Published in final edited form as:

J Glaucoma. 2014 ; 23(8 0 1): S68–S72. doi:10.1097/IJG.0000000000000121.

Animal models of exfoliation syndrome, now and future

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Abstract

Currently, no animal models fully embody exfoliation syndrome (XFS) or exfoliation glaucoma (XFG). Both genetic and environmental factors appear critical for disease manifestation, and both must be considered when generating animal models. Because mice provide a powerful mammalian platform for modeling complex disease, this paper focuses on mouse models of XFS and XFG.

Exfoliation syndrome (XFS) is the most common identifiable cause of open-angle glaucoma. Despite its prevalence, little is understood about its molecular etiology or about the factors determining susceptibility and progression to exfoliation glaucoma (XFG). It is clear that XFS is a complex, age-related disease affected by both genetic and environmental factors. Nevertheless, both the genetic and environmental factors need better definition.^{1–4} A strong association between single-nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs) in the lysyl oxidase-like 1 (*LOXLI*) gene and XFS was identified in the Swedish and Icelandic populations using a genome-wide association study.⁵ This association was replicated in other populations.^{6–22} However, risk alleles of *LOXLI* are very common in unaffected controls, and the mechanisms of action of these alleles are not clear.^{7, 23} Risk alleles at contactin-associated protein-like 2 (*CNTNAP2*) loci also have significant associations between XFS and XFG in some but not all populations.^{24–26} Mutations in *CNTNAP2* cause neurologic disease, and it is not clear if allelic, genetic background or other differences modulate the phenotypic consequences of mutation in this gene. A host of environmental factors have been suggested to influence XFS but findings are often inconsistent across studies.^{3, 4}

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Disclosure: The authors declare no conflict of interest

The challenge of modeling XFS/XFG

To understand the molecular mechanisms underlying XFS and progression to XFG tractable animal models are needed. Extremely few publications have studied animal models of XFS, and to our knowledge, only 2 animal models have been reported.^{27, 28} There are no reports of models with all of the features of XFS with XFG. The lack of animal models has been suggested to reflect the typical occurrence of XFS at old ages, with the belief that model species do not live long enough to develop the condition. Although possible, we do not feel that the shorter lifespan of model species in absolute years prevents development of XFS. Disease susceptibility in model species increases with age relative to lifespan in a similar fashion to that in people.²⁹ For example, within a 2 years life span, mice often develop complex, age-related diseases that occur later in human life. On the other hand, differences in environment may be critical and profoundly impact whether or not model species develop XFS. The degree and nature of exposure to light (UV), low temperature, viruses and caffeine have all been suggested to impact development of XFS.^{4, 30-33} Most laboratory animals are housed in cages with limited UV exposure, constant controlled temperature, limited or no exposure to pathogens and lack of caffeine and other lifestyle factors.

Genetic differences across species may also be important. In humans a high-risk genotype at the *LOXLI* locus is typically necessary for manifestation of XFS, as high-risk alleles are present in almost all patients with XFS.²³

Thus, the challenge of modeling XFS/XFG in animals is to develop models reflecting these complex genetic and environmental risk factors.

Current Models

Porcine model

The first animal model was reported in pigs.²⁷ The authors fed pigs a high sucrose, high salt diet to induce cataracts. They reasoned that cataracts are common in XFS and that mature cataracts shed exfoliative material. After a few months on the diet the pigs developed cataracts and had an exfoliation-like material that contained crystallins. We are not aware of any follow up studies. The relevance of this model to the human disease is not yet clear, though it may caution against high salt and sugar intakes.

Lyst mutant mouse model

The other model is an inherited mouse model, which shares several features with human XFS. In addition to the accumulation of fibrillar material in the eye, patients with XFS have characteristic saw-tooth morphology of the iris pigment epithelium.^{34, 35} This results in iris transillumination defects characterized by a specific concentric, circular transillumination pattern.³⁶ Similar to human patients, *Lyst* mutant mice have microscopically detectable deposits of fibrillin 1 positive material in the eye.²⁸ They also replicate the saw-tooth morphology of the iris pigment epithelium and have the same pattern of transillumination defects as human patients (Figure 1). In human XFS, increased susceptibility to oxidative stress has been suggested to contribute to the pathology^{37, 38} and, as in other glaucomas, levels of transforming growth factor beta (TGF- β) superfamily members are elevated³⁹⁻⁴².

The *Lyst* mutant iris disease involves oxidative damage⁴³ and TGF- β levels in *Lyst* mutant eyes remain to be tested. Thus, the mice have some XFS-like phenotypes, but lack clinically obvious XFS deposits or glaucoma. Although the degree of relevance of this mouse to human XFS is not yet clear, it is currently the most similar available model. Further evaluation of this model will be important. Similarly, evaluation of the *LYST* gene and functionally related genes in human patients is worthwhile.

Future models

The housing environment may critically interact with genetics to determine if model species develop XFS. Thus, environment should be considered and manipulated when working to produce new models of XFS. Among other factors, the degree and nature of exposure to light (UV), low temperature, presence of specific viruses/microbes, dietary composition and caffeine intake may impact the development of XFS.^{4, 30-33, 44} Using animal models, the importance of specific environmental factors could be clearly determined. It is now possible to abrogate or greatly decrease the amount of gene product produced by mutating genes in various species and a variety of species may contribute to improved understanding of XFS. Due to their small size, high fecundity, relatively low cost and the most powerful array of available genetic resources and tools for dissecting complex diseases and humanizing their genomes, mice will remain a very important model species.^{45, 46} Mice are likely to add substantially to our mechanistic understanding of XFS (Figure 2).

Mice with human alleles of *LOXL1* and *CNTNAP2*

As the *LOXL1* genotype is critically important in the development of XFS, an important step in producing a new mouse model of XFS is to make mice with variant forms of the *Lox1l* gene. Mice with a completely nonfunctional allele of *Lox1l* have an elastic tissue disease⁴⁷ but do not develop XFS.^{48, 49} Although it is worth aging and assessing these mice in different environments, it remains possible that a null allele will not cause XFS. Since the specific DNA change(s) that render susceptibility to XFS are not clearly defined and may be intronic, making mice that are transgenic for a human bacterial artificial chromosome (BAC) containing a high-risk human allele of *LOXL1* is a high priority. If multiple high-risk alleles are defined from different populations, mice can be made with alleles conferring different degrees of risk with initial bias towards those with the strongest effect. Also, it will be important to evaluate multiple transgenic mouse lines with different expression levels.

LOXL1 genotype alone is unlikely to be sufficient to induce XFS, as many individuals with a high-risk allele do not have the disease. Thus, it will be important both to combine the human *LOXL1* transgene with mutations in other genes (such as *Lyst*) and to assess the effects of different environments. Decreased antioxidant capacity and increased propensity to inflammation may be important in XFS and XFG.^{38, 50, 51} Mutations that alter these systems can be introduced into the transgenic mice by breeding. Altered TGF- β signaling has been implicated in XFS, but transgenic or knockout mice affecting this pathway have not been demonstrated to develop XFS. Combining human *LOXL1* transgenes with mutations affecting TGF- β pathways may prove valuable, especially for the development of high IOP and glaucoma.⁵²⁻⁵⁵ Although less clearly important, mutations in *CNTNAP2* are

also implicated in XFS and it is worth assessing mice with *CNTNAP2* mutations and humanizing mice with human high-risk alleles.

Other XFS gene and models

Various efforts to identify XFS genes are underway, including genome wide association studies and genetic studies in human families. Due to the complexity of the disease these studies are not easy, but once more genes are identified they can be assessed in mice using the approaches discussed above. Genetic studies in families with many affected individuals may have the highest likelihood of success and are very important. Mutagenesis screens in mice are another powerful approach for providing animal models and discovering disease mechanism.^{46, 56-59} With adequate aging and attention to environment, such screens may provide key new models of XFS and XFG. One important strategy for discovering XFS genes and pathways would be to perform a mutagenesis screen using mice that are transgenic for human high-risk alleles of *LOXLI*. Modifier screens to identify genetic differences that alter phenotypes caused by the *LOXLI* transgene (or other human alleles) between mouse strains may prove valuable.⁶⁰⁻⁶³

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Figure 1. Characteristic iris transillumination defects of XFS/XFG

(A) Mouse homozygous for the *Lyst*^{bg-J} mutation imaged with standard slit-lamp illumination. Note concentric circles of transillumination defects (*red*). (B) Human XFS patient imaged with infrared videography showing concentric circles of transillumination defects (*white*). The two images have been scaled differently to promote comparison.

Figure 2. Strategies to model XFS/XFG in mice

Gene Discovery: A main priority is to identify genes associated with XFS. Large families provide a rare but important resource for identifying causal genes - they may provide the most effective mode of gene discovery. Genome-wide association studies (GWAS) remain important, but gene discovery can be difficult due to complexity and very large sample sizes are needed for further progress. The characterization of mice with mutations or transgenes affecting specific genes may also identify new XFS genes. Another avenue for gene discovery is characterization of a series of mouse strains that are specifically tailored for identifying genes that underlie complex diseases like XFS, such as Collaborative Cross (CC), Diversity Outcross (DO) and Recombinant Inbred (RI) mice. Mice can be screened for XFS based on the presence of exfoliation, concentric circular iris defects, or high IOP and glaucoma. **Mouse models:** Once human genes are identified, mouse models can be made by targeted mutagenesis or by making transgenic mice. A top priority is to create a humanized mouse model containing a high-risk allele of *LOXLI*. BAC transgenic mice with a human *LOXLI* allele and its regulatory elements will likely best recapitulate *LOXLI*-associated disease risk. **Mouse studies:** Humanized *LOXLI* mice and other mouse models need to be studied in the context of aging, genetic modifiers, environmental conditions, and gene-environment interactions. Using chemical mutagenesis to induce random point mutations in humanized *LOXLI* mice is an unbiased way to uncover genetic modifiers of *LOXLI*. Generating combined mutants with *LOXLI* variants and *Lyst*, humanized *CNTNAP2*, or newly discovered XFS genes is also an effective strategy to understand genetic interactions. Priority areas that may provide the quickest route to useful mouse models are indicated in bold.