Accumulation of copy-back viral genomes during respiratory syncytial virus infection is preceded by diversification of the copy-back viral genome population followed by selection

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Abstract

RNA viruses generate non-standard viral genomes during their replication, including viral genomes of the copy-back (cbVG) type that cannot replicate in the absence of a standard virus. cbVGs play a crucial role in shaping virus infection outcomes due to their ability to interfere with virus replication and induce strong immune responses. However, despite their critical role during infection, the principles that drive the selection and evolution of cbVGs within a virus population are poorly understood. As cbVGs are dependent on the virus replication machinery to be generated and replicated, we hypothesized that host factors that affect virus replication exert selective pressure on cbVGs and drive their evolution within a virus population. To test this hypothesis, we used respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) as model and took

an experimental evolution approach by serially passaging RSV in immune competent A549 control and immune deficient A549 STAT1 KO cells which allow higher levels of virus replication. As predicted, we observed that virus populations accumulated higher amounts of cbVGs in the more permissive A549 STAT1 KO cells over time but, unexpectedly, the predominant cbVG species after passages in the two conditions were different. While A549 STAT1 KO cells accumulated relatively short cbVGs, A549 control cells mainly contained cbVGs of much longer predicted size that have not been described previously. These long cbVGs were the first species generated in both cell lines *in vitro* and the predominant ones observed in samples from RSV infected patients. Although high replication levels are associated with cbVG generation and accumulation, our data show that high levels of virus replication are critical for cbVG population diversification, a process that preceded the generation of shorter cbVGs that selectively accumulated over time. Taken together, we show that selection and evolution of cbVGs within a virus population is shaped by how resistant (low replication) or permissive (high replication) a host is to RSV.

Key words: respiratory syncytial virus; copy-back viral genomes; experimental evolution

1. Introduction

The ability of RNA viruses to rapidly evolve is a major concern for public health due to the potential emergence of virus variants with enhanced pathogenicity (Carrasco-Hernandez et al., 2017). It is, therefore, of critical importance to understand the principles that drive virus evolution. An RNA virus consists of communities of standard viral genomes and non-standard viral genomes, such as copy-back viral genomes (cbVGs), that are generated during virus replication (Vignuzzi and Lopez, 2019). cbVGs are generated when the polymerase detaches

from the template strand at a break point and resumes elongation at a downstream rejoin point creating a complementary end to the 5'-end of the nascent genome (Kolakofsky, 1976; Lazzarini et al., 1981; Vignuzzi and Lopez, 2019). cbVGs are usually shorter than standard viral genomes and their flanking trailer promoters have a higher affinity for the viral polymerase than the leader promoter present at the 3' end of the standard viral genome, thereby providing a replication advantage to cbVGs (Li and Pattnaik, 1997; Rao and Huang, 1982). cbVGs depend on standard viral genomes to be generated and replicated. Many cbVGs are packaged, released from the infected cell, and can infect new host cells affecting the interaction of the virus with the host (Lazzarini et al., 1981; Vignuzzi and Lopez, 2019). cbVGs can inhibit standard viral genome replication by competing for the virus replication machinery or by inducing innate immune signaling pathways (Henle and Henle, 1943; Strahle et al., 2006; Sun et al., 2015; Tapia et al., 2013). Despite the critical role of cbVGs in shaping the infection outcome, most RNA virus evolution studies only consider standard viral genomes. As a result of this, the principles that drive the selection and evolution of cbVGs within a virus population are poorly understood.

As cbVGs depend on the virus replication machinery to be generated and replicated, we hypothesized that host factors that affect virus replication exert selective pressure on cbVGs and drive their evolution within a virus population. To test this hypothesis, we used the non-segmented negative sense RNA virus respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) as a model because RSV generates many cbVGs during infection *in vitro* and *in vivo* (Collins et al., 2013; Felt et al., 2021; Sun et al., 2015; Treuhaft and Beem, 1982). RSV cbVGs promote MAVS signaling during infection, which leads to the production of antiviral type I and III interferons (IFNs) (Sun et al., 2019). This antiviral response is dependent on cbVGs triggering the intracellular viral sensors RIG-I-like receptors, as has been shown for many non-segmented negative sense RNA viruses

(Baum et al., 2010; Ho et al., 2016; Linder et al., 2021; Mura et al., 2017; Runge et al., 2014; Strahle et al., 2007; Xu et al., 2015; Yount et al., 2008). The expression of type I and III IFNs leads to the activation of STAT1, which is followed by the production of hundreds of proteins that interfere with virus replication (Mesev et al., 2019). Interestingly, recently it has been shown that some viruses can activate STAT1 even earlier independently of IFNs through a RIG-I/MAVS/Syk pathway further establishing STAT1 as an important antiviral protein (Liu et al., 2021). *In vivo*, RSV can replicate to higher levels in STAT1 knockout mice compared to wildtype mice (Durbin et al., 2002; Hashimoto et al., 2005; Stier et al., 2017). Based on these previous studies, we decided to test if STAT1, as a host factor model that controls RSV replication, exerts selective pressure on RSV cbVGs and drive their evolution within an RSV population. Specifically, we took an experimental evolution approach and serially passaged RSV using a fixed-volume or fixed-MOI in immune competent A549 control cells or in immune deficient A549 STAT1 KO cells. As RSV also generates cbVGs in infected patients (Felt et al., 2021), we also analyzed cbVGs in nasal washes from RSV infected pediatric patients to assess what cbVGs are selected for during natural infections.

To detect cbVGs in RNA-seq data, we used an updated version of our previously published Viral Opensource DVG Key Algorithm (VODKA) (Sun et al., 2019), now called VODKA2, which identifies cbVG reads based on their alignment to unique junction sequences that contain a break and rejoin point. Predicted cbVG species sizes can then be calculated based on the break and rejoin points. Our study revealed that the diversity of cbVGs generated is much larger than previously thought. We found that cbVGs of longer predicted sizes that have not been described previously are generated first *in vitro* and found predominantly in samples from RSV infected

patients, and that high virus replication levels led to cbVG population diversification that preceded the generation and selective accumulation of shorter cbVGs.

2. Methodology

2.1 Cells and viruses

A549 control cells, A549 STAT1 KO cells and HEp2 cells (HeLa-derived human epithelial cells, ATCC, CCL23) were cultured at 5% CO2 and 37°C with Dulbecco's modified Eagle's medium supplemented with 10% fetal bovine serum (FBS), 1 mM sodium pyruvate, 2 mM L-Glutamine, and 50 mg/ml gentamicin. The A549 CRISPR cell lines were kindly provided by Dr. Susan Weiss (University of Pennsylvania) and have been previously characterized (Whelan et al., 2019; Xu et al., 2017). All cell lines were treated with mycoplasma removal agent (MP Biomedicals) and routinely tested for mycoplasma before use. As previously described, RSV A2 was obtained from ATCC (#VR-1540) and amplified in Hep2 cells at a low MOI of 0.01 to generate RSV stocks with low cbVG contents (Sun and Lopez, 2016). We used these stocks as parental (P0) virus stocks for our experiments.

2.2 Passaging experiments

In fixed-volume passaging experiments, for the first passage, A549 control and STAT1 KO cells were infected at an MOI of 10 with an RSV stock depleted of cbVGs (P0) to focus on *de* novo generation of cbVGs. We chose this MOI as higher MOIs favor the accumulation of non-standard viral genomes, including cbVGs, in virus populations (Huang, 1973; Kingsbury et al., 1970; Stampfer et al., 1971; Sun and Lopez, 2016; Thompson and Yin, 2010; Von Magnus, 1954; von, 1951; Welch et al., 2020). Two days post infection (before cells start dying

significantly (Collins et al., 2013)), cells were collected and centrifuged for 5 minutes at 280 x g to separate supernatant from cells. Most of the supernatant was transferred to a new tube and kept on ice to preserve viral particles. The remaining supernatant was left to cover the cell pellet to make sure the cell pellet does not dry. As most RSV particles remain attached to cells (Collins et al., 2013), three freeze/thaw (dry ice/ethanol + 37C water bath) cycles were performed on the cell pellet to release virus particles. Cells were vortexed after each freeze/thaw cycle to further increase virus particle release. Cells were then centrifuged for 5 minutes at 280 x g to separate cell debris from supernatant with released viral particles. Supernatant from freeze/thaw cycles was then mixed with supernatant that was kept on ice and 36 ul, which represent ~1/25th of the total mixed supernatant, was then used to infect the next round of fresh cells (passage 2). These procedures and volume were kept consistent throughout the remaining passages. We chose a ratio of ~1/25 as in a previous study it was shown to lead to accumulation of non-standard viral genomes (Williams et al., 2016). At each passage the remaining supernatant was snap frozen in dry ice/ethanol to preserve viral particles for downstream analysis (titration and RNAseq/VODKA2 analysis).

For the fixed-MOI passaging experiment, A549 control and STAT1 KO cells were initially infected at an MOI of 0.1 or 10 with an RSV stock depleted of cbVGs (P0). The steps between each passage and preservation of samples were performed such as for the fixed-volume experiment. However, supernatants were tittered in between each passage to maintain the same MOI throughout the 10 passages. For the fixed-MOI of 10 experiment, an MOI of 10 was maintained if titer and volumes allowed it. For the first 6 passages it was possible to use an MOI of 10, however, for passages 7, 8, 9 and 10, the MOIs were reduced to 5, 8, 5 and 5 respectively.

2.3 Titration

Supernatants were tittered by $TCID_{50}$ on Hep2 cells to assess the amount of infectious viral particles as previously published (Sun and Lopez, 2016). Briefly, supernatants were serially diluted, added on Hep2 cells, incubated for 4-5 days and after addition of crystal violet the last dilution with CPE was determined to calculate the TCID50.

2.4 Nasopharyngeal aspirates

Nasopharyngeal aspirates from pediatric patients were obtained from the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP). The CHOP cohort was previously described in detail (Felt et al., 2021). All samples used were banked samples obtained as part of standard testing of patients. Samples were de-identified and sent to our lab for RNA extraction and cbVG detection.

2.5 RNASeq

Total RNA was extracted using TRIzol LS (Invitrogen). RNA quality was assessed using an Agilent TapeStation or Bioanalyzer (Agilent Technologies) prior to cDNA library preparation. For the Figure 1, 2 and 3 dataset total cDNA libraries were prepared using the Illumina TruSeq Stranded Total RNA Library Prep Kit with Ribo-Zero Gold, for the Figure 4 dataset cDNA libraries were prepared using Sigma SeqPlex RNA Amplification Kit, and for Figure 5 and 6 dataset total cDNA libraries were prepared using the Illumina Non-Stranded Total RNA Library Prep Kit with Ribo-Zero Gold. Samples from Figures 1, 2 and 3 were run on Illumina NextSeq 500 to generate 75 bp, single-end reads, resulting in ~ 45–72 million reads per sample. Samples from Figures 4, 5 and 6 were run on NovaSeq 6000 to generate 150 bp, paired-end reads, resulting in ~33–62 million reads per sample. Only R1 reads were used for analysis. Average phred quality score of samples ranged between 34.7-36.1. Raw RNAseq data from samples S1-S3 from Figures 1, 2 and 3 were used in a previous study (Sun et al., 2019).

2.6 Viral Opensource DVG Key Algorithm 2 (VODKA2)

After trimming sequencing adapters (Illumina Universal Adapter – AGATCGGAAGAG, https://support.illumina.com/) from the 3' end of the reads using Cutadapt (DOI:10.14806/ej.17.1.200) and removing all reads aligned to the human genome (GRCh38, GRC website) with Bowtie2 (https://doi.org/10.1038/nmeth.1923), an updated version of VODKA (VODKA2.0 beta, https://github.com/eachouri/VODKA2/tree/main/VODKA2-v2.0b-master), was used to detect cbVG junction reads deriving from the entire viral genome (*in vitro* reference genome KT992094.1 and clinical samples reference genome KC731482.1). We only focused on cbVGs generated from the 5' end of the viral genome, which are the most described in the literature (Vignuzzi and Lopez, 2019). Briefly, VODKA2.0 beta first runs a Bowtie2 alignment of the reads against a database representing all theoretical cbVGs potentially present in the dataset, followed by an extra filtering step based on the Basic Local Alignment Search Tool (Blastn v.2.11.0, https://doi.org/10.1016/S0022-2836(05)80360-2) alignment of the predicted break and rejoin junction sequences against the virus reference genome (BLAST options: '-word_size 11 -gapopen 5 -gapextend 2 -penalty -3 -reward 2 -evalue 0.001 -perc_identity 0.1'). Only sequences with two alignment ranges reported on opposite strands of the reference genome are considered cbVG reads. Sequences with BLAST alignment positions that are not consistent with the initial Bowtie2 alignment are discarded. An extended report is then generated, including in particular the aggregation of cbVG junction reads into 'species', i.e. junction reads leading to cbVGs of exact same theoretical size but with break and rejoin occurring within a range of +/-5 nucleotides. 'Species' with only 1 read were removed from analysis. Break and rejoin positions from VODKA2.0 beta were used to calculate the predicted size of cbVGs [(break position-genome size)+(rejoin position-genome size)+2].

2.7 Statistical analysis

Statistical analyses were performed as indicated in each figure legend using GraphPad Prism v.9.

3. Results

3.1 cbVGs accumulate to high levels after 20 passages in A549 STAT1 KO cells but not in A549 control cells.

To examine the evolution of cbVG populations and selection of cbVG species, we passaged a fixed volume of supernatant from RSV infected cells twenty times in A549 control cells or A549 STAT1 KO cells **(Figure 1A)**. To assess *de novo* generation of cbVGs we started with a parental virus stock (Passage 0, P0) that contained low levels of cbVGs. We confirmed the low cbVG content by our previously established RT-PCR method and RNAseq/VODKA2 pipeline **(Table 1)** (Sun et al., 2015; Sun et al., 2019). We carried out three experimental evolution replicates (3 lineages) for each cell line and repeated this experiment independently three times. For simplicity in visual representation, one representative repeat is shown throughout. As expected, RSV replication, as measured by titer, was overall higher in A549 STAT1 KO cells than A549 control cells, at least for the first 14 passages, for all three lineages **(Figure 1B)**. RSV replication dropped to very low levels for several passages in A549 control cells, whereas RSV replication was maintained to high levels throughout the entire experiment in A549 STAT1 KO cells **(Figure 1B).** To assess how cbVGs evolved in these two cell lines, we performed RNASeq followed by analysis using VODKA2 for the detection of cbVGs in the parental stock (P0) and in passage 20. cbVG junction reads were detected in all samples **(Table**

1) and the cbVG content was increased relative to P0 in virus passaged in A549 STAT1 KO cells (S1-S3) but not in A549 control cells (C1-C3) **(Table 1 and Figure 1C)**. These data demonstrate that an environment that does not allow RSV to maintain high replication levels, such as A549 control cells, prevents cbVG accumulation. However, an environment that allows RSV to maintain high replication levels, such as A549 STAT1 KO cells, promotes cbVG accumulation. This is consistent with the literature as most studies use permissive cells or cells with innate immune defects to generate viral stocks with high cbVG content (Santak et al., 2015; Sun and Lopez, 2016; Tilston-Lunel et al., 2021; Welch et al., 2020).

Table 1: RNAseq/VODKA2 data of parental virus population and passage 20 virus populations.

Sample	non-junction reads (=virus reads)	junction reads (=cbVG reads)	Normalized cbVG reads per 10^6 virus reads	Median break position (IQR)	Median rejoin position (IQR)	Median predicted cbVG size in bp (IQR)
P0	5504075	18	3	4049 (1524-5256)	4053 (1558-6090)	22346 (19102-27366)
C1	4009829	4	1	2509 (964-4053)	2546 (989-4102)	25394 (22293-28495)
C2	6780899	8	1	2978 (2727-2978)	3009 (2746-6936)	24462 (16611-24977)
C3	6184077	26	4	2793 (966-8990)	3009 (987-9014)	24462 (12444-28495)
S1	2268944	2261	996	14953 (14596-14973)	15166 (15058-15175)	309 (303-794)
S2	2838659	2273	801	14724 (13775-14725)	15048 (14942-15049)	675 (675-1733)
S3	3284630	1684	513	14895 (14724-14896)	15182 (15048-15183)	370 (370-675)

IQR = interquartile range

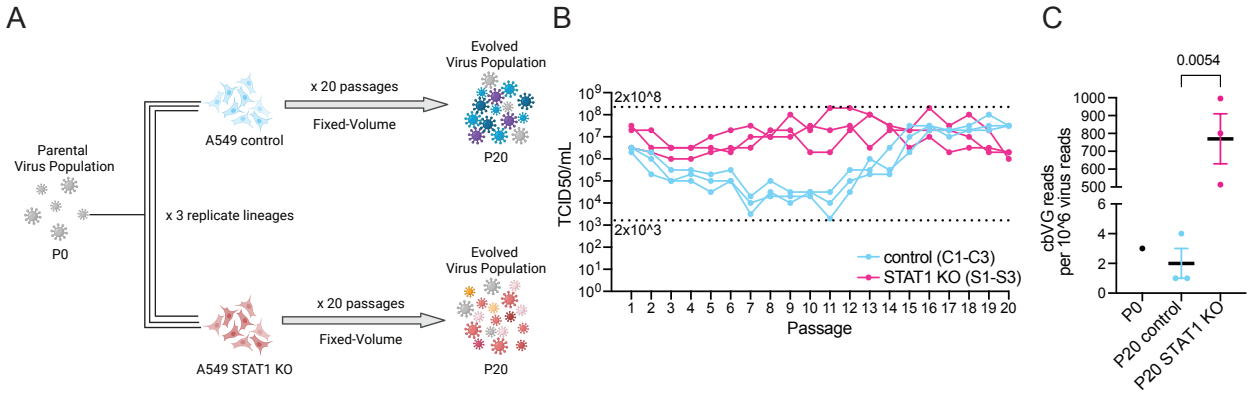

Figure 1: Experimental evolution design and detection of infectious viral particles and cbVGs. (A) Schematic of experimental evolution experiment. (B) TCID50 assay was performed on Hep2 cells for all samples. Dashed lines indicate the minimum and maximum TCID50/ml values

reached in the experiment. (C) cbVG reads detected by VODKA2 were normalized per every 1 million virus reads. Each dot represents the median of a lineage. Data are shown as mean ± s.e.m. Significant P value for two-tailed unpaired t test between A549 control and A549 STAT1 KO (n = 3 lineages) is indicated.

3.2 Short cbVGs accumulate after 20 passages in A549 STAT1 KO cells but not in A549 control cells.

We next determined the break (where the polymerase fell off) and rejoin (where the polymerase re-attached) genome position of the cbVGs present in each sample **(Figure 2A)**. As cbVGs unique sequence and size can be predicted by its break/rejoin positions, we used these data to determine if different cbVG species were present in our samples. In previous studies, we set up VODKA to detect cbVGs generated only on the last 3000 bp of the RSV genome as we were only interested in the cbVG species with the most reads (Sun et al., 2019). However, in this study, we assessed the entire cbVG population and thus we set up VODKA2 to identify cbVG junction reads generated through the entire RSV genome. We found that most cbVG reads (98.5%) in our dataset (P0, C1-C3 and S1-S3) had their break and rejoin position in the last 3000 bp of the genome (red box) **(Figure 2B)**. However, by running VODKA2 on the entire genome, we discovered novel cbVG species with break and rejoin positions outside the 3000 bp range (31 out of 75 cbVG species) and some with predicted sizes longer than the genome (20 out of 75 cbVG species > 15223 bp) **(Figure 2B and 2C)**. Although only short cbVGs accumulate, these data show that cbVG populations are diverse and that cbVGs are generated across the entire genome.

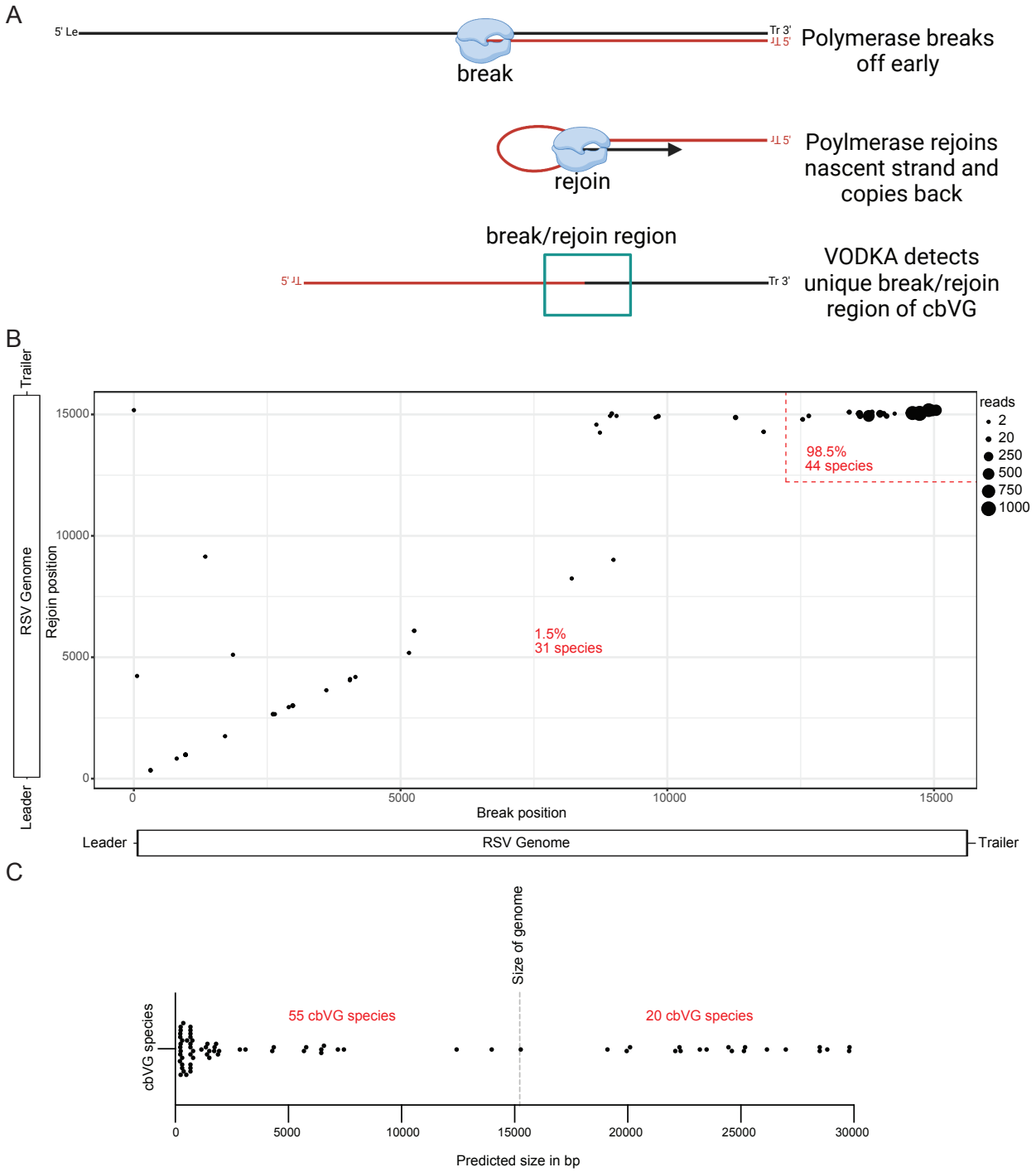

Figure 2: RNAseq/VODKA2 approach and detection of cbVG species across the entire genome. (A) Schematic of cbVG generation and cbVG detection by VODKA2. (B) Each dot represents a cbVG species and its break/rejoin position. The size of the dots represents the number of reads. A legend was added as a reference for size. The percentage of cbVG reads and number of cbVG species within or outside the last 3000bp of the RSV genome (red box) are indicated in red. (C) Each dot represents a cbVG species. The number of cbVG species above or below genome size are indicated in red.

We then focused more specifically on the cbVG species that were present in the virus populations that were passaged twenty times in A549 control and STAT1 KO cells. It is important to note that we mainly detected *de novo* generated cbVGs, as only 1 cbVG species from P0 (green dots) was found at P20 **(Figure 3A)**. We observed that cbVGs in virus populations from A549 STAT1 KO cells had break and rejoin positions predominantly in the last 3000bp of the RSV genome (red box) corresponding to cbVG species of predicted shorter size as compared to virus populations from A549 control cells **(Figure 3A)**. To consider variability and stochasticity in cbVG species generation and accumulation, we also plotted the median break **(Figure 3B)**, rejoin **(Figure 3C)**, and predicted size **(Figure 3D)** for each lineage **(Table 1)**. The median values of the 3 lineages in each condition were similar and the differences observed in break, rejoin, and predicted size in different conditions were statistically different **(Figure 3B-3D)**. Finally, we observed that in each A549 STAT1 KO cells lineage (S1-S3) cbVG species of short sizes dominated the virus population after 20 passages **(Figure 3E)**. Overall, our data demonstrate that short cbVG species are selected for in permissive A549 STAT1 KO cells. This selection was not observed in virus populations passaged in more resistant A549 control cells. Instead, short cbVGs were rarely generated and no individual predicted longer cbVG species became predominant.

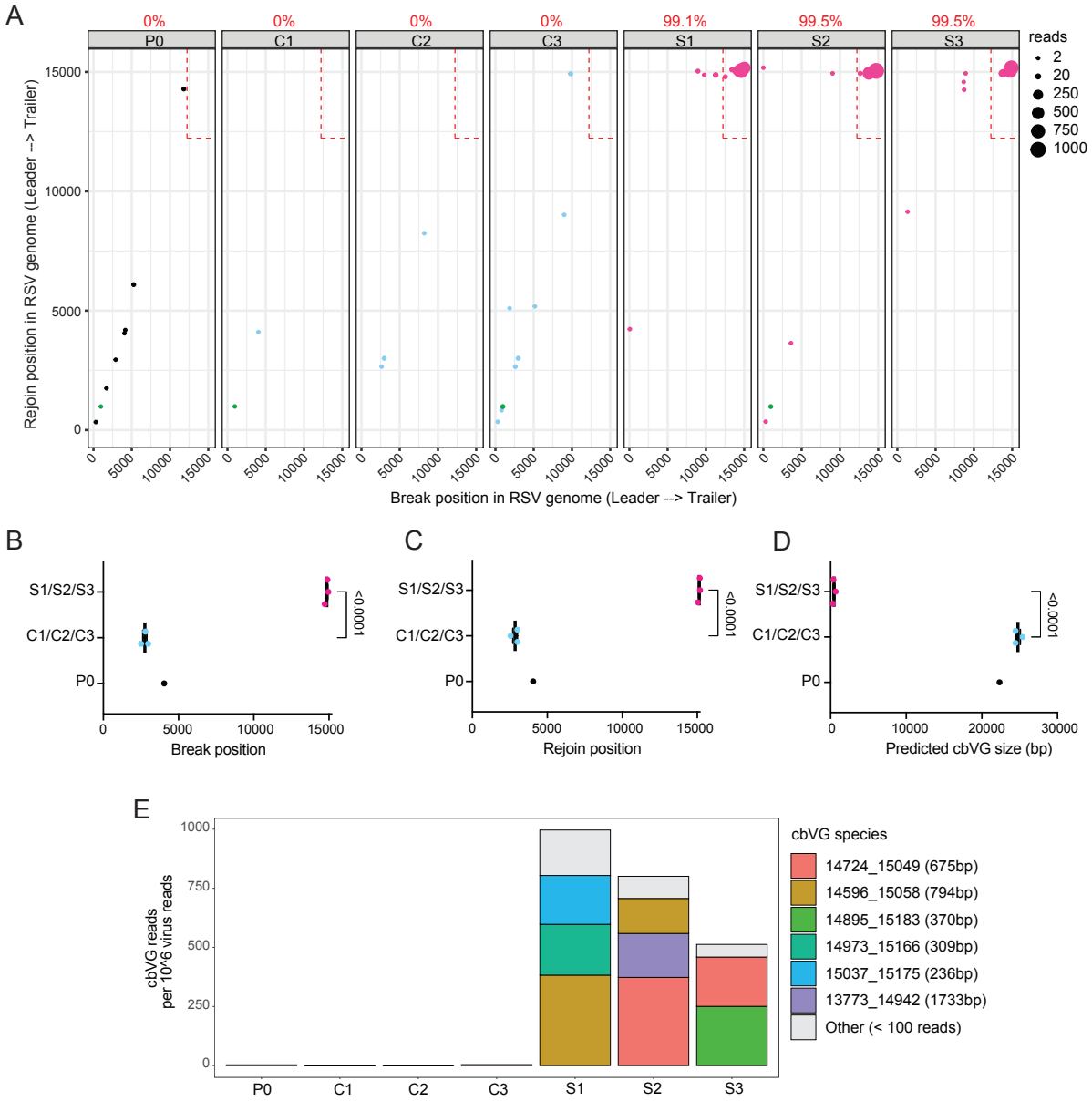

Figure 3: cbVG species in A549 control and A549 STAT1 KO cells at passage 20. (A) Each dot represents a cbVG species and its break/rejoin position. The size of the dots represents the number of reads. A legend was added as a reference for size. The black dots are cbVGs species from P0, the blue dots are cbVG species from A549 control cells, the pink dots are cbVG species from A549 STAT1 KO cells and the green dots represent cbVG species that were conserved from P0. The percentage of cbVG reads within the last 3000bp of the RSV genome (red box) are indicated in red above each plot. (B-D) Mean break position, rejoin position and predicted cbVG size are shown in these graphs. Each dot represents the median of a lineage. Data are shown as mean ± s.e.m. Significant P values for two-tailed unpaired t test between A549 control and A549 STAT1 KO (n = 3 lineages) are indicated. (E) Stacked bar graph shows cbVG species with at least 100 reads present in each sample. The legend includes information on break position, rejoin

position and predicted cbVG size. cbVG species with less than 100 reads were grouped together as “Other”.

3.3 Longer predicted cbVGs are predominant in nasal washes of hospitalized RSV-infected pediatric patients.

We detected predominantly cbVG species of longer predicted sizes in virus populations from A549 control cells. Longer predicted cbVG species were also present in virus populations from A549 STAT1 KO cells, however they were outnumbered by shorter cbVG species. In both cell lines, longer predicted cbVGs species had less reads, which indicates they do not accumulate like the shorter cbVG species **(Figure S1)**. To determine whether long cbVGs are of biological significance, we sought to assess if these longer predicted cbVGs could be detected during natural infections. We have previously shown that detection of RSV cbVGs in nasal secretions of infected patients is associated with distinct clinical outcomes. To determine what cbVG species are generated in natural RSV infections, we chose six representative samples from RSV-infected pediatric patients that were previously confirmed to contain cbVGs by RT-PCR (Felt et al., 2021). We first extracted RNA from the nasal washes and analyzed them following our RNAseq/VODKA2 pipeline. We observed that cbVGs generated within the last 3000bp of the genome (red box) were almost absent in the samples, and mostly cbVG species of longer predicted size were detected **(Figure 4 and Table 2)**. These results indicate that cbVGs species of a longer predicted length are also generated during natural infections and are the most predominant cbVG species. Overall, although cbVGs of longer predicted size do not accumulate as much as short cbVGs *in vitro*, these newly discovered species of cbVGs are predominant *in vivo* and associate with distinct clinical outcomes as reported in our previous study (Felt et al.,

2021), emphasizing the importance of taken them in consideration when studying RSV cbVG populations.

Table 2: RNAseq/VODKA2 data of clinical samples.

Sample	Median break position (IQR)	Median rejoin position (IQR)	Median predicted cbVG size in bp (IQR)
cl2	3286 (2222-5134)	3352 (2300-5170)	23835 (20160-25942)
cl59	3661 (2249-4935)	3705 (2333-4982)	23017 (20526-25828)
cl79	2981 (2000-4226)	3030 (2032-4267)	24445 (21969-26428)
cl87	4361 (3014-4794)	4377 (3031-4820)	21726 (20854-24422)
cl99	4582 (3556-4794)	4608 (3589-4820)	21275 (20854-23317)
cl103	3892 (3027-4794)	3923 (3060-4821)	22655 (20854-24370)

IQR = interquartile range

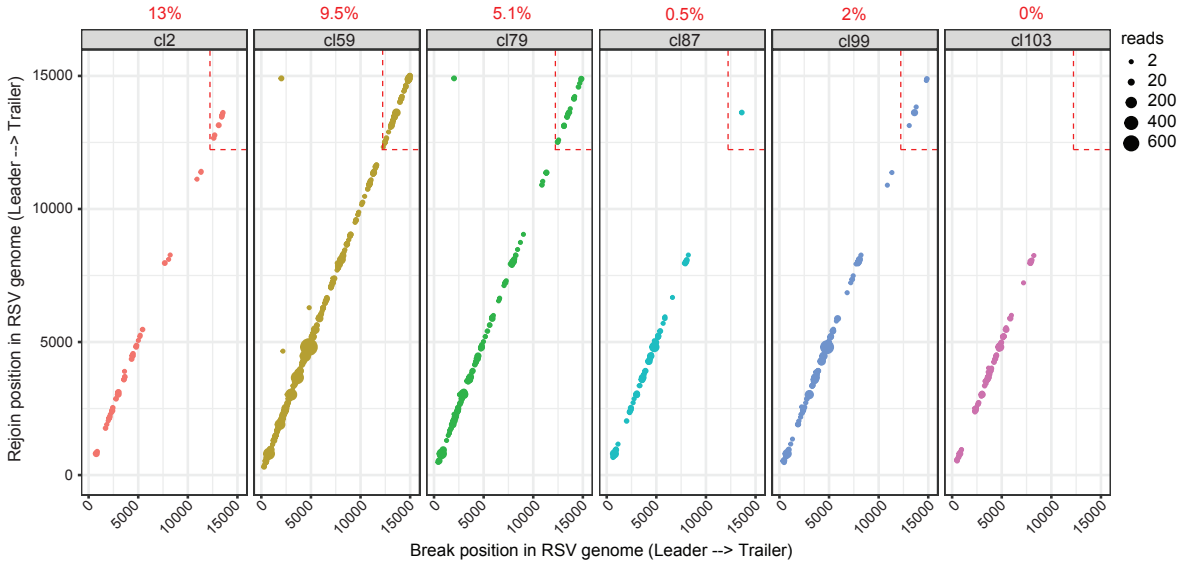

Figure 4: cbVGs in nasal washes of RSV-infected hospitalized pediatric Each dot represents a cbVG species and its break/rejoin position. The size of the dots represents the number of reads. A legend was added as a reference for size. The percentage of cbVG reads within the last 3000bp of the RSV genome (red box) are indicated in red above each plot.

3.4 Virus replication levels drive cbVG species selection

We next investigated what drives the difference in cbVG populations at passage 20 between A549 control cells and A549 STAT1 KO cells. As cbVGs are dependent on the virus replication machinery to be generated and replicated, we hypothesized that STAT1 exerts selective pressure on cbVGs by limiting virus replication and drives their evolution within a virus population. To determine how cbVG populations evolved over time in control and STAT1 KO cells, we analyzed passages 0, 4, 8, 12, 16 and 20 using our RNAseq/VODKA2 pipeline. As cbVG populations of the 3 lineages for each cell line were very similar **(Figure 3)**, we chose one representative lineage per cell line (C3 and S2).

To assess this hypothesis, we compared virus replication kinetics, using virus reads as a proxy, to the disappearance and emergence of cbVG species in control and STAT1 KO cells **(Figure 5A-B)**. We categorized cbVG species based on their break and rejoin position occurring within or outside the last 3000 bp of the RSV genome as we have done in the previous figures **(Figure 2B, 3A, 4A and 5B)**. We observed that through passages a decrease in virus replication levels associated with a decrease in cbVG species in both control and STAT1 KO cells (control: passage 4, 8 and 12; STAT1 KO: passage 4) **(Figure 5A-B)**. In both cell lines, the number of cbVG species generated within the last 3000bp of the viral genomes initially dropped more through the passages than the number of cbVG species generated outside of this range, resulting in cbVG populations which only (control: passage 4, 8 and 12) or mainly (STAT1 KO: passage 4) consisted of longer cbVG species **(Figure 5B-C)**. This was followed by an increase in virus replication levels that associated with an increase in cbVG species (control: passage 16 and 20; STAT1 KO: passage 8 and 12) **(Figure 5A-B)**. In control cells, higher virus replication levels associated with the appearance of shorter cbVG species generated within the last 3000bp of the

viral genome, however by passage 20 these species did not accumulate within the cbVG population in these conditions **(Figure 5B-D)**. We also did not observe an increase in overall cbVG content within the virus population by passage 20 **(Figure 5E)**. In STAT1 KO cells, virus replication levels began declining after passage 12 and associated with the appearance of shorter cbVG species **(Figure 5 A-D)**. These shorter cbVG species then accumulated and became predominant, which led to an increase in overall cbVG content within the virus population by passage 20 **(Figure 5 C-E)**.

Overall, these data show that longer predicted cbVG species are predominant in both cell lines until high virus replication levels lead to diversification of cbVGs species and generation of shorter cbVGs. In STAT1 KO cells, where high virus replication levels were maintained throughout the experiment, we observed that shorter cbVGs were selected and accumulated, which allowed for an increase in the overall cbVG content within the virus population. However, in control cells this selection was not observed, likely because high virus replication levels were not maintained throughout the experiment and peak virus replication levels were not reached before passage 20.

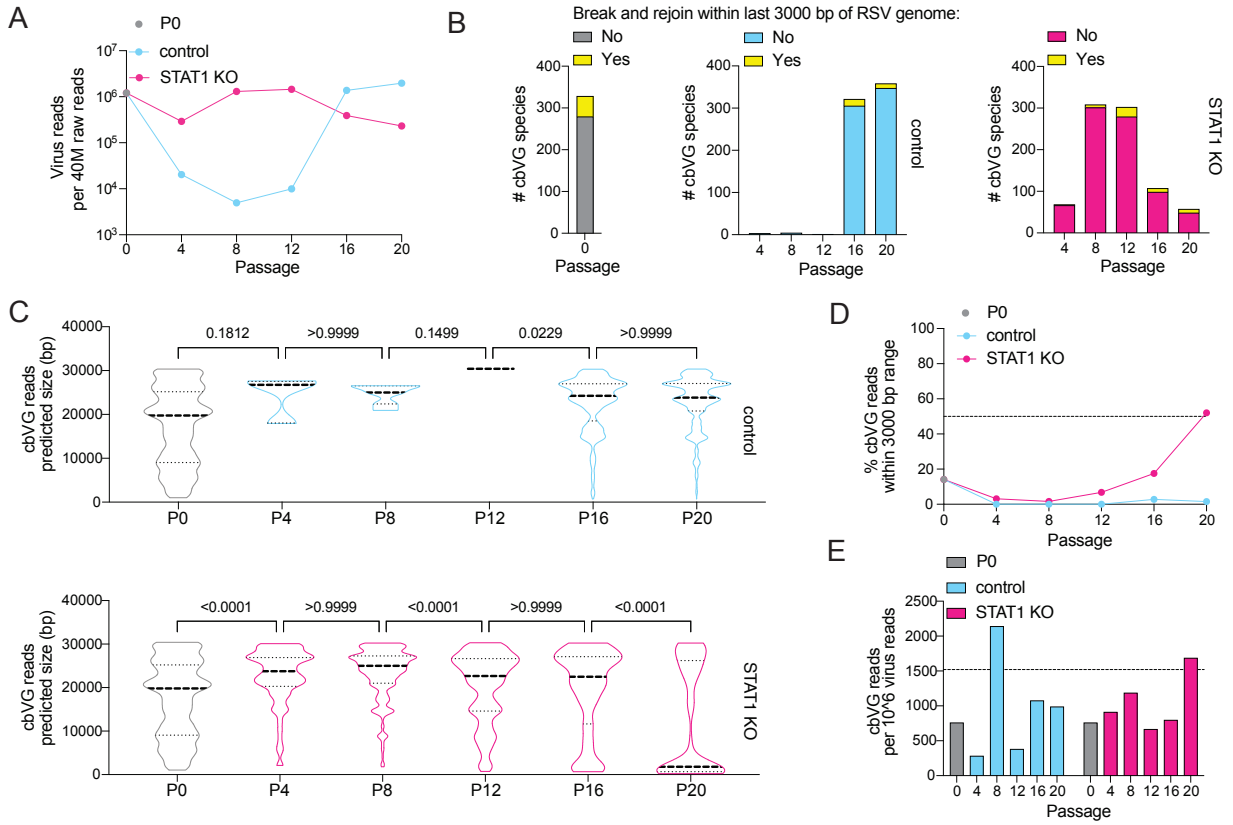

Figure 5: High replication levels in A549 STAT1 KO drive the selection of short cbVG species (A) Line graph shows virus reads normalized per 40 million total raw reads for different passages in A549 control (blue) or STAT1 KO (pink) cells. (B) Stacked bar graph showing amount of cbVG species per passage. cbVG species that were generated within the last 3000bp of the RSV genome are indicated in yellow. (C) Data are shown as truncated violin plots with median (thick dashed line) and interquartile ranges (fine dotted line). P values for Kruskal-Wallis test with Dunn post-hoc test between passages are indicated. (D) Line graph shows percent cbVG reads that that were generated within the last 3000bp of the RSV genome. A dashed line was added to represent 50%. (E) Bar graphs shows cbVG reads normalized to 1 million virus reads. A dashed line was added at 1520, which represents a two-fold increase as compared to P0.

To more directly address if virus replication levels are the major driver of cbVG selection, we serially passaged RSV at a fixed MOI of either 0.1 or 10 in both A549 control and STAT1 KO cells for 10 passages. As opposed to the fixed-volume experiment, these conditions would normalize virus replication levels between control and STAT1 KO cells throughout the experiment. MOI of 0.1 was chosen to limit virus replication levels. MOI of 10 was chosen to

promote virus replication to high levels. As with the fixed-volume experiment **(Figure 1A)**, we carried out three experimental evolution replicates for each cell line. We hypothesized that if high replication levels are the major driver of short cbVG selection, we should observe selection of short cbVGs only at a fixed-MOI of 10 but in both cell lines due to normalization of virus replication levels.

As expected, replication levels were similar between control and STAT1 KO cells throughout the experiment for both MOIs **(Figure 6A and B)**. We analyzed P0 and P10 viral stocks using the RNAseq/VODKA2 pipeline and found that RSV populations contained more cbVGs when passaged at an MOI of 10 than 0.1 in both cell lines **(Figure 6C)**. At MOI 10 we noticed an accumulation of cbVGs with break and rejoins occurring in the last 3000 bp of the RSV genome (red box) corresponding with cbVGs of short length regardless of the cell line **(Figure 6D)**. This did not occur at an MOI 0.1 where mainly longer cbVG were present **(Figure 6D)**. To assess if the differences observed were consistent between lineages, we plotted the median break, rejoin and predicted size values for each lineage in each condition **(Figure 6E-G)**. All three analyses showed more drastic differences between MOI 0.1 and 10 than among control and STAT1 KO cells, which we expected due to normalization of virus replication levels between cell lines **(Figure 6E-G)**. At MOI 10, we noticed selection of shorter cbVGs that took over populations **(Figure 6H)**, similar to what we observed in STAT1 KO in the fixed-volume experiment **(Figure 3E)**. Notably, at passage 10, some of the most predominant cbVGs species were of longer predicted length than the most predominant species at passage 20 in the fixed-volume experiment suggesting that the average length of accumulated cbVG species get shorter over time **(Figure 3E and Figure 6H)**. Finally, we did observe that shorter cbVG species tended

to accumulate more in STAT1 KO than control cells during MOI 10 passages, suggesting that other factors might play a minor role alongside virus replication levels **(Figure 6G)**.

Taken together, these data confirm that high MOI (high replication) conditions are a main driver of the generation and selection of short cbVGs that accumulate within virus populations. We also show that more resistant cell lines, such as A549 control, which were not susceptible to cbVG accumulation in the fixed-volume experiment, can change phenotype if saturated by high MOI conditions. Meanwhile, the more permissive cell line A549 STAT1 KO, which was susceptible to cbVG accumulation in the fixed-volume experiment, can change phenotype if MOI conditions are maintained to very low levels.

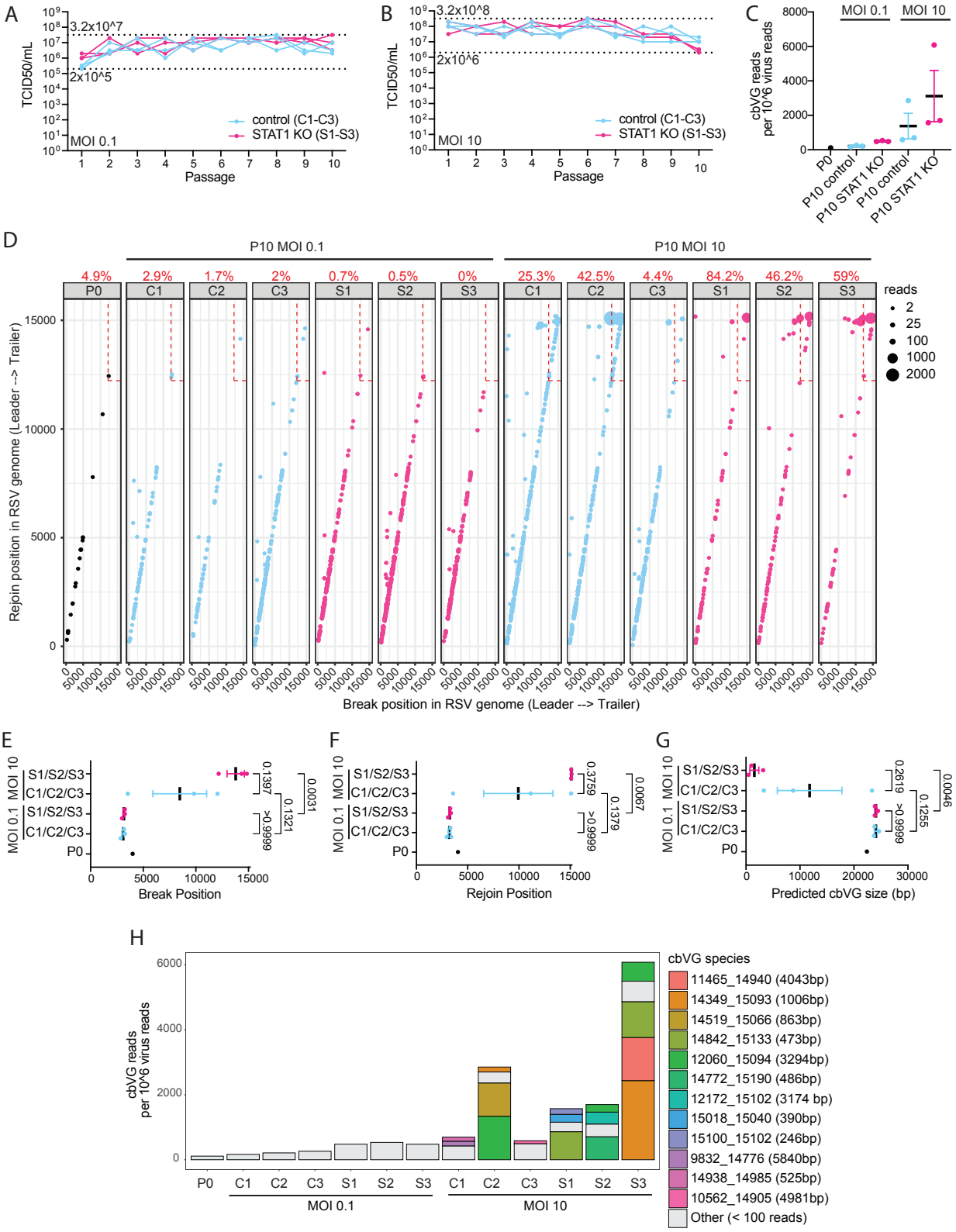

Figure 6: Selection of short cbVG species only occurs at high MOI conditions (A-B) TCID50 assay was performed on Hep2 cells for all samples from fixed MOI 0.1 and 10 experiment.

Dashed lines indicate the minimum and maximum TCID50/ml values reached in each experiment. (C) cbVG reads detected by VODKA2 were normalized per every 1 million virus reads. Each dot represents the median of a lineage. Data are shown as mean ± s.e.m. (D) Each dot represents a cbVG species and its break/rejoin position. The size of the dots represents the number of reads. A legend was added as a reference for size. The percentage of cbVG reads within the last 3000bp of the RSV genome (red box) are indicated in red above each plot. (E-G) Mean break position, rejoin position and predicted cbVG size are shown in these graphs. Each dot represents the median of a lineage. Data are shown as mean ± s.e.m. P values for one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) with Bonferroni post-hoc test for all groups are indicated. (H) Stacked bar graph shows cbVG species with at least 100 reads present in each sample. The legend includes information on break position, rejoin position and predicted cbVG size. cbVG species with less than 100 reads were grouped together as "Other".

4. Discussion

Although non-standard viral genomes play a crucial role in shaping virus infection outcomes (Felt et al., 2021; Sun et al., 2015; Vasilijevic et al., 2017), the principles that drive the selection and evolution of non-standard viral genomes within a virus population are poorly understood. *In vitro*, non-standard viral genomes usually accumulate within virus populations when RNA viruses are serially passaged at a high multiplicity of infection (MOI) (Huang, 1973; Kingsbury et al., 1970; Stampfer et al., 1971; Sun and Lopez, 2016; Thompson and Yin, 2010; Von Magnus, 1954; von, 1951; Welch et al., 2020). These studies suggest that accumulation of non-standard viral genomes is favored by increasing the number of cells infected, the virus replication within cells, and/or the number of co-infected cells with standard and non-standard viral genomes. However, how non-standard viral genome species change when an increase in the cbVG content of a virus population occurs remains unknown.

Non-standard viral genomes of the copy-back type are historically described as significantly shorter than standard viral genomes (Huang, 1973; Huang and Wagner, 1966; Kingsbury et al., 1970; Lazzarini et al., 1981; Vignuzzi and Lopez, 2019) and it is unclear if the bias for a shorter size is due to preferential generation of short cbVGs, faster replication rate and accumulation of

short cbVGs, and/or due to limitations in detection methods. It is also not clear how cbVG species are selected for under different environmental conditions and how this selection impacts the evolution of the overall cbVG population. In this study, we address how cbVG selection and cbVG population evolution is affected by a permissive host environment that allows high replication levels (A549 STAT1 KO cells) and a resistant host environment that limits replication levels (A549 control cells). Overall, we found that cbVGs of a longer predicted size predominate first and that high RSV replication levels lead to cbVG population diversification. This diversification leads to the generation and selection of shorter cbVGs that later accumulate and allow for an increase in the cbVG content within a virus population **(Figure 7)**.

It is important to note that although permissive STAT1 KO cells accumulated significantly more cbVGs than resistant control cells, cbVGs were found in both cell lines **(Figure 1B and Table 1).** These data suggest that accumulation but not generation of cbVGs is dependent on "high" virus replication. This is consistent with our recent study where we showed that cbVGs were found in nasal washes of experimentally RSV-infected adult patients before high virus replication levels were reached (Felt et al., 2021). Taken together, our study also shows that generation of cbVGs is inherent to RSV replication and that most RSV populations will contain cbVGs. This is likely true for many other RNA viruses and, as cbVGs have been shown to play a crucial role in virus infections, underlines the need to consider cbVGs in the study of RNA virus populations.

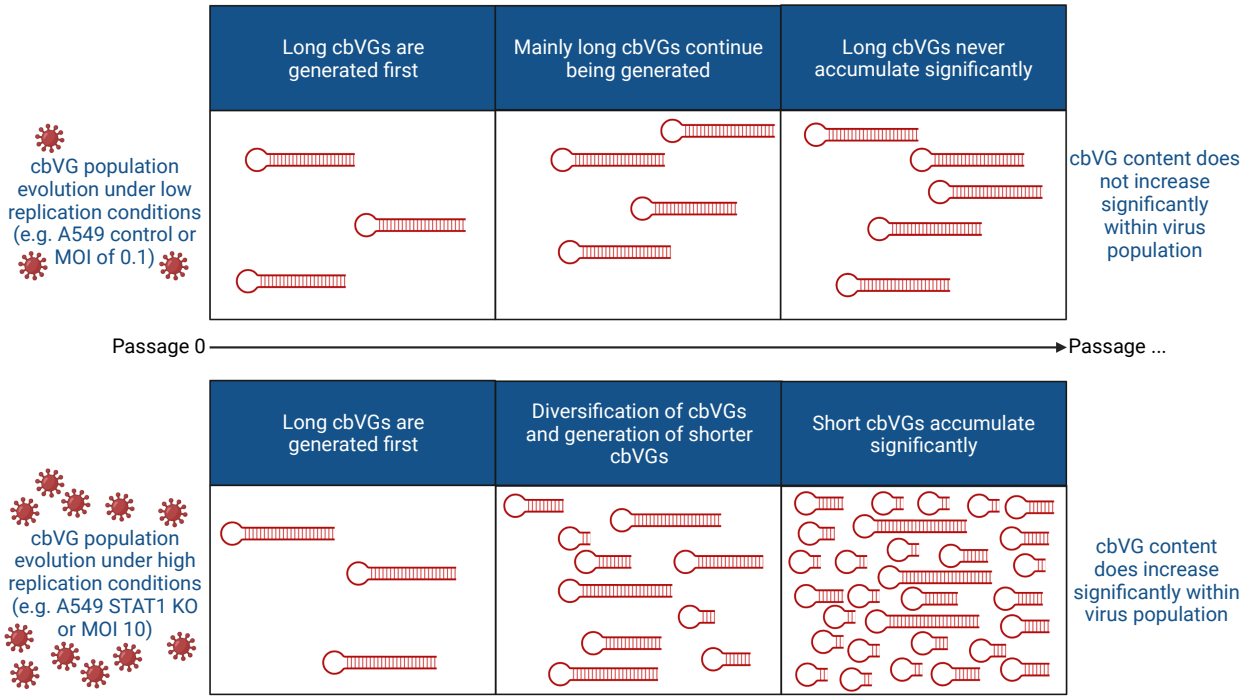

Figure 7: Schematic summary of cbVG population evolution in resistant and permissive host. Summary of the cbVG population changes observed in our study over time in different host environments.

Next-generation sequencing and pipelines to analyze virus populations have improved significantly in recent years (Beauclair et al., 2018; Bosma et al., 2019; Boussier et al., 2020; Jaworski and Routh, 2017; Olmo-Uceda, 2022; Routh and Johnson, 2014; Timm et al., 2014). In this study, we used an updated version of our previously published RNAseq/VODKA pipeline, now called VODKA2, to study cbVG populations (Sun et al., 2019). Previous methods such as RT-PCR are limited to the detection of short cbVGs that are of high abundance, however, our RNAseq/VODKA2 pipeline can overcome these challenges and detect cbVG species of various predicted sizes and abundance **(Figure 2B and 2C)**. Therefore, VODKA2 revealed that the diversity of cbVGs generated by RSV is much larger than previously thought. The use of stranded total RNA library preparation kits can further allow VODKA2 to determine if cbVGs

are only generated (only genomic) or are also being replicated by the viral polymerase (mixture of genomic and antigenomic). As the cDNA library preparation of samples P0, C1-C3 and S1-S3 of the fixed-volume experiment were stranded **(Figure 1, 2 and 3)**, we were able to determine that 39.77% of cbVGs were genomic and 60.23% of cbVGs were antigenomic indicating that cbVGs were not only generated but also replicated **(Figure S2)**. Furthermore, short cbVGs correlated with more reads indicating that short cbVGs are replicated more efficiently as has been shown previously for some non-standard viral genomes **(Figure S1)** (Laske et al., 2016; Mendes and Russell, 2021; Pelz et al., 2021). Overall, these data suggest that high replication drives the generation of shorter cbVGs; however, it is the highly efficient replication of short cbVGs that ultimately leads to the accumulation of shorter cbVGs and an increase in the cbVG content within a virus population.

Our RNAseq/VODKA2 pipeline also allowed us to compare cbVG species between virus populations from the cell line that limited virus replication (A549 control cells) and the cell line that allowed high virus replication (A549 STAT1 KO cells). The virus population observed in STAT1 KO cells mainly consisted of shorter cbVGs, whereas virus population from control cells consisted mainly of much longer cbVGs. A fixed-MOI passaging experiment confirmed that it is virus replication levels that drive the selection of shorter versus longer cbVGs. By analyzing several passages of the fixed-volume passaging experiment, we observed that the cbVG population diversified and short cbVGs started to be generated when viral replication levels reached the highest levels, demonstrating that high virus replication does not directly lead to cbVG accumulation **(Figure 5**). Instead, high virus replication leads to cbVG diversification, which leads to the generation of shorter cbVG, which then accumulate and take over the population **(Figure 7)**. The exact molecular mechanism that drives the generation of shorter

cbVGs is not clear. Are shorter cbVGs generated from longer ones? Do high virus replication levels affect the processivity of the polymerase directly or maybe indirectly through host factors? Future studies will address these questions.

In this study, we also discovered the first evidence of cbVGs of long predicted sizes. These cbVGs are the first ones being generated *in vitro* and are the most predominant *in vivo*. Some of these cbVGs are predicted to be longer than the genome. It is possible that previous studies did not detect these longer cbVGs due to lack of sensitivity in the methods used. The fact that we detected these longer cbVGs in patients raises the question on how they are functionally different to the shorter cbVGs, which have been studied so far *in vitro.* Do they interact with different pattern recognition receptors and/or induce different signaling pathways? Why do we mainly find longer cbVGs in patients and not shorter ones? Is there a fitness advantage of these longer cbVGs *in vivo*? We must also consider that we are limited to nasal samples from patients and that cbVG populations could differ between microenvironments (e.g. nose vs lung) as has been shown for Zika non-standard viral genomes (Johnson et al., 2020). However, we have observed that Sendai virus populations in the lung of mice also consist of mainly longer cbVGs, indicating that this might be a common feature of *in vivo* cbVG populations (unpublished data). Further characterization of longer cbVGs is still needed as we can only extract predicted sizes based on VODKA2. Due to their size and complex structure, amplifying long cbVGs by RT-PCR remains a challenge. So far, we can detect the break/rejoin region of some of these larger cbVGs by RT-PCR confirming the validity of our VODKA results (Felt et al., 2021). Interestingly, cbVG species of longer predicted size never accumulated to significant amounts, strongly suggesting that they are indeed of longer size and hence not as competitive against the standard viral genome or shorter cbVG species **(Figure S1)**.

Currently, they are very few studies showing what roles host proteins could play in non-standard viral genome generation, accumulation, and selection (Holland et al., 1976; Kang and Allen, 1978). We have previously shown that children are more likely to accumulate RSV cbVGs than adults and that female patients are more likely to accumulate RSV cbVGs than males (Felt et al., 2021). Furthermore, in an adult cohort, although all patients were experimentally infected with the same virus (RSV Memphis 37), not all patients accumulated cbVGs (Felt et al., 2021). All these studies strongly suggest that the host might play an important role in shaping cbVG populations. In this study, we have shown that STAT1 by limiting virus replication can exert selective pressure on cbVG populations and shape their evolution. It will be important to assess in future studies what other host proteins can shape cbVG content within virus populations.

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Conflict of interest: None declared.

Data Availability

Raw sequence data are deposited on SRA (PRJNA837014).

Supplementary Data

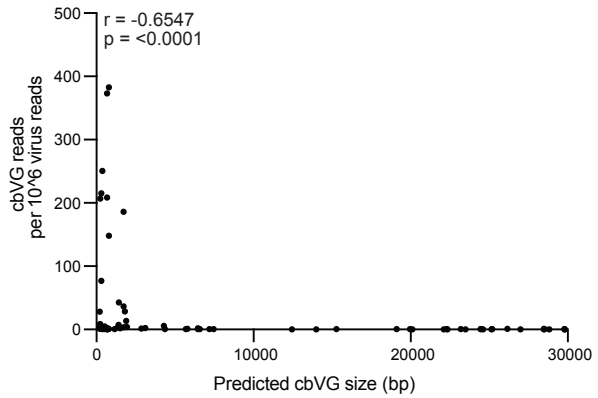

Figure S1: Correlation between predicted cbVG size and cbVG reads Figure Each dot represents a cbVG species from fixed-volume experiment (P0, C1-C3 and S1-S3). P value for non-parametric spearman correlation between predicted cbVG size and cbVG reads are indicated.

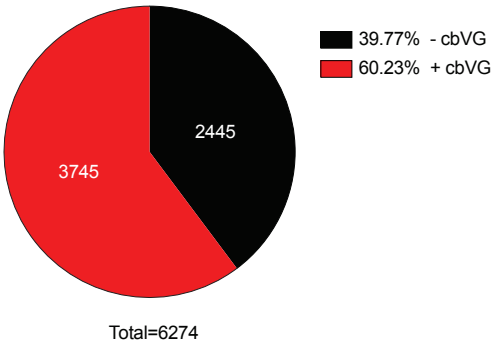

Figure S2: Proportions of genomic and antigenomic cbVGs cbVGs from fixed-volume experiment (P0, C1-C3 and S1-S3) were aligned to reference genome to assess strandness. Pie chart indicates proportion of genomic (-cbVG) and antigenomic (+cbVG) cbVGs.

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