Real-time PCR Biochip for On-Site Detection of *Coxiella Burnetii* in Ticks

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Research

Keywords: *Coxiella burnetii*, Q fever, Asian longhorned tick, *Haemaphysalis longicornis*, tick-borne diseases, on-site detection

Posted Date: February 11th, 2021

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-198104/v1>

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Version of Record: A version of this preprint was published at Parasites & Vectors on May 6th, 2021. See the published version at <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13071-021-04744-z>.

Abstract

Background: Q fever, a zoonosis caused by *Coxiella burnetii*, has adverse effects on public health. Ticks are the natural reservoirs of *C. burnetii* and they contribute to the transmission of the pathogen. A tool for rapid, sensitive, and accurate detection of *C. burnetii* from ticks is important for the prevention of Q fever.

Methods: Ultra-rapid real-time PCR (UR-qPCR) as a chip-based real-time PCR system was developed for the detection of *C. burnetii* from ticks. The UR-qPCR system was established and evaluated for the rapidity, sensitivity, and specificity of *C. burnetii* detection.

Results: *C. burnetii* was detected using UR-qPCR from 5,644 larval, nymphal, and adult ticks from 408 pools collected from livestock and epidemiologically linked environments in two provinces, Gangwon and Jeju, in Korea. Ticks from three species were identified; *Haemaphysalis longicornis* accounted for the highest number, present in 333 of 408 pools (81.62%), followed by *Haemaphysalis flava* in 62 pools (15.19%) and *Ixodes nipponensis* in 13 pools (3.19%). The rapidity and sensitivity of PCR detection was demonstrated with the sufficient amplification and detection of approximately 56 copies of *C. burnetii* DNA with only 20 min of PCR amplification. The kappa value for the diagnostic agreement between UR-qPCR and stationary qPCR was in perfect agreement ($p = 1$). PCR detection and sequencing indicated that *C. burnetii* was present in 5 of the 408 pools (1.23%), in which four pools contained *H. longicornis* and one pool contained *H. flava*. The infection rates of *C. burnetii* in the tick pools collected from Gangwon and Jeju Provinces were 1.70% and 0.58%, respectively. Phylogenetic analysis indicated a close relationship between the detected *C. burnetii* and those originated from goats, humans, and ticks in different countries, such as USA, France, Germany, and Serbia.

Conclusions: The results of this study could be important for the prevention and control of Q fever in the two provinces. The UR-qPCR with its features of mobility, sensitivity, and rapidity is helpful for constructing early alert systems in the field for *C. burnetii* in ticks and for alleviating the transmission and economic damage due to Q fever.

Introduction

Coxiella burnetii is an obligate intracellular bacterium that causes flu-like zoonotic disease [1]. *C. burnetii* infects a variety of vertebrates and is a key threat to veterinary and human health worldwide [2, 3]. The transmission to humans usually occurs mainly through inhalation of bacteria from contaminated faeces, close contact with livestock, or ingestion of infected animals and animal products [3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8].

The reservoirs of *C. burnetii* include birds, mammals, and ticks [1]. More than 40 species of hard and soft ticks are identified as vectors of *C. burnetii* [9, 10]. Body fluids and faeces of ticks contain a large number of infectious *C. burnetii* [11], as a result, exposure to tick excreta, direct contact with ticks, or tick bite pose potential risks of *C. burnetii* transmission [10, 12]. However, the possibility of humans being directly infected by tick bites is rare [13, 14, 15, 16].

Polymerase chain reaction (PCR) and related techniques are widely used as sensitive and specific tools for the detection of *C. burnetii* in ticks, such as conventional PCR [17], restriction fragment length polymorphism (RFLP)-PCR [18, 19], and direct sequencing [20]. The repetitive, transposon-like element, named IS1111, is a specific DNA marker for sensitive detection of *C. burnetii*, in transposon (Trans)-PCR [5, 21]. PCR-based detection is fast and does not require handling in biosafety level 3 (BL3) cabinets, unlike the isolation of *C. burnetii*.

The cases of Q fever diagnosed in humans in Korea have rapidly increased in the subsequent years since the first case was recorded in 2006 [22, 23]. However, there is little information on the tick species that carry *C. burnetii* as well as the regions where *C. burnetii* is present in ticks [24]. Therefore, the present study aimed to detect *C. burnetii* in tick samples collected from different regions of Korea. Ultra-rapid real-time PCR (UR-qPCR), a chip-based real-time PCR, was used for the rapid detection of *C. burnetii* from total nucleic acids extracted from tick samples.

Methods

Tick samples

In total, 5,644 larval, nymphal, and adult ticks from 408 pools were collected from livestock (cattle and horse) and wild animals (elk, roe deer, raccoon, badger, wild boar, and wild rabbit) from two provinces, Gangwon and Jeju, in Korea between August and November 2019. The 235 pools collected from Gangwon Province were designated as 19M1–19M235, and the 173 samples collected from Jeju Province as 19T1–19T173. Samples were then stored at -20°C for the detection of *C. burnetii*.

Identification of tick species

The tick species were identified using a stereo microscope, Discovery.V8 (ZEISS, Oberkochen, Germany). The morphological identification was based on a previously established method [25].

Extraction of total nucleic acid

Total nucleic acids were extracted from tick samples using the Maxwell[®] RSC Viral Total Nucleic Acid Purification Kit using Maxwell[®] Instruments (Promega, Madison, WI, USA). One adult tick, 10 nymphs, or 50 larvae were homogenised in a tissue homogeniser using steel beads of diameter 2.381 mm (SNC, Hanam, Korea). The sample was lysed with 330 µl of lysis buffer in a Precellys 24 Tissue Homogeniser (Bertin Instruments, Montigny-le-Bretonneux, France). The homogenate was incubated at 56°C for 10 min and the following steps were performed using Maxwell[®] RSC Instrument, according to the manufacturer's instructions. Finally, 50 µl of total nucleic acid was obtained from each sample.

Primers and standard DNA of *C. burnetii*

C. burnetii was detected by targeting a 295-bp long DNA fragment in the transposase of the insertion sequence (IS) element IS1111a, using the primers Cox-F (5'- GTCTTAAGGTGGGCTGCGTG-3'), and Cox-R (5'-CCCCGAATCTCATTGATCAGC-3'); and probe Cox-TM (FAM-AGCGAACCATTGGTATCGGACGTT-TAMRA) [26]. DNA from the *C. burnetii* strain 493 (Nine Mile Phase I), preserved in our laboratory, was used as the positive control. The PCR product was cloned in the pGEM[®]-T vector system (Promega, Madison, WI, USA).

PCR performance

UR-qPCR was performed using a GENECHECKER[®] UF-300 PCR (Genesystem Co., Ltd., Daejeon, Korea) and 2× Rapi: Spec[™] Probe Master mix (Cat. No. 9799100500; Genesystem Co., Ltd.). The reaction mix (10 µl) consisted of 0.4 µl (20 pmol) of each primer, 0.4 µl (2 pmol) of probe, 0.8 µl ddH₂O, 5 µl PCR premix, and 3 µl of sample total nucleic acid. PCR conditions were set as follows: 95 °C for 30 s, 50 cycles of 95 °C for 5 s, and 60 °C for 10 s. Detection of *C. burnetii* was carried out in two steps; screening and detection. *C. burnetii* was screened from a pool of five samples, prepared by combining 10 µl of total nucleic acid from each sample. The individual samples from the PCR-positive pooled samples were then reanalysed to identify the exact sample that carried the pathogen.

The performance of the UR-qPCR system was compared to that of CFX96 Touch Real-time PCR Detection System (Bio-Rad, Hercules, CA, USA), by evaluating the amplification for each of the 408 tick pool nucleic acids using the same primers and probe. The 20 µl reaction mixture consisted of 1 µl (10 pmol) of each primer, 1 µl (5 pmol) of probe, 10 µL of iQ[™] Supermix as PCR premix (Bio-Rad), 3 µl of DNA template, and 4 µl of ddH₂O. PCR conditions were set as follows: 50 °C for 2 min, 95 °C for 10 min, 40 cycles of 95 °C for 15 s, and 60 °C for 30 s.

Sensitivity and specificity of *C. burnetii* UR-qPCR

To check the sensitivity of UR-qPCR, serial dilutions of *C. burnetii* recombinant DNA template, from 2.8×10^8 to 2.8×10^0 copies, were used for PCR in triplicate to identify the minimum copy number at which the amplification was stable.

To evaluate the specificity of UR-qPCR for *C. burnetii*, DNA from five other tick-borne pathogens (*Anaplasma phagocytophilum*, *Ehrlichia chaffeensis*, *Ehrlichia canis*, *Toxoplasma gondii*, *Borrelia burgdorferi*) were tested with *C. burnetii*-specific primers and probe under the same PCR conditions.

Sequencing and phylogenetic analysis

The accuracy of UR-qPCR for *C. burnetii* detection was confirmed through sequencing of the PCR products using Cox-F/R primers. Phylogenetic analysis of the *C. burnetii* sequence was performed using a 687 bp DNA fragment of the IS1111 transposon gene, which was amplified using the primer pair Trans 1 (5'-TATGTATCCACCGTAGCCAGTC-3')/Trans 2 (5'-CCCAACAACACCTCCTTATTC-3') [27, 28]. The sequences were compared to the available *C. burnetii* sequences in NCBI using the Basic Local Alignment Search Tool (BLAST). Consensus sequences were aligned using the Clustal X2 program [29], overhanging ends were trimmed using BioEdit 7.2 [30], and a maximum likelihood phylogenetic tree was created using MEGA7 [31], bootstrapping 1000 times.

Results

Sensitivity and specificity of *C. burnetii* specific UR-qPCR

UR-qPCR could stably detect *C. burnetii* DNA at 5.6×10^1 copies with a Ct of less than 40 (Fig. 1a). The linear regression representing the relationship between initial DNA copy number and Ct from triplicate PCR reactions was determined by $y = -3.1797x + 45.079$; $R^2 = 0.9977$, where y and x are Ct value and $\log_{10}$ DNA copy number, respectively (Fig. 1b). The amplification efficiency calculated from the slope of the standard curve ($E = 10^{(-1/\text{slope})} - 1$) was 106.30%.

The specificity of the UR-qPCR system for *C. burnetii* detection was confirmed by the lack of cross detection of any of the five other tick-borne pathogens (Fig. 2). Therefore, the UR-qPCR system could be a potential molecular tool for the rapid, sensitive, and specific detection of *C. burnetii* from ticks and for the diagnosis of Q fever.

Infection rate of *C. burnetii* in tick samples

Ticks from 408 pools were evaluated; the major species was *Haemaphysalis longicornis* (Asian longhorned tick), present in 333 pools (81.62%), followed by *H. flava*, in 62 pools (15.19%), and *Ixodes nipponensis* (Japanese hard tick), in 13 pools (3.19%). *I. nipponensis* was observed only in the pools from Gangwon Province. Five of the 408 tick pools (1.23%) carried *C. burnetii*, in which four pools originated from wild animals and epidemiologically linked environments in Gangwon Province (19M22, 19M42, 19M73, and 19M88) and one pool (19T112) was collected from the cattle in Jeju Province (Table 1).

The rate of *C. burnetii* infection was at 1.20% (4/333 pools), 1.61% (1/62 pools), and 0% (0/13 pools) in *H. longicornis*, *H. flava*, and *I. nipponensis*, respectively. *C. burnetii* infection was detected in the larval and adult stages of *H. longicornis* at 2.63% (2/76 pools) and 0.87% (2/230 pools), respectively, however, only in the adult stage of *H. flava* at 2.70% (1/37 pools) (Table 2).

The accuracy of *C. burnetii* detection in UR-qPCR was consistent with that of conventional real-time PCR (qPCR; CFX96 Touch Real-time PCR; Bio-Rad). The same five tick pools (19M22, 19M42, 19M73, 19M88,

and 19T112) were positive (Table 1; Fig. 3). The Cohen's kappa coefficient calculated from the results of UR-qPCR and qPCR was $\kappa = 1$, indicating a near perfect agreement (0.81–1.00).

Sequencing and phylogenetic analysis

Sequencing the 295 bp amplicons confirmed the accuracy of detection. The amplicon from the 19M22, 19M42, 19M73, and 19T112 pools showed 99% DNA sequence identity with the sequence from *C. burnetii* strain RSA493 (NCBI accession number CP040059); while the sequence from the 19M88 pool showed 100% identity to the sequence from *C. burnetii* strain BTM90C (NCBI accession number MN025541) (Additional file 1).

The analysis of the 687 bp fragment showed homologies ranging from 97.43 to 99.85% to the sequences of *C. burnetii* in NCBI. The detected *C. burnetii* was closely related to and clustered with strains originated from ticks, goats, and humans in the USA, France, Germany, and Serbia, on the phylogenetic tree (Fig. 4).

Discussion

A chip-based PCR system, UR-qPCR, was introduced in this study for the rapid detection of the tick-borne Q fever pathogen. The UR-qPCR system is rapid, requiring approximately 20 min for 50 cycles, compared to the approximately 1 h and 30 min required for the other PCR systems compared in this study. In addition, targeting IS1111, a multi-copy element in *C. burnetii* [26, 32], increases the sensitivity of the UR-qPCR system. It is believed that the use of IS1111 is limited by its presence in *Coxiella*-like bacteria (CLB) [33]; however, we showed that the CLB in ticks does not interfere with the accuracy of *C. burnetii* detection using sequencing.

The diagnosis of Q fever relies mainly on serology [34]. However, serological diagnosis can be unreliable due to the cross-reaction with *Bartonella* spp., *Ehrlichia* spp., and *Rickettsia* spp. [35]. PCR is a useful detection tool for improving the accuracy of a diagnosis [21, 36]; PCR detection of *C. burnetii* in blood was effective in diagnosing Q fever with a sensitivity of approximately 81% compared to indirect immunofluorescence assay (IFA) [37]. Therefore, UR-qPCR could be used for on-site conformational diagnosis of Q fever, for the prompt control of milk, blood, or serum samples.

Detection of *C. burnetii* using loop-mediated isothermal amplification (LAMP) assay [38, 39] is rapid and comparable to real-time PCR. The positive detection is based on change of colour in the reaction mix after 30 min incubation. However, the sensitivity of the colorimetric LAMP assay is only 93.75% compared to that of real-time PCR. Therefore, the UR-qPCR proposed in this study has the advantages of being rapid, with less than 20 min reaction time, and sensitive, at 100% sensitivity compared to other real-time PCR systems. The UR-qPCR and the crude DNA preparation [39] together will take less than 30 min for the detection of *C. burnetii* on-site.

There is only one previous report of *H. longicornis* sample, from Cheongju city in Chungcheongbuk Province in Korea, harbouring *C. burnetii* [40]. However, this study revealed that two (*H. longicornis* and *H. flava*) of the three prevalent tick species (*H. longicornis*, *H. flava*, and *I. nipponensis*) [41] in two provinces (Gangwon and Jeju) harbour the Q fever pathogen. *C. burnetii* was detected in tick samples from wild animals, livestock, and grasslands with one and four pools in Jeju and Gangwon Provinces, respectively, although no case of Q fever in humans has been recorded in Jeju Province [22]. These provinces have a high risk of *C. burnetii* transmission through the ticks harbouring the pathogen and parasitizing cattle.

Conclusions

A rapid real-time PCR assay was developed for the detection of the Q fever pathogen, *C. burnetii*, in tick species collected from two provinces in Korea. The rapidity and accuracy of this PCR system was evaluated. The automated nucleic acid isolation system used in this study minimized the exposure to living bacteria in tick, which could pose a risk of *C. burnetii* infection during the sample DNA preparation. *C. burnetii* was detected in two tick species (*H. longicornis* and *H. flava*), which are parasites in wild animals and from the grasslands in Gangwon Province, and in *H. longicornis* from cattle in Jeju Province. This information is important for the prevention of Q fever, particularly in Jeju Province, where no case of infection in humans has been recorded.

Abbreviations

IS1111: Insertion sequence 1111; CLB: *Coxiella*-like bacteria; KDCA: Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency; UR-qPCR: Ultra-rapid real-time polymerase chain reaction; RFLP: Restriction fragment length polymorphism; Ct: Cycle threshold; LAMP: Loop-mediated isothermal amplification.

Declarations

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the Brucellosis OIE Reference Laboratory in Animal and Plant Quarantine Agency in the Republic of Korea for kindly helping with the preparation of the standard DNA of *Coxiella burnetii*.

Authors' contributions

The study was designed by YSC, B-RY, and A-TT. A-TT, JL, SM, YMY, and J-TK performed the field and laboratory tests. YSC supervised the study. A-TT, B-RY, M-SY, SY, and YSC analysed the data. A-TT and YSC wrote the manuscript. All authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript for publication.

Funding

This study was supported by the Animal and Plant Quarantine Agency (Grant number B-1543081-2020-22-03).

Availability of data and materials

All data generated or analysed during this study are included in this published article and Additional file 1: Table S1.

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Not applicable

Consent for publication

All the authors consent to publication.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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Tables

Table 1 Infection rate of *Coxiella burnetii* in ticks collected from Jeju and Gangwon Provinces in 2019

Province	Species	Stage	No. of ticks (No. of tested pools)	Positive pools (%)	
				UR-qPCR	qPCR
Gangwon	<i>H. longicornis</i>	Larva	2,764 (53)	1 (1.89)	1 (1.89)
		Nymph	50 (14)	0	0
		Adult (male)	38 (15)	0	0
		Adult (female)	240 (122)	2 (1.64)	2 (1.64)
	<i>H. flava</i>	Larva	0	0	0
		Nymph	93 (7)	0	0
		Adult (male)	28 (5)	1 (20.00)	1 (20.00)
		Adult (female)	10 (6)	0	0
	<i>I. nipponensis</i>	Larva	0	0	0
		Nymph	16 (2)	0	0
		Adult (male)	3 (1)	0	0
		Adult (female)	30 (10)	0	0
Jeju	<i>H. longicornis</i>	Larva	1,470 (23)	1 (4.35)	1 (4.35)
		Nymph	158 (13)	0	0
		Adult (male)	99 (33)	0	0
		Adult (female)	208 (60)	0	0
	<i>H. flava</i>	Larva	0	0	0
		Nymph	368 (18)	0	0
		Adult (male)	30 (8)	0	0
		Adult (female)	39 (18)	0	0
Total			5,644 (408)	5 (1.23)	5 (1.23)

Table 2 Detection rate of *Coxiella burnetii* from tick species

Species	Stage	No. of ticks (No. of tested pools)	Positive pools (%)	
			UR-qPCR	qPCR
<i>H. longicornis</i>	Larva	4,234 (76)	2 (2.63)	2 (2.63)
	Nymph	208 (27)	0	0
	Adult (male)	137 (48)	0	0
	Adult (female)	448 (182)	2 (1.10)	2 (1.10)
<i>H. flava</i>	Larva	0	0	0
	Nymph	461 (25)	0	0
	Adult (male)	58 (13)	1 (7.69)	1 (7.69)
	Adult (female)	49 (24)	0	0
<i>I. nipponensis</i>	Larva	0	0	0
	Nymph	16 (2)	0	0
	Adult (male)	3 (1)	0	0
	Adult (female)	30 (10)	0	0
Total		5,644 (408)	5 (1.23)	5 (1.23)

Figures

Figure 1

Sensitivity of UR-qPCR for detection of *Coxiella burnetii*. a The amplification curves indicate the amplification of *C. burnetii* recombinant DNA, serially diluted from 5.6×10^8 to 5.6×10^0 copies, denoted by

numbers 8 to 0, respectively. “N” is negative control without DNA template. b Standard linear regression graph representing the relationship between initial DNA copy number and Ct value, averaged from PCR reactions performed in triplicate.

Figure 2

Specificity of UR-qPCR for detection of *Coxiella burnetii*. The specificity of UR-qPCR for the detection of *C. burnetii* was confirmed by the lack of amplification from the DNA templates of five other tick-borne pathogens (*Anaplasma phagocytophilum*, *Ehrlichia chaffeensis*, *Ehrlichia canis*, *Toxoplasma gondii*, *Borrelia burgdorferi*) and in the negative control, which lacked the DNA template. “P” is the positive control containing 105 copies of *C. burnetii* recombinant DNA.

Figure 3

Confirmation of *Coxiella burnetii* detection from tick samples. Detection curves indicate that the same five tick samples are positive for *C. burnetii*, when tested using the CFX96 Touch Real-time PCR System (Bio-Rad). a Four samples (19M88, 19M73, 19M42, 19M22) from Gangwon Province, b One sample (19T112) from Jeju Province. "P" is the positive control using *C. burnetii* recombinant DNA. c Electrophoresis of PCR amplicons (295 bp long) from the five samples (19M88, 19M73, 19M42, 19M22, 19T112) positive for *C. burnetii*. "P" and "N" are the positive control and the negative control, without DNA template, respectively, and "M" is the 100 bp DNA marker.

Figure 4

Maximum likelihood phylogenetic tree based on the partial IS1111 nucleotide sequences (643 bp) of *Coxiella burnetii* from the Republic of Korea and other countries. The sequences were aligned using Clustal X2, edited using BioEdit, and maximum likelihood tree generated using MEGA7 software, bootstrapping 1000 times.

Supplementary Files

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