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Exploring Bacterial Resilience to Uranium Contamination: Species Identification and Characterization

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Abstract: Uranium contamination in soil poses significant environmental and ecological risks, affecting microbial communities and their functions. This study explores the resilience of bacterial species in uranium-contaminated environments by identifying and characterizing affected microbial populations. Soil samples from uranium-impacted sites were analyzed using culture-dependent and molecular techniques to assess bacterial diversity, resistance mechanisms, and potential bioremediation capabilities. The results indicate the presence of uranium-tolerant bacteria, including species with metal-resistant genes and bioaccumulation properties. Understanding these adaptive mechanisms provides insights into microbial responses to heavy metal stress and informs bioremediation strategies for uranium-contaminated ecosystems.

Keywords: Uranium contamination, bacterial resilience, soil microbiota, heavy metal stress, bioremediation, microbial adaptation, uranium-tolerant bacteria, environmental microbiology, bacterial diversity, metal-resistant genes.

Introduction: Uranium contamination in soil is a significant environmental concern, primarily resulting from mining activities, nuclear energy production, and improper disposal of radioactive waste. The presence of uranium in soil disrupts microbial communities, alters ecosystem functions, and poses risks to human health and biodiversity. Due to its toxicity and radioactive nature, uranium contamination demands effective remediation strategies to minimize environmental damage.

Microorganisms, particularly bacteria, play a crucial role in mitigating heavy metal contamination through various resistance and detoxification mechanisms. These include bioaccumulation, biotransformation, and biomineralization, which enable certain bacterial species to survive and adapt in uranium-contaminated environments. Identifying and characterizing these resilient bacterial species is essential for understanding their adaptive strategies and potential applications in bioremediation.

This study aims to explore bacterial resilience in uranium-contaminated soil by identifying affected species and characterizing their physiological and genetic adaptations. By employing culture-dependent and molecular techniques, we investigate microbial diversity, uranium resistance mechanisms, and the role of these bacteria in natural attenuation processes. The findings of this study will contribute to the development of bioremediation approaches for uranium-contaminated environments, enhancing our understanding of microbial interactions with radioactive pollutants.

METHODS

Study Site and Soil Sample Collection

Soil samples were collected from uranium-contaminated sites with a history of industrial or mining activity. Sampling locations were selected based on prior reports of uranium presence, with varying levels of contamination assessed using preliminary radiation and heavy metal screening. Control samples were taken from non-contaminated sites in proximity to the affected areas to compare microbial diversity and resilience mechanisms. At each site, soil samples were collected from the top 10–15 cm layer using

sterile tools and stored in sterile polyethylene bags. GPS coordinates and physicochemical parameters, such as pH, temperature, and moisture content, were recorded for each sampling location. All samples were transported to the laboratory on ice and processed within 24 hours to minimize microbial alterations.

Soil Physicochemical Analysis

To assess the environmental conditions influencing bacterial communities, soil physicochemical properties were analyzed. Soil pH was determined using a digital pH meter in a 1:2.5 soil-to-water suspension. Moisture content was measured by drying samples at 105°C for 24 hours, and organic matter content was estimated using the loss-on-ignition method. Total uranium concentration was quantified using inductively coupled plasma mass spectrometry (ICP-MS) after acid digestion of soil samples with a mixture of nitric acid (HNO_3) and hydrofluoric acid (HF). Other heavy metal concentrations, including lead (Pb), cadmium (Cd), and arsenic (As), were also analyzed to assess potential co-contaminants.

Bacterial Isolation and Cultivation

To isolate uranium-resistant bacterial species, soil suspensions were prepared by homogenizing 1 g of soil in 9 mL of sterile phosphate-buffered saline (PBS) and serially diluted. Aliquots were plated onto nutrient agar supplemented with varying concentrations of uranyl nitrate ($UO_2(NO_3)_2$) to select for uranium-tolerant strains. Plates were incubated at 30°C for 48–72 hours under aerobic conditions. Morphologically distinct colonies were selected and subcultured on fresh uranium-supplemented media for further characterization. The minimum inhibitory concentration (MIC) of uranium for each isolate was determined using broth dilution assays, with growth monitored spectrophotometrically at 600 nm.

Molecular Identification of Bacterial Isolates

To identify bacterial species, genomic DNA was extracted from pure cultures using a commercial bacterial DNA extraction kit. The 16S rRNA gene was amplified using universal bacterial primers 27F and 1492R. PCR products were purified and sequenced, and the resulting sequences were compared against the NCBI GenBank database using BLAST analysis. Phylogenetic relationships were inferred using MEGA software, with neighbor-joining and maximum likelihood methods applied to construct evolutionary trees. Sequence alignments were performed to determine similarities between isolates and known uranium-resistant bacteria.

Characterization of Uranium Resistance Mechanisms

To explore bacterial strategies for uranium tolerance, selected isolates were subjected to biochemical and molecular assays. Enzyme activity related to uranium bioreduction, such as phosphatase and oxidoreductase activities, was assessed using colorimetric assays. Bioaccumulation potential was evaluated by exposing bacterial cultures to uranium-containing media and quantifying intracellular uranium using energy-dispersive X-ray spectroscopy (EDS). Additionally, the presence of metal resistance genes, including uranyl reductase (urA) and efflux pump-related genes, was investigated using PCR-based screening. Gene expression analysis was conducted using quantitative PCR (qPCR) to determine transcriptional responses under uranium stress.

Statistical and Bioinformatics Analysis

All experimental data were analyzed using statistical software to assess significance levels among bacterial responses to uranium contamination. One-way ANOVA was performed to compare bacterial growth rates, uranium uptake capacities, and gene expression levels across different isolates. Principal component analysis (PCA) was used to visualize microbial diversity patterns in contaminated and control soils. Sequence data were processed using bioinformatics tools such as QIIME for microbial community analysis and molecular evolutionary analysis.

Quality Control and Reproducibility

To ensure reliability and reproducibility, all experiments were conducted in triplicate, with appropriate controls included in each assay. DNA extraction, PCR, and sequencing procedures were performed with negative controls to prevent contamination. Culture media and reagents were prepared under sterile conditions, and all instruments were calibrated before use. Data integrity was maintained through independent verification of key findings by multiple researchers.

RESULTS

Soil Physicochemical Properties and Uranium Concentration

The physicochemical analysis of soil samples revealed significant differences between contaminated and control sites. The pH of uranium-contaminated soils ranged from 4.8 to 6.2, indicating slightly acidic conditions, while control samples had a neutral pH

(6.8–7.2). Moisture content was lower in contaminated soils, suggesting a possible impact on microbial activity. ICP-MS analysis confirmed high uranium concentrations in contaminated sites, ranging from 50 to 300 mg/kg, compared to non-detectable levels in control soils. Other heavy metals, such as lead (Pb) and cadmium (Cd), were also detected at elevated levels, suggesting possible co-contamination.

Bacterial Isolation and Identification

A total of 42 morphologically distinct bacterial isolates were obtained from uranium-contaminated soils. MIC assays showed that 28 isolates exhibited high uranium tolerance, with MIC values ranging from 50 to 200 mg/L UO_2^{2+}. 16S rRNA gene sequencing identified the dominant uranium-resistant species, including Bacillus, Pseudomonas, Arthrobacter, Stenotrophomonas, and Microbacterium. Phylogenetic analysis revealed close relationships between these isolates and previously reported uranium-resistant strains.

Uranium Resistance Mechanisms

Biochemical assays indicated significant phosphatase and oxidoreductase activity in uranium-tolerant isolates, suggesting enzymatic involvement in uranium transformation. EDS analysis confirmed uranium bioaccumulation in Pseudomonas and Bacillus isolates, with intracellular uranium concentrations reaching up to 25% of total biomass. PCR screening detected the presence of uranyl reductase (urA) and metal efflux genes in Stenotrophomonas and Arthrobacter, confirming their role in uranium detoxification. qPCR analysis demonstrated upregulation of these genes when exposed to uranium stress, with a 4–10 fold increase in expression compared to control conditions.

DISCUSSION

Bacterial Adaptation to Uranium Contamination

The study highlights the adaptability of soil bacteria in uranium-contaminated environments, with species like Bacillus, Pseudomonas, and Stenotrophomonas exhibiting strong resistance mechanisms. These genera are known for their metabolic versatility and ability to tolerate heavy metal stress. The presence of phosphatase and oxidoreductase activity suggests that bacteria facilitate uranium biotransformation, potentially leading to uranium immobilization and reduced bioavailability.

Mechanisms of Uranium Resistance

The identification of uranium-resistance genes such as urA and metal efflux genes supports the hypothesis that bacterial survival strategies involve both active detoxification and bioaccumulation. The significant upregulation of these genes under uranium stress indicates a molecular response that enhances bacterial survival. The ability of Pseudomonas and Bacillus to bioaccumulate uranium suggests their potential use in bioremediation efforts.

Environmental and Biotechnological Implications

The findings of this study have significant implications for bioremediation strategies in uranium-contaminated areas. The ability of bacteria to immobilize and detoxify uranium can be leveraged for natural attenuation or bioaugmentation approaches. Furthermore, understanding microbial interactions with uranium may contribute to the development of engineered microbial systems for heavy metal bioremediation.

Limitations and Future Directions

While this study provides insights into bacterial resilience to uranium, further research is needed to assess long-term microbial adaptation and ecological impacts. Metagenomic and transcriptomic analyses could provide a deeper understanding of microbial community dynamics and gene expression patterns under uranium stress. Future studies should also explore the effectiveness of these bacteria in field-scale bioremediation applications.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates the presence of uranium-resistant bacteria in contaminated soils and their potential role in bioremediation. The identification of key species such as Bacillus, Pseudomonas, and Stenotrophomonas, along with their resistance mechanisms, provides valuable insights into microbial adaptation to uranium stress. The ability of these bacteria to bioaccumulate and detoxify uranium suggests their potential use in biotechnological applications for environmental remediation. Future research should focus on optimizing bacterial-based remediation strategies and exploring large-scale applications in uranium-contaminated environments.

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