

光学学报

基于单分子检测原理的 MicroRNA 超灵敏检测研究

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摘要 MicroRNA(miRNA)是癌症等重大疾病检测过程中一类非常重要的标志物。定量实时聚合酶链式反应由于逆转录限制主要存在扩增偏差大的问题,Northern印迹杂交存在灵敏度低的不足,下一代测序和单分子阵列技术兼有检测限低及灵敏度高的优势。然而,扩增偏差大或缺乏简化的工作流程不利于即时点对点医疗诊断、治疗以及预后。基于此,提出一种基于单分子检测原理的miRNA检测方法。首先,依据泊松分布,利用三明治夹心结构形成复合物,链霉亲和素-poly-HRP与酪胺-Alexa Fluor 488分子通过催化沉积的方式生成并放大信号;然后,运用纤维蛋白水凝胶而非微流控芯片固定复合物;最后,进行单分子计数处理,通过样点寻址、样点筛选、图像重合及信息提取等4个步骤识别并统计阳性点个数,从而实现miRNA超灵敏定量检测。以人类miR-21为检测对象,检测下限是6 fmol/L。该方法在体外诊断检测miRNA方面有较好的潜在应用价值。

关键词 医学光学与生物技术; miR-21; 纤维蛋白水凝胶; 数字分析; 光学检测

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1 引言

目前,人类体外诊断检测常见的标志物主要分为两类,一类是蛋白质,另一类是核酸。常见的蛋白质类标志物有前列腺癌的前列腺特异性抗原PSA^[1]、卵巢癌的CA125^[2]、胰腺癌的CA19-9^[3]、结肠直肠癌的癌胚抗原CAE^[4],以及肝癌的甲胎蛋白AFP^[5]等。核酸类标志物包括DNA和RNA。MicroRNA(miRNA)是内源性非编码的单链小RNA,长度约为18~22个核苷酸序列,通过与靶基因的5'-非翻译区、3'-非翻译区或编码序列区不完全配对,使靶mRNA降解或阻止其转录后翻译^[6]。miRNA可以调控超过50%人类编码的活性基因,在细胞分化^[7]、增殖^[8]、凋亡^[9]、代谢^[10]、免疫反应^[11]过程中发挥关键作用,它的异常表达与心血管疾病^[12]、神经系统疾病^[13]、免疫疾病^[14]、类风湿性关节炎^[15]、多种癌症^[16-17]等重大疾病相关。在多种癌症疾病中几乎都可以检测到miRNA的异常表达。例如:非小细胞肺癌中,let-7的高表达和miR-155的低表达与不良预后有关^[18];肝癌中,miR-103通过增加血管通透性促进癌细胞转移^[18];肺癌和乳腺癌中,miR-21作为致癌基因表达上调^[19]。miR-21是肿瘤细胞中表达量上调最普遍的miRNA,它几乎与癌症发生的各个方面

相关:基因组不稳定与突变、细胞增殖、炎症、代谢异常、逃避细胞凋亡、免疫破坏,以及生长抑制等^[20]。

传统的microRNA检测方法主要有定量实时聚合酶链式反应(qPCR)^[21-22]和Northern印迹杂交法^[23-25]。qPCR作为miRNA常规检测技术,具有出色的灵敏度和特异性,可以在较宽的动态范围内运行。然而,由于逆转录环节的限制,qPCR存在样本损失与扩增偏差大的问题。此外,qPCR需要设计复杂的引物,还要精确控制温度,实验室技能和所需的操作条件都很复杂^[26]。Northern印迹法作为早期miRNA检测最常用的方法,能够检测相对丰度和相对分子质量。然而,Northern印迹法存在灵敏度低、样品需求量大的缺陷^[27]。近些年,一些新设计的检测方法主要有下一代测序(NGS)和单分子阵列技术(SiMoA)。NGS作为第二代测序技术被用于miRNA检测,具有检测限低和灵敏度高的优势。然而,NGS通过扩增检测低丰度的miRNA,存在偏差大的问题^[28]。SiMoA是一种直接检测miRNA的方法,也具有检测限低和灵敏度高的优势。然而,SiMoA需要设计复杂的微流控芯片用于磁珠的分离,存在磁珠加载效率低的问题。同时,微孔中产生的荧光信号具有流动性,需要通过密封油封闭微孔^[29]。一种极佳的miRNA检测方法应具有检测限低、

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灵敏度高、简化的工作流程,以及样本需求量少等优点,能够满足即时点对点医疗诊断的需求。

针对上述问题,本文提出一种基于单分子检测原理的直接检测 miRNA 方法。依据泊松分布,利用三明治夹心结构形成复合物,通过酪胺-Alexa Fluor 488 分子催化沉积在链霉亲和素-poly-HRP 上生成并放大信号,通过纤维蛋白水凝胶固定磁珠然后采集图像并进行单分子计数处理,对 miRNA 进行定量检测。

2 检测原理

2.1 复合物形成

每个羧基化的顺性磁珠上含有大量捕获探针结合的位点,捕获探针与羧基化的顺性磁珠共价连接,使每个磁珠被捕获探针包覆。 x 个捕获探针包覆的磁珠与 y 个 miRNA 随机结合符合统计学规律。当 miRNA 个数 y 足够大时,符合大数定律,此时,捕获探针包覆的磁珠和 miRNA 结合发生的事件可以用统计分布描述。假设在 y 次独立重复的实验中,每次实验发生的概率为 p ,发生 k 次的概率服从二项分布,在 miRNA 与捕获探针包覆的磁珠结合过程中,将单个 miRNA 与捕获探针包覆的磁珠之间的结合作为独立实验中发生的事件,实验重复 y 次,每个 miRNA 与捕获探针包覆的磁珠结合的概率为 $\frac{1}{x}$, y 个 miRNA 中指定 k 个与捕获探针包覆的磁珠结合发生的概率 $P(k)$ 符合二项分布:

$$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} P(k) = \binom{y}{k} p^k (1-p)^{y-k} \\ \binom{y}{k} = \frac{y!}{(y-k)!k!} \\ p = \frac{1}{x} \\ q = 1 - p \\ \mu = yp \\ \sigma^2 = ypq \end{array} \right. , \quad (1)$$

式中: μ 是二项分布数学期望; σ^2 为方差。当 y 足够大、 p 足够小时,二项分布收敛于泊松分布。一般认为 $y \geq 20$ 、 $p \leq 0.05$ 时,二项分布近似于泊松分布。指定 k 个 miRNA 与捕获探针包覆的磁珠之间结合的事件为随机变量 X_p ,其统计分布符合泊松分布:

$$P(X_p=k) = \exp(-\lambda) \frac{\lambda^k}{k!}, \lambda = \mu = \sigma^2, \quad (2)$$

式中: λ 是捕获探针包覆的磁珠携带 miRNA 个数 z 与捕获探针包覆的磁珠总个数 x 之间结合的平均率。将标记 miRNA 的磁珠个数 z 与磁珠总个数 x 的比值记作 R_{AEB} ,则有

$$\lambda = R_{AEB} = \frac{z}{x} = cVN_A, \quad (3)$$

式中: c 是稀释样品浓度; V 是溶液体积; N_A 是阿伏伽

德罗常数。

当捕获探针包覆的磁珠不含 miRNA 时,结合式(2)、(3)以及稀释倍数 m 可计算样品原始浓度 C :

$$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} k=0 \\ P(0)=\exp(-\lambda) \\ \ln [P(0)]=- \lambda \\ c=\frac{\lambda}{N_AV_d}=-\frac{\ln [P(0)]}{N_AV_d}=\frac{x-z}{x} \\ C=mc \end{array} \right. . \quad (4)$$

y 个 miRNA 与 x 个捕获探针包覆的磁珠之间结合符合泊松分布。当 miRNA 的个数 y 远小于磁珠总个数 x 时(即 $\lambda \leq 0.1$),大多数磁珠只包含 0 或 1 个 miRNA,携带 2 个及 2 个以上的 miRNA 磁珠个数忽略不计。捕获探针包覆的磁珠携带 miRNA 个数 z 和 miRNA 样品稀释浓度 c 可以通过式(4)确定样品原始浓度 C 。在此基础上,设计了一种用于单分子检测的复合物结构,如图 1(a)所示,捕获探针包覆的磁珠与 miRNA 一半碱基结合,它们之间结合满足 $\lambda \leq 0.1$,miRNA 另一半碱基与生物素化检测探针结合,检测探针与链霉亲和素-poly-HRP 结合,形成复合物。在 H_2O_2 溶液中,链霉亲和素-poly-HRP 与酪胺-Alexa Fluor 488 分子以催化沉积的方式结合来放大信号。

2.2 纤维蛋白凝胶固定复合物

复合物在溶液中做布朗运动,会随机地撞击其他悬浮的复合物。为了固定复合物,方便 miRNA 单分子计数,设计了一种简化的复合物固定方法,如图 1(b)所示,运用纤维蛋白水凝胶而非微流控芯片,解决了微流控芯片所需的设计与制造问题。纤维蛋白水凝胶是由纤维蛋白原在凝血酶和催化因子作用下聚合生成的。纤维蛋白原是从干细胞合成并分泌的一种糖蛋白,每个纤维蛋白原分子由 α 、 β 、 γ 等 3 对不同多肽链组成,呈两侧对称排列,分子之间和分子内部通过二硫键相连,纤维蛋白原分子通过分子之间相互作用,以多聚体形态在溶液中存在。纤维蛋白原到纤维蛋白水凝胶的形成过程如图 2 所示:首先,纤维蛋白原在凝血酶作用下,形成纤维蛋白多肽,纤维蛋白多肽不稳定,称为软凝块;然后,在凝血酶及 Ca^{2+} 的作用下激活非活性纤维蛋白稳定因子(Factor XIII)为活性的纤维蛋白稳定因子(Factor XIII a);最后,在 Ca^{2+} 的作用下,纤维蛋白稳定因子通过转谷氨酰胺作用完成对多肽的交联,形成纤维蛋白水凝胶。纤维蛋白水凝胶作为一种可降解材料,具有生物相容性、一定的透明性、透射光谱覆盖紫外到近红外及透射率高的特点。

2.3 单分子计数算法

纤维蛋白水凝胶固定复合物后,分别在明场和暗场采集图像并运用单分子计数算法计数。单分子计数算法包括 4 个步骤:1) 样点寻址,明场下,计算图像的补码,使磁珠明亮背景黑暗,基于顶帽变换去除光照分

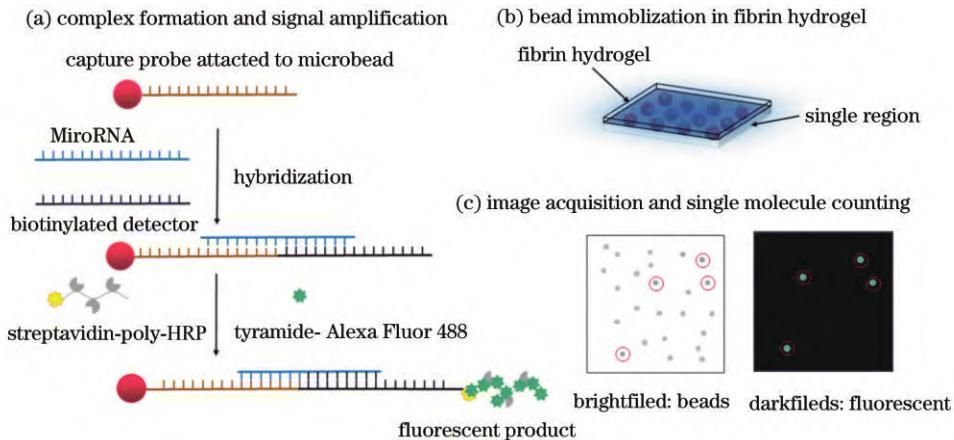


图 1 miRNA 检测原理示意图。(a)miRNA 复合物形成;(b)纤维蛋白凝胶固定磁珠;(c) miRNA 单分子计数

Fig. 1 Schematic diagrams of miRNA detection principle. (a) miRNA compound formation; (b) beads immobilized in fibrin hydrogel; (c) miRNA single molecule counting

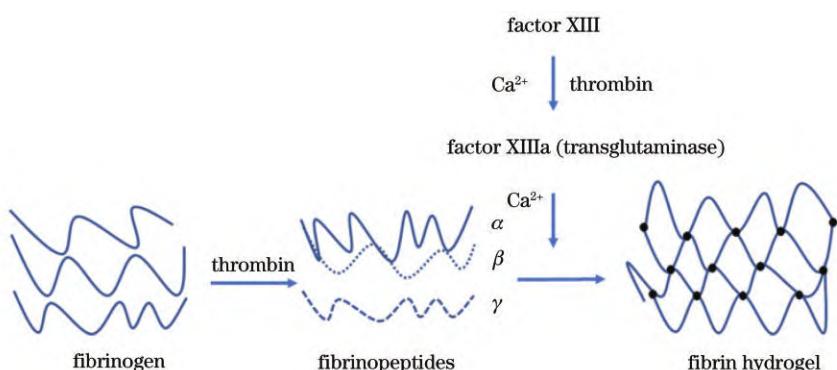


图 2 纤维蛋白凝胶生成示意图
Fig. 2 Fibrin hydrogel formation diagram

布不均效应,暗场下,增加图像对比度,基于顶帽变换去除光照分布不均效应;2)样点筛选,如图 1(c)所示,明场下,通过形态学处理识别并筛选出单个磁珠,暗场下,通过形态学处理,识别并筛选出单个亮点;3)图像重合,对明场和暗场下获取的图像进行重合处理,使磁珠位置和亮点位置重叠;4)信息提取,识别统计具有亮信号的磁珠,记为阳性点,最后,统计全部阳性点数目。

3 实验

材料:人类合成 miR-21、捕获探针及生物素化检测探针(上海生工生物工程股份有限公司)。

仪器与试剂:Olympus IX81 荧光显微镜(奥林巴斯科技有限公司)、Zyla 5.5 sCMOS CCD 相机(安道尔科技有限公司)、人工设计分离与保持装置、直径 3 μm 羧基化顺性磁珠(苏州纳微科技股份有限公司)、Alexa Fluor - 488 SuperBoost 试剂盒和链霉亲和素-poly-HRP(赛默飞世尔上海仪器有限公司)、牛血浆纤维蛋白原和牛血浆凝血酶(默克化工技术上海有限公司)等。

3.1 捕获探针与磁珠结合

将 2-(N-吗啉)乙醇磺酸(MES)缓冲液

(50 mmol/L, pH=6.0)分别与 EDC 和 NHS 混合配制浓度均为 50 mg/mL EDC 和 NHS 溶液;1×PBS、0.5 mol/L NaCl 及 0.1% Tween-20 配制 pH=7.4 的偶联缓冲液;1×PBS 和 1% Tween-20 配制清洗缓冲液;1×PBS 和 1% BSA 配制阻断缓冲液;50 mmol/L Tris-HCl、150 mmol/L NaCl、10 mmol/L EDTA、0.1% Tween-20 及 1% BSA 配制存储缓冲液。

使用 0.01 mol/L NaOH 溶液清洗 5×10^6 个磁珠 3 次。取配制的 EDC 和 NHS 溶液各 25 μL 加入磁珠中,室温下振荡孵育,持续 30 min, 使用偶联缓冲液清洗磁珠 1 次。将 40 nmol/L 的捕获探针溶液添加到磁珠中,室温下振荡孵育,持续 3 h, 使用清洗缓冲液清洗磁珠 1 次。磁珠中添加淬灭缓冲液(100 mmol/L Tris-HCl, pH=7.4),室温下振荡孵育,持续 45 min, 使用清洗缓冲液清洗磁珠 2 次。磁珠中添加阻断缓冲液,室温下振荡孵育,持续 45 min, 使用清洗缓冲液清洗磁珠 3 次。最后,将磁珠放在 100 μL 的存储缓冲液中保存。

3.2 复合物形成

将 5×SSC 和 DEPC 溶液混合配制杂交缓冲液;miR-21 在杂交缓冲液中分别稀释至 0 fmol/L、2 fmol/L、4 fmol/L、6 fmol/L、8 fmol/L、10 fmol/L, 检

测探针在杂交缓冲液中稀释至 40 nmol/L; 用 1.6 mL 1×反应缓冲液与 16 μL 1×H₂O₂和 16 μL 酵胺-Alexa Fluor 488 配制工作溶液。

将 10 μL miR-21、10 μL 磁珠及 10 μL 生物素化检测探针溶液混合, 50 °C下振荡孵育, 持续 2 h, 使用清洗缓冲液清洗磁珠 6 次。在每个样品中加入 10 μL 5 μg/mL 链霉亲和素-poly-HRP, 时间为 10 min, 然后清洗 3 次。将磁珠悬浮于 50 μL 的工作溶液中, 静置培养, 持续 1 h, 清洗缓冲液清洗磁珠 8 次。取 20 μL 稀释液(1×SSPE 和 1.6% 葡聚糖硫酸盐溶液)添加到磁珠中。

3.3 复合物固定与成像

纤维蛋白原和凝血酶分别在 1×PBS 溶液混合溶解, 配制成 10 mg/mL 溶液和 1.25 U/mL 溶液。等体积的纤维蛋白原溶液与凝血酶溶液在 37 °C下充分混合, 配制纤维蛋白凝胶溶液。复合物添加到人工分离与固定装置的单个区域内, 加入 40 μL 纤维蛋白凝胶溶液, 时间持续 15 min 后, 在荧光显微镜和相机下, 可以获取 25~30 组图片, 每组图片分别在明场和暗场下拍摄。

4 讨论与结果

4.1 捕获与检测探针设计

miR-21、捕获探针及生物素化的检测探针之间碱基结合形成复合物, 碱基对之间是由氢键连接的, 氢键稳定性受温度影响很大。miR-21 碱基序列为 UAGCUUAUCAGACUGAUGUUGA, 捕获探针与 miR-21一半碱基序列结合, miR-21另一半碱基序列与生物素化的检测探针结合, 每个结合的序列片段由 11 个碱基组成。为了提高氢键稳定性, 从而增强杂交结合特异性, 捕获探针与检测探针使用了锁核苷酸。锁核苷酸在捕获探针和检测探针位置与个数不同, Tm 也不同, 通过 LNA 设计和优化工具(<https://www.exiqon.com/oligo-tools>), 得到的捕获探针为/5AmMC12/TTTTTT+T+CA+A+CATCAG+T, 检测探针为 C+TGAT+A+AG+C+TA/3Bio/, 其中, “+”表示使用锁核苷酸碱基合成。

4.2 纤维蛋白水凝胶

影响纤维蛋白水凝胶稳定性的因素主要是温度、纤维蛋白原释放出的多肽的量以及凝血酶含量。室温下, 纤维蛋白原浓度一定时, 随着凝血酶含量增多, 凝胶形成时间变短。凝血酶含量一定时, 纤维蛋白原释放出的多肽的含量越多, 凝胶形成时间越短。为了使复合物可以快速且稳定地被固定和方便图像收集, 调试纤维蛋白水凝胶的形成参数, 得到纤维蛋白原浓度是 10 mg/mL, 凝血酶浓度是 1.25 U/mL。实验需要一个分离和固定装置, 方便添加复合物溶液和纤维蛋白水凝胶, 如图 3 所示, 该装置由两部分构成, 一部分以载玻片为基底材料, 另一部分是 PMMA 材料制作的

分离区域, 分离区域规格为 10 mm×10 mm×2 mm, 共 8 个分离区域。1 次实验可以获取 25~30 组图片, 每组图片分别在明场与暗场下拍摄。

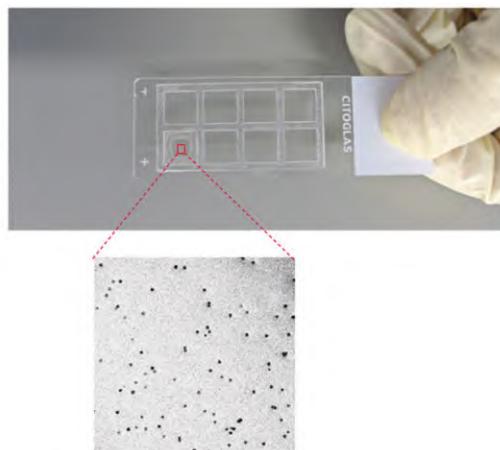


图 3 纤维蛋白凝胶分离和固定装置

Fig. 3 Fibrin hydrogel separation and fixation device

4.3 单分子计数算法

在单个分离区内, 光源大小及镜头视野等外部干扰因素会影响图像收集, 出现光照不均匀现象, 不利于后续图像的定位和识别。以 miR-21 在 10 fmol/L 浓度下进行的一次测试为例, 该测试下共得到 25 组图片, 每组图片分别在明场和暗场下拍摄, 明场下的曝光时间为 1 s, 暗场下曝光时间为 2 s, 选择 1 组图片进行单分子计数算法处理, 如图 4 所示, 图 4(a) 和图 4(b) 分别是明场和暗场下的图片。明场下, 计算图像的补码, 采用顶帽变换去除光照分布不均效应, 通过多次的腐蚀和膨胀运算消除连通区域, 以下四分位为阈值二值化, 筛选出单个样点, 设置直径为 3 μm 圆盘结构元素来定位磁珠位置。暗场下, 增强图像对比度, 使光照过亮处亮度降低, 光照过暗处亮度提升, 去除光照分布不均效应, 通过多次的腐蚀和膨胀运算去除连通区域, 保留上四分位亮点强度值, 定位并筛选单个亮点位置。图 4(c) 是将明场和暗场下获取的图片重合处理得到的阳性点处理结果。将 25 组图片重复运用单分子计数算法, 得到 1 次测试中全部阳性点个数, 此时阳性点个数即为 miR-21 个数。

4.4 标准曲线拟合

通过上述分析, 对 miR-21 分别在 0 fmol/L、2 fmol/L、4 fmol/L、6 fmol/L、8 fmol/L、10 fmol/L 浓度下进行实验, 每组进行 5 次重复性测试, 统计阳性点个数。理论上, 复合物只含有 0 或 1 个 miR-21, 将携带 miR-21 的磁珠个数 z 统计成阳性点个数, 计算 z 与磁珠总个数 x 的比值, 由式(3)可以得到 R_{AEB} 值, 具体如表 1 所示。

从表 1 可知, 在 0 fmol/L、2 fmol/L、4 fmol/L 浓度下, 根据单分子计数方法得到的 R_{AEB} 取值范围分别是 0.0251~0.0401、0.342~0.0483、0.0392~0.0586, 它

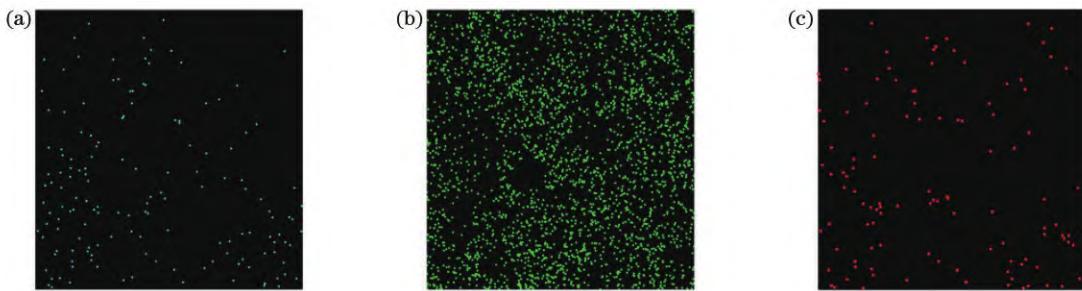


图 4 单分子计数算法处理(部分)结果。(a)明场筛选后处理结果;(b)暗场筛选后部分结果;(c)阳性点处理结果
Fig. 4 Single molecule counting algorithm processing (partial) results. (a) Partial processing results after open field screening;
(b) partial processing results after dark field screening; (c) positive point processing results

表 1 miR-21 实验测试结果
Table 1 miR-21 experimental test results

Concentration / (fmol/L)	Experimental time				
	1	2	3	4	5
0	0.0401	0.0421	0.0322	0.0453	0.0251
2	0.0342	0.0415	0.0483	0.0441	0.0382
4	0.0586	0.0468	0.0449	0.0512	0.0392
6	0.0555	0.0511	0.0602	0.0545	0.0562
8	0.0643	0.0663	0.0633	0.0681	0.0657
10	0.0755	0.0725	0.0868	0.0746	0.0741

们的取值范围波动较大,主要原因是样本量少,荧光微弱,阳性点少,接近背景信号强度值,背景噪声信号与荧光信号混淆。背景噪声的主要来源是仪器本身、溶液和载玻片发生的反射。在 6 fmol/L、8 fmol/L、10 fmol/L 浓度下, R_{AEB} 取值范围分别是 0.0511~0.0602、0.0633~0.0681、0.0725~0.0868,它们的取值范围波动小,主要原因是样本量增加,伴随荧光信号的增强,阳性点增多。此外,每组实验存在样本溶液在清洗过程中丢失、磁珠重叠无法识别被排除等影响数据波动性的因素。

根据表 1 获取每组浓度的平均值和标准偏差以及变异系数(CV),具体如表 2 所示。变异系数是一个重要的统计量,用于衡量不同组间测量值的变异程度,变异系数值大于 15% 时,认为数据表现不正常。根据表 2 可知:在 0 fmol/L、2 fmol/L、4 fmol/L 下偏差大,变异系数值大于 15%;6 fmol/L、8 fmol/L、10 fmol/L 偏差小,变异系数值小于 8%。对 miR-21 进行标准曲线拟合,通过 Logistic 模型得到的相关系数 $R^2=0.998$ (大于 0.99),得到的拟合曲线如图 5 所示。依据变异系数值、相关系数 R^2 ,结合表 1,将背景平均值+2 标准偏差确定为下限,则最低检测下限是 6 fmol/L。

5 结 论

设计了一种基于单分子检测原理的 miRNA 检测方法。以人类 miR-21 为检测对象,最低检测限为 6 fmol/L。根据泊松分布原理,通过三明治夹心结构形成复合物,将链霉亲和素-poly-HRP 与酪胺-Alexa

表 2 miR-21 标准曲线 R_{AEB} 值
Table 2 R_{AEB} values for miR-21 calibration curves

Concentration / (fmol/L)	Average R_{AEB}	Standard deviation	CV /%
0	0.0369	0.00820	22.2
2	0.0413	0.00541	13.1
4	0.0481	0.00726	15.1
6	0.0555	0.00328	5.9
8	0.0655	0.00185	2.9
10	0.0767	0.00575	7.5

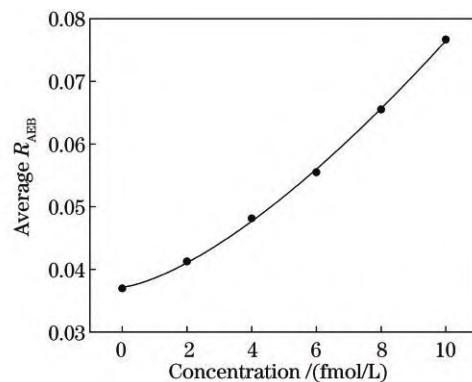


图 5 miR-21 标准曲线
Fig. 5 miR-21 calibration curve

Fluor 488 以催化沉积的方式结合,生成并放大信号,使用易于获取的纤维蛋白水凝胶而非微流控芯片固定复合物,解决了微流控芯片所需的设计与制造问题。该方法具有较低的检测限,简化的检测流程方便即时点对点医疗诊断、治疗以及预后,在体外诊断检测 miRNA 方面有比较好的潜在应用价值。

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Ultrasensitive Detection of MicroRNA Based on Single Molecule Detection Principle

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Abstract

Objective Currently, the traditional biomarkers used for human in vitro diagnostic testing are divided into two categories: proteins and nucleic acids. Traditional protein biomarkers include prostate-specific antigen (PSA) for prostate cancer, CA125 for ovarian cancer, CA19-9 for pancreatic cancer, carcinoembryonic antigen (CEA) for colorectal cancer, and

alpha-fetoprotein (AFP) for liver cancer. Nucleic acid biomarkers include DNA and RNA. MicroRNA (miRNA) is an endogenous, non-coding, single-stranded, and small RNA, with a length equaling approximately 18–22 nucleotides, and regulates over 50% of human protein-coding genes. miRNA plays a key role in cell differentiation, proliferation, apoptosis, metabolism, and immune response. Its abnormal expression is associated with major diseases such as cardiovascular disease, neurological disease, immune disease, rheumatoid arthritis, and various cancers. Abnormal expression of miRNA can be detected in almost all types of cancer diseases, such as let-7's high expression and miR-155's low expression associated with poor prognosis in non-small cell lung cancer; miR-103 promotes cancer cell migration by increasing vascular permeability in liver cancer; miR-21 serves as upregulation of an oncogene in lung and breast cancers. miR-21 is the most commonly upregulated miRNA in tumor cells and is associated with every aspect of cancer development, including genomic instability and mutation, cell proliferation, inflammation, metabolic abnormalities, evading apoptosis, immune destruction, and growth inhibition.

Results and Discussions miRNA is an important biomarker in the detection of major diseases such as cancer. While quantitative real-time polymerase chain reaction (RT-qPCR) suffers from amplification bias due to reverse transcription limitations. Northern blotting has limitations in sensitivity. Next-generation sequencing (NGS) and single-molecule array technology (SiMoA) have advantages in low detection limits and high sensitivity. However, amplification bias or a lack of simplified workflow will hinder the real-time point-of-care medical diagnosis, treatment, and prognosis. In this paper, we presented a miRNA detection method based on the single-molecule detection principle.

Conclusions To begin with, a sandwich structure was formed by using the Poisson distribution to create a complex. The captured probe-coated magnetic beads bound to half of the base pairs of the miRNA, satisfying the binding rule, while the other half of the miRNA base pairs bound to biotinylated detection probes. The detection probe then bound to streptavidin-poly-HRP, forming a complex. In an H_2O_2 solution, streptavidin-poly-HRP bound to the tyramide-Alexa Fluor 488 molecule in a catalytic deposition manner to amplify the signal. Subsequently, the complex was immobilized by using fibrin hydrogel instead of microfluidic chips. The complex underwent Brownian motion in solution, continuously moving in an irregular pattern and randomly colliding with other suspended complexes. In order to immobilize the complex and facilitate single-molecule counting of miRNA, a simplified method for immobilizing the complex was designed by using fibrin hydrogel instead of microfluidic chips, which solved the design and manufacturing issues required by microfluidic chips. Fibrin hydrogel was generated by the polymerization of fibrinogen under the action of thrombin and catalytic factors. Fibrinogen was a glycoprotein synthesized and secreted from stem cells, and each fibrinogen molecule consisted of three pairs of different peptide chains, namely α , β , and γ , which were arranged symmetrically on both sides. The molecules were connected by disulfide bonds both between and within the molecules, and fibrinogen molecules existed in a polymeric form in solution through intermolecular interactions. Firstly, fibrinogen was converted to fibrin peptides by the action of thrombin, resulting in an unstable soft clot. Then, the inactive fibrin stabilizing factor (Factor XIII) was activated by the action of thrombin and Ca^{2+} to become an active fibrin stabilizing factor (Factor XIIIa). Finally, under the action of Ca^{2+} , the fibrin stabilizing factor completed the cross-linking of peptides through transglutaminase activity, forming fibrin hydrogel. As a degradable material, fibrin hydrogel had the characteristics of biocompatibility, a certain degree of transparency, transmission spectra covering ultraviolet to near-infrared, and high transmittance. At last, single-molecule counting processing was performed. After the fibrin hydrogel immobilized the complex, images were acquired in bright and dark fields, and single-molecule counting algorithms were applied. The single-molecule counting algorithm consisted of four steps. First, spot addressing. In the bright field, the complement of the image was calculated to make the magnetic beads bright and the background dark. The uneven illumination distribution effect was removed based on top-hat transformation. In the dark field, contrast enhancement was applied, and the uneven illumination distribution effect was removed based on top-hat transformation. Second, spot screening. In the bright field, single magnetic beads were identified and screened by morphology processing. In the dark field, single bright spots were identified and screened by morphology processing. Third, image overlay. The images obtained in the bright and dark fields were overlaid, aligning the positions of magnetic beads and bright spots. Fourth, information extraction. Magnetic beads with bright signals were recognized and counted as positive spots. Finally, all positive spots were counted to achieve ultra-sensitive quantification of miRNA.

In this paper, human miR-21 was used as the detection target, with a detection limit of 6 fmol/L (Fig. 5). This method has great potential application value for future in vitro diagnosis and detection of miRNA.

Key words medical optics and biotechnology; miR-21; fibrin hydrogel; digital analysis; optical detection