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Citation

Yang, L., M. Guell, D. Niu, H. George, E. Lesha, D. Grishin, J. Aach, et al. 2015. "Genome-Wide Inactivation of Porcine Endogenous Retroviruses (PERVs)." Science 350 (6264) (October 11): 1101–1104. doi:10.1126/science.aad1191.

Published Version

doi:10.1126/science.aad1191

Permanent link

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Genome-wide inactivation of porcine endogenous retroviruses (PERVs)

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Abstract:

The shortage of organs for transplantation is a major barrier to the treatment of organ failure. While porcine organs are considered promising, their use has been checked by concerns about transmission of porcine endogenous retroviruses (PERVs) to humans. Here, we describe the eradication of all PERVs in a porcine kidney epithelial cell line (PK15). We first determined the PK15 PERV copy number to be 62. Using CRISPR-Cas9, we disrupted all 62 copies of the PERV *pol* gene and demonstrated a > 1000-fold reduction in PERV transmission to human cells using our engineered cells. Our study shows that CRISPR-Cas9 multiplexability can be as high as 62 and demonstrates the possibility that PERVs can be inactivated for clinical application of porcine-to-human xenotransplantation.

One sentence summary:

CRISPR-cas9 can be used to inactivate all 62 copies of a porcine endogenous retrovirus from a swine genome (PERVs).

Pig genomes contain from a few to several dozen copies of PERV elements (*1*). Unlike other zoonotic pathogens, PERVs cannot be eliminated by biosecure breeding (*2*). Thus, strategies for reducing the risk of PERV transmission to humans have included small interfering RNAs (RNAi), vaccines (*3–5*), and PERV elimination using zinc finger nucleases (*6*) and TAL effector nucleases (*7*), but these have had limited success. Here we report the successful use of the CRISPR-Cas9

RNA-guided nuclease system (*8*) (*9, 10*) to inactivate all copies of the PERV *pol* gene and show that this reduces PERV infectivity of human cells by 1000-fold.

To design Cas9 guide RNAs (gRNAs) that specifically target PERVs, we analyzed the sequences of publically available PERVs and other endogenous retroviruses in pigs (Methods). We identified a distinct clade of PERV elements (Fig. 1A) and determined there to be 62 copies of PERVs in PK15 cells using droplet digital PCR (Fig. 1B). We then designed two Cas9 guide RNAs (gRNAs) that targeted the highly conserved catalytic center (*11*) of the *pol* gene on PERVs(Fig. 1C, Fig. S1). The *pol* gene product functions as a reverse transcriptase (RT) and is thus essential for viral replication and infection. We determined that these gRNAs targeted all PERVs but no other endogenous retrovirus or other sequences in the pig genome (Methods).

Initial experiments showed inefficient PERV editing when Cas9 and the gRNAs were transiently transfected (Fig. S2). Thus we used a PiggyBac transposon (*12*) system to deliver a doxycycline-inducible Cas9 and the two gRNAs into the genome of PK15 cells (Fig. S2-3). Continuous induction of Cas9 led to increased targeting frequency of the PERVs (Fig. S5), with a maximum targeting frequency of 37% (~23 PERV copies per genome) observed on day 17 (Fig. S5). Neither higher concentrations of doxycycline or prolonged incubation increased targeting efficiency (Fig. S4,5), possibly due to the toxicity of non-specific DNA damage by CRISPR-Cas9. Similar trends were observed when Cas9 was delivered using lentiviral constructs (Fig. S6). We then genotyped the cell lines that exhibited maximal PERV targeting efficiencies. We observed 455 different insertion and deletion (indel) events centered at the two gRNA target sites (Fig. 2B). Indel sizes ranged from 1 to 148bp, 80% of which were small deletions (<9bp). We validated the initial deep sequencing results with Sanger Sequencing (Fig. S7).

We next sorted single cells from PK15 cells with high PERV targeting efficiency using flow cytometry and genotyped the *pol* locus of the resulting clones via deep sequencing (*13, 14*). A repeatable bimodal (Fig. 2A, S8-9) distribution was observed with ~10% of the clones exhibiting high levels of PERV disruption (97%-100%), and the remaining clones exhibiting low levels of editing (<10%). We then examined individual indel events in the genomes of these clones (Fig. 2B, Fig. S10-11). For the highly edited clones (Clone 20, 100%; Clone 15, 100%; Clone 29, 100%; Clone 38, 97.37%), there were only 16-20 unique indel patterns in each clone (Fig. 2B, S11). In addition, there was much higher degree shared of indels within the clones than across the clones (Fig. S25), suggesting that gene conversion might have operated during editing to spread previously mutated PERV copies to wild-type PERVs cut by Cas9 (Fig. 2B, Fig. S25). Mathematical modeling of DNA repair during PERV elimination (Fig. S26), and analysis of expression data (Fig. S22-24) supported this hypothesis and suggested that highly edited clones came from cells in which Cas9 and the gRNAs were highly expressed.

Next, we examined whether unexpected genomic rearrangements had occurred as a result of the multiplexed genome editing. Karyotyping of individual modified clones (Fig. S12-S14) indicated that there were no observable genomic rearrangements. We also examined 11 independent genomic loci with at most 2bp mismatches to each of the intended gRNA targets and observed no non-specific mutations (Fig. S27 and methods). This suggests that our multiplexed Cas9-based genome engineering strategy did not cause catastrophic genomic instability.

Last, we examined whether our disruption of all copies of PERV *pol* in the pig genome could eliminate *in vitro* transmission of PERVs from pig to human cells. We could not detect RT activity

in the cell culture supernatant of the highly modified PK15 clones (Fig. S15), suggesting that modified cells can only produce minimal amounts of PERV particles. We then co-cultured WT and highly modified PK15 cells with HEK 293 cells to test directly for transmission of PERV DNA to the human cells (*15*). After co-culturing PK15 WT and HEK 293 cells for 5 days and 7 days (Fig. 3A, S16-17), we detected PERV *pol, gag,* and *env* sequences in the HEK 293 cells (Fig. 3A). We estimated the frequency of PERV infection to be approximately 1000 PERVs/ 1000 human cells (Fig. 3B). However, PK15 clones with > 97% PERV *pol* targeting exhibited up to 1000-fold reduction of PERV infection, similar to background levels (Fig. 3C). We validated these results with PCR amplification of serial dilutions of HEK293 cells that had a history of contact with PK15 clones (Fig. 3D, S18-21). We could consistently detect PERVs in single HEK293 cells isolated from the population co-cultured with minimally modified Clone 40, but we could not distinctly detect PERVs in 100 human cells from the population co-cultured with highly modified Clone 20. Thus, we concluded that the PERV infectivity of the engineered PK15 cells had been reduced by up to 1000 fold.

In summary, we successfully targeted the 62 copies of PERV *pol* in PK15 cells and demonstrated greatly reduced *in vitro* transmission of PERVs to human cells. While *in vivo* PERV transmission to humans has not been demonstrated (*16, 17*), PERVs are still considered risky (*18, 19*) and this strategy could completely eliminate this risk. As no porcine embryonic stem cells exist, this system will need to be recapitulated in primary porcine cells and cloned into animals using somatic cell nuclear transfer procedure. Moreover, we achieved simultaneous Cas9 targeting of 62 loci in single pig cells without salient genomic rearrangement. To our knowledge, the maximum number of genomic sites previously reported to be simultaneously edited has been six (*20*). Our methods thus open the possibility of editing other repetitive regions of biological significance.

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Figure 1| CRISPR-Cas9 gRNAs were designed to specifically target the *pol* gene in 62 copies of PERVs in PK15 cells. (**A**) Phylogenetic tree representing endogenous retroviruses present in the pig genome. PERVs are highlighted in blue. (**B**) Copy number determination of PERVs in PK15 cells *via* digital droplet PCR. The copy number of *pol* elements was estimated to be 62 using three independent reference genes: *ACTB*, *GAPDH*, and *EB2*. N=3, mean +/- SEM. (**C**) We designed two CRISPR-Cas9 gRNAs to target the catalytic region of the PERV *pol* gene. The two gRNA targeting sequences are shown below a schematic of PERV gene structure. Their PAM sequences are highlighted in red.

Figure 2| Clonal PK15 cells with inactivation of all copies of PREV *pol* genes after Cas9 treatment. (**A**) A bimodal distribution of *pol* targeting efficiencies was observed among the single-cell-derived PK15 clones after 17 days of Cas9 induction. 45/50 exhibited <16% targeting efficiency; 5/50 clones exhibited >93% targeting efficiency. (**B**) PK15 haplotypes at PERV *pol* loci after CRISPR-Cas9 treatment. In red, indel events in the PERV *pol* sequence are represented. Shades of purple indicate endogenous PERVs.

Figure 3| (A) Detection of PERV *pol, gag*, and *env* DNA in the genomes of HEK-293-GFP cells after co-culturing with PK15 cells for 5 days and 7 days (293G5D and 393G7D, respectively). A pig GGTA1 primer set was used to detect pig cell contamination of the purified human cells. **(B)** qPCR quantification of the number of PERV elements in 1000 293G cells derived from a population co-cultured with wild type PK15 cells using specific primer sets. (N=3, mean+/-SEM) **(C)** qPCR quantification of the number of PERV elements in PK15 Clones 15, 20, 29, and 38, with high levels of PERV *pol* modification, and minimally modified Clones 40 and 41. (N=3, mean+/-SEM) **(D)** Results of PCR on PERV *pol* on genomic DNA from various numbers of HEK 293-GFP cells (0.1, 1, 10,and 100) isolated from populations previously cultured with highly modified PK15 Clone 20 and minimally modified Clone 40. See Fig. S18-21 for a full panel of PCR reactions.