Carbon nanotube-induced genotoxicity in mice:
Detection of DNA double strand breaks in histopathological lung specimens

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Multiwalled carbon nanotubes (MWCNTs) can induce DNA strand breaks in lung tissue, but the genotoxic potential of these materials varies considerably. In the present study phosphorylation of histone H2AX (γ-H2AX) at serine 139 was used as a biomarker of DNA double strand breaks allowing assessment of genotoxicity in histopathological tissue sections commonly prepared in animal toxicity studies.

Materials & Methods

We investigated the toxic effects of 10 forms of carbon nanotube (CNT) materials (4 MWCNTs and 6 single-walled CNTs) (Table 1) in female C57BL-6 mice, sampled 28 days after treatment by intratracheal instillation (54 µg/mouse). The immunofluorescent γ-H2AX-staining was performed on formalin-fixed paraffin-embedded lung samples with an autostainer using primary (rabbit monoclonal anti-gamma H2AX-phospho-Ser139) and secondary (goat anti-rabbit IgG) antibody incubations and tyramide amplification of the fluorescent signal (Alexa Fluor™ 488 Tyramide SuperBoost™ Kit, ThermoFisher Scientific) according to manufacturer’s instructions. Samples were counterstained with DAPI (4’,6-diamidino-2-phenylindole) and digitized with 20x fluorescent scanning (Figure 1). For each sample, all nuclei in four randomly selected annotations (200 µm x 200 µm) were classified as negative, weak positive (≤ 3 foci), positive (> 3 foci), or apoptotic (pan-stained nucleus).

Results & discussion

From the 10 studied CNT materials, five (NM-402, NRCWE-051, NRCWE-052, NRCWE-055 and NRCWE-062) showed induction of γ-H2AX positivity 28 days after the treatment compared to the control animals (Figure 2). Strongest γ-H2AX-positivity was detected after treatment with NRCWE-062 MWCNTs. The detection of γ-H2AX in situ enables the localization of the genotoxic effect in tissue-specific structures and even cell types. In the present study, majority of the γ-H2AX-positivity was seen in the bronchial epithelium.

Results of the γ-H2AX analysis were compared to existing data from the same experiments. Genotoxicity was assessed in bronchoalveolar lavage fluid (BAL) and lung tissue cells by the comet assay (Figure 3) and systemic genotoxicity by the micronucleus assay in blood erythrocytes (Figure 4). Inflammatory reaction in the CNT exposed mice was evaluated by the influx of neutrophils in BAL and serum amyloid A3 (SAA3) induction (Figure 5). However, no clear correlation was seen between the results of the different assays.

CNTs can be modified by adding functional groups on their surface. This can enhance material properties, but functionalization may also alter the toxicity of CNT materials. In the present study CNT materials with hydroxyl groups (-OH) induced less γ-H2AX-positivity than the corresponding pristine CNTs. Similar effect, however, was not observed for the other assays.

The toxic potential of CNTs may be highly variable due to their heterogeneous physicochemical properties and further studies are still needed to clarify the mode of action of CNT genotoxicity. The immunofluorescent γ-H2AX-staining provides means to localize the genotoxic effect in histopathological lung tissue samples.

Study shows that the immunofluorescent detection of γ-H2AX in histopathological tissue specimens can be used for post-experimental assessment of the genotoxicity of CNTs in vivo. Method allows new possibilities for studying genotoxic effects in tissue samples collected from past animal experiments and from exposed humans.