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Zooming in on genetic shuffling

Scientists generate the most precise map of genetic recombination ever

Heidelberg/Hinxton, 09 July 2008 - Genetic recombination, the process by which sexually reproducing organisms shuffle their genetic material when producing germ cells, leads to offspring with a new genetic make-up and influences the course of evolution. In the current issue of *Nature*, researchers at the European Molecular Biology Laboratory (EMBL) in Heidelberg, Germany, and the EMBL-European Bioinformatics Institute (EMBL-EBI) in Hinxton, UK, present the most precise map of genetic recombination yet. The study sheds light on fundamental questions about genetic shuffling and has implications for the tracking of disease genes and their inheritance.

In order to generate germ cells, sexually reproducing organisms undergo a complex series of cell divisions (meiosis) that includes the shuffling of genetic material inherited from the two parents. Equivalent chromosomes from mother and father pair up and exchange sections of DNA in a process called crossover. In a different type of recombination, called non-crossover, a small piece of DNA is copied from one chromosome onto the other without reciprocal exchange leading to gene conversion. Non-crossovers are minute events with a subtler effect than the exchange of larger fragments, but both types of recombination can increase genetic diversity and explain why organisms of the same species differ in many ways. Both types of recombination can also act to separate the transmission of neighbouring genes, which are normally inherited together.

The groups of Lars Steinmetz at EMBL and Wolfgang Huber at EMBL-EBI have produced the most detailed map to date of recombination events in the yeast genome.

“Our map has the highest resolution of recombination events that currently exists for any organism. We can locate crossovers and even hard-to-trace non-crossovers, typically with a precision of about 80 bases. This resolution is 20 times higher than in any existing yeast map and more than 360 times higher than a recent human map,” says Steinmetz.

The map revealed many new insights into the organisation of recombination in yeast. On average over 150 recombination events were observed during a typical meiosis. These events did not occur uniformly across the genome. The recombination rate varied according to location, with events concentrated at so-called hotspots, some of which favoured either crossovers or non-crossovers. The researchers also found evidence for interference between crossovers and non-crossovers - a phenomenon previously only known to occur between crossovers - that makes it unlikely for two recombination events to happen in close proximity.

The fundamental principles of recombination are likely to be shared between yeast and humans. “Our map expands our understanding of crossover and provides a wealth of new information about non-crossovers and gene conversion. It will act as a reference for future research into recombination,” says Richard Bourgon from Huber's group, who developed the statistical methodology for this new type of data.

The insights gained will not only help tackle questions about the basic mechanisms of recombination; they will also have practical implications for the tracking of disease genes in humans.

Source Article

E. Mancera, R. Bourgon, A. Brozzi, W. Huber & L.M. Steinmetz. High-resolution mapping of meiotic crossovers and noncrossovers in yeast. *Nature*, 9 July 2008

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About EMBL

The European Molecular Biology Laboratory is a basic research institute funded by public research monies from 20 member states (Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom) and associate member state Australia. Research at EMBL is conducted by approximately 80 independent groups covering the spectrum of molecular biology. The Laboratory has five units: the main Laboratory in Heidelberg, and Outstations in Hinxton (the European Bioinformatics Institute), Grenoble, Hamburg, and Monterotondo near Rome. The cornerstones of EMBL's mission are: to perform basic research in molecular biology; to train scientists, students and visitors at all levels; to offer vital services to scientists in the member states; to develop new instruments and methods in the life sciences and to actively engage in technology transfer activities. EMBL's International PhD Programme has a student body of about 170. The Laboratory also sponsors an active Science and Society programme. Visitors from the press and public are welcome.

About EMBL-EBI

The European Bioinformatics Institute (EBI) is part of the European Molecular Biology Laboratory (EMBL) and is located on the Wellcome Trust Genome Campus in Hinxton near Cambridge (UK). The EBI grew out of EMBL's pioneering work in providing public biological databases to the research community. It hosts some of the world's most important collections of biological data, including DNA sequences (EMBL-Bank), protein sequences (UniProt), animal genomes (Ensembl), three-dimensional structures (the Macromolecular Structure Database), data from microarray experiments (ArrayExpress), protein-protein interactions (IntAct) and pathway information (Reactome). The EBI hosts several research groups and its scientists continually develop new tools for the biocomputing community. www.ebi.ac.uk

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