desirable and adequate differentiation of epithelial cells at basal and apical cell surfaces [53, 54]. Recently, some 3D organoid models, which emulate the virus-host microenvironment, were reported to promote successful hNoV replication using INT-407 and Caco-2 cells, a human embryonic small intestinal epithelial cell line [55] and a human epithelial colon rectal adenocarcinoma cell line [56], respectively. To build a 3-D model, target cells are cultivated as in a conventional 2-D culture to a certain density in monolayers before incubated with porous collagen-coated beads in a bioreactor, called rotating wall vessel (RWV), which was first developed by NASA. Cells are attached to the beads and form cell-bead complexes, left allowed to grow under microgravity in a RWV. Resulting 3-D cells generally epitomize important aspects of cellular differentiation and tissue organization, which parallel those of the body *in vivo* [52]. By adopting 3-D culture techniques, Straub *et al.* established *in vitro* cell culture models using Int-407 and Caco-2 which were rendered susceptible to hNoV GI and GII [55, 56]. Infected cells exhibited signs of cytopathic effect (CPE) and seemed to produce hNoV particles in the culture. However, extensive scrutiny of the utility of the 3-D cell culture model for hNoV infection is entailed as there have been disparities reported by an independent research group regarding susceptibility of the model to hNoV based on real-time PCR or immunofluorescence assay [29, 57], and the latter group suggested that observed CPE reported by Straub *et al.* presumably stemmed from the toxicity of contaminating

LPS in the virus stock prepared from fecal samples.

### hNoV infection in BJAB cells

Several pieces of evidence demonstrated that B cells might be one of the targets of noroviruses in vivo. First of all, B cells were stained positive for MuNoV when interferon-deficient or interleukin 10-deficient mice were inoculated with the virus [58, 59]. On the other hand, MuNoV infection and replication significantly decreased in mice where functional B cells were absent such as in *Rag1*<sup>-/-</sup> mice (lacking both B and T cells) and  $\mu$ -deficient mice (lacking B cells only) [60]. Furthermore, Bok *et al.* also reported that duodenal B cells of chimpanzees infected with hNoV were stained positive for hNoV capsid protein [61]. More recently, Jones *et al.* demonstrated MuNoV infection in the B cells of Peyer's patches and the expression of a viral nonstructural protein attested to bona fide viral infection and replication in the cell type [62, 63]. Taken together, these data strongly suggest that B cells are a legitimate target in vivo. Indeed, Jones *et al.* first demonstrated that murine B cell lines, M12 and WEHI-231, were susceptible to both acute (MuNoV-1) and chronic (MuNoV-3) strains of MuNoV. Moreover, a human B cell line (BJAB) was shown to support hNoV (GII.4-Sydney) entry and replication only when co-infected with an enteric bacteria, *Enterobacter cloacae* [62, 63]. It is surprising but not totally unprecedented to see that enteric bacteria play an important role in viral infections as exemplified in other viral infections: rotavirus, poliovirus, and mouse mammary tumor virus [64–70]. The same was true to MuNoV infection as extended oral administration of antibiotics significantly reduced MuNoV infection and replication, strongly suggesting a role of enteric bacteria. A prominent difference was that hNoV displays absolute requirement of bacterial co-infection as filtered virus-containing stool samples could not establish infection in BJAB cells while MuNoV can infect the target cells (macrophages and dendritic cells) in the absence of enteric bacteria. It is not clear yet whether both noroviruses constrain the presence of enteric bacteria for viral tropism in B cells in vivo. Alternatively, those two viruses have evolutionarily diverged out, evincing differential requirement for efficient infection of target cells. Of note, not all enteric bacteria enabled norovirus infection in BJAB cells as co-infection with *Escherichia coli*, deficient of HBGA-like

substances on the surface, could not confer viral susceptibility on the cells, highlighting the critical role of HBGA in viral infections [71]. Interestingly, not only intact enteric bacterial co-infection but also addition of synthetic soluble H antigen alone could facilitate viral entry into BJAB cells. In fact, a number of studies have implicated HBGA as a (co)-receptor for hNoV: i) genetic, biochemical, and immunological studies demonstrated that HBGA is required for hNoV infection [72–80], ii) when HBGA binding was inhibited, hNoV infection was curtailed [81], and iii) presence of carbohydrate attachment factors, which are widely expressed on the bacterial surface [82], was prerequisite for efficient hNoV infection [83–85]. On the other hand, potential implications of this phenomenon could shake our conventional view of HBGA as a receptor for human norovirus. One may imagine that a soluble form of a cellular receptor would antagonize, rather than promote, viral infection. Therefore, it would be tempting to postulate that there is another receptor which binds to HBGA-hNoV complexes, allowing them to be endocytosed into target cells. In this regard, it is intriguing to note that a proteinaceous receptor has recently been identified for MuNoV [86].

However simple it may sound, hNoV infection in BJAB cells raise a number of questions. First, the major caveats of the use of unfiltered stool sample as a virus stock include variable reproducibility of BJAB cell infection in different laboratories [63]. Furthermore, the higher titers of hNoV were inoculated, the lower levels of viral production were observed, which likely hints on the presence of viral replication inhibitors in the stool sample. Second, although exact causes of variability have yet to be identified, the source and quality of fetal bovine serum and the state of BJAB cells, such as clumping activity, could be incriminated for low reproducibility of viral infection among different laboratories. Last but not in the least, *E. cloacae* co-infection rather inhibited hNoV infection in gnotobiotic pigs [87], a well-established hNoV animal model [88–90]. Thus, the role of HBGA-expressing bacteria on hNoV infection may not be generalized in different species. Of note, based on analyses by real-time PCR or immunohistochemistry, no signs of hNoV infection in B cells of gnotobiotic pigs were evident [87], suggesting that B cells may not be the main target of hNoV in the swine model. The same may be true to hNoV infection in humans. As B cell-deficient

patients were still shown to be susceptible to hNoV [91, 92], B cells seem to be dispensable for hNoV infection and pathology. The susceptibility and roles of B cells for hNoV biology need to be extensively investigated in the future studies.

#### **hNoV infection in stem cell-derived human enteroids**

Saxena *et al.* developed human intestinal enteroids (HIEs) to study pathophysiology of human rotavirus [93], which has narrow host range and low levels of replicability in transformed cell lines. After differentiation, HIEs contained various physiologically active intestinal epithelial cells, including enterocytes, Paneth and goblet cells. The model successfully supported human rotavirus infection and was shown to recapitulate some of rotavirus-induced pathologies such as luminal expansion upon endotoxin treatment and induction of viroplasm and lipid droplets following viral infection. Very recently, similar enteroid cultures were applied to hNoV infection and were demonstrated to support hNoV entry and replication in a monolayer established from stem cells derived from duodenum, jejunum, and ileum [94]. Unlike infection in BJAB cells described above, infected HIEs display clear signs of cytopathic effects (cellular rounding and death) upon hNoV inoculation while UV-inactivated virus did not induce similar cellular destruction, which argues for authentic virus-mediated pathology rather than that of contaminating LPS in the virus stock. Viral progeny production was confirmed by transmission electron microscopy, showing typical morphology of hNoV virus particles [3, 4]. Furthermore, viral replication was documented by expression of structural (VP1) and nonstructural proteins (RdRp, NTPase) or double-stranded RNA's, an intermediate during hNoV RNA replication [95] when assessed by confocal microscopy [96, 97].

Of note, replication of some hNoV strains, such as G1.1, GII.3, and GII.17, required the pretreatment of bile salt on both virus stocks and HIEs. Bile is known to have diverse functions on cells such as a natural surfactant, a modulator of varying signaling pathways, and an aid of lipid digestion and absorption [98, 99]. However, interestingly, bile pretreatment on HIEs cells was not necessary but could enhance the infectivity of other strains (e.g. GII.4). Besides, the presence of secretor status in HIEs also affects strain-specific hNoV susceptibil-

ity. Expression of human fucosyltransferase 2 (FUT2, known as secretor-positive genotype), which transfers a fucose to the HBGA precursor in gastrointestinal cells, correlates with viral infectivity with most GII.4 hNoVs [79, 100–102]. Ettayebi *et al.* also reported that all secretor-positive jejunal HIEs supported viral replication of various hNoV strains evident within 96 hours to 6 days post-infection (d.p.i) [94]. On the other hand, only hNoVs GII.3 could infect HIEs of secretor-negative individuals, which closely reflects epidemiological characteristics of hNoV [100]. Successful establishment of hNoV-susceptible enteroid models allowed assessment of effectiveness of suggested methods for hNoV inactivation, such as gamma irradiation and heat treatment (60°C from 15–60 min). Inoculation of HIEs with inactivated GII.3 and GII.4 did not result in viral growth, demonstrating utilities of HIEs for testing effectiveness of a variety of other anti-hNoV treatments in the coming years. Despite the paucity of availability of patient-derived intestinal stem cell-derived enterocytes, employment and cultivation of HIEs will undoubtedly advance our understanding of hNoV-mediated pathogenesis.

## **Conclusion**

Lack of robust cell culture and small animal models for hNoV infection has imposed a significant barrier to proper understanding of pathophysiology of hNoV since its discovery in 1968. In this regards, the recent development of the two in vitro cell culture models for hNoV has been met with great enthusiasm from the scientific community as it holds great promise for inspecting cellular, as well as viral, factors that affect the susceptibility of the cell culture models to the virus. In fact, by employing those two cell culture models, the critical role of bile on infectivity of some strains of hNoV is revealed and indispensability of HBGA for hNoV infection is confirmed. Although some aspects of hNoV entry were examined, much remains yet to be analyzed and scrutinized to fathom depths and widths of hNoV biology in target cells, including but not limited to searching for the proteinaceous cellular receptor(s), mechanisms of commensal bacteria-mediated infection, and activation status of various cellular signaling pathways. Better understanding of hNoV biology will pave the way for the development of effective antivirals and preventive vaccines.

## Acknowledgments

This research was supported by a research grant from the Ministry of Food and Drug Safety (14162-973).

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## 국문 초록

### 인간노로바이러스의 세포배양 기술개발: 새로운 시작?

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인간노로바이러스는 바이러스성 식중독 원인의 대부분을 차지한다. 노로바이러스가 건강한 성인에 감염하면 설사 등의 병변을 몇 일간 일으키다 대부분 별다른 처치 없이도 치유되는 경우가 대부분이다. 그러나 면역기능이 약화된 환자에게 감염한 경우, 만성감염 내지 치명적 감염도 가능한 것으로 보고 되고 있다. 1968년에 처음 노로바이러스가 보고된 이후 세포 감염 모델과 소동물 감염 모델을 만들고자 하는 시도가 이어져 왔으나 대부분 실패하였다. 그러나 최근들어 세포감염 모델 개발에 있어 주목할 만한 기념비적인 연구들이 이루어졌다 것이 고무적이다 할 수 있다. 이번 총설에서는 새로 개발된 감염 모델들의 특징과 장단점을 살펴보고, 이를 더욱 개선할 수 있는 방향에 대하여 살펴보고자 한다.