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Th2 cytokine-mediated methimazole-induced acute liver injury in mice

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ABSTRACT: Drug-induced liver injury (DILI) is a major safety concern in drug development and clinical practice. The pathogenesis of DILI usually involves the participation of the parent drug or metabolites that either affect cellular function or elicit an immune response. However, the mechanisms leading to DILI are unknown in most cases. Methimazole (MTZ) is used as an antithyroid drug and is well known to have induced liver injuries such as cholestatic hepatitis in a small number of human cases. Immune-mediated reactions were also suggested to play a role in MTZ-induced acute liver injury, but the mechanism underlying this process has not been elucidated. To address this issue, we measured plasma aspartate aminotransferase (AST) and alanine aminotransferase (ALT) levels, hepatic glutathione levels, hepatic expression of CD4⁺ Th cell-related transcriptional factors, cytokines and chemokines, plasma interleukin (IL)-4 levels and histopathological changes in the liver following MTZ (450 mg kg⁻¹, p.o.) administration in mice. The hepatic expression of mRNA for Th2 cell-related factors, such as GATA-binding protein, macrophage inflammatory protein-2 (MIP-2) and plasma IL-4 levels, as well as plasma AST and ALT levels, was significantly increased in mice treated with MTZ. These changes were markedly enhanced by pre-treatment with L-buthionine sulfoximine (3 mmol kg⁻¹, i.p.) and MTZ (15 mg kg⁻¹, p.o.). Neutralization of IL-4 using a monoclonal anti-mouse IL-4 antibody (100 µg/mouse, single i.p.) suppressed the hepatotoxic effect of MTZ. In conclusion, this report is the first to demonstrate that Th2 cytokine-mediated immune responses are involved in MTZ-induced acute liver injury in mice. Copyright © 2012 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Keywords: drug-induced liver injury; cytokines; IL-4; eotaxin; helper T cells

INTRODUCTION

Drug-induced liver injury (DILI) remains an important cause of acute liver failure and is a major reason for the withdrawal of approved drugs from the market. The pathogenesis of drug-induced liver injury usually involves the participation of the parent drug or metabolites that either directly affect cell functions or elicit an immune response. Some drugs, such as tienilic acid, amodiaquine and halothane, are suggested to induce immune-related DILI (Bugelski, 2005). In most cases, the mechanisms underlying DILI are unknown because predictive *in vitro* screening methods and animal models are lacking.

Methimazole (MTZ), which is widely used to treat hyperthyroidism, is well known to induce DILI, such as acute hepatic necrosis and cholestatic hepatitis, with a low incidence (Luca *et al.*, 2009; Sadoul *et al.*, 1993; Vitug and Goldman, 1985). The metabolic activation of MTZ by either hepatic cytochrome P-450 (P450) or flavin-containing monooxygenases (FMO) has been proposed to produce reactive metabolites that may covalently bind to proteins and inactivate P450 (Lee and Neal, 1978; Kedderis and Rickert, 1985). It was reported that the inadequate detoxification of reactive metabolites was responsible for the hepatotoxicity observed in glutathione (GSH) depleted mouse and rat models using L-buthionine sulfoximine (BSO) (Mizutani *et al.*, 1999; Shimizu *et al.*, 2011). However, it is not clear whether immune-mediated factors are involved in MTZ-induced acute liver injury.

Although the pathogenesis of DILI is not fully understood, it can be divided into a two-stage process based on studies of the mechanisms involved in animal models (Lavery *et al.*,

2010). In the first step, chemical stress responses, such as mitochondrial dysfunction, are induced owing to excessive drug accumulation and/or metabolic activation. The second step is the process of adaptation or failure of the response mediated by immune-related cells. In addition, as knowledge concerning the role of immune cells in hepatic pathology accumulates, it is becoming clear that immune responses possibly play an essential role in DILI (Adams *et al.*, 2010). Therefore, it is important to understand the mechanisms by which cells that play a role in the immune system are activated during DILI.

Helper T cells (CD4⁺ Th cells) are an important regulator in the pathogenesis of a variety of human liver disorders (Kita *et al.*, 2001; Heneghan and McFarlane, 2002). The action of T cells in the liver is mediated through the release of a variety of cytokines that target liver cells and immune cells by activating multiple signaling cascades (Leonard and O'Shea, 1998). Th cells are subdivided into Th1, Th2, regulatory T cells (Treg) and Th17 based on their unique production of cytokines and characteristic transcription factors (Kidd,

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2003; Zhu and Paul, 2008). Th1 cells require 'T-box expressed in T cells' (T-bet) and secrete interferon (IFN)- γ . Th2 cells require GATA-binding domain-3 (GATA-3) and produce IL-4 and IL-5. In addition, Th17 cells secrete IL-17 and IL-22 require 'retinoid-related orphan receptor γ t' (ROR- γ t) for differentiation (Zhu and Paul, 2008).

Th2 cell-mediated responses influence a wide range of events associated with allergic inflammation via IL-4 and IL-5. IL-4 promotes the development of mast cells. IL-5 is involved in the development of eosinophils (Kay, 2001). In concanavalin (Con) A-mediated hepatitis, a widely accepted mouse model for studying T cell-mediated liver injury, IL-4 stimulates the secretion of eotaxin-1 and enhances IL-5 production, resulting in attraction of neutrophils and eosinophils to the liver, which leads to hepatitis (Jaruga *et al.*, 2003).

We recently reported that IL-17 is involved in halothane- and α -naphthylisothiocyanate-induced acute liver injury in mice (Kobayashi *et al.*, 2009, 2010) and that IL-4 is involved in dicloxacillin-induced acute liver injury in mice (Higuchi *et al.*, 2011). In this study, we found that Th2 cytokine-mediated immune responses play a role in MTZ-induced acute liver injury in mice.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Materials

MTZ and BSO were purchased from Sigma-Aldrich (St Louis, MO, USA). GSH was obtained from Wako Pure Chemical Industries (Osaka, Japan). β -NADPH and GSH reductase came from Oriental Yeast (Tokyo, Japan). RNAiso came from Nippon Gene (Tokyo, Japan). ReverTra Ace came from Toyobo (Tokyo, Japan). Random hexamers and SYBR Premix Ex Taq were from Takara (Osaka, Japan). All primers were commercially synthesized at Hokkaido System Sciences (Sapporo, Japan). A rabbit polyclonal antibody against myeloperoxidase (MPO) was obtained from Thermo Fisher Scientific Anatomical Pathology (Cheshire, UK). A monoclonal anti-mouse IL-4 antibody came from U-Cytech Biosciences (Utrecht, Netherland). A monoclonal rat IgG2a isotype, used as a negative control, was purchased from R&D Systems (Abingdon, UK). A Ready-SET-GO! Mouse IL-4 enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA) kit was obtained from eBioscience (San Diego, CA, USA). Fuji DRI-CHEM slides of GPT/ALT-PIII and GOT/AST-PIII, which were used to measure alanine aminotransferase (ALT) and aspartate aminotransferase (AST), respectively, came from Fujifilm (Tokyo, Japan). Other chemicals used were of analytical or the highest grade commercially available.

MTZ Administration

Female BALB/cCrSlc mice (6 weeks old, 15–20 g) were obtained from SLC Japan (Hamamatsu, Japan). The animals were housed in a controlled environment (temperature $25 \pm 1^\circ\text{C}$, humidity $50 \pm 10\%$, 12 h light/12 h dark cycle) in the institution's animal facility with *ad libitum* access to food and water. The animals were acclimatized before use in the experiments. MTZ was dissolved in saline (45 mg ml^{-1}) and administered orally to the mice at a dose of 450 or 15 mg kg^{-1} following overnight fasting. Two hours after MTZ administration, the mice were again allowed access to food and water *ad libitum*. Animal maintenance and treatments

were conducted in accordance with the National Institutes of Health Guide for Animal Welfare of Japan, as approved by the Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee of Kanazawa University, Japan.

An MTZ dose of 450 mg kg^{-1} was set at approximately one-half the oral LD_{50} value based on the results of experiments to determine the effects of MTZ doses of 860 (the oral LD_{50} in mice), 450 and 225 mg kg^{-1} as follows. It was difficult to assess the hepatotoxicity of MTZ at a dose of 860 mg kg^{-1} because symptoms of moribundity, such as decreased locomotor activity and tremor, were observed in all mice treated with MTZ at this dose. In addition, plasma AST and ALT values exhibited a high degree of individual variation (AST and ALT values were 3165 ± 7175 and $4087 \pm 8063 \text{ IU l}^{-1}$, respectively). There was no difference in plasma AST and ALT values between the MTZ 450 mg kg^{-1} (AST and ALT values were 104 ± 29 and $79 \pm 4 \text{ IU l}^{-1}$, respectively) and MTZ 225 mg kg^{-1} groups (AST and ALT values were 74 ± 16 and $70 \pm 12 \text{ IU l}^{-1}$, respectively; the *P*-values for AST and ALT were 0.06 and 0.09, respectively). Based on these results, the dose of MTZ was set at 450 mg kg^{-1} .

The dose of MTZ was set at 15 mg kg^{-1} for experiments involving the co-administration of BSO and MTZ because it was reported that MTZ at doses of 11.4, 22.8 and 45.6 mg kg^{-1} resulted in dose-dependent increases (12- to 180-fold of the values in controls) in serum ALT activity (Mizutani *et al.*, 1999).

Administration of BSO

BSO was dissolved in water and administered intraperitoneally at a dose of $3 \text{ mmol}/20 \text{ ml kg}^{-1}$ to mice 1 h before MTZ (15 mg kg^{-1}) administration. The dose of BSO was set at 3 mmol kg^{-1} because it was confirmed in several previous studies that hepatic GSH was decreased after intraperitoneal injection of mice with BSO at a dose of approximately 3 mmol kg^{-1} (Mizutani *et al.*, 1999; Tirmenstein and Nelson, 1991; Shimizu *et al.*, 2009).

Administration of Anti-mouse IL-4 Antibodies

One hour prior to MTZ administration, the mice were administered an anti-mouse IL-4 antibody intraperitoneally ($100 \mu\text{g}$ of anti-mouse IL-4 antibody in 0.5 ml of sterile PBS). As a negative control, rat IgG2a was administered ($100 \mu\text{g}$ of rat IgG2a in 0.5 ml of sterile PBS).

Sample Collection and Histopathology

At 6 h after MTZ administration, the animals were sacrificed, and their plasma and livers were collected because it was reported that serum AST and ALT activities were markedly increased 6 h after MTZ administration and slightly decreased at 24 h (Mizutani *et al.*, 1999). A portion of each excised liver was fixed in 10% neutral buffered formalin, embedded in paraffin, sectioned at a $4 \mu\text{m}$ thickness and subjected to hematoxylin-eosin (HE) staining and immunohistochemical staining for MPO. The degree of liver injury was confirmed by HE staining. Neutrophil infiltration was assessed by immunostaining for MPO. After deparaffinization, liver sections were microwaved in a target retrieval solution (TRS, pH6.1, Dako) for 15 min to unmask the antigens. Then, the

sections were immersed in an aqueous 3% H₂O₂ solution for 5 min to inactivate endogenous peroxidase following blocking of unspecific proteins with Brock Ace (DS Pharma Biomedical Co., Osaka, Japan) for 1 h at room temperature. Diluted primary antibody (1:150) was applied to the sections, which were then incubated at 4°C. After overnight treatment, the sections were incubated with Histofine Simple Stain Mouse MAX PO[®] (Nichirei Corp., Tokyo, Japan) for 30 min according to the manufacturer's instructions.

Quantification of Hepatic MPO-positive Cells

The numbers of MPO-positive cells were counted throughout an entire section from each of three mice and expressed as numbers of cells per square millimeter.

Real-time Reverse Transcription-PCR

RNA from mouse livers was isolated using RNAiso according to the manufacturer's instructions. T-bet, GATA-3, ROR γ t, FoxP3, interferon- γ (IFN- γ), IL-5, tumor necrosis factor α (TNF α), eotaxin, chemokine (C-X-C motif) ligand 1 (Cxcl-1), monocyte chemoattractant protein-1 (MCP-1), macrophage inflammatory protein-2 (MIP-2) and Gapdh were quantified using real-time reverse transcription (RT)-PCR. The primer sequences used in this study are shown in Table 1. For the RT step, total RNA (10 μ g) and 150 ng random hexamers were

mixed and incubated at 70°C for 10 min. An RNA solution was added to a reaction mixture containing 100 units of ReverTra Ace, reaction buffer and 0.5 mM dNTPs in a final volume of 40 μ l. The reaction mixture was incubated at 30°C for 10 min and 42°C for 1 h then heated at 98°C for 10 min to inactivate the enzyme. Real-time RT-PCR was performed using Mx3000P (Stratagene, La Jolla, CA, USA). The PCR mixture contained either 1 or 2 μ l of template cDNA, SYBR Premix Ex Taq solution and 8 pmol of forward and reverse primers. The amplified products were monitored directly by measuring the increase in the intensity of the SYBR Green I dye (Molecular Probes, Eugene, OR, USA) binding to the double-stranded DNA amplified by PCR.

GSH Levels

Total GSH (the sum of both the reduced and oxidized form) was measured using reduced GSH as a standard. Mouse liver tissue was homogenized with a glass homogenizer on ice with cold 5% sulfosalicylic acid and centrifuged at 8000 *g* at 4°C for 10 min. The resultant supernatant was diluted with distilled water, and finally, the GSH concentration was measured as described previously (Tietze, 1969). The GSH standard curve (0.035–0.55 μ mol *g*⁻¹ protein) showed good linearity (*R* > 0.99).

Table 1. Sequences of primers used for real-time RT-PCR analyses

| Gene | | Sequence |
|----------------|----|---|
| T-bet | FP | 5'- CAA GTG GGT GCA GTG TGG AAA G-3' |
| | RP | 5'- TGG AGA GAC TGC AGG ACG ATC-3' |
| IFN γ | FP | 5'- GGC CAT CAG CAA CAT AAG C-3' |
| | RP | 5'- TGG ACC ACT CGG ATG AGC TCA-3' |
| GATA-3 | FP | 5'- GGA GGA CTT CCC CAA GAG CA-3' |
| | RP | 5'- CAT GCT GGA AGG GTG GTG A-3' |
| IL-5 | FP | 5'- AAA GAG ACC TTG ACA CAG CTG-3' |
| | RP | 5'- AGA GCT CTG TCT AGG TCC TGG-3' |
| FoxP3 | FP | 5'- CTA GCA GTC CAC TTC ACC AAG-3' |
| | RP | 5'- GCT GCT GAG ATG TGA GTG TC-3' |
| ROR γ t | FP | 5'- ACC TCC ACT GCC AGC TGT GTG CTG TC-3' |
| | RP | 5'- TCA TTT CTG CAC TTC TGC ATG TAG ACT GTC CC-3' |
| TNF α | FP | 5'- TGT CTC AGC CTC TTC TCA TTC C-3' |
| | RP | 5'- TGA GGG TCT GGG CCA TAG AAC-3' |
| Eotaxin | FP | 5'- TCC ACA GCG CTT CTA TTC CT-3' |
| | RP | 5'- CTA TGG CTT TCA GGG TGC AT-3' |
| MIP-2 | FP | 5'- AAG TTT GCC TTG ACC CTG AAG-3' |
| | RP | 5'- ATC AGG TAC GAT CCA GGC TTC-3' |
| Cxcl-1 | FP | 5'- GAT TCA CCT CAA GAA CAT CCA GAG-3' |
| | RP | 5'- GAA GCC AGC GTT CAC CAG AC-3' |
| MCP-1 | FP | 5'- TGT CAT GCT TCT GGG CCT G-3' |
| | RP | 5'- CCT CTC TCT TGA GCT TGG TG-3' |
| Gapdh | FP | 5'- AAA TGG GGT GAG GCC GGT-3' |
| | RP | 5'- ATT GCT GAC AAT CTT GAG TGA-3' |

FP, forward primer; RP, reverse primer; T-bet, T-box expressed in T cells; IFN γ , interferon- γ ; GATA-3, GATA-binding domain-3; IL-5, interleukin-5; FoxP3, forkhead box P3; ROR γ t, retinoid-related orphan receptor γ t; TNF α , tumor necrosis factor α ; MIP-2, macrophage inflammatory protein-2; Cxcl-1, chemokine (C-X-C motif) ligand 1; MCP-1, monocyte chemoattractant protein-1.

Plasma IL-4 Levels

The plasma IL-4 level was measured with an enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA) using a Ready-SET-GO! Mouse IL-4 kit from eBioscience according to the manufacturer's instructions.

Statistical Analysis

Statistical analyses were performed using SAS 9.1.3. Comparison of two groups was carried out with a two-tailed Student's *t*-test. Comparison of multiple groups was

accomplished using the Dunnett test. Values of $P < 0.05$ were considered statistically significant.

RESULTS

Changes in Plasma AST, ALT and Hepatic GSH levels, and Histopathological Changes in the Liver in MTZ-treated Mice

Female BALB/c mice were administered MTZ orally at a dose of 450 mg kg^{-1} . A slight but significant increase in the levels of AST (45 ± 5 and $104 \pm 29 \text{ IU l}^{-1}$ in the control and MTZ 450 mg kg^{-1} group, respectively) and ALT (25 ± 6 and 79 ± 4

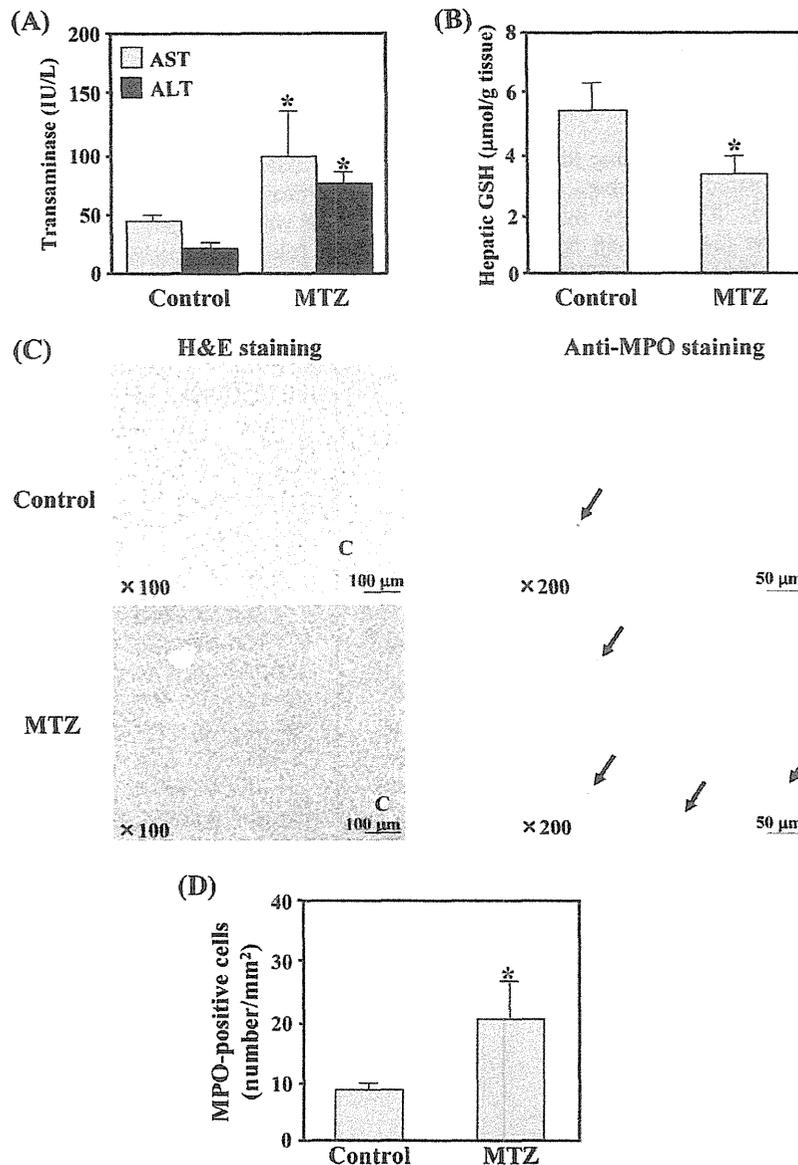


Figure 1. Plasma aspartate aminotransferase (AST) and alanine aminotransferase (ALT) and hepatic glutathione (GSH) levels; histopathological presentation of liver injury and quantification of hepatic myeloperoxidase (MPO) positive cells in methimazole (MTZ) treated mice. Mice were administered MTZ (450 mg kg^{-1} , p.o.), and plasma and liver tissue were collected 6 h after MTZ administration. Plasma AST and ALT (A) and hepatic GSH levels (B) were measured. Data are shown as the means \pm SD of results from five mice. Differences compared with the control group were considered significant at $*P < 0.05$. Histopathological examination of the liver (C). Liver tissue sections were stained with HE or immunostained with an anti-MPO antibody. Arrows indicate MPO-positive cells. C, central vein. The numbers of MPO-positive cells in three mice were counted throughout the entire section and are expressed as the numbers of cells per square millimeter. The numbers of MPO-positive cells were compared with those in mice administered MTZ (D). Differences compared with the control group were considered significant at $*P < 0.05$.

IUI⁻¹ in the control and MTZ 450 mg kg⁻¹ group, respectively) in plasma was observed 6 h after MTZ administration (Fig. 1A). The GSH level in the liver was significantly lower in mice treated with MTZ than in control mice (Fig. 1B). The histopathological changes observed in the mouse livers 6 h after MTZ administration are shown in Fig. 1(C). Based on HE staining, a decrease of glycogen was observed in the hepatocytes of MTZ-treated mice. In the immunohistochemical analysis, a small number of cells reacted to the anti-MPO antibody 6 h after MTZ administration. An increase in the number of MPO-positive cells was observed in the MTZ-treated mice (Fig. 1D).

Expression of mRNA for CD4⁺ Th Cell-related Transcription Factors and Cytokines in the Livers of MTZ-treated Mice

To investigate the effects of MTZ administration on immunological factors in the mouse liver, the hepatic mRNA expression levels of transcriptional factors for each T helper lineage were measured using real-time RT-PCR (Fig. 2). In previous studies by our group (Kobayashi *et al.*, 2010; Higuchi *et al.*,

2011), we confirmed that the expression levels of mRNA and protein were similar for interleukins and chemokines. Thus, changes in mRNA were mainly followed in the present study, except for IL-4. The hepatic mRNA expression levels of T-bet and IFN- γ , which are a master regulator and a major cytokine of Th1 cells, respectively, in mice treated with MTZ were significantly decreased compared with the levels in control mice (Fig. 2A and B). The hepatic mRNA expression levels of GATA-3 and IL-5, which are a master regulator and a major cytokine of Th2 cells, respectively, in mice treated with MTZ were 3-fold higher than those in control mice (Fig. 2C and D). However, the hepatic mRNA expression levels of FoxP3 and ROR γ t, which are master regulators of Treg and Th17 cells, respectively, in mice treated with MTZ were not changed compared with control mice (Fig. 2E and F).

Changes of Proinflammatory Cytokine and Chemokine Genes in the Livers of MTZ-treated Mice

To investigate whether the neutrophil infiltration observed in mice treated with MTZ resulted from increases in the levels of proinflammatory cytokines and chemokines, the hepatic expression levels of TNF α , eotaxin, MIP-2, Cxcl-1 and MCP-1

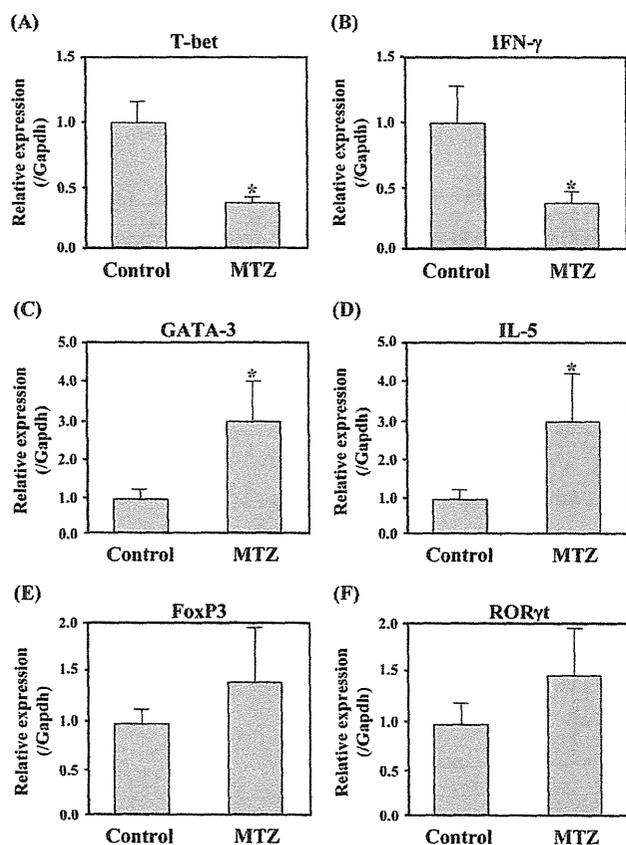


Figure 2. Hepatic mRNA expression levels of CD4⁺ Th cell-related transcription factors and cytokines 6 h after MTZ administration. The relative hepatic expression levels of T-box expressed in T cells (T-bet, A), interferon- γ (IFN- γ B), GATA-binding domain-3 (GATA-3, C), interleukin-5 (IL-5, D), forkhead box P3 (FoxP3, E) and retinoid-related orphan receptor γ t (ROR γ t, F) mRNA were measured using real-time reverse transcriptase (RT)-PCR and normalized to Gapdh mRNA. Data are shown as the means \pm SD of results from five mice. Differences compared with the control group were considered significant at $*P < 0.05$.

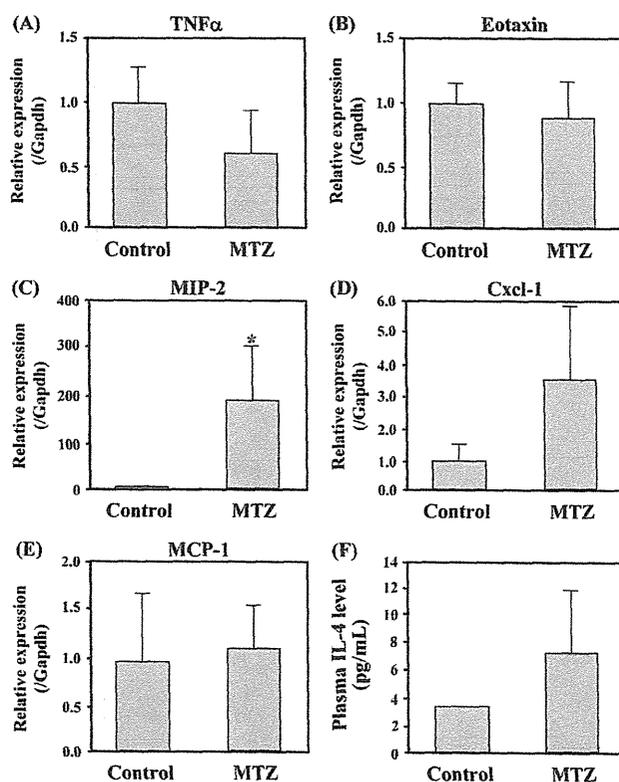


Figure 3. Hepatic mRNA expression levels of proinflammatory cytokines and chemokines and plasma IL-4 levels 6 h after MTZ administration. The relative expression levels of tumor necrosis factor α (TNF α A), eotaxin (B), macrophage inflammatory protein-2 (MIP-2, C), chemokine (C-X-C motif; Cxcl-1, D) and monocyte chemoattractant protein-1 (MCP-1, E) mRNA were measured using real-time RT-PCR and normalized to Gapdh mRNA. The plasma IL-4 level was measured using ELISA. The limit of detection for plasma IL-4 was 3.9 ng mL⁻¹ (F). Data are shown as the means \pm SD of results from five mice. Differences compared with the control group were considered significant at $*P < 0.05$.

mRNA were measured. The expression levels of $\text{TNF}\alpha$, eotaxin and MCP-1 mRNA were not altered by MTZ administration (Fig. 3A, B and E). However, the level of MIP-2 mRNA was markedly increased 6 h after MTZ administration (Fig. 3C).

Changes in Plasma IL-4 Levels

IL-4 is a major cytokine of Th2 cells. We attempted to measure the mRNA expression of hepatic IL-4, but no expression was detected in either MTZ-treated or control samples, as suggested previously (Higuchi et al., 2011). Thus, plasma IL-4 was measured using ELISA. Plasma IL-4 was not detectable in control mice by ELISA but was detected in mice treated with MTZ (Fig. 3F). The detection limit of this assay was 3.9 pg ml^{-1} .

Co-treatment of Mice with BSO and MTZ (15 mg kg^{-1})

A group of mice was subjected to treatment with BSO (3 mmol kg^{-1} , i.p., 1 h before MTZ administration) and MTZ (15 mg kg^{-1} , p.o.). BSO was administered to inhibit the ability

to generate GSH upon experiencing a challenge (e.g. reactive metabolites of MTZ or reactive oxygen species). In mice treated with BSO alone, no elevation of ALT and AST levels and no histopathological changes were observed. However, the hepatic GSH level was significantly decreased (Fig. 4A, B, E and F). The activity of γ -glutamylcysteine synthetase (γ -GCS) was measured to validate the effectiveness of BSO as described previously (Hamel et al., 1992). It was confirmed that 1 and 6 h after BSO administration at a dose of 3 mmol kg^{-1} , hepatic γ -GCS activities were 23.6 ± 7.4 and $22.6 \pm 1.7\%$, respectively, of those in the vehicle-treated control, using five mice in each case. The plasma AST (44 ± 5 and $13\ 184 \pm 4500 \text{ IU l}^{-1}$ in the MTZ 15 mg kg^{-1} alone and BSO and MTZ 15 mg kg^{-1} groups, respectively) and ALT (21 ± 8 and $20\ 424 \pm 7180 \text{ IU l}^{-1}$ in the MTZ 15 mg kg^{-1} alone and BSO and MTZ 15 mg kg^{-1} groups, respectively) levels were markedly increased in mice treated with BSO and MTZ at a dose of 15 mg kg^{-1} compared with mice treated with MTZ alone at 15 mg kg^{-1} (Fig. 4C). The GSH level in the liver was significantly decreased in mice

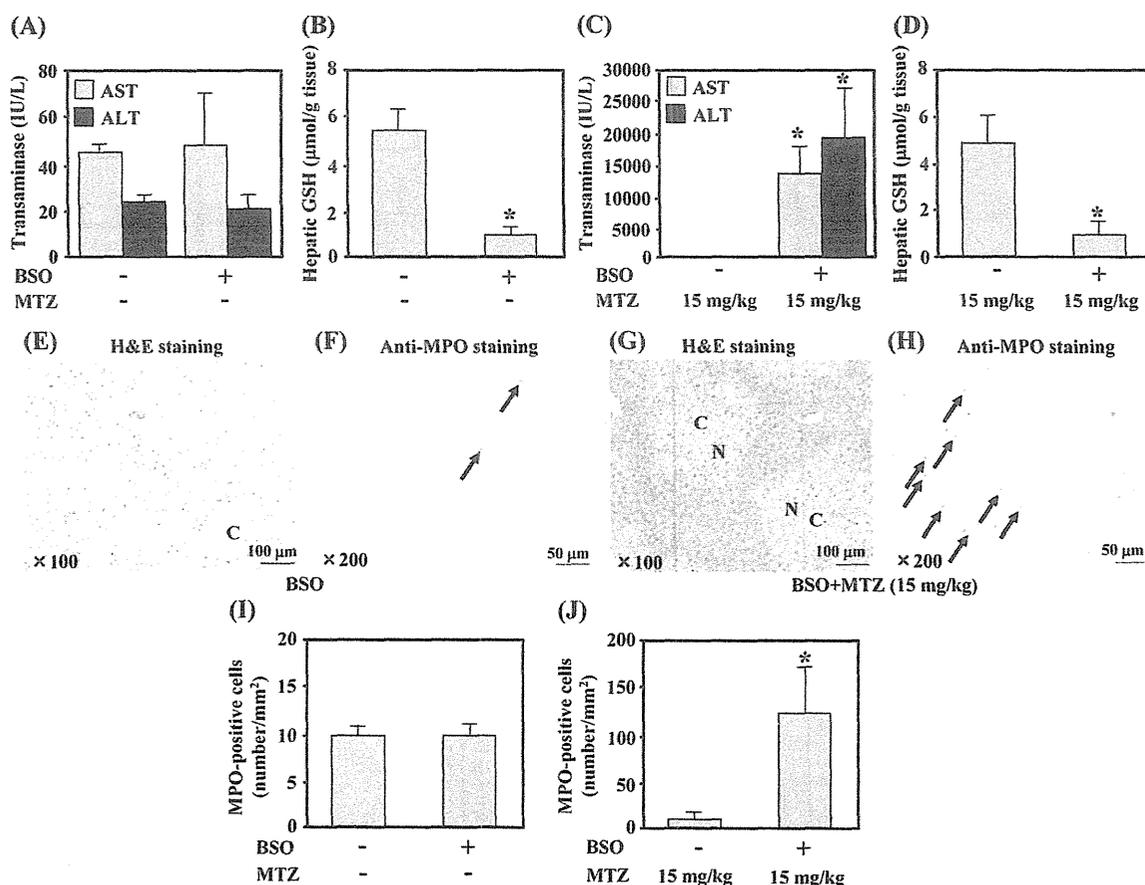


Figure 4. Plasma AST and ALT, hepatic GSH levels, histopathological presentation of liver injury and quantification of hepatic MPO-positive cells in mice treated with L-buthionine sulfoximine (BSO) and MTZ. Mice were administered BSO alone (3 mmol kg^{-1} , i.p.) (A, B), MTZ alone (15 mg kg^{-1} , p.o.) (C, D) or MTZ (15 mg kg^{-1} , p.o.) 1 h after pre-treatment with BSO (C, D), and plasma and liver tissue were collected 6 h after administration. Plasma AST and ALT (A, C) and hepatic GSH levels (B, D) were measured. Data are shown as the means \pm SD of results from five mice. Differences compared with the control group or the MTZ alone (15 mg kg^{-1}) group were considered significant at $*P < 0.05$. Histopathological examination of the liver (E–H). Liver tissue sections from mice treated with BSO alone (E, F) or BSO and MTZ (15 mg kg^{-1}) (G, H) were stained with hematoxylin–eosin (HE) or immunostained with an anti-MPO antibody. Arrows indicate MPO-positive cells. C, central vein; N, necrotic area. The numbers of MPO-positive cells were counted throughout an entire section from each of three mice and are expressed as the numbers of cells per square millimeter. The numbers of MPO-positive cells were compared with mice administered BSO (I). In the BSO and MTZ (15 mg kg^{-1}) treated groups, the numbers of MPO-positive cells were significantly increased compared with the group treated with MTZ at 15 mg kg^{-1} alone ($*P < 0.05$) (J).

treated with BSO and MTZ at 15 mg kg⁻¹ compared with mice treated with MTZ alone at 15 mg kg⁻¹ (Fig. 4D). The histopathological changes observed in the mouse liver 6 h after MTZ administration are shown in Fig. 4G and H. Using HE staining, centrilobular degeneration and necrosis were observed in mice treated with BSO and MTZ at 15 mg kg⁻¹ (Fig. 4G). However, no histopathological changes were observed in mice treated with MTZ at 15 mg kg⁻¹ alone (data not shown). In the immunohistochemical analysis, a large number of cells was observed to react to the anti-MPO antibody 6 h after MTZ administration (Fig. 4H). The number of MPO-positive cells was remarkably increased in mice treated with BSO and MTZ at 15 mg kg⁻¹ compared with mice treated with MTZ 15 mg kg⁻¹ alone (Fig. 4J). There was no difference in the number of MPO-positive cells between the control and BSO groups (Fig. 4I).

To investigate whether the liver injury detected in mice treated with BSO and MTZ at 15 mg kg⁻¹ was related to immunological factors, the changes in the levels of mRNA expression for transcription factors, cytokines and chemokines, hepatic GATA-3, IL-5, TNF α , eotaxin, MIP-2, Cxcl-1 and MCP-1 as well as plasma IL-4 protein were measured (Fig. 5). The levels of IL-5 and TNF α mRNA were not altered following co-administration of BSO and MTZ at 15 mg kg⁻¹ (Fig. 5B and C). However, GATA-3, eotaxin and MCP-1 mRNA expression was markedly increased at 6 h following treatment of mice with BSO and MTZ at 15 mg kg⁻¹ (Fig. 5A, D and G). The plasma IL-4 level was elevated (Fig. 5H). These effects were not observed in response to the administration of BSO alone (data not shown).

Effects of Anti-IL-4 Antibody Administration in Mice Treated with BSO and MTZ

To investigate whether IL-4 was involved in the liver injury observed in mice treated with BSO and MTZ, we conducted a neutralization study. In the neutralization study, intraperitoneal injection of a monoclonal anti-mouse IL-4 antibody (100 μ g per mouse) 1 h prior to MTZ administration significantly reduced the plasma AST and ALT levels detected 6 h after MTZ administration (Fig. 6A). No significant difference was observed in the hepatic GSH levels among the three groups (Fig. 6B). In histopathological analyses, centrilobular degeneration, necrosis and infiltration of neutrophils were found to be attenuated in mice treated with the anti-mouse IL-4 antibody (Fig. 6C) compared with mice treated with rat IgG2a (Fig. 6C). Additionally, the infiltration of cells reacting to the anti-MPO antibody was attenuated in mice treated with the anti-mouse IL-4 antibody (Fig. 6C), and the number of MPO-positive cells was decreased in these mice (Fig. 6D). There were no significant differences in the hepatic mRNA expression levels of TNF α , MIP-2, Cxcl-1 and MCP-1, but the expression of hepatic eotaxin mRNA was significantly decreased in mice treated with the anti-mouse IL-4 antibody compared with mice treated with BSO and MTZ at 15 mg kg⁻¹ (Fig. 7A–D). The mRNA expression levels of GATA-3 in mice treated with the anti-mouse IL-4 antibody were decreased compared with those in mice treated with BSO and MTZ at 15 mg kg⁻¹, although this difference was not statistically significant (Fig. 7F, P -value=0.06). The plasma IL-4 level in mice treated with the anti-mouse IL-4 antibody was significantly decreased compared with that in mice

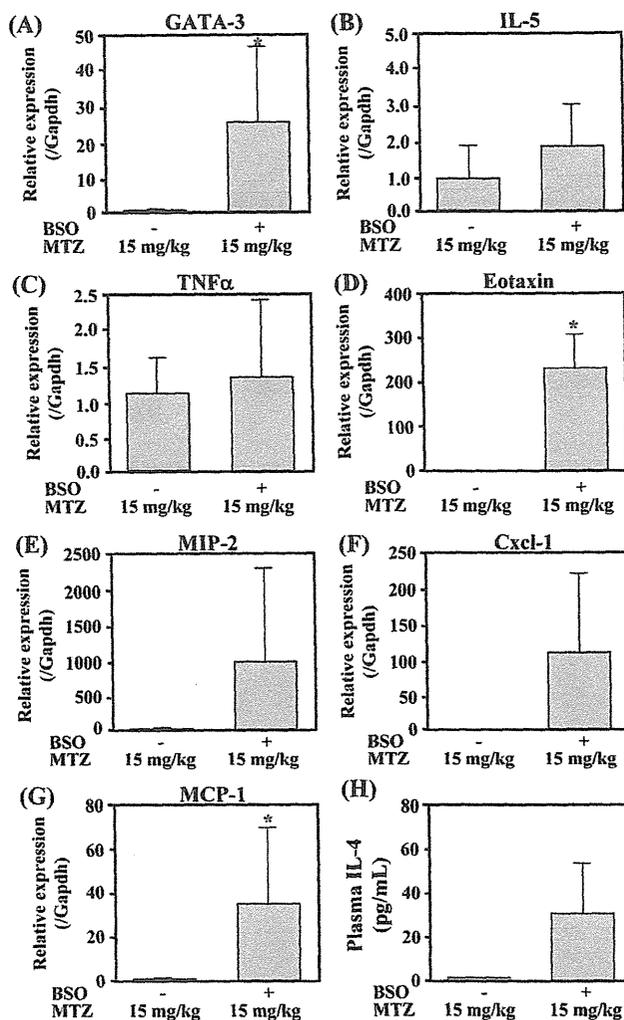


Figure 5. Effect of BSO pre-treatment on the hepatic mRNA expression of a transcription factor, cytokines and chemokines as well as plasma IL-4 protein levels 6 h after MTZ administration. Mice were administered MTZ alone (15 mg kg⁻¹, p.o.) or MTZ (15 mg kg⁻¹, p.o.) 1 h after pre-treatment with BSO, and liver tissue was collected 6 h after administration. The relative expression levels of hepatic mRNA for GATA-3 (A), IL-5 (B), TNF α (C), eotaxin (D), MIP-2 (E), Cxcl-1 (F) and MCP-1 (G) were measured using real-time RT-PCR and normalized to Gapdh mRNA. The fold induction of the mRNA level is shown compared with nontreated control mice. The plasma IL-4 level (H) was measured using ELISA. The limit of detection for plasma IL-4 was 3.9 pg ml⁻¹. Data are shown as the means \pm SD of results from five mice. Differences compared with the MTZ alone (15 mg kg⁻¹) group were considered significant at * P < 0.05.

treated with BSO and MTZ at 15 mg kg⁻¹ (Fig. 7G). These changes were not observed following the administration of rat IgG2a.

DISCUSSION

Reactive metabolite formation followed by covalent binding is believed to be associated with idiosyncratic toxicity, possibly through immune-related mechanisms. Reactive metabolites of MTZ biotransformed by both P450 and FMO are known to bind covalently to proteins and inactive P450 (Lee and Neal, 1978; Kedderis and Rickert, 1985). The

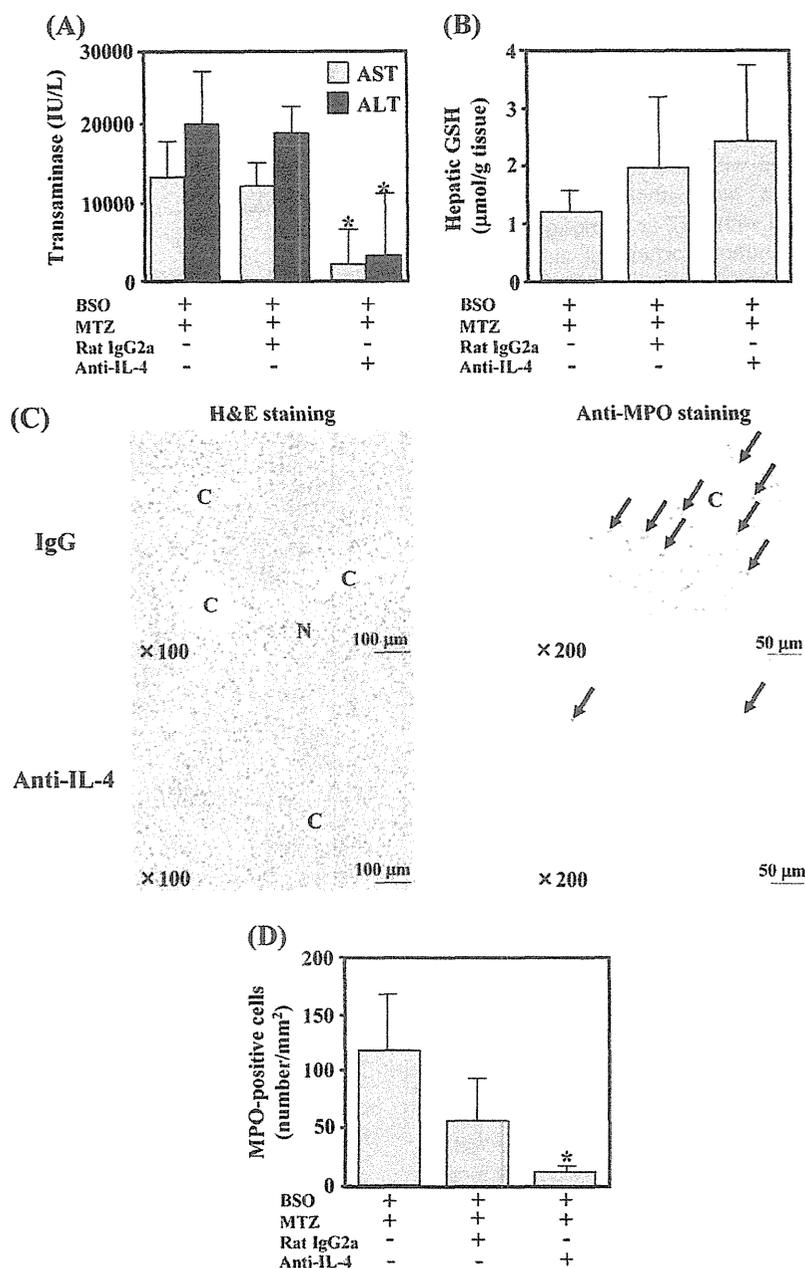


Figure 6. Effect of an anti-mouse IL-4 antibody on plasma AST and ALT, hepatic GSH levels, histopathological presentation of liver injury and quantification of hepatic MPO-positive cells in mice treated with BSO and MTZ. Mice were injected with a monoclonal anti-mouse IL-4 antibody (100 μg per mouse, i.p.) or IgG2a 1 h prior to MTZ administration (15 mg kg^{-1}), and plasma and liver tissue were collected 6 h after MTZ administration. Plasma AST and ALT (A) and hepatic GSH levels (B) were measured. Data are shown as the means \pm SD of results from five or six mice. Differences compared with the BSO and MTZ (15 mg kg^{-1}) treated group were considered significant at $^*P < 0.05$. Histopathological examination of the liver (C). Liver tissue sections were stained with HE or immunostained with an anti-MPO antibody. Arrows indicate MPO-positive cells. C, central vein; N, necrotic area around central vein. The numbers of MPO-positive cells were counted throughout an entire section in each of three mice and are expressed as the numbers of cells per square millimeter. The numbers of MPO-positive cells were compared with those in mice administered BSO and MTZ (15 mg kg^{-1}) (D). In the groups administered the anti-mouse IL-4 antibody, the numbers of MPO-positive cells were significantly decreased compared with the BSO and MTZ (15 mg kg^{-1}) treated group ($^*P < 0.05$) (D).

resulting metabolites are likely to be detoxified by GSH (Mizutani *et al.* 1999). It has been reported that glucocorticoids improve MTZ-induced severe cholestatic jaundice in humans (Zhang *et al.*, 2010), suggesting that MTZ-induced liver injury may involve immune-mediated reactions. In the present study, we investigated whether immune-

mediated factors play an important role in MTZ-induced acute liver injury.

An acute toxicity analysis demonstrated that the oral LD₅₀ value for MTZ in mice is 860 mg kg^{-1} (7.5 mmol kg^{-1} ; Brock and Lorenz, 1954). A lethal dose of MTZ appears to cause small fatty and necrotic changes in hepatocytes. In this study,

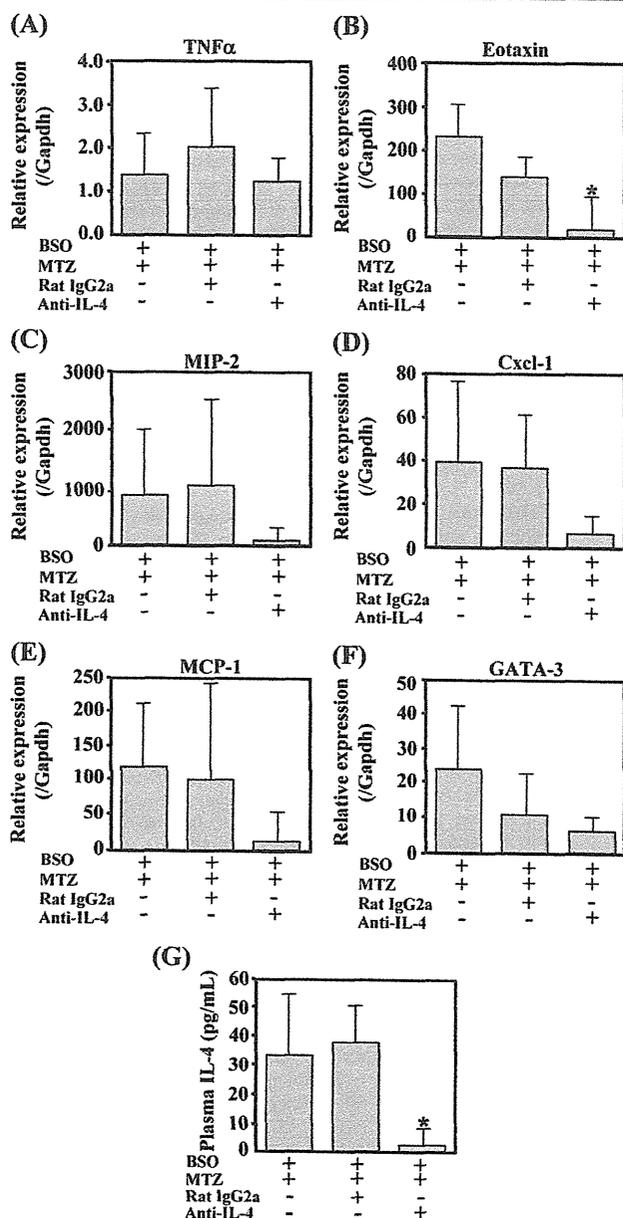


Figure 7. Effect of an anti-mouse IL-4 antibody on the hepatic mRNA expression of a cytokine, chemokines and a transcription factor as well as plasma IL-4 protein levels 6 h after BSO and MTZ administration. Mice were injected with a monoclonal anti-mouse IL-4 antibody (100 μ g per mouse, i.p.) or IgG2a 1 h prior to MTZ administration (15 mg kg⁻¹), and liver tissue was collected 6 h after MTZ administration. The relative expression levels of TNF α (A), eotaxin (B), MIP-2 (C), Cxcl-1 (D), MCP-1 (E) and GATA-3 (F) were measured using real-time RT-PCR and normalized to the Gapdh mRNA level. The fold induction of the mRNA level is shown compared with nontreated control mice. The plasma IL-4 level (G) was measured using ELISA. Data are shown as the means \pm SD of results from five or six mice. Differences compared with the BSO and MTZ (15 mg kg⁻¹) treated group were considered significant at * P < 0.05.

the MTZ dose of 450 mg kg⁻¹ was set at approximately one-half the oral LD₅₀ value based on the results of experiments to determine the effects of MTZ doses of 860 (the oral LD₅₀ in mice), 450 and 225 mg kg⁻¹. Following treatment of mice with an MTZ dose of 450 mg kg⁻¹, small numbers of

MPO-positive cells were observed using an anti-MPO antibody (Fig. 1), suggesting that neutrophil infiltration had occurred. Furthermore, changes in the hepatic expression of CD4⁺ T cell-related transcription factors and cytokines were measured. The expression of GATA-3, IL-5, IL-4 and MIP-2 was significantly increased in MTZ-treated mice (Figs 2C, D and 3C), suggesting that Th2-related immune factors are activated, even in mice with a mild liver injury.

To establish a more sensitive mouse model for MTZ-induced acute liver injury, we adapted a BSO pre-administration method. Previously, Mizutani *et al.* (1999) reported that serum ALT levels were 76.5 and 3,150 IU l⁻¹ in ICR mice treated with MTZ alone at a dose of 228 mg kg⁻¹ or with BSO (3 mmol kg⁻¹, i.p.), and MTZ at a dose of 22.8 mg kg⁻¹, respectively. Using the BSO-enhanced mouse model, DILI is expected to be more clearly detectable. In the present study, the dose of MTZ (15 mg kg⁻¹) was reduced to one-thirtieth of the dose without BSO pre-treatment, resulting in greatly increased levels of AST (44 \pm 5 and 13 184 \pm 4500 IU l⁻¹ in the MTZ 15 mg kg⁻¹ alone and BSO and MTZ 15 mg kg⁻¹ groups, respectively) and ALT (21 \pm 8 and 20 424 \pm 7180 IU l⁻¹ in the MTZ 15 mg kg⁻¹ alone and BSO and MTZ 15 mg kg⁻¹ groups, respectively). The difference in the degree of enhancement of liver injury following BSO pre-treatment observed in the present study compared with Mizutani's data may be due to the different mouse strains used. Moreover, in the present study, the hepatic GSH level following administration of BSO alone (Fig. 4B) appeared to be lower than that found in other studies (Mizutani *et al.*, 1999; Shimizu *et al.*, 2009). This might be the reason why no further decrease in the hepatic GSH level was observed in mice treated with BSO and MTZ (15 mg kg⁻¹) compared with mice treated with BSO alone.

The levels of Th2-related factors, such as IL-4, GATA-3 and eotaxin, were clearly higher in mice treated with BSO and MTZ (15 mg kg⁻¹) compared with those treated with MTZ alone (450 mg kg⁻¹), and a Th1/Th2 imbalance may be involved in MTZ-induced acute liver injury. IL-4 is a multi-functional Th2 cytokine that is reported to play a pivotal role in concanavalin (Con) A-induced liver injury (Jaruga *et al.*, 2003) and to promote the hapten-induced pro-inflammatory responses associated with trifluoroacetyl chloride-induced liver injury (Njoku *et al.*, 2009). In the present study, we found that the plasma IL-4 level was significantly increased by the administration MTZ alone and by co-treatment with BSO. IL-5 is involved in allergic inflammation (Kay, 2001) and plays a critical role in recruiting eosinophiles (Coffman *et al.*, 1989). In this study, changes in IL-5 expression were not observed to be correlated with the severity of liver injury. Moreover, no eosinophil infiltration of the liver was observed in the BSO-enhanced mouse model, suggesting that IL-5 may not play an essential role in this process.

It is well known that hepatic GSH plays an important role in the detoxification of active metabolites. The activity of hepatic glutathione S-transferase (GST) and the hepatic GSH content are 10–20 times and approximately 2 times higher in mice than in humans, respectively (Grover and Sims, 1964; Woodhouse *et al.*, 1983; Watanabe *et al.*, 2003), suggesting that the GSH-depleted animal model could sensitively detect DILI. In the present study, the GSH-depleted mouse model presented significantly increased sensitivity to MTZ-induced DILI at one-thirtieth of the dose

without BSO pre-treatment. Thus, this GSH-depleted mouse model would be useful for testing certain drugs to elucidate the mechanisms of DILI.

It has been reported that the expression of hepatic cytochrome P450s was markedly suppressed in an interleukin-concentration dependent manner (Siewert *et al.*, 2000) and that the detoxification abilities of Phase II enzymes were decreased by interleukins (Romero *et al.*, 2002). Therefore, interleukin-knockout mice should be carefully applied in this kind of study. This is one reason why we performed an IL-4 neutralization study using an anti-mouse IL-4 antibody, instead of using interleukin-knockout mice. In a previous study by our group addressing dicloxacillin-induced acute liver injury (Higuchi *et al.*, 2011), the appropriate dose of the anti-IL-4 antibody was found to be 100 µg per body, and the timing of anti-IL-4 injection was 1 h before drug administration. In this study, neutralization of IL-4 significantly attenuated hepatotoxicity in mice treated with BSO and MTZ (Fig. 6A), suggesting that IL-4 is mainly involved in MTZ-induced acute liver injury.

Eotaxin is a CC chemokine that is known to stimulate the migration of eosinophils by acting on CC chemokine receptor 3 (Forssaman *et al.*, 1997; Rankins *et al.*, 2000) and other leukocytes and lymphocytes via other chemokine receptors (Menzies-Gow *et al.*, 2002). In the present neutralization study, the hepatic mRNA expression level of eotaxin was significantly decreased, and MTZ-induced acute liver injury was attenuated (Fig. 7B). Expression of eotaxin was reported to be induced by IL-4 in primary mouse hepatocytes, sinusoidal cells and HepG2 cells (Jaruga *et al.*, 2003). Depletion of eotaxins markedly attenuated Con A-induced liver injury (Jaruga *et al.*, 2003), which closely resembles the pathology of human autoimmune hepatitis (Tiegs *et al.*, 1992). In addition, the recruitment of tissue leukocytes, which are primarily attracted to tissues during drug-induced liver injury in humans, might depend on eotaxin expression (Pham *et al.*, 2001). Based on these and similar reports, it was proposed that decreased IL-4 levels attenuated DILI via decreasing eotaxin in the neutralization study.

With respect to investigating the mechanisms underlying DILI, lipopolysaccharide (LPS)-treated rodents are known to be sensitive to human hepatotoxic drugs, such as sulindac, chlorpromazine and trovafloxacin (Zou *et al.*, 2009; Shaw *et al.*, 2009). Various cytokines are upregulated after activation of Toll-like receptor 4 by LPS (Shaw *et al.*, 2009). However, the involvement of Th2 factors in DILI in LPS-treated rodents has never been reported. Thus, LPS-treatment methods are probably not appropriate for studying Th2 factor-related DILI.

In the present study, we first demonstrated that IL-4 mediated immune responses are involved in MTZ-induced acute liver injury in mice. Investigation of immune-related factors using a GSH depletion animal model might be useful to elucidate the mechanisms of DILI and to develop drugs by revealing the potential for DILI.

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Plasma MicroRNA Profiles in Rat Models of Hepatocellular Injury, Cholestasis, and Steatosis

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Abstract

MicroRNAs (miRNAs) are small RNA molecules that function to modulate the expression of target genes, playing important roles in a wide range of physiological and pathological processes. The miRNAs in body fluids have received considerable attention as potential biomarkers of various diseases. In this study, we compared the changes of the plasma miRNA expressions by acute liver injury (hepatocellular injury or cholestasis) and chronic liver injury (steatosis, steatohepatitis and fibrosis) using rat models made by the administration of chemicals or special diets. Using miRNA array analysis, we found that the levels of a large number of miRNAs (121–317 miRNAs) were increased over 2-fold and the levels of a small number of miRNAs (6–35 miRNAs) were decreased below 0.5-fold in all models except in a model of cholestasis caused by bile duct ligation. Interestingly, the expression profiles were different between the models, and the hierarchical clustering analysis discriminated between the acute and chronic liver injuries. In addition, miRNAs whose expressions were typically changed in each type of liver injury could be specified. It is notable that, in acute liver injury models, the plasma level of miR-122, the most abundant miRNA in the liver, was more quickly and dramatically increased than the plasma aminotransferase level, reflecting the extent of hepatocellular injury. This study demonstrated that the plasma miRNA profiles could reflect the types of liver injury (e.g. acute/chronic liver injury or hepatocellular injury/cholestasis/steatosis/steatohepatitis/fibrosis) and identified the miRNAs that could be specific and sensitive biomarkers of liver injury.

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Introduction

MicroRNAs (miRNAs) are a family of short noncoding RNA whose final product is a 22-nucleotide functional RNA molecule [1]. They regulate the expression of target genes by binding to complementary regions of transcripts to repress their translation or cause mRNA degradation. There is growing evidence that miRNAs play a fundamental role in a variety of physiological and pathological processes in animals [1,2]. At present, more than 1400, 720, and 400 miRNAs have been identified in human, mouse, and rat, respectively. Many miRNAs are expressed in a tissue or cell-specific manner. Aberrant expression of miRNAs in tissues has been implicated in a variety of diseases including cancer [3], viral hepatitis [4], and heart disease [5]. Recently, it was reported that miRNAs are present in the body fluids such as plasma [6], serum [6], urine [7], and saliva [8,9]. Their expression patterns significantly vary in various diseases suggesting their potential as biomarkers [6,10,11]. The first study of a plasma miRNA profile in liver injury was from Wang et al. [12]. They comprehensively analyzed the plasma miRNA expression in mice with hepatocellular injury caused by acetaminophen (APAP) overdose. Subsequently, it was reported that the plasma miR-122 level was increased in a rat model of hepatocellular injury

caused by trichlorobromomethane or carbon tetrachloride (CCl₄) administration [13], and was increased in a mouse model of D-galactosamine/lipopolysaccharides- or alcohol-induced liver injury [14]. However, information on the plasma miRNA changes by liver injury is still limited.

Acute liver injury is classified into three types: hepatocellular injury, cholestasis, or mixed type [15,16]. Chronic liver injury is a progressive disease showing increasing severity such as steatosis, steatohepatitis, fibrosis, cirrhosis and cancer. For the diagnosis of liver injury, alanine aminotransferase (ALT), aspartate aminotransferase (AST), alkaline phosphatase (ALP) and total bilirubin (T-Bil) in the blood are commonly used. However, these parameters cannot thoroughly identify the type of liver injury. In addition, these parameters may show increases with extrahepatic injury such as muscle damage or cardiac injury [17,18]. Moreover, ALT is not always correlated well with the histomorphologic data of liver [19,20]. In this study, we sought to compare the plasma miRNA expression profiles in various types of liver injury using rat models in order to evaluate whether plasma miRNAs can be markers that can distinguish the different types of liver injury. In addition, we determined the time course of changes of selected plasma miRNA levels with acute liver injury, and evaluated the utility of miRNAs as quantitative markers of liver injury.

Materials and Methods

Chemicals and Reagents

APAP, α -naphthyl isothiocyanate (ANIT) and CCl₄ were purchased from Wako Pure Chemicals (Osaka, Japan). Methapyrene (MP) was from Sigma-Aldrich (St. Louis, MO). Standard diets (StdD), high fat diets (HFD) and methionine choline-deficient diet (MCDD) were obtained from Oriental Yeast (Tokyo, Japan). RNAiso was from Takara (Shiga, Japan). *mirVana* PARIS kit, Megaplex pools, TaqMan microRNA Reverse Transcription kit, TaqMan microRNA assays, TaqMan 2 \times Universal PCR Master Mix No AmpErase UNG and TaqMan Rodent MicroRNA Array v2.0 were from Applied Biosystems (Foster City, CA). All other chemicals and solvents were of the highest grade commercially available.

Animal Models

Animal maintenance and treatment were conducted in accordance with the National Institutes of Health Guide for Animal Welfare of Japan, as approved by the Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee of Kanazawa University, Japan. The study was approved by the Animal Ethics Committee of Kanazawa University (No. 31203). Male 5-week-old Sprague-Dawley rats were purchased from Japan SLC (Hamamatsu, Japan). Rats were housed in a controlled environment (temperature 25 \pm 1°C, humidity 50 \pm 10%, and 12 h light/12 h dark cycle) in the institutional animal facility with access to food and water *ad libitum*. Rats were acclimatized before use for the experiments. To make the hepatocellular injury models, rats (n=6–8) were orally administered 500 mg/kg (low dose) or 1,000 mg/kg (high dose) APAP suspended in 0.5% carboxymethylcellulose (CMC) after fasting. In some experiments, rats were administered APAP without fasting. Rats (n=6) were orally administered 300 mg/kg MP dissolved in 0.5% CMC. These rats were sacrificed 24 h after the administration. To make cholestasis models, rats (n=5) were orally administered 150 mg/kg ANIT dissolved in corn oil and were sacrificed 48 h after the administration. Bile duct ligated (BDL) or sham operated rats (male, 5-week-old, n=3–4) were purchased from Japan SLC, and were sacrificed 3 days after the operations. To make steatosis and steatohepatitis models, rats (n=5) were fed HFD and MCDD, respectively for 8 weeks. To make a fibrosis model, rats (n=5) were intraperitoneally administered 0.5 mg/kg CCl₄ dissolved in olive oil twice a week for 10 weeks, and were sacrificed 3 days after the last administration. After sacrifice, blood and liver were collected. EDTA was added as an anticoagulant to the blood and kept on ice for 30 min. After centrifugation, plasma was collected and kept at –80°C until use. A part of the liver was fixed in buffered neutral 10% formalin.

Biochemical Assay and Pathological Examination

Plasma ALT, AST and T-Bil levels were determined by using the Dri-Chem 4000 (FUJIFILM, Saitama, Japan) according to the manufacturer's instructions. The formalin fixed samples were embedded in paraffin and sectioned, and then stained with hematoxylin-eosin for microscopic examination. A part of the frozen liver was embedded in optimal cutting temperature (O.C.T) compound (Sakura Finetek Japan, Tokyo, Japan) and sectioned, and then stained with Oil red O and hematoxylin.

Evaluation of Stability of Plasma miRNAs

The study using human samples was approved by the Ethics Committee of Kanazawa University, Japan (No. 203). Written informed consent was obtained from all subjects. Blood samples were collected from 9 healthy male subjects (22 to 27-year-old) or

2 non-treated male rats (6-week-old). EDTA was added as an anticoagulant to the blood and kept on ice for 30 min. After centrifugation, plasma was collected and pooled. The pooled samples were divided into each 30 μ L, and were kept at 4°C, room temperature or 37°C. After 3, 6, 12 and 24 h, total RNAs were prepared and individual miRNAs were measured as described below.

TaqMan MicroRNA Assay

Total RNAs including small RNAs from the plasma were isolated using RNAiso according to the manufacturer's instructions. Dr. GENTLE Precipitation Carrier (Takara) was used as a carrier. The cDNAs were synthesized using TaqMan microRNA Reverse Transcription kit with TaqMan microRNA assays 5 \times reaction mix according to the manufacturer's protocol. To the cDNA sample, TaqMan 2 \times Universal PCR Master Mix (No AmpErase UNG) and TaqMan microRNA assays 5 \times reaction mix were added, and the real-time PCR was performed using MP3000P (Stratagene, La Jolla, CA) with the MxPro QPCR software.

TaqMan MicroRNA Array Analysis

Total RNAs including small RNAs were prepared from 600 μ L pooled rat plasma (n=3–8) using the *mirVana* PARIS kit according to the manufacturer's protocol except that the acid/phenol/chloroform extraction was repeated two times. The cDNAs were synthesized from the total RNA using Megaplex pools according to the manufacturer's protocol. Primers used in the reverse transcription reaction were TaqMan stem-loop primers for 365 individual miRNAs and 3 endogenous controls. Pre-amplification was performed by adding of 2 \times TaqMan PreAmp Master Mix and 10 \times Megaplex PreAmp Primers to the cDNA sample. To the preamplification products, TaqMan 2 \times Universal PCR Master Mix (No AmpErase UNG) were added. The entire mixture was applied to individual ports of TaqMan Array Rodent MicroRNA A+B Cards Sets v2.0, 384-well microfluidics cards containing 375 (A array) or 210 (B array) primer-probe sets for individual miRNAs. Quantitative real-time PCR was performed using a 7900HT Fast Real-Time PCR system (Applied Biosystems) with an SDS software v.2.4. Expression levels were evaluated using comparative cycle threshold (Ct) method. Ct values ranged from 0 to 40. miRNAs giving Ct values >32 in all groups were omitted from data analysis because this cut-off value was recommended by the manufacturer. The data were presented as (40 - Ct). Δ Ct values [Δ Ct = (40 - Ct model) - (40 - Ct control)] were calculated as fold changes. The hierarchical clustering was performed using Cluster 3.0 software (complete linkage) and mapletree.

Statistical Analysis

Data are expressed as mean \pm SD. Comparison of two groups was made with a Mann-Whitney's U-test. Comparison of multiple groups was made with Kruskal-Wallis followed by Dunn's test. A value of $P < 0.05$ was considered statistically significant.

Results

Plasma biochemistry and histopathology of rat models of acute and chronic liver injury

The plasma ALT and AST levels were significantly elevated by the administration of APAP (Fig. 1A). The elevation of the ALT and AST levels in high dose of APAP-treated rats was considerably higher than that in low dose APAP-treated rats. The hepatocellular injury was observed at the pericentral regions. Thus, the APAP-induced hepatocellular injury model was established. Next, we sought to establish another hepatocellular injury model by the

administration of MP. In the treated rats, the plasma ALT and AST levels were significantly elevated and the hepatocellular injury was observed at the periportal regions (Fig. 1A). Thus, we established two types of hepatocellular injury model. In the ANIT-treated rats, the plasma ALT and T-Bil levels were considerably elevated (Fig. 1B). Degenerating and vanishing bile ducts as well as mild necrosis or inflammation were observed. Thus, the ANIT-induced cholestasis model was established. Next, we evaluated another cholestasis model by BDL. In the treated rats, the plasma ALT and AST levels were considerably elevated (Fig. 1B). Enlargement of bile ducts as well as mild necrosis or inflammation were observed. Thus, we established two types of cholestasis model. In the HFD-fed rats, the plasma ALT and AST levels were not changed, whereas in the MCDD-fed rats, the ALT level tended to be higher than that in StdD-fed rats (Fig. 1C). Cytosolic hypertrophy and clear vacuoles containing lipid were observed in HFD-fed rats. Diffuse macrovesicular steatosis and infiltration of inflammatory cells were observed in MCDD-fed rats. Accumulation of fat was observed in both groups by Oil red O staining. Thus, we considered that the steatosis and steatohepatitis models were established. In the CCl₄-treated rats, the plasma ALT and AST levels were considerably elevated (Fig. 1D). Fibrosis, adipose degeneration, and infiltration of inflammatory cells were observed at the periportal region. Accumulation of fat was also observed by Oil red O staining. Thus, we established a fibrosis model.

Stability of plasma miRNAs

It has been reported that the miRNAs in human plasma are stable [6], but there is no information on the stability of miRNAs in rat plasma. We investigated the stability of miRNAs in rat plasma compared to those in human plasma. We chose miR-16, miR-21 and miR-122 because their sequences are identical in rat and human and these miRNAs are substantially expressed in plasma. We found that these miRNAs in rat plasma were unstable at 37°C, whereas those in human plasma were stable, supporting the previous study (Fig. 2). The extent of degradation varied depending on the kinds of rat miRNAs. The miR-21 and miR-122 were decreased to 2% and 1% of the control, respectively, after 6 h incubation at 37°C, whereas the miR-16 was sustained at 30% of the control. The level of miR-122 was 10-fold higher than the levels of miR-16 and miR-21, which showed similar levels. Thus, it appeared that the extent of degradation was not associated with the expression levels. When the plasma samples were incubated at room temperature (~25°C), the degradation of the miRNAs was attenuated. Moreover, the degradation of miRNAs was considerably repressed when the miRNAs were kept at 4°C. Accordingly, for the subsequent study, we kept the rat plasma samples on ice until the RNA extraction.

Plasma miRNAs expression profiles in rat models of liver injury

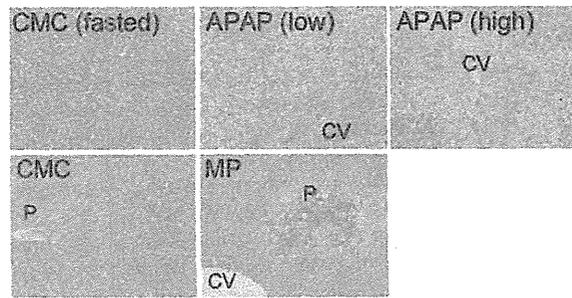
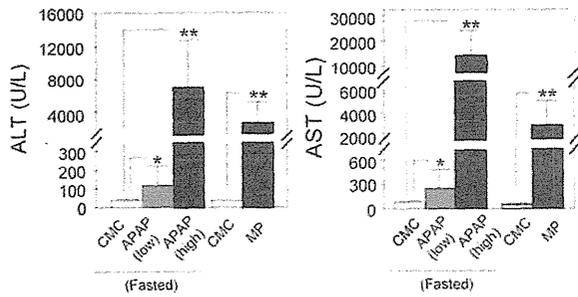
The expression profiles of the plasma miRNAs in the rat models of liver injury were determined by TaqMan microRNA array analysis. The global normalization method (correction with the sum of the expression levels of detected miRNAs) is generally used for normalization in array analyses. The numbers of miRNAs that were detected, or the Ct values of which were <32, in the liver injury groups except the BDL group tended to be larger than those in the control groups (Table 1). Accordingly, we considered that the global normalization method would be inappropriate. Alternatively, we confirmed by the measurement of the ccl-miR-39 levels (a miRNA in *C. elegans*) that the efficiencies of extraction and detection of miRNAs were almost equal in all groups. The number of miRNAs, which gave Ct values <32 in at least one

group, was 433. We performed a clustering analysis for the expression levels of the 433 miRNA. As shown in Fig. 3A, all groups were roughly divided into three, 1) APAP (high), MP, and ANIT groups, 2) HFD, APAP (low), CCl₄, MCDD groups and the controls, and 3) sham and BDL groups. Next, we examined the fold changes in the miRNA expression. The numbers of miRNAs showing >2-fold increases or <0.5-fold decreases in the liver injury groups in comparison with a control groups are shown in Table 1. In most groups, the numbers of increased miRNAs were larger than those of decreased miRNAs whereas, in the BDL group, the numbers of decreased miRNAs were larger than those of increased miRNAs. We performed clustering analysis for the fold changes of the miRNAs (Fig. 3B). It was demonstrated that the profiles of the APAP (high) and MP groups were similar. The profile of the ANIT group was similar to the above two groups, but that of the BDL group was quite different. The profiles of the CCl₄, HFD, and MCDD groups were roughly close to each other, and the CCl₄ group with an increased ALT level close to the groups with acute liver injury. Thus, it was demonstrated that the changes of miRNA expression were different between the acute and chronic liver injuries.

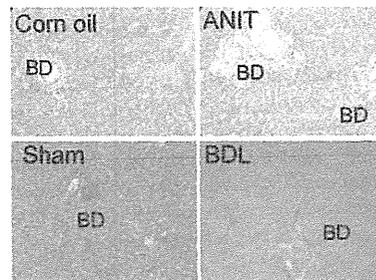
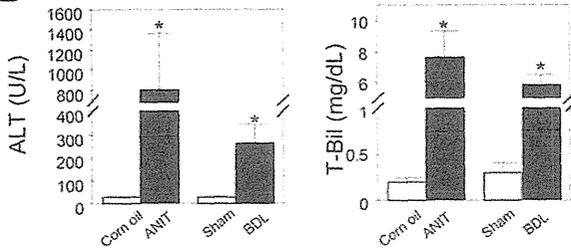
Among the up-regulated miRNAs in the APAP (high) group (317 miRNAs) and MP group (295 miRNAs), 283 miRNAs were common (Fig. 4A). Among the 6 down-regulated miRNAs in the APAP (high) group and 10 down-regulated miRNAs in the MP group, only 2 miRNAs were common. Among the 280 up-regulated miRNAs in the ANIT group and 60 up-regulated miRNAs in the BDL group, 57 miRNAs were common (Fig. 4B). Among the 10 down-regulated miRNAs in the ANIT group and 130 down-regulated miRNAs in the BDL group, 2 miRNAs were common. Among the 121 up-regulated miRNAs in the HFD group, 186 up-regulated miRNAs in the MCDD group and 225 up-regulated miRNAs in the CCl₄ groups, 63 miRNAs were common. Among the 16 down-regulated miRNAs in the HFD group, 35 miRNAs in the MCDD group and 27 miRNAs in the CCl₄ groups, only 3 miRNAs were common. To find potential biomarkers for hepatocellular injury, cholestasis, and steatosis, the miRNAs whose expression was commonly changed in the same type of liver injury were compared across the different types of liver injury. As the results, we found that 16 miRNAs were specifically up-regulated in hepatocellular injury model, 2 miRNAs and 3 miRNAs were specifically down-regulated in cholestasis and steatosis models, respectively (Fig. 4, Table 2). It was suggested that these miRNAs would be a novel biomarker for hepatocellular injury, cholestasis, and steatosis.

Next, we looked at the miRNAs whose expression was specifically changed in each model. By the comparison across the all models, we found that 12 out of 38 miRNAs (sum of up-regulated and down-regulated miRNAs) and 11 out of 20 miRNA were specifically changed in the APAP and MP groups, respectively (Fig. 4A, Table 3). It was considered that these miRNAs could be used to know the damaged area, pericentral or periportal region. Since the 223 miRNAs and 3 miRNAs that were up-regulated in ANIT and BDL groups, respectively were also up-regulated in the hepatocellular injury models, no miRNAs were found to be specific for these models. However, 8 out of 8 miRNAs and 101 out of 208 miRNAs were specifically down-regulated in ANIT and BDL groups, respectively (Fig. 4B, Table 3). It was suggested that these miRNAs would be candidate biomarkers of intrahepatic and extrahepatic cholestasis. We found that 3 out of 28 miRNAs, 17 out of 50 miRNAs, and 11 out of 92 miRNA were specifically changed in the HFD, MCDD, and CCl₄ groups, respectively (Fig. 4C, Table 3). It was suggested that these miRNAs would be candidate biomarkers of steatosis, steatohepatitis and

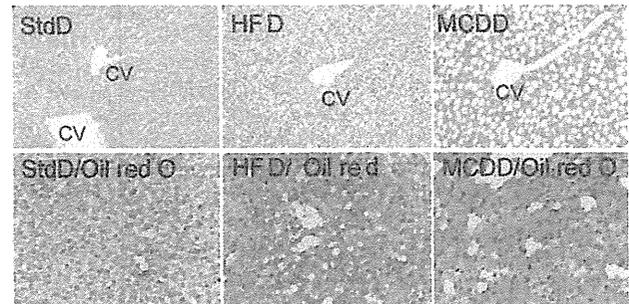
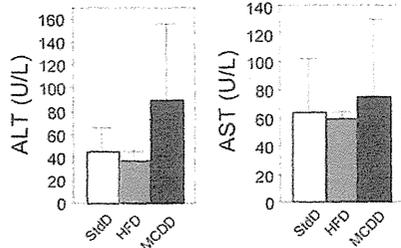
A Hepatocellular injury



B Cholestasis



C Steatosis or Steatohepatitis



D Fibrosis

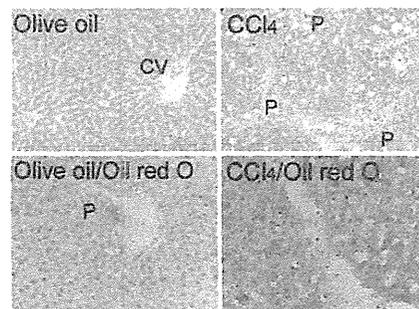
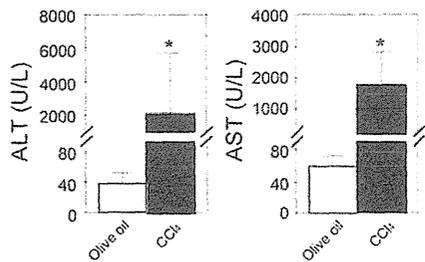


Figure 1. Plasma ALT, AST or T-Bil levels and histopathological changes of liver in rat models of hepatocellular injury induced by the administration of APAP (n = 6–8) or MP (n = 6) (A); cholestasis induced by the administration of ANIT, or BDL (n = 5) (B); steatosis or steatohepatitis induced by feeding of HFD (n = 5) or MCDD (n = 5) (C); and fibrosis induced by the administration of CCl4 (n = 6) (D). Data are mean ± SD. Significantly different from control group (**P* < 0.05 and ***P* < 0.01). Liver sections were stained with HE for all models (original magnification ×200) and Oil red O for the chronic liver injury models (original magnification ×400). CV: Central vein; P: Portal region; BD: Bile duct.

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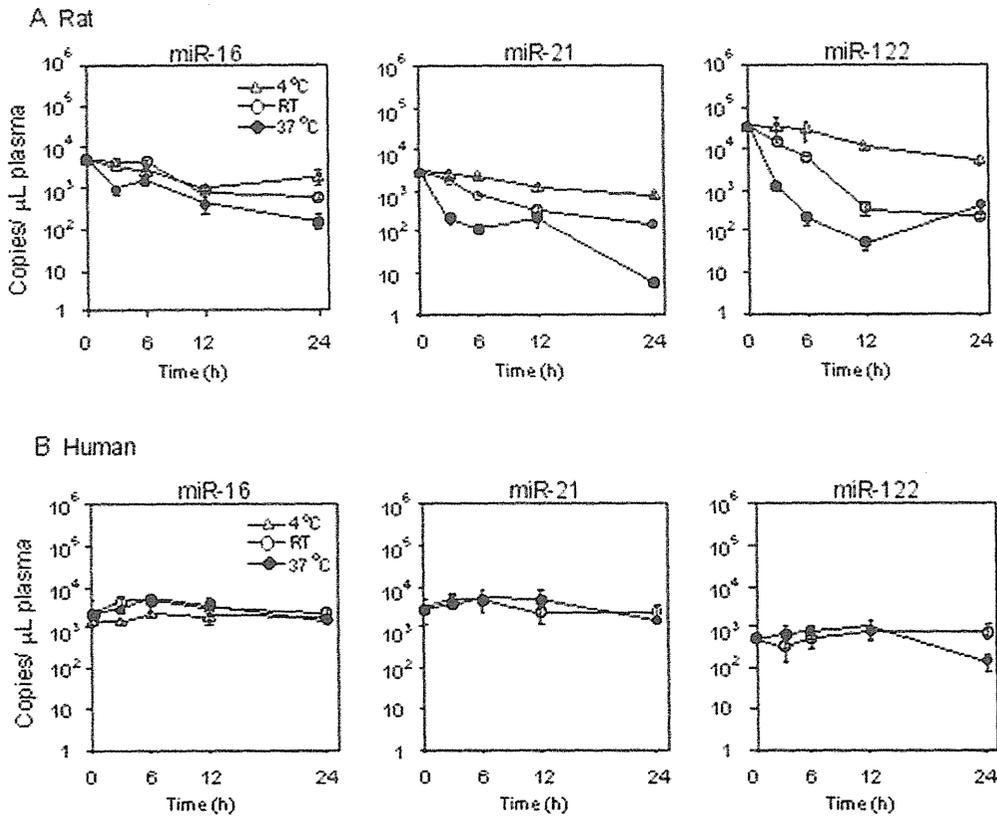


Figure 2. Stability of miR-16, miR-122 or miR-21 in rat (A) or human (B) plasma. Plasma samples from 2 non-treated male rats or 9 male healthy subjects were pooled and incubated at 4°C, room temperature (RT) or 37°C. Data represent copy numbers per one μL of plasma. Data are mean ± SD of triplicate determination (n = 3).
doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0030250.g002

Table 1. Number of miRNAs whose expressions were detected and changed with liver injury in rat plasma.

| Drug or diet | Type | Detectable | Ct<32 | Up (>2.0-fold) | Down (<0.5-fold) |
|--------------|-----------------|------------|-------|----------------|------------------|
| CMC (fasted) | | 277 | 181 | - | - |
| APAP (Low) | Hepatocellular | 328 | 231 | 237 | 18 |
| APAP (High) | Hepatocellular | 400 | 313 | 317 | 6 |
| CMC | | 284 | 179 | - | - |
| MP | Hepatocellular | 381 | 282 | 295 | 10 |
| Corn oil | | 286 | 177 | - | - |
| ANIT | Cholestasis | 352 | 259 | 280 | 10 |
| Sham | | 241 | 137 | - | - |
| BDL | Cholestasis | 207 | 126 | 60 | 130 |
| StdD | | 269 | 175 | - | - |
| HFD | Steatosis | 294 | 206 | 121 | 16 |
| MCDD | Steatohepatitis | 305 | 214 | 186 | 35 |
| Olive oil | | 248 | 152 | - | - |
| CCl4 | Fibrosis | 289 | 201 | 225 | 27 |

The total number of miRNAs on the array system is 585.
 APAP: acetaminophen; MP: methapyrilene; ANIT: α-naphthyl isothiocyanate; BDL: bile duct ligation; StdD: standard diet; HFD: high fat diet; MCDD: methionine choline-deficient diet.
 doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0030250.t001

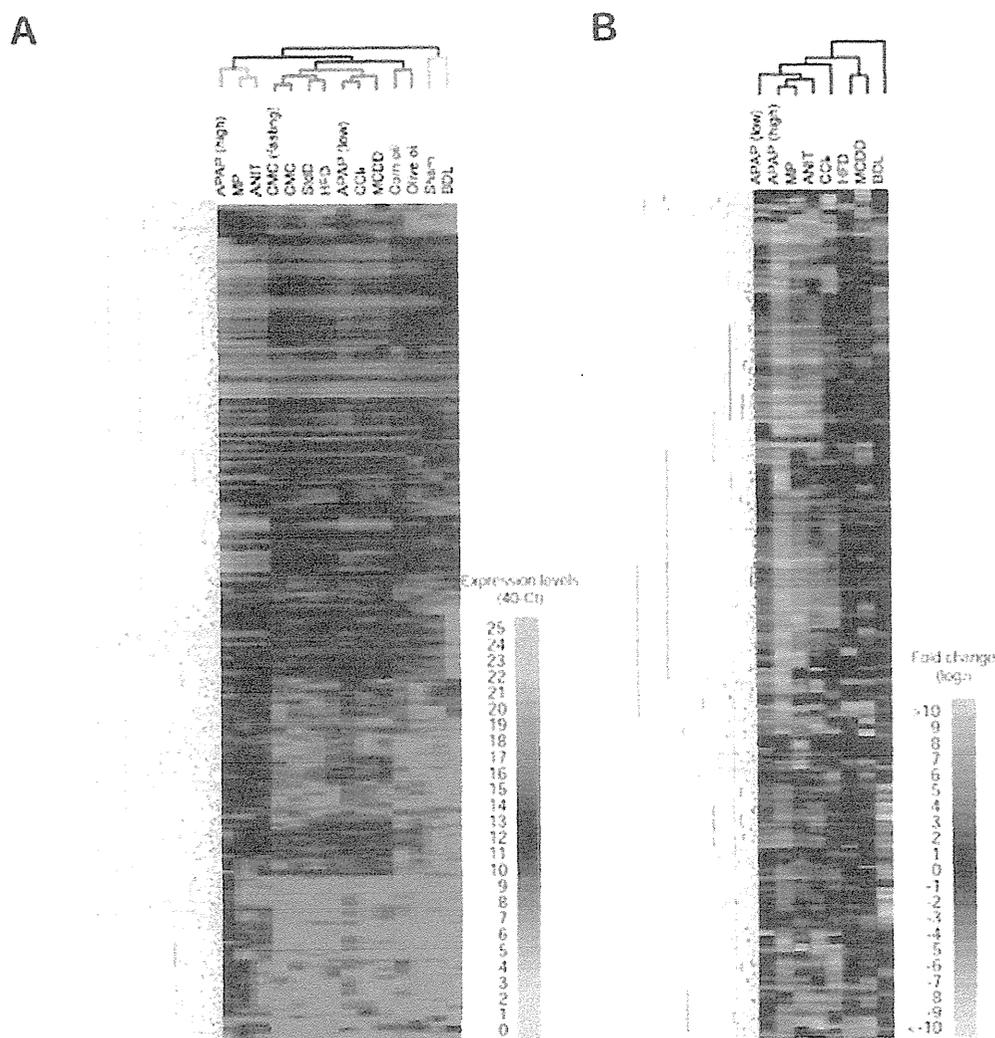


Figure 3. Hierarchical clustering of plasma miRNA expression profiles in rats with liver injury (A) and the fold changes between the injury model and control (B). The levels were clustered by using Cluster 3.0 software (complete linkage) and visualized by using MapleTree software. Data are presented as 40-Ct (A) and \log_2 (B) value.
doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0030250.g003

fibrosis, respectively. Especially, the miRNAs whose expressions changed only in the HFD group might be associated with the fat accumulation without inflammation or fibrosis.

All groups except the BDL and HFD groups showed necrosis and inflammation. Based on the fact, we sought to identify the miRNAs whose expressions were changed in response to necrosis and inflammation. By searching miRNAs whose expressions were commonly increased in the APAP, MP, ANIT, MCDD, and CCl4 groups, but not in BDL and HFD groups, we found that 67 miRNAs might reflect necrosis and inflammation (Fig. 4D). Among them, we focused on miR-122, which is the most abundant miRNA in liver [21], in the next experiment.

Time course of plasma miRNA change in rats with acute liver injury

We examined the time course of the plasma miRNA changes in rats with acute liver injury, focusing on miR-122. We measured the plasma ALT and miR-122 levels over time in six rats administered 1000 mg/kg APAP. The ALT levels began to

increase 6 h after the administration, reached a peak at 24 h and then decreased (Fig. 5A). In contrast, the plasma miR-122 levels began to increase 3 h after the administration, reached a peak at 12–36 h and then decreased. Although there were large interindividual differences in the ALT levels, the interindividual differences in plasma miR-122 level were relatively small. It should be noted that the change of plasma miR-122 was more dynamic than that of ALT. Next, we looked at five rats treated with 300 mg/kg MP. The ALT and miR-122 levels began to increase 3 h after the administration, but the extent and rate of the increase of miR-122 was more dramatic than those of the ALT levels (Fig. 5B). These results suggest that the plasma miRNA level changed more sensitively than the ALT level did in response to acute liver injury.

Association of the plasma miR-122 increase with hepatocellular injury

We examined whether the increase of plasma miR-122 was due to liver injury or the administered chemicals. To address this issue, 500 mg/kg of APAP were orally administered to rats without

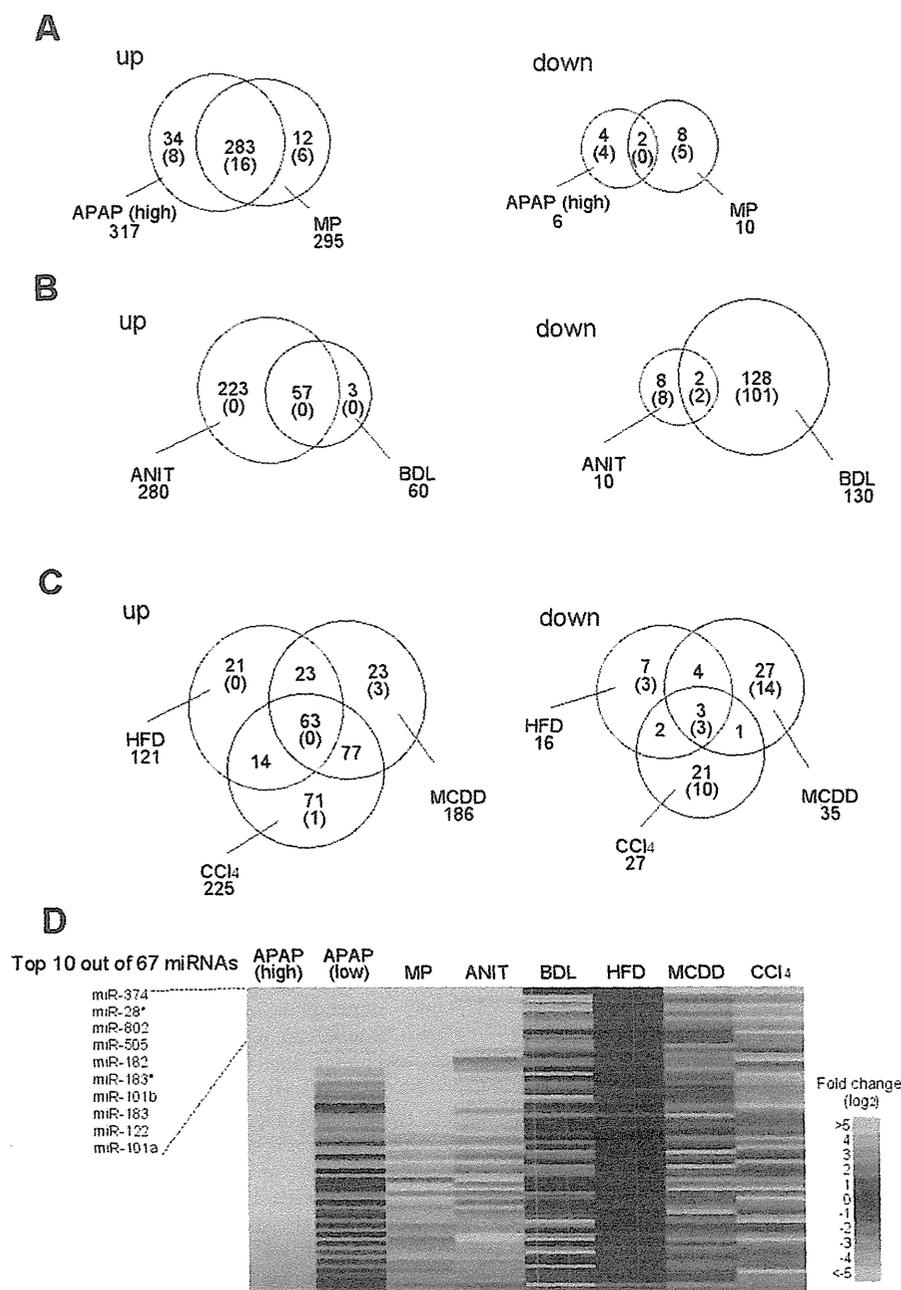


Figure 4. Up- or down-regulated miRNAs in hepatocellular injury models (A), cholestasis models (B), and chronic liver injury models (C). Venn diagram shows the number of changed miRNAs. The numbers in the parenthesis are the numbers of miRNAs whose expressions were specifically changed only in the given models. Heat map of 67 miRNAs in all models, which were commonly up-regulated with necrosis and inflammation (D).
doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0030250.g004

fasting. In contrast to the administration of APAP with fasting, which decreased the hepatic glutathione level, the treatment neither caused histopathological changes (data not shown) nor an elevation of ALT in rats (41 ± 4 U/L versus 34 ± 6 U/L in control) (Fig. 6). In these rats, the plasma miR-122 levels were almost the same as those in control rats (40-Ct value: 7.1 ± 2.6 versus 7.1 ± 1.6 in control). Therefore, we could conclude that the increase of the plasma miR-122 was due to liver injury, but not to APAP itself.

When 500 mg/kg APAP were administered with fasting, hepatocellular necrosis and inflammation were observed in all 12 rats, with scores of + (7 rats, closed circle), ++ (1 rat, closed triangle), and +++ (4 rats, closed square). In the 7 rats showing mild (+) histopathological changes, the increase of the ALT levels was not significant (104 ± 107 , 3.1 fold of control), but the increase of the miR-122 level was remarkable (10.6 ± 1.0 , 11.3 fold of control). In addition, the extent of the increase of miR-122 mirrored the

Table 2. The miRNAs whose expressions were changed in hepatocellular injury, cholestasis and steatosis.

| Type of liver injury | Up-regulated miRNAs | Fold change (log2) | | | Fold change (log2) | | |
|-----------------------|-------------------------|--------------------|------|-----------------------|--------------------|------|------|
| | | APAP | MP | Down-regulated miRNAs | APAP | MP | |
| Hepatocellular injury | miR-200a* | 13.2 | 8.7 | | | | |
| | let-7c-1* | 10.8 | 3.0 | | | | |
| | miR-503 | 10.2 | 9.0 | | | | |
| | miR-337-3p | 9.6 | 7.1 | | | | |
| | miR-10b | 9.2 | 2.2 | | | | |
| | miR-34c | 8.6 | 6.3 | | | | |
| | miR-327 | 8.5 | 8.8 | | | | |
| | miR-351 | 8.2 | 5.5 | | | | |
| | miR-704 | 7.8 | 9.7 | | | | |
| | miR-410 | 7.6 | 1.7 | | | | |
| | Top 10 out of 16 miRNAs | | | | | | |
| | | ANIT | BDL | | ANIT | BDL | |
| Cholestasis | - | | | miR-190 | -5.9 | -6.0 | |
| | | | | miR-743b | -3.3 | -8.3 | |
| | | HFD | MCDD | CCl4 | HFD | MCDD | CCl4 |
| Steatosis | - | | | miR-449c | -7.0 | -6.0 | -2.6 |
| | | | | miR-410 | -4.4 | -4.4 | -2.8 |
| | | | | miR-10b* | -2.5 | -5.0 | -5.1 |

doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0030250.t002

histopathological changes (++) 15.2 and (+++) 20.0±1.5). In the rats administered 1000 mg/kg APAP with fasting, the interindividual variability of miRNA (20.7±1.7) was less than that of ALT (6960±5615). Thus, it is suggested that miRNA would be a more sensitive and quantitative biomarker of liver injury, with low interindividual variability, than a conventional biomarker, ALT.

Discussion

It was reported in 2008 that miRNAs stably exist in human plasma or serum [6,10]. After these reports, miRNAs in body fluids have been investigated in a wide variety of patient samples and animal models and have been revealed as potential biomarkers of various diseases [22]. In contrast to human miRNAs, there was no report on whether the miRNAs in rodent plasma are also stable. Therefore, we first determined the stability of miRNAs in rat plasma and found that the miRNAs in rat plasma were less stable than those in human plasma. The extent of degradation was different among the miRNAs, but was independent of the expression levels of these miRNAs. We could provide important information for dealing with rat plasma miRNAs. Although the relative instability of miRNAs in rat plasma was revealed, our finding does not hinder the potential as a biomarker, because the degradation can be suppressed if the samples are kept below 4°C or stored in freezer, and it is speculated that the circulating miRNAs in body would be stable at similar extent between human and rat, based on the fact encompassing in vesicle or binding to proteins. Thus, we consider that the miRNAs in rat plasma could also be useful as a biomarker.

In this study, we established various rat models with liver injury including hepatocellular injury (APAP or MP), cholestasis (ANIT or BDL), steatosis (HFD), steatohepatitis (MCDD), and fibrosis (CCl₄), and determined the plasma miRNA expression profiles. In

the hepatocellular injury models caused by 500 mg/kg (low dose) or 1000 mg/kg (high dose) of APAP, 231 and 313 miRNAs out of 328 and 400 detectable miRNAs were up-regulated in the plasma, respectively. In a previous study by Wang et al. [12] using a mouse model that was administered 300 mg/kg APAP, it was demonstrated that 25 miRNAs out of 53 detectable miRNAs were up-regulated (>1.5 fold). Almost all the up-regulated miRNAs (22 out of 25 miRNAs) such as miR-122, miR-192, miR-685, miR-193, and miR-29c were also up-regulated in our rat model, suggesting that common plasma miRNAs seem to be up-regulated in APAP-induced liver injury independent of species. It should be noted that the miRNAs that were detected or up-regulated in their study were considerably fewer than those in our study, although the number of probes were comparable between the studies (the hybridization-based array they used contained probes representing 576 mouse miRNAs, whereas the TaqMan real time-PCR based-array we used contained probes representing 585 rodent miRNAs). The differences may possibly be due to species differences in the expression level of miRNAs in plasma or differences in the sensitivity of the platforms used for array analysis.

Wang et al. [12] also reported using a mouse model with APAP that the levels of the miRNAs, which were increased in plasma, were decreased in liver. They described that the cellular damage in the liver tissue resulted in the transport or release of cellular miRNAs into the plasma, which may be a similar process by which cellular enzymes are released after cellular damage. Although we have not confirmed yet whether such an inverse correlation also exists in rat models, it might be true because the miRNAs whose expressions in plasma were increased were tended to be common in the models representing hepatocellular damage (APAP, MP, ANIT, MCDD, and CCl₄ groups). Additionally, we found miRNAs whose expressions were specifically changed in the APAP and MP group. APAP and MP induced hepatocellular