Effect of Chlorhexidine Varnish on *Actinomyces naeslundii* Genospecies in Plaque from Dental Fissures

**Key Words**

*Actinomyces naeslundii*  
Chlorhexidine  
Mutans streptococci  
Oral streptococci  
Varnish

**Abstract**

This study describes the effects of varnish containing 40% chlorhexidine diacetate on *Actinomyces naeslundii* populations in plaque from human molar fissures. In each of 15 subjects two dental fissures with high levels of mutans streptococci were selected. The experimental treatment consisted of the single application of a small amount of chlorhexidine varnish onto the selected fissures. The varnish was removed 15 min after application. One month after varnish application a significant increase was observed in *A. naeslundii* counts while the number of mutans streptococci had decreased significantly compared with preexperimental levels. From 85 randomly selected *Actinomyces* isolates taken from blood agar plates before varnish application, 44% belonged to *A. naeslundii* genospecies 1 and 56% to *A. naeslundii* genospecies 2. From 106 isolates taken 1 month after chlorhexidine varnish application, 42% belonged to *A. naeslundii* genospecies 1 and 58% to *A. naeslundii* genospecies 2. At baseline 28% of *A. naeslundii* genospecies 1 strains were catalase-positive, but 1 month after varnish application 4% of the strains were catalase-positive (p<0.05). It is concluded that chlorhexidine varnish application caused an increase of *A. naeslundii* in dental plaque, but induced no significant changes in the distribution of the two *A. naeslundii* genospecies.

Several studies have shown that treatment of tooth surfaces with chlorhexidine varnish can lead to a long-lasting suppression of mutans streptococci, and subsequent caries reduction [reviewed by Emilson, 1994]. Microbiological monitoring following chlorhexidine varnish treatment suggested that this long-term suppression of mutans streptococci is mainly due to bacterial interference [Schaeken et al., 1989]. Earlier studies indicated that streptococci from the *Streptococcus oralis* group, such as *Streptococcus gordonii*, *S. oralis*, *Streptococcus sanguis*, and *Streptococcus mitis*, and *Actinomyces* species play a role in the suppression of mutans streptococci [Mikx et al., 1975; van der Hoeven and Rogers, 1979; McDermid et al., 1987; Perrons and Donoghue, 1990]. Indeed, using gnotobiotic rats it could be demonstrated that *Streptococcus* and *Actinomyces* strains inhibit regrowth of *Streptococcus mutans* after chlorhexidine application [van der Hoeven and Schaeken, 1995]. It is not surprising that physiologically related bacteria are involved in control of mutans streptococci in dental plaque. However, it is not known how specific the relationship is, and if particular *Streptococcus* and *Actinomyces* species have more effect than others in controlling mutans strepto-
coci. In an earlier experiment we have recorded the *Streptococcus* species that repopulate the tooth surface after chlorhexidine varnish application [Schaeken et al., 1994]. It appeared that the sequence of recolonization of the surface by streptococcal species proceeded according to the same pattern as observed for cleaned enamel surfaces in the mouth [Theilade et al., 1982; Nyvad and Kilian, 1987; Frandsen et al., 1991]. This supported previous observations by Svanberg and Loesche [1977, 1978] that resistance against colonization of teeth by mutans streptococci is a feature of the normal oral microflora.

*Actinomyces naeslundii* genospecies 1 and 2 are dominant parts of the dental plaque microflora and have overlapping substrate requirements with mutans streptococci, and streptococci from the *S. oralis* group, 'oralis streptococci'. Therefore *A. naeslundii* genospecies are, like the other streptococci, competing with mutans streptococci. Due to their presumed role in controlling mutans streptococci, the present experiment is aimed to investigate *A. naeslundii* genospecies in dental plaque before and after intensive chlorhexidine treatment.

### Materials and Methods

#### Participants and Treatments

After written informed consent 15 students in social sciences, between 18 and 26 years of age, participated in the study. In each subject two dental fissures were selected that contained high levels of mutans streptococci, that is more than 40% of the total cultivable flora. These fissures were treated with 40% chlorhexidine varnish [Schaeken et al., 1989]. Prior to application of the varnish, the fissures were isolated with cotton rolls and dried with compressed air. In a previous study we found that a short contact time of the varnish with the tooth surface was sufficient for effective suppression of mutans streptococci in approximal areas [Schaeken et al., 1991b]. In this experiment we therefore removed the varnish 15 min after application with a dental explorer.

#### Sample Collection and Bacterial Procedures

Plaque samples from the experimental sites were collected before, and 1, 2 and 3 months after varnish application. Plaques from the two selected fissures were pooled. Prior to plaque sampling, adherent saliva on the teeth was removed by water spray. Plaque was collected using a needle (12 mm × 0.4 mm) that fitted in a needle holder. The plaque was transferred into a vial containing 1 ml of isotonic saline and processed within 1 h.

The samples were homogenized by ultrasonic dispersion for 20 s at 0°C using a Kontes cell disrupter (type 910001, Kontes, Vineland, N.J., USA). The suspensions were serially diluted 10-fold and plated onto blood agar, TSY20B agar [Schaeken et al., 1986a] and CNAC-20 agar [Ellen and Balcerzak-Raczkowski, 1975]. All plates were incubated at 37°C in an atmosphere of 91% N₂, 5% CO₂ and 4% H₂ for 5 days.

Total cultivable flora and oralis streptococci were counted on blood agar. Species of the oralis group including *S. sanguis*, *S. oralis* and *S. gordonii* [Kilian et al., 1989] cannot be distinguished by colonial morphology and were counted together. TSY20B served to enumerate mutans streptococci, and *A. naeslundii* genospecies were counted on blood agar and on CNAC-20 agar.

#### Characterization of the Actinomyces Populations before and after Chlorhexidine Treatment

The effect of chlorhexidine application on *A. naeslundii* genospecies [Johnson et al., 1990] was studied in plaque samples from 8 subjects that were taken at baseline, and at 1 month after treatment. From randomly selected colonies on the blood agar plates *Actinomyces*-like organisms were isolated. Pure cultures of 85 *Actinomyces* strains isolated at baseline and 106 *Actinomyces* strains isolated after 1 month were kept in skimmed milk at -80°C. All isolated strains were identified with the API 20A system (BioMérieux, Marcy-l'Etoile, France) and the API PLUS computer program. Additionally, the MiniTec system (BBL, Cockeysville, Md., USA) was used to test the presence of nitrate and nitrite reductase, the hydrolysis of esculin, and urease activity. Acidic end products of glucose fermentation were determined by means of isotachophoresis. To this end the strains were cultured under anaerobic conditions for 48 h in Trypticase Soy broth (BBL) supplemented with 5% glucose. Catalase activity was tested by emulsifying a colony in a drop of H₂O₂ on a glass slide. Finally all strains isolated on blood agar were tested for growth on CNAC-20 agar.

#### Statistical Procedures

The bacteriological counts were log-transformed prior to statistical analyses, so that the variances would be normalized. The data were analyzed using ANOVA, and contrast (t) tests were used to evaluate differences between treatments and sampling occasions. Recoveries of *A. naeslundii* on CNAC-20 agar were analyzed with the chi-square test.

#### Results

One month after varnish application no significant differences were found in total viable counts of plaque samples and counts of oralis streptococci compared with baseline values. However, a significant increase was observed in *A. naeslundii* counts (p<0.01), while the number of mutans streptococci had significantly decreased (p<0.01) after chlorhexidine varnish treatment (fig. 1).

The characterization of the *A. naeslundii* populations before and after chlorhexidine treatment is given in table I. The percentage *A. naeslundii* genospecies of total counts on blood agar was 33% at baseline, and 61% 1 month after treatment (p<0.05). At baseline 37 strains were classified as *A. naeslundii* genospecies 1, and 48 as *A. naeslundii* genospecies 2 (formerly called *A. viscosus*), and 1 month after chlorhexidine treatment 45 strains were classified as *A. naeslundii* genospecies 1 and 61 as *A. naeslundii* genospecies 2.

At baseline 8 out of 29 (28%) *A. naeslundii* genospecies 1 strain was catalase-positive. In the samples taken at 1 month
after chlorhexidine varnish application the number of catalase-positive *A. naeslundii* genospecies 1 strain was significantly (p<0.05) lower i.e. 2 out of 45, i.e. 4%.

Only 64% of all *A. naeslundii* isolates grew on CNAC-20 agar. Growth on CNAC-20 after chlorhexidine treatment (72%) was significantly better than before (72 vs. 49%; p<0.01; chi square). *A. naeslundii* genotype 2 strains grew better on CNAC-20 than did *A. naeslundii* genotype 1 strain (72 vs. 50%; p<0.01; chi square).

**Discussion**

After a single varnish treatment long-term selective suppression of mutants streptococci was observed, which confirmed previous findings [Sandham et al., 1988; Schaeken et al., 1989, 1991a, b]. A contact time between varnish and tooth surface of only 15 min was sufficient to achieve this long-term suppression. From earlier experiments it is known that the suppression of oralis streptococci is of very short duration and that these organisms recover within 1 or 2 days [Schaeken et al., 1986b, 1994]. *A. naeslundii* genotypes need about 1 week for complete recovery [Schaeken et al., 1986b, 1989].

In this study we found that the *A. naeslundii* counts were significantly higher after the chlorhexidine varnish application than before. Similar results were found after 1% chlorhexidine rinses in primates [Emilson et al., 1981] and after chlorhexidine varnish treatment of root surfaces in periodontal patients [Schaeken et al., 1991a], and in patients wearing overdentures [Keltjens et al., 1992] who used chlorhexidine gel daily. In contrast, Fure and Emilson [1990] reported no increase in *Actinomyces* levels after combined chlorhexidine gel and chlorhexidine varnish treatments. In their study the *Actinomyces* population was back to pretreatment level after 1 month. High levels of *Actinomyces* may be considered a favorable condition as these organisms are associated with sound tooth surfaces [Meiers et al., 1982; Brown et al., 1986; Fure et al., 1987; Keltjens et al., 1987].

Since *A. naeslundii* are involved in the resistance of the microflora against colonization by mutans streptococci, it

![Fig. 1. *A. naeslundii* (X) and mutans streptococci (•) in dental plaque from human fissures before and after the application of chlorhexidine varnish.](image-url)
was of interest to know whether chlorhexidine varnish treatment would induce profound changes of *A. naeslundii* genospecies populations. The observations fail to demonstrate such changes because the distribution of genospecies 1 and 2 was almost the same before and after chlorhexidine treatment. This supports the idea that following intensive chlorhexidine treatment, the tooth surface is sequentially repopulated by indigenous oral microflora according to the sensitivities to chlorhexidine. Within *A. naeslundii* genospecies 1 a shift towards catalase-negative biotypes was observed. It is difficult to speculate on the ecological significance of this phenomenon. Further, it is not known whether or not the shifts observed here are beyond normal fluctuations in the composition of the oral flora.

The recovery of *A. naeslundii* on CNAG agar was in accordance with our earlier observations, but lower than that of reference strains [Ellen and Balcerzak-Raczkowski, 1975].

We may speculate on the role of *A. naeslundii* in countering the recolonization of the chlorhexidine-treated surfaces by *S. mutans*. To begin with, we know relatively little of the ecological determinants of *A. naeslundii*. For instance, oralis and mitis streptococci, but not *A. naeslundii*, accumulate when dental plaque is enriched on human saliva [de Jong and van der Hoeven, 1987; van der Hoeven et al., 1989]. This fits in with the early colonization of teeth by these streptococci, but fails to explain the emergence of *A. naeslundii* in early plaque. On the other hand, human saliva can support carbohydrate-limited growth of *A. naeslundii* in pure culture. With respect to the interactions between *S. mutans* and *A. naeslundii* we assume that, for most of the time, competition for free sugars is a major determinant of the population sizes of these organisms in dental plaque. This is so because both organisms depend upon carbohydrates for growth [Buchanan and Pine, 1967; Carlsson, 1970]. It is likely that at in-between meal periods, release of complex-bound sugars is the rate-limiting step in the supply of free sugar. Although *A. naeslundii* lose competition with *S. mutans* for free sugars anaerobically [van der Hoeven and de Jong, 1984; van der Hoeven and Gottschal, 1989], the organism derives competitive advantage in the presence of oxygen by increasing its cell yield [de Jong et al., 1988; van der Hoeven and van den Kieboom, 1990]. Further, *A. naeslundii* is less sensitive to growth inhibition by oxygen than *S. mutans* [van der Hoeven and Gottschal, 1989].

Collectively, the results of this study strongly suggest that the indigenous populations of *A. naeslundii* genospecies are involved in controlling the return of *mutans* streptococci after chlorhexidine treatments.

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### References


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