ECOLOGY AND TAXONOMY OF PATHOGENIC ASPERGILLI

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Abstract
2. Historical Perspective
3. Introduction to Aspergillus
4. Importance of Aspergilli in Industry, Agriculture, and Human Health
   4.1. Industrial importance of aspergilli
   4.2. Role of aspergilli in plant infection and production of toxic metabolites
   4.3. Role of aspergilli in animal infections
   4.4. Species of Aspergillus pathogenic to humans
   4.5. Aerobiology of pathogenic aspergilli
   4.6. Public health importance and virulence factors of Aspergillus fumigatus
5. Classification and Identification of Aspergillus Species
   5.1. Morphology of Aspergillus
   5.2. Description of the species
   5.2.1. Aspergillus candidus
   5.2.2. Aspergillus clavatus
   5.2.3. Aspergillus flavus
   5.2.4. Aspergillus fumigatus
   5.2.5. Aspergillus glaucus
   5.2.6. Aspergillus nidulans
   5.2.7. Aspergillus niger
   5.2.8. Aspergillus ochraceus
   5.2.9. Aspergillus oryzae
   5.2.10. Aspergillus restrictus
   5.2.11. Aspergillus usus
   5.2.12. Aspergillus terreus
   5.2.13. Aspergillus versicolor
6. Molecular Approaches to Classification and Identification of Aspergillus Species
7. Genetics of Aspergillus
8. Conclusion
9. Acknowledgement
10. References

1. ABSTRACT

Aspergillus fumigatus and related species are widely distributed in nature. The majority of the species belonging to this genus are saprophytic in nature. Only a few species including A. fumigatus are capable of causing diseases in man. These opportunistic agents may cause infection or allergy in susceptible individuals. These fungi also cause diseases in animals, birds, and in plants. In addition, some of the enzymes and metabolic products have tremendous value in industry. A few of the Aspergillus species produce potent toxins of the aflatoxin family, which can cause cancer. Toxic death due to aflatoxins has been reported in humans, animals, and birds.

There are currently about 180 recognized species of Aspergillus, and these species are placed in 6 subgenera, which are further divided into several sections. The telemorphs belonging to the genera are Chaetosartorya, Dichlarea, Eurotium, Emericella, Fennellia, Hemicarpentes, Neosartorya, Petromyces, Sclercleisia, and Warcupiella. This review presents a concise overview of the ecology, taxonomy, and genetics of Aspergillus species including their role in plant, animal, and human diseases, production of toxic metabolites, and molecular methods for their identification.

2. HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Aspergilli have always played an important role in life and health of humans. It was Micheli (1), who in 1729 for the first time made a microscopic study of these molds and was able to distinguish stalks (conidiophores) and spore heads. He observed that the spore chains or columns radiated from a central structure to suggest a pattern like that of “Aspergillum” (holy water sprinkler), with which he, as a priest, was familiar. Hence he gave the name Aspergillus to these molds. The generic description and some of the illustrations given by Micheli correctly
Taxonomy of Pathogenic Aspergilli

represent the genus as has been long accepted. The first correct interpretation of structure of conidial head of Aspergillus appeared in the work of Corda (2), who described and illustrated his studies from fresh materials. De Bary (3) in 1854 described and illustrated the ascigerous stage (cleistothecia), Eurotium herbariorum in Aspergillus (A. glaucus). In the last 273 years since the work of Micheli, considerable literature concerning Aspergillus has accumulated. The early literature was based on microscopic study of specimens collected from natural sources. After De Bary’s group began to investigate moulds in comparative culture in the early 1880’s, the study of aspergilli received a great impetus. Later in 1883, Eidam (4) described the ascigerous stage of A. nidarans. Wehmer in Germany studied the biochemical aspects of aspergilli (5) and this culminated in the publication of a monograph on the genus Aspergillus in 1901 (6). Thom and Church (7) in 1926 attempted to bring together all of the existing literature and published a monograph “The Aspergilli”, presenting a critical review on the species described. The number of species accepted, either known in culture or determined from existing literature was 60. In the years 1929-1930, Tamiya and Morita (8) cited in their “Bibliographe von Aspergillus”, 2424 papers which in some way concerned the aspergilli. The role of Aspergilli in industrial processing, decomposition of organic matter in soil, and causing human and animal disease were being increasingly recognized. Thom and Raper (9) did an extensive re-examination of the genus Aspergillus, which led to the publication of a monograph “A Manual of Aspergilli” in 1945. Eighty species and ten varieties, assembled in 14 groups, were accepted as valid.

Subsequently numerous additional species and varieties were described in the literature, and several ascosporic stages were discovered. Raper and Fenell (10) in 1965 published a comprehensive monograph “The Genus Aspergillus”, describing exhaustively all the species then known. Numerous additional species and varieties of Aspergillus have been described in the literature since 1965. Klich and Pitt published a laboratory guide for identification of common Aspergillus species and their teleomorphs (11). A monograph was published by Powell et al. (12) on the taxonomy, genetics, and industrial application of the members belonging to the genus Aspergillus. Recent treatises on various interrelated subjects of Aspergillus have appeared in the literature (13-17). de Hoog et al. (18) have presented descriptions of 40 medically important species of Aspergillus with illustrations and a key for their identification including molecular features.

3. INTRODUCTION TO ASPERGILLUS

The genus Aspergillus is distinguished by the presence of a vesicle, a swollen tip of the conidiophore (stalk) bearing phialides (metulae) in single or two series. The phialides bear columnar or divergent (radiate) unbranched chains of conidia. The conidia remain attached to each other by a connective bridge (disjunctor), which may be conspicuous or almost invisible. Conidia are borne in a basipetal fashion, the youngest conidium being at the base and the oldest being at the tip of the chain. Colonies of the fungus are usually rapid growing, powdery, white, greenish yellow, brown or black. Most species of Aspergillus reproduce only asexually; sexual state (teleomorph) is known only for a few species but most closely related teleomorphs are known even for species that have no sexual state. The teleomorph of Aspergillus is a round, closed structure (called cleistothecium) enclosing numerous asci which contain the ascospores. When the cleistothecium bursts, the asci are spread to the surrounding. The telemorphs belong to the genera, Chaetosartorya, Dichlanea, Emericella, Eurotium, Fenelia, Hemicarpentes, Neosartorya, Petromyces, Sclerelisia, Warcupiella (Ascomycota, Euascomycetes, Eurotiales, Trichocomaceae). In most cases, ascii are 8-spored. Almost all species of Aspergillus known to form cleistothecia are homothallic. The cleistothecia vary in size, colour, shape and appearance in different species. The external covering of the cleistothecia in some species e.g. A. nidarans is comprised of a loose network of hyphae with a large number of terminal or intercalary elliptical or globose, vesculose cells with very thick walls almost obliterating the cell lumen (Hülle cells).

There are currently about 180 recognized species of Aspergillus. Aspergilli are perhaps the commonest group of fungi in human environment and are widely distributed. Many species are found on a wide variety of substrata, including soil, forage products, various types of food products, dust, organic debris and decomposing matter. Aspergillus species play an essential role in the recycling of carbon and nitrogen sources. Many species of Aspergillus including the important pathogenic species do not have any special nutritional requirements and can grow in simple media, such as glucose-asparagine-phosphate broth, which contains a single protein hydrolysate. Aspergillus species can degrade a number of organic components, viz. sugars, fatty acids, proteins, cellulose, pectin, and xylene (19).

4. IMPORTANCE OF ASPERGILLI IN INDUSTRY, AGRICULTURE, AND HUMAN HEALTH

4.1. Industrial importance of aspergilli

Several species of Aspergillus have industrial importance. For instance, A. oryzae and A. niger are widely employed for production of enzymes, including cellulases, amylases, proteases, lipases, and pectinases (19, 20). These fungi are well-suited for large-scale industrial production because of their efficient secretion system. The most widely used enzymes are lipases and proteases, as additives to detergents. Other enzyme preparations from Aspergillus are used for malting in the production of brewed and distilled alcoholic beverages, as food additives to aid digestion in livestock and humans, and for degradation of fats and oils for foods and fragrances (20). Aspergillus niger is also employed in the production of glucuronic acid by fermentation of corn steep liquor supplemented with glucose, and citric acid by fermentation of molasses. Aspergillus oryzae, A. sojae and A. tamari have been used for over 4000 years in a number of food
Taxonomy of Pathogenic Aspergilli

4.2. Role of aspergilli in plant infection and production of toxic metabolites

Aspergillus species are considered as weak plant pathogens. *Aspergillus flavus* and *A. parasiticus* have a particular affinity for nuts and oil seeds. The three most important crops affected are peanut, maize and cottonseed. These fungi generally infect plant hosts wounded by insects or other agents (20). Penetration of healthy tissue of plants causing systemic infection has been demonstrated under conditions of stress e.g. drought (20-22). Pre-harvest infection of fruits by *Aspergillus* spp. is a serious problem (21).

Systemic infection of developing pea-nut plant by *A. flavus* has been reported (21, 22). Pre-harvest infection in maize is partly dependent on insect damage to cobs, but the fungus can also invade the developing ears (23). The greatest concern of plant infection by *Aspergillus* involves the production of aflatoxin (a polyketide) by *A. flavus* and *A. parasiticus* in stored grains and nuts, a process that is probably initiated frequently by pre-harvest penetration by the fungus (22, 23). Aflatoxins were first discovered after the deaths of over 100,000 turkeys fed with contaminated groundnut meal (24).

Aflatoxicosis is a well-recognized disease in birds, other animals, and humans. Spores of *A. flavus* and other species of *Aspergillus* are often found in outside air. Under stress conditions of drought and high temperature, maize and groundnut may be infected and may promote growth of *A. flavus* leading to contamination with aflatoxin before harvest (22, 23). Both *A. flavus* and *A. parasiticus* produce aflatoxin B₁ and B₂ while *A. parasiticus* produces, in addition aflatoxins G₁ and G₂. The symbols 'B' and 'G' refer to the blue and green colours produced by these toxins under UV light on thin layer chromatography plates, while the subscript numbers 1 and 2 indicate major and minor compounds respectively (23). Aflatoxin B₁ is widespread in contaminated foodstuffs and is considered a great hazard to human health. It is a type 1 human carcinogen (25).

In 1974, an outbreak of hepatitis resulted in 100 deaths from contamination of heavily contaminated maize (26). Both *A. flavus* and *A. parasiticus* grow at temperatures 10 to 43°C with an optimum near 32-33°C, aflatoxin being produced between 12 and 40°C. Reduction of available oxygen by modified atmosphere packaging of foods in barrier film or with oxygen scavengers can inhibit aflatoxin production by *A. flavus* and *A. parasiticus* (25). Another mycotoxin, ochratoxin A (OA), a pentaketide is produced by *A. ochraceous*, *A. carbonarius* and occasionally by other species including *A. niger* (22). *Aspergillus ochraceous* has a natural habitat in dried or decaying vegetation, seeds, nuts and fruits (22). It grows in the temperature range of 8-37°C, with ochratoxin produced nearly over the entire range. *Aspergillus carbonarius* is also wide spread in tropical foods and can survive sun drying. It grows in the range 10-40°C (25). OA is associated with both acute kidney disease and cancers of the renal system and urinary tract (27). It has been linked to renal disease in Tunisia and Egypt (25).

4.3. Role of aspergilli in animal infections

Aspergilli have been known to infect the lungs and air-sacs of birds of all types (28, 29). The two major clinical manifestations of aspergillosis in birds are pneumonia in young chicks and chronic pulmono-visceral disease in older birds (28). Outbreaks of acute forms (called brooder’s pneumonia) have caused devastating losses of birds in hatcheries (28, 30). In these epizootics, the source of the infecting fungus has been traced to contaminated litter (28). The disease is most commonly caused by *A. fumigatus*, although *A. flavus*, *A. niger*, *A. nidulans*, and *A. terreus* may be occasional causal agents (28, 31). Acute aspergillosis presenting as placentitis has been frequently reported in cattle, and sometimes in sheep, horses and pigs (28). Cases of disseminated invasive aspergillosis caused by *A. terreus*, and *A. deflexus* have been reported in dogs (32-34).

Sinus infections due to *Aspergillus* also have been described in dogs (35). *Aspergillus nidulans* has been known to cause mycosis of the guttural pouch (air-filled diverticulum of the Eustachian tube) in horses (36).

4.4. Species of *Aspergillus* pathogenic to humans

A diversity of species of *Aspergillus* have been implicated in human mycoses. de Hoog et al. (18) have described 40 species reported as causal agents of opportunistic infections in humans. Many species are thermotolerant and their dry hydrophobic conidia are easily inhaled. Among these, *A. fumigatus* is the most frequent etiological agent followed by *A. flavus* and *A. niger*. Among the remaining species, less commonly or rarely recovered as opportunistic pathogens are *A. clavatus*, *A. glaucus*, *A. nidulans*, *A. oryzae*, *A. terreus*, *A. usit*, *A. versicolor*, *A. ochraceus* and several others (13, 18, 37). Aspergilli cause a variety of opportunistic infections, such as mycotic keratitis, otomycosis, nasal sinusitis, allergic bronchopulmonary aspergillosis (ABPA), aspergilloma, invasive aspergillosis, which may present in a wide spectrum, varying from local involvement to dissemination. Immunosuppression is the major factor predisposing to development of invasive aspergillosis (37). The frequency of invasive *Aspergillus* infections has increased in recent years due to increasing number of patients receiving aggressive chemotherapy and immunosuppressive agents.

4.5. Aerobiology of pathogenic aspergilli

*Aspergillus* species are ubiquitous in the environment, especially near decomposing vegetation. It has been suggested that the environment plays a crucial role in the epidemiology of invasive aspergillosis. *Aspergillus* conidia released in the air from several saprophytic sources of the fungus are dispersed in air currents and remain airborne for prolonged periods. *Aspergillus* spores are thus ubiquitously found in air and contaminate anything in contact with air (37). Viable propagules of *Aspergillus* spp (usually conidia) are commonly recovered from both indoors and outside. Inhalation of airborne conidia, either directly or through
Taxonomy of Pathogenic Aspergilli

Intermediate nasopharyngeal colonization is considered a direct cause of pulmonary infection in the immunocompromised host (38). Several studies have been conducted to correlate the airborne concentration of Aspergillus and risk of invasive disease and colonization. Increased incidence of aspergillosis and/or increased concentration of airborne Aspergillus have been attributed to hospital construction and renovation, excavation, contaminated air filtering systems, fire proofing material, damp wood, potting soil, shower wall, carpeting and season of the year (38-43). In one study (41), the cluster of cases of invasive aspergillosis in a bone marrow transplant unit (BMTU) could not be linked to construction, though construction did increase the rates of Aspergillus colonization in the BMTU and the adjacent wards. Outside air conidial levels have been reported to range generally from 1 to 5 cfu m-3 (41). Hospenthal et al. (44) recovered A. fumigatus and A. flavus at an average of 1.83 cfu m-3 air sampled over a period of 54-week period in the oncology wards of hospital. Other Aspergillus species were recovered at a mean of 2.38 cfu m-3. There was no correlation of air borne concentration of aspergilli with ward or season nor was there any association linking the six cases of invasive aspergillosis seen during the air sampling period with the changes in recovery of airborne Aspergillus (44). On the other hand, Paugam et al. (45) were able to demonstrate by molecular typing the identity of A. fumigatus isolates obtained by air sampling and the one from a deep-tissue of an invasive case of aspergillosis in an immunosuppressed patient. The importance of optimal physical barriers and air filtration to decrease airborne fungal spores in high-risk units has been emphasized. Oren et al. (46) reported that keeping neutropenic patients in a special ward with high efficiency particulate air filtration (HEPA) system eliminated the risk of invasive aspergillosis completely. In view of these reports, it is desirable to have efficient air filtering devices e.g. HEPA filters to aim at reducing Aspergillus conidia to zero level in the air of wards housing severely immunocompromised patients.

A few aeromycological studies have also been carried out in relation to suspected cases of hypersensitivity pneumonitis in some occupational groups. Sandhu et al. (47) carried out an aeromycological survey in 2 cane sugar mills where a case of hypersensitivity pneumonitis in an employee of one of the mills had originated. A. fumigatus accounted for 42.5% of the total aerial fungal colony counts recorded in the mills as against 2% in other localities. Further, the aerial concentration of A. fumigatus in the bagasse-containing sites was higher (50.3%) than in the bagasse-free sites (13.5%) in the mills (47).

4.6. Public health importance and virulence factors of Aspergillus fumigatus

Aspergillus fumigatus is the most important pathogenic species among aspergilli. It is thermotolerant, can grow over a temperature range from 20 to 520C, optimally at 370C, well at 30-45 0C, and it can survive for long periods of time at 55 0C (37, 48, 49). Aspergillus fumigatus is thus abundant in self-heating environments such as hay, corn, and compost. It is also very frequently isolated from herbivore dung, accumulations of bird droppings, bird nests, inadequately heat dried plant material, such as spices or marijuana-cultivated soils and graminaceous seeds, such as those of wheat, barley, oats, rice, sorghum and corn (20, 22, 37). Humans and animals constantly inhale numerous conidia of A. fumigatus. The conidia are normally eliminated in the immunocompetent host by innate immune mechanisms. Allergic bronchopulmonary aspergillosis (ABPA), aspergillosis, mycotic keratitis, otomyositis and nasal sinustitis are the only infections observed in such hosts. In the immunosuppressed patients, in addition to these infections, it causes invasive and disseminated aspergillosis (48). Aspergillus fumigatus is an important and life threatening aerial pathogen frequently causing nosocomially acquired invasive aspergillosis, typically in the treatment setting of hematological patients. The invasive infections occur most frequently in patients who are neutropenic or have dysfunctional neutrophils (37, 48). Conidia of A. fumigatus are airborne and are present in all environments at concentrations between 0.1 and 3 conidia m-3 of air; their small size allows them to reach all levels of the respiratory tract (49).

It has been hypothesized that when A. fumigatus undergoes transition from a free-living organism existing on dead organic matter in the environment, to an opportunistic pathogen, it undergoes metabolic reprogramming that induces the expression of specific sets of genes necessary for the growth in the host. Several virulent factors have been identified in A. fumigatus (48, 49), that could mediate host tissue adherence, colonization and invasion, and facilitate the escape of the host immune responses. The ability of A. fumigatus to bind to extracellular matrix (ECM) of host tissue is considered crucial in the establishment of the fungus and in initiation of infection (50). Several components of ECM such as fibrinogen, laminin, fibrinectin and type I collagen have been proposed as cellular ligands for conidia (50). The conidial hydrophobin helps the fungus to adhere to epithelium. Recognition of some glycoproteins present at the surface of the host tissue (called ligands) also appears to be a crucial step in the initiation of infection (50). Adhesiopotes for A. fumigatus are located on the outer D domains of the fibrinogen molecule, and in laminin P1 (51). A variety of enzymes produced by A. fumigatus, viz. catalase, aspartic protease, metallopeptase, elastase and collagenase help in lung colonization and invasion of host tissue (49). The enzymes phospholipase and ribonucleases destroy host cells, and superoxide dismutase protects the fungus against antioxidants. Aspergillus fumigatus also produces two major hydroxymates, N, N’, N” triacetyl fusaricaine C and ferricrocin siderophores, which can compete successfully with human iron proteins to procure iron to support fungal growth (50).

A monograph by Brakehage et al. (52) gives a comprehensive overview of biology, clinical aspects, epidemiology, and molecular biology of A. fumigatus infections.

5. CLASSIFICATION AND IDENTIFICATION OF ASPERGILLUS SPECIES

The genus Aspergillus is now assigned to the family Trichocomaceae of order Eurotiales in the class Plectinomycetes of phylum Ascomycota (18). Currently species in the genus Aspergillus are taxonomically placed
Taxonomy of Pathogenic Aspergilli

Table 1. Morphological criteria used for identification of Aspergillus species

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Colony characteristics</th>
<th>Rate of growth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pigmentation of the aerial mycelium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Colour of reverse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Appearance of the colony margin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Texture of surface growth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conidial head</td>
<td>Colour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shape, overall dimension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Distribution of conidial chains in massed upright columns, or separate radiating conidial chains, or a formation intermediate between the two arrangements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conidiophore</td>
<td>Length</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Diameter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wall characteristics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vesicle</td>
<td>Shape</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dimension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Colour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fertile area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phialides</td>
<td>Uniseriate (single row) or biseriate (two rows)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conidia</td>
<td>Dimension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wall characteristics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Colour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hülle cells (present or absent)</td>
<td>Shape and colour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sclerotium or sclerotia like bodies (present or absent)</td>
<td>Form</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dimension and colour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual stage (Cleistothecia)</td>
<td>Colour, form, dimension and structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ascospores pattern, colour and dimension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aleuriospores</td>
<td>Present or absent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from Summerbell (13) and Richardson (37).

used to delineate species include the presence of extracellular polysaccharides (54), biotyping by the yeast killer system (55), the ubiquinone system, especially Q-9 and Q-10 (56), serological typing (57), and pectinolytic enzymes (58). Application of combination of different types of biochemical, physiological and morphological characteristics and molecular approaches to taxonomy of Aspergillus has been discussed by several workers (13, 14, 59). This approach has not yet found application for routine species identification of Aspergillus. Practical identification is still essentially based on a detailed study of morphological and cultural characteristics of the isolates (10, 11-13, 15-18).

Since only a few species of Aspergillus form the sexual state, it is the anamorphic state, which is usually encountered in culture from clinical specimens. Thus identification of most of the species is based on the basis of characteristics of the colonies and a detailed study of the microscopic morphology, especially that of the asexual spore bearing head. The key for identification of 13 species of Aspergillus presented here is based on these characteristics. Several monographs and text books are available as aids in the identification of common species and medically important species (11-13, 15-18). The important morphological criteria used in species identification of aspergilli are listed in the Table 1.

5.1. Morphology of Aspergillus

Colony characters studied include pigmentation of the aerial mycelium or the underlying medium, rate of growth, appearance of the colony margin, whether heavy or sharply limited or thin and diffuse, smooth and entire or irregularly lobed or submerged and the texture of surface growth, whether velvety (consisting of submerged mycelium, from which only fruiting structures arise above the surface) or floccose (producing a conspicuous aerial felt of branching and interlacing hyphae and conidiophores). The characters of the conidial head include its colour and shape i.e. conidia produced in dry chains forming columns (columnar), or diverging (radiate) observed in a mature sporing culture, colour, size, shape (globose, subglobose or oval) and wall texture of the conidia i.e. smooth-walled or ornamented, ii. shape of the vesicle (subspherical, hemispherical, clavate, or flask-shaped); iii. roughness or smoothness of the conidiophore wall; iv. phialides being in single row (uniseriate) or two rows (biseriate). These morphological features of conidial heads are characteristics of the species and are better studied in slide culture. Examination of several heads in colonies (often on several media) is essential for complete description and interpretation of their size and shape. Cells with extremely thick walls (Hülle cells) of unknown function may be present in certain species of Aspergillus. The close and consistent association of globose Hülle cells with cleistothecia of A. nidulans suggests that presence of such structures in other species may indicate a potential for cleistothecia formation. True sclerotia consisting of thick-walled, parenchyma-like cells occur regularly in some isolates of A. candidus, A. niger, A. flavus and A. ochraceus. Some isolates of A. versicolor, A. wentii and A.
Taxonomy of Pathogenic Aspergilli

| Table 2. A key to the 13 pathogenic species commonly involved in human infections is given below followed by brief descriptions of the species |
|---|---|
| 1a. Colonies some shade of green | 2 |
| 1b. Colonies not green | 7 |
| 2a. Vesicles elongate, clavate or club shaped | Aspergillus clavatus |
| 2b. Vesicles globose, or hemispherical | 3 |
| 3a. Colonies uniformly yellow green, conidiophores rough-walled | Aspergillus flavus |
| 3b. Colonies yellow green but turning brown with age, conidiophores rough-walled | 4 |
| 3c. Colonies dark green, very restricted in growth, conidial heads long and twisted | Aspergillus restrictus |
| 3d. Colonies dark green, sometimes with yellow areas, conidiophores smooth-walled | 5 |
| 4a. Phialides in one series | 6 |
| 4b. Phialides in two series | Aspergillus fumigatus |
| 5a. Phialides on upper two-thirds of small dome shaped vesicle | Aspergillus glaucus |
| 5b. Phialides on the entire surface of the large globose or club shaped vesicle | Aspergillus nidulans |
| 6a. Conidiophores pale brown, conidial heads short columnar, ascospores with two equatorial crests | Aspergillus versicolor |
| 6b. Conidiophores hyaline, conidial heads radiate, colonies colour variable from green to yellow green, buff in the same culture | 7 |
| 7a. Colonies white, conidial heads radiate | Aspergillus candidus |
| 7b. Colonies black or in shades of gray, brown or ochre | 8 |
| 8a. Colonies black, conidial heads radiate, globose vesicles entirely covered by phialides | Aspergillus niger |
| 8b. Colonies dull gray to charcoal coloured, conidial heads radiate to loosely columnar | Aspergillus usitius |
| 8c. Colonies cinnamon brown to sand coloured, conidial heads densely columnar | Aspergillus terreus |

5.2.1. Aspergillus candidus

Colonies usually slow growing, 1.5 to 3.5 cm in diam. after 2 weeks at room temperature (24-28 °C), flat to domed, granular to floccose, persistently white or pale cream to yellow with reverse generally colorless. Conidial heads white to cream, radiate, often appearing loosely columnar. Conidiophores 200-500 μm in length, hyaline, smooth-walled to finely roughened. Vesicles subspherical to spherical, 10-40 μm diam. Phialides biseriate, occasionally uniseriate in smaller heads, covering the entire surface of the vesicle. Sometimes smaller heads may lack the vesicle and resemble *Pentillium* conidiophores. Conidia hyaline, smooth-walled, spherical to subspherical, 2.5-4.0 μm diam. Sometimes reddish purple to black sclerotia may be present.

5.2.2. Aspergillus clavatus

Colonies moderately fast growing (3.5 to 4.5 cm in 10 days at room temperature), bluish green, consisting of dense felt of conidiophores. Conidial heads clavate, large (300-400 x 150-200 μm) radiate, later splitting into several columns of compact conidial chains. Conidiophores very long, 2-4 mm in length, thin-walled, smooth, hyaline, 20-30 μm diam., gradually enlarging at the apex into clavate, club-shaped or elongate vesicles, 40-60 μm diam. Phialides in single series, covering almost the entire surface of the vesicle. Conidia smooth-walled, pale green, ellipsoidal, 3.0-5.5 x 2-3 μm.

5.2.3. Aspergillus flavus

Colonies are moderately fast growing (3.5-5.0 cm after 10 days at room temperature) or relatively rapid growing (6-7.5 cm after 10 days at room temperature), flat, floccose to granular, occasionally radially furrowed or cerebifrom, bright yellow-green, occasionally yellow-brown with reverse cream colored or pinkish. Dark brown to black sclerotia produced in several strains, particularly in fresh isolates. Conidial heads large (300-450 μm), typically radiate, breaking into poorly defined columns with age. Conidiophores 400 to 850 μm long, thick and rough walled with subglobose or globose vesicles, 20-50 μm diam. Phialides uniseriate with two patterns rarely occurring in the same head, borne on the entire surface of the vesicle. Conidia round to elliptical, smooth or finely roughened, 3-6 μm diam.

5.2.4. Aspergillus fumigatus

Colonies spreading very fast over the medium (5.0 to 7.0 cm after 10 days at room temperature), flat, velvety or powdery to felt-like, occasionally floccose, white at first becoming green, blue green or smoky green with white margin with sporulation. Reverse cream colored, yellow, green dark or dark red-brown. Conidial heads strongly columnar and compact, often densely crowded, young conidial heads radiate. Conidiophores smooth walled, relatively short up to 300 μm long and 5-8 μm wide with a dome shaped vesicle 20-30 μm diam. Phialides unsinterate, borne only on the upper half of the vesicle with axis parallel to that of the conidiophore. Conidia green in mass, globose to subglobose, 2.5-3.5 μm diam., finely roughened.
5.2.5. *Aspergillus glaucus*

Colonies slow growing (2.5 to 3.0 cm after 10 days at room temperature), flat, powdery to densely floccose, dull green to grey-green becoming brownish green. Conidial heads, sparse, pale green, radiate, 500-1000 µm diam. Conidiophores 700-800 µm in length, hyaline, smooth-walled. Vesicles globose to club shaped. Phialides uniseriate covering the entire surface of the vesicle. Many isolates have aberrant heads with secondary conidiophores arising from the vesicle. Conidia hyaline, globose to oval, echinulate, 4.0-8.0 µm diam.

Teleomorph – *Eurotium herbariorum*. Ascoarps yellow, covered with red hyphae, spherical to sub-spherical, 75-200 µm diam. Ascii 8-spored, 10-12 µm diam. Ascospores smooth-walled or slightly roughened with a marked equatorial furrow, hyaline or subhyaline, lenticular 6.0-7.0 x 3.0-5.0 µm.

**5.2.6. Aspergillus nidulans**

Colonies moderately fast growing (3.5 to 4.0 cm after 10 days at room temperature), flat, velvety to powdery, green, dark-green or cream buff or honey yellow, with reverse deep red to purple. Conidiophores, brownish, 60-120 x 2-3 µm long with hemispherical vesicles, 8-10 µm diam. Phialides biseriate, borne on the upper half of the vesicle. Conidia globose to slightly elliptical, smooth-walled, subhyaline, green in mass, 3-4 µm diam.

Teleomorph - *Emeriella nidulans*. Ascoarps purple, spherical, 100-200 µm, surrounded by yellowish to cinnamon brown layer of scattered hyphae bearing aggregates of pale yellow, thick-walled, spherical to subspherical Hülle cells. Ascii 8-spored, spherical to subspherical, 6-12 µm. Ascospores purple, smooth-walled, lenticular with two equatorial crests, 3.5-4.5 x 3.5-4 µm (excluding crests).

5.2.7. *Aspergillus niger*

Colonies fast growing (4.5 to 6.5 cm in 10 days at room temperature), flat, often radially furrowed, granular, initially white to yellow, becoming black with reverse cream or pale-yellow. Conidial heads large (up to 750 to 850 µm in diam.) and black, radiate, splitting into columns with age. Conidiophores very long 1.5-3.0 mm, thick-walled, smooth with large round or globose vesicle, 45-75 µm. Phialides biseriate covering the entire surface of the vesicle. Conidia brown, thick-walled, spherical or subspherical, 2.5-10 µm diam. with prominent warts and ridges.

5.2.8. *Aspergillus ochraceus*

Colonies restricted in growth, attaining a diameter of 3.5 to 4.0 cm after 10 days at room temperature, yellow to yellow-orange, ochraceous or buff, powdery to granular. Conidial heads radiate, later splitting into several columns. Conidiophores brownish, 1-1.5 m long, rough walled. Vesicles globose; phialides biseriate covering almost the entire surface of the vesicle. Conidia spherical to sub-spherical, 2.5-3.5 µm in diam., smooth walled to finely roughened. Pink to vinaceous-purple coloured, irregularly shaped sclerotia (up to 1 mm diam.) may be formed in some isolates.

5.2.9. *Aspergillus oryzae*

Colonies growing rapidly (5.0 to 6.5 cm after 10 days at room temperature), pale yellow or olive yellow with different shades of green, becoming typically dull brown with age. Conidial heads radiate or loosely columnar, 100-300 µm diam. with conidial chains divergent or loosely adherent. Conidiophores very long up to 4-5 mm in length. Vesicles subspherical or occasionally flask shaped, 40 to 50 µm, occasionally reaching up to 60 to 75 µm diam. Phialides uni- or biseriate, both conditions occurring in the same strain or the same conidial head, covering the entire or three-fourths of the vesicle. Conidia greenish brown, subspherical to ovoidal, smooth-walled or roughened, 4.5-10.0 x 4.5-7.5 µm.

5.2.10. *Aspergillus restrictus*

Colonies very restricted in growth (0.5 to 1.0 cm in diam. after 2 weeks at room temperature), velvety with central area wrinkled and raised in some strains with fimbriate margin, coloured in varying shades of green with reverse colorless or greenish. Conidial heads dark olive green, columnar, often twisted. Conidiophores hyaline, smooth-walled or finely roughened. Vesicles flask-shaped or hemispherical, 6-12 µm diam. Phialides uniseriate, covering the upper third of the vesicle. Conidia dark green in mass, cylindrical when young, becoming ellipsoidal or pyriform when mature, rough-walled, 4.0-10.0 x 3.0-6.0 µm, adherent in long columns.

5.2.11. *Aspergillus ustus*

Colonies fast growing (4.5-6.5 cm after 10 days at room temperature), floccose, often umbonate, rarely zonate, at first white or cream yellow, soon becoming dull brown to purple gray or gray, often with purple exudate; reverse yellow, reddish or purple. Conidial heads (100-150 µm), radiate, later splitting into more or less well defined columns. Conidiophores smooth-walled, often sinuous, typically colored in brown shades with hemispherical to subspherical vesicles, 7-15 µm diam. Phialides biseriate, covering upper two-thirds of the vesicle. Conidia dark brown, spherical, rough-walled, 3.0-4.5 µm diam. Occasionally Hülle cells, often bent and twisted may be present.

5.2.12. *Aspergillus terreus*

Colonies moderately fast rapidly growing (3.5-6.0 cm after 10 days at room temperature), flat, velvety to slightly granular, or powdery, occasionally floccose with thin irregular margins, cinnamon-buff to brown, rarely orange-brown, consisting of a dense felt of conidiophores with reverse yellow to pale brown. Amber coloured exudate produced in some strains. An isolate with deep orange colonies with lemon yellow diffusible pigment has been described. Conidial heads pale-brown, long, densely columnar, characteristically appearing fan-shaped. Conidiophores short, 100-250 µm long, flexuous, smooth-walled with dome-shaped vesicle, 10-20 µm diam. Phialides biseriate on upper two third of the vesicle. Conidia hyaline, smooth-walled, spherical to broadly elliptical, 1.5-2.5 µm diam. Round to oval, hyaline aleuropiconidia with truncate base may be formed singly on the submerged hyphae in some isolates.
Taxonomy of Pathogenic Aspergillus

5.2.13. Aspergillus versicolor

Colonies slow growing (1.5 to 2.5 cm after 10 days at room temperature), flat, flocose, velvety or granular in shades of green, yellow, light brown or buff with considerable variation in the same culture, with reverse pale cream to red, often poorly sporulating. Conidial heads radiate, up to 100-140 μm in diam. Conidiophores, hyaline, smooth walled with subsherial or ellipsoidal vesicles. Phialides biseriate, covering the entire surface of the vesicle, sometimes reduced to Penicillium-like heads. Conidia spherical, echinulate, 2.3-μm diam., usually borne in loosely radiating chains. Hülle cells present in some isolates.

6. MOLECULAR APPROACHES TO CLASSIFICATION AND IDENTIFICATION OF ASPERGILLUS SPECIES

Molecular techniques are a powerful tool that can provide a new perspective on classification and identification of aspergilli and their detection in environment. The sequence homology within the rDNA genes of fungi (18S, 5.8S and 28S genes) and differences within the internal transcribed spacer regions (ITS1 and ITS2) are the genetic basis for organization of fungi into taxonomic groups (60). Molecular targets for the genus level identification of Aspergillus include the 18S rRNA gene, mitochondrial gene, and the ITS1 and ITS2. The rRNA gene for 5.8S RNA gene separates the two ITS regions. The ITS regions are located between the 18S and 28S rDNA genes and offer several advantages over other molecular targets including increased sensitivity due to the existence of approximately 100 copies per genome (61). Gaskell et al. (62) showed that ITS regions of the genera, Aspergillus, Penicillium, Alternaria and Cladosporium were distinct; however, they also discovered that ITS2 region alone was highly conserved among species of Aspergillus and Penicillium. Rath and Ansorg (63) found that analysis of the PCR-amplified ITS I and ITS II region by single strain conformational polymorphism (SSCP) allowed discrimination of five medically important species, viz., A. fumigatus, A. flavus, A. niger, A. terreus, and A. nidulans. This method does not require morphologically fully developed colonies and yields species diagnosis faster than the conventional macroscopic and microscopic examination. In another study, Henry et al. (61) also showed that aspergilli could be identified from very young cultures i.e., 24 hr growth of clinical isolates by sequence comparison of both ITS1 and ITS2 regions in combination with BLAST bit score. Interspecies sequence variations within multiple strains of Aspergillus tested were minimal in this study. Some other techniques employed earlier include use of randomly amplified DNA (RAPD) markers (64), restriction enzyme analysis of mitochondrial DNA (65), restriction fragment length polymorphism (RFLP) analysis of nuclear and mitochondrial DNA (66). Wang et al. (67) used 426 bp fragments of a mitochondrial (mt) cytochrome b gene amplified by polymerase chain reaction (PCR) for differentiation of A. fumigatus, A. flavus, A. niger, A. terreus, and Emericella (Aspergillus) nidulans by detecting species specific nucleotides in each of these species. Geiser et al. (68) showed that A. fumigatus is close to the anamorph of Neosartorya fischeri by partial β-tubulin and hydrophobin sequences. Peterson et al. (69) described the phylogenetic relationships of species of Aspergillus based on molecular studies.

Aspergillus fumigatus is the most common airborne fungal pathogen today and infections due to this fungus have become major problem in hospital hematology and transplant units. It has been necessary for epidemiological investigations to differentiate between the strains of A. fumigatus. In the past decade, research has concentrated on developing genotyping methods for typing of isolates of A. fumigatus and investigating the nosocomial origin of the infection. The techniques employed include restriction endonuclease analysis of total cellular DNA (70), ribosomal probes with part of the intergenic spacer region from the ribosomal RNA gene complex of A. nidulans (71). The RFLP analysis by Southern hybridization with M13 bacteriophage genome (72) gave highest level of isolate discrimination but RFLP analysis is time consuming. Southern hybridization with a retrotransposon-like element (73) has proved highly discriminatory for A. fumigatus strains. Bart-Delabesse et al. (74) tested 50 environmental, 50 clinical isolates, and 2 reference isolates with the microsatellite markers. No clustering between the environmental and clinical isolates was observed suggesting that every isolate is potentially pathogenic. Microsatellite markers may prove useful in large epidemiological studies of aspergillosis. Paris and Latge (75) reported Aj1 2, a new family of degenerative gypsy-like retrotransposon from A. fumigatus, which could be used in DNA finger printing of isolates of this species. They characterized four probes from recombinant clones containing non-ribosomal repetitive sequences, which have potential for fingerprinting of isolates of A. fumigatus. Reiss et al. (76) typed approximately 1000 isolates of A. fumigatus from environmental and clinical sources by restriction enzyme analysis probed with an A. fumigatus specific retrotransposon-like sequence. These investigators found that patients with no symptoms of aspergillosis may carry several strains, whereas patients with pulmonary aspergillosis may carry one or two strains. Further it was found that environmental population of A. fumigatus is extremely diverse and any given environmental strain can be infectious. Nosocomial transmission of aspergillosis was proven in 39% of the patients studied. A multiple discriminatory typing procedure is required to understand the ecology of A. fumigatus strains and epidemiology of infections due to this fungus.

7. GENETICS OF ASPERGILLUS

Classical genetics of several pathogenic species of Aspergillus including A. fumigatus, A. niger, and A. nidulans has been studied. Aspergillus nidulans has been extensively studied for conventional genetic analysis by various investigators because of its both asexual and sexual life cycles. A considerable amount of information on genomic structure and gene regulation of this organism is available. The genetics of population, conidiation, regulation of carbon and nitrogen metabolism in Aspergillus has been very well described by Smith and Pateman (77). During the past few decades, molecular
Taxonomy of Pathogenic Aspergilli

Techniques have been applied to isolate and clone structural, regulatory genes and also genes responsible for morphogenetic processes and several metabolic functions (78).

Genes encoding for multiple drug resistance have been identified in some Aspergillus species, such as A. fumigatus and A. flavus (79). Very recently Edlinde et al. (80) have cloned and sequenced the VVP51 gene, which encodes the target of antifungal azoles, namely cytochrome P450 sterol 14, α-demethylase. Rhodes et al. (81) have identified the genes encoding the regulatory subunit of cyclic adenosine monophosphate (cAMP)-dependent protein kinase and a member of ras gene family in A. fumigatus, both of which are involved in cAMP-mediated signaling in fungi. These genes were found to regulate growth of the fungus on endothelial cells in murine model. Boetner et al. (82) were able to clone CgrA, the ortholog of the yeast nuclear protein Cgr1p. Orthologs of the A. fumigatus Cgr1 protein have also been cloned from A. nidulans (83) and Saccharomyces cerevisiae (84). It is speculated that targeting nuclear proteins involved in ribosome biogenesis would be an effective therapeutic strategy against infections due to Aspergillus and other fungi. The cloning of the A. fumigatus CgrA gene is the first important step to this goal (82). There have also been some studies on gene disruption to identify virulence factors. The gene pyrG, which encodes an enzyme required for de novo synthesis of uracil, alb1 (pksp), which enables a polyketide synthase involved in conidial pigment production, chsG, which encodes a class III chitin synthase, and areA, a transcription factor regulating nitrogen metabolism, have been shown to reduce virulence of a deletion mutant in a mouse model (85-89). Tang et al. (90) reported that lysine and aminobenzoic acid (PABA) deficiency in A. nidulans was associated with avirulence. Likewise Sandhu et al. (91) established that PABA deficiency in auxotrophic mutants of A. fumigatus resulted in loss of virulence.

8. CONCLUSION

The genus Aspergillus has about 180 accepted species. The circumscription and classification of these species has been based primarily on difference of their morphological and cultural characteristics. The complexity of the genus is emphasized by the number and diversity of associated teleomorphs (10 in Trichocomaceae). About 40 species have been isolated from humans. Though the identification of Aspergillus species based on traditional morphological criteria is very effective, the large number of species emphasizes the use of alternative approaches. Several studies based on combinations of different types of morphological, biochemical and physiological characteristics have been used but their practical utility is yet to be established. Molecular techniques though widely applied are still in a developmental phase due to insufficient availability of reference data. Further the degree of variability of most of the species for the particular gene is unknown (18). Analysis of rRNA sequences has proved useful in identification of certain strains of Aspergillus species, which are difficult to identify by morphological criteria (14, 34). Identification of pathogenic species of Aspergillus from 24 hr old cultures using nucleic acid sequential analysis of ITS1 and ITS2 regions in combination with BLAST bit score is a reliable and efficient method that provides earlier diagnosis than standard culture methods (61). The use of ITS sequencing should be further explored for identification of Aspergillus species in culture and directly in clinical specimens. Further research on molecular biology and genetics of A. fumigatus is needed to develop accurate genotyping methods for clinical and environmental isolates of this species for a better understanding of epidemiology and pathogenesis of infections caused by it.

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Taxonomy of Pathogenic Aspergilli

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