Experimental Pandemic (H1N1) 2009 Virus Infection of Cats

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To demonstrate that pandemic (H1N1) 2009 virus may cause respiratory disease in cats, we intratracheally infected cats. Diffuse alveolar damage developed. Seroconversion of sentinel cats indicated cat-to-cat virus transmission. Unlike in cats infected with highly pathogenic avian influenza virus (H5N1), extraregistered lesions did not develop in cats infected with pandemic (H1N1) 2009 virus.

Soon after pandemic (H1N1) 2009 virus emerged in North America, infections in domestic cats were reported (1,2). Infection with highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) virus (H5N1) leads to severe and often fatal diffuse alveolar damage and systemic virus spread in cats (3–5). In contrast, seasonal human influenza viruses do not cause disease in cats (6). To elucidate the pathogenesis of pandemic (H1N1) 2009 virus infection in cats, we studied 8 laboratory cats intratracheally infected with this virus.

The Study

Pandemic (H1N1) 2009 virus (A/Netherlands/602/2009) was isolated from a 3-year-old girl from the Netherlands who had mild influenza after she visited Mexico in early 2009. Virus was cultured in embryonated chicken eggs and passaged once in MDCK cells (7).

We used 2 groups (4 cats/group) of 16-week-old, purpose-bred, specific pathogen–free, European shorthair cats that were seronegative for hemagglutination-inhibition (HI) antibodies against pandemic (H1N1) 2009 virus and circulating seasonal influenza A viruses. These cats were intratracheally infected with a 10^6.0 tissue culture infectious dose of TCID_{50} of pandemic (H1N1) 2009 virus. A third group of 3 sentinel cats were housed with these 2 infected groups (1 with group 1 and 2 with group 2) from 2 days postinfection (dpi) onward. Serum samples were obtained on 0, 4, 7, and 21 dpi and stored at –20°C until tested for HI antibodies against pandemic (H1N1) 2009 virus (8).

All 11 cats were monitored daily for clinical signs, and body temperature was measured at 15-min intervals. Nasal, pharyngeal, and rectal swab specimens were obtained daily from all cats. After being anesthetized with ketamine, all cats were killed by exsanguination. Cats in groups 1 and 2 were killed at 4 dpi and 7 dpi, respectively. Sentinel cats were killed at 21 dpi. Experiments were performed under Biosafety Level 3 by using protocols approved by our Institutional Animal Welfare Committee.

Necropsies were performed according to a standard protocol. Lung, nasal turbinates, nasal septum, trachea, bronchi, tracheobronchial lymph node, nictitating membrane, tonsil, heart, liver, spleen, kidney, pancreas, duodenum, jejunum, colon, adrenal gland, brain, and olfactory bulb samples were obtained, were fixed in formalin, and processed to obtain sections for staining with hematoxylin and eosin.

For detection of viral antigen, tissue sections were stained with viral nucleoprotein–specific antibody (6). Alveolar epithelial cells were phenotyped by using a destaining–restaining technique (9). After organ samples were weighed and stored at –80°C, infectious pandemic (H1N1) 2009 virus was quantified by limiting dilution virus isolation in MDCK cells (10).

Cats in groups 1 and 2 infected with pandemic (H1N1) 2009 virus showed mild-to-moderate clinical signs (lethargy, appetite loss, rapid and labored breathing, and protruding nictitating membrane) after 1 dpi or 2 dpi onwards. Average body temperatures increased after 1 dpi, showed a maximum increase of ±1.5°C by 2 dpi, and returned to baseline values within 4–5 dpi (Figure). Sentinel cats showed no clinical signs. Two cats in group 1 (2 pharyngeal samples) and 2 cats in group 1 and 1 cat in group 2 (1 pharyngeal sample) had low virus titers during 1–4 dpi (<10^{1.8} TCID_{50}/g). Nasal swab specimens from all sentinel cats and pharyngeal and rectal swab specimens from 2 virus-positive cats by reverse transcription–PCR (cycle threshold ≥35) 2–6 days after first contact with infected cats. No virus was isolated from these swab specimens.

On 4 dpi, high virus titers were found in lungs, bronchi, and tracheas from 4 infected cats (10^{5.6–6.3}, 10^{2.9–4.6}, and 10^{1.1–3.8} TCID_{50}/g, respectively). Tonsils from 2 cats, intestines from 1 cat, and the spleen from 1 cat also had high virus titers (10^{3.0}, 10^{2.2}, 10^{4.6}, 10^{4.0}, and 10^{1.6} TCID_{50}/g, respectively). On 7 dpi, virus was detected in lung from 1 cat and trachea from 1 cat (10^{1.0} and 10^{0.6} TCID_{50}/g, respectively). Infectious virus (10^{1.2–2.2} TCID_{50}/g) was found in liver, intestine, brain, adrenal glands, and nictitating membranes of individual cats. The olfactory bulb of 1 cat was virus posi-
Intratracheal infection of domestic cats with pandemic (H1N1) 2009 virus resulted in mild-to-moderate clinical signs and virus replication throughout the respiratory tract, which caused diffuse alveolar damage. The pathogenesis in the respiratory tract in cats was similar to that occurring in humans, macaques, and ferrets (7,11–13). Seroconversion of sentinel cats indicated cat-to-cat transmission.

Unlike infection with seasonal human influenza viruses, infection with pandemic (H1N1) 2009 virus causes respiratory disease in cats. To compare infections with these viruses, we used our unpublished data for cats intratracheally infected with 10^5.0 TCID\textsubscript{50} of HPAI virus (H5N1) (A/Indonesia/5/2005) at 4 dpi and 7 dpi (4) and for sham-infected cats. Histopathologic and immunohistochemical findings in lungs of cats infected with these viruses coincided, which indicated a similar pathogenetic process and increased severity in cats infected with HPAI virus (H5N1).

### Conclusions

The results of our study indicate that infection with pandemic (H1N1) 2009 virus causes respiratory disease in cats, similar to that seen in other species. However, the clinical signs and histopathologic changes observed in cats were less severe compared to those seen in humans, macaques, and ferrets. The infection also caused a significant increase in virus replication in the respiratory tract, which resulted in diffuse alveolar damage. The findings of this study suggest that cats may be a potential reservoir for transmission of pandemic (H1N1) 2009 virus to other species, including humans.

### Table

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<th>Tissue source</th>
<th>IHC analysis</th>
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*Four cats were examined on each day. IHC, immunohistochemical; dpi, days postinfection.
†No virus was isolated from tracheobronchial lymph node, pancreas, heart, or kidney of any cats.
However, in contrast to HPAI virus (H5N1), pandemic (H1N1) 2009 virus does not cause extrapulmonary lesions in infected cats. Our data show that pandemic (H1N1) 2009 virus may cause respiratory disease in cats and that human-to-cat transmission is the most likely route of infection.

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References


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Macroscopic, histopathologic, and immunohistochemical analysis on day 4 of lungs of cats infected with highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) virus (H5N1), pandemic (H1N1) 2009 virus (pH1N1), or phosphate-buffered saline (Sham). Macroscopic analysis of lungs (top row) in cats infected with HPAI
virus (H5N1), showing multifocal or coalescing consolidation characterized by dark red, firm, slightly raised areas. Multifocal consolidation occurred in the group infected with pandemic (H1N1) 2009 virus. The sham-infected group had no lesions. Lesions of cats infected with HPAI virus (H5N1) (first column), showing severe epithelial necrosis in bronchioles and alveoli (hematoxylin and eosin [HE] stain) with intraluminal edema and inflammatory cell infiltrates, and associated influenza virus antigen expression (immunohistochemical stain with 3-amino-9-ethylcarbazole substrate and hematoxylin counterstain [IHC]) in bronchiolar and type II alveolar epithelial cells. The group infected with pandemic (H1N1) 2009 virus (second column) had lesions characterized by inflammatory cell infiltrates in bronchioles and alveoli (HE stain) associated with influenza virus antigen expression in bronchiolar epithelial cells and type II alveolar epithelial cells (IHC stain). The group infected with phosphate-buffered saline (third column) showed no lesions (HE stain) or expression of influenza virus antigen (IHC stain). Original magnification, bronchiole x200, alveoli HE x400, and alveoli IHC x1,000.