Transcriptome-wide identification of 5-methylcytosine by deaminase and reader protein-assisted sequencing

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Abstract

5-Methylcytosine (m^{5}C) is one of the post-transcriptional modifications in mRNA and is involved in the pathogenesis of various diseases. However, the capacity of existing assays for accurately and comprehensively transcriptome-wide m^{5}C mapping still needs improvement. Here, we develop a detection method named DRAM (deaminase and reader protein assisted RNA methylation analysis), in which deaminases (APOBEC1 and TadA-8e) are fused with m^{5}C reader proteins (ALYREF and YBX1) to identify the m^{5}C sites through deamination events neighboring the methylation sites. This antibody-free and bisulfite-free approach provides transcriptome-wide editing regions which are highly overlapped with the publicly available BS-seq datasets and allows for a more stable and comprehensive identification of the m^{5}C loci. In addition, DRAM system even supports ultra-low input RNA (10ng). We anticipate that the DRAM system could pave the way for uncovering further biological functions of m^{5}C modifications.

Keywords: RNA, 5-methylcytosine, deaminase, m^{5}C reader

Introduction

Epigenetics refers to stable inheritance without changing the basic sequence of DNA, involving various forms such as DNA methylation, histone modification and RNA modification. In recent years, RNA sequencing technology has boosted research on RNA epigenetics. More than 170 RNA modifications have been identified, mainly including m6A, m5C, m1A, m7G and others [1,2]. Notably, RNA m5C methylation represents a crucial post-transcriptional modification observed across different RNA types, such as tRNA, mRNA, rRNA, vault RNA, microRNA, long non-coding RNA and enhancer RNA[3-8]. Numerous studies have revealed multiple molecular functions of m5C in numerous key stages of RNA metabolism, such as mRNA stability, translation, and nuclear export[5,9-13]. The dynamic alterations of m5C play integral roles in many physiological and pathological processes, such as early embryonic development[14], neurodevelopmental disorder[15,16] and multifarious tumorigenesis and migration[17-20]. Moreover, this modification significantly contributes to the regulation of gene expression[5,9-13,17]. Therefore, the detection of m5C sites appears to be essential for understanding their underlying effects on cellular function and disease states.

With the recent advances in sequencing techniques, several high-throughput assays have been developed for qualitative or quantitative analysis of m5C. To date, bisulfite-sequencing (BS-seq) has been proven to be the gold standard method for RNA m5C methylation analysis[5,21,22]. This approach chemically deaminates unmethylated cytosine to uracil, while keeping methylated cytosine unchanged. The m5C methylation sites can be identified by subsequent library construction and sequencing. However, bisulfite treatment of BS-seq is extremely detrimental to RNA, thus resulting in unstable detection of m5C in low abundance RNA or highly structured RNA, which directly affects the confidence of results[23,24]. Another major type of global m5C analysis depends on antibody-assisted immunoprecipitation of m5C methylated RNAs, such as m5C-RIP-seq[25-27], AZA-IP-seq[28] or miCLIP-seq[7]. These methods are unable to recognize methylation on mRNAs with low abundance and secondary structure. Moreover, these methods are highly dependent on antibody specificity, which usually leads to unspecific binding of RNA and a low amount of m5C-modified regions. Moreover, TAWO-seq, originally developed for the identification of hm5C, is also capable of m5C analysis, but it highly depends on the oxidation efficiency of perovskite, which usually causes false positives and unstable conversion [29,30]. Furthermore, the emerging third-generation sequencing, such as Nanopore-seq, can directly map m5C by tracking the characteristic changes of bases, but it still faces challenges of a high error rate[31-33]. These together largely hamper its wide application on transcriptome profiling of m5C (Supplementary Table 1). Hence, there is an urgent need for a simple, efficient, sensitive, and antibody-independent method for global m5C detection.

The RNA-binding protein ALYREF is the initially recognized nuclear m5C reader that binds directly to m5C sites in mRNA and plays key roles in promoting mRNA nuclear export or tumor progression[5]. Another well-known m5C reader, YBX1, can also recognize m5C-modified mRNA through its cold-shock domain and participates in a variety of RNA-dependent events such as mRNA packaging, mRNA stabilization and translational regulation[9,18]. RNA affinity chromatography and mass spectrometry analyses using biotin-labelled oligonucleotides with or without m5C were performed in previous reports, which indicated that ALYREF and YBX1 had a more prominent binding ability to m5C-modified oligonucleotides[5,18]. YBX1 can preferentially recognize mRNAs with m5C modifications via key amino acids W65-N70 (WFNVRN)[18], while K171 is essential for the specific binding of ALYREF to m5C sites [5]. Previous studies have shown

that mutations in key amino acids responsible for recognising m[5]C binding in ALYREF and YBX1

lead to a significant reduction in their binding levels to m[5]C-containing oligonucleotides[5,18]. Nucleic

acid deaminases, primarily categorized as cytosine deaminases and adenine deaminases, are zinc-

dependent enzymes which facilitate the deamination of cytosine or adenine within DNA or RNA

substrates[34]. APOBEC1, an evolutionarily conserved family member of APOBEC proteins, can

specifically catalyze the deamination of cytosine in single-stranded RNA (ssRNA) or DNA (ssDNA)

to uracil[35-37]. TadA8e is an adenine deaminase optimized through re-engineering of TadA and it

induces conversion of adenine to inosine (eventually read as guanine by transcriptases) in ssRNA

or ssDNA[38,39]. APOBEC1 and TadA8e, with their prominent deamination efficiency, have been

employed for the development of precise and efficient base editors such as CBE and ABE8e, which

find widespread application in studies related to genome editing[37,38].

Here we aim to establish a deaminase and m[5]C reader-assisted RNA methylation sequencing

approach (DRAM-seq), which identifies the m[5]C sites through reader-mediated recognitions and

deaminase-mediated point mutations neighboring the m[5]C methylation sites. This bisulfite-free and

antibody-free method is anticipated to provide more comprehensive and cost-effective

transcriptome-wide detection of m[5]C methylation, which may better assist on exploring its further

regulatory mechanisms.

Results

Development of DRAM system for m[5]C detection

Our sequencing platform is inspired by the concept of the m[6]A DART-seq assay, in which C

near the m[6]A site is converted into U without affecting sequences near non-m6A sites[40]. Therefore,

we hypothesized that, by utilizing the targeted binding of m[5]C readers, deaminase can be recruited

to achieve deamination of cytosine or adenine in the vicinity of the m[5]C sites on single-stranded

RNA, thereby facilitating the detection of the m[5]C site. This approach was named DRAM

(deaminase and m[5]C reader-assisted RNA methylation sequencing). As RNA-binding proteins,

ALYREF and YBX1 also could bind to RNAs without m[5]C modification[5,18]. To exclude the false-

positive detection of DRAM due to the non-m[5]C specific binding of ALYREF and YBX1, knockout

of W65-N70 (WFNVRN) amino acids in YBX1and K171A mutation in ALYREF were introduced

seperately, resulting in the DRAM[mut] system (Fig. S1A-S1D). Subsequently, we verified the affinity

ability of YBX1 and ALYREF for m[5]C-modified RNAs by RNA pull-down experiments. Consistent

with previous reports[5,18], those two m[5]C readers preferentially bound RNAs containing m[5]C

modifications. Furthermore, mutating key amino acids involved in their interaction with m[5]C

significantly reduced their binding ability, indicating that ALYREF and YBX1 exhibit specificity

for m[5]C-methylated mRNAs. (Fig. S1E-S1H). To confirm the recognition of m[5]C site by DRAM

system, DRAM, DRAM[mut] and Deaminase system were transfected into the human HEK293T cells,

respectively. Finally, we considered the presence of m[5]C modification in the vicinity only if the

deamination changes produced under DRAM induction were significantly different from those

produced under DRAM[mut] or Deaminase induction (Fig. 1A).

Previous studies have indicated that there is no uniform intrinsic signature motif sequence that

can characterize all m[5]C sites[5,26,41,42]. To comprehensively detect the m[5]C loci, the readers of m[5]C

(ALYREF and YBX1) were separately fused to the C-terminus of the deaminases (APOBEC1 and

TadA-8e), namely DRAM-ABE and DRAM-CBE system (Fig.1B).

DRAM detection system is assayed in an m⁵C-dependent form

To confirm the recognition of m⁵C site by DRAM system, DRAM, DRAM[mut] and Deaminase
were transfected into the human HEK293T cells, respectively. To evaluate candidate DRAM
constructs within a cellular environment, we performed fluorescence microscopy to analyze the
expression of DRAM. The results showed that DRAM-ABE and DRAM-CBE were properly
expressed in HEK293T cells (Fig. S2A-S2B). In addition, flow cytometry displayed ~60% of cells
were GFP-positive (Fig. S2C). Two previously reported m⁵C sites in RPSA and AP5Z1 were
selected for the analysis [5,21], and their methylation status was verified by bisulfite sequencing PCR.
The deep sequencing results showed that the m⁵C fraction of RPSA and SZRD1 was 75.5% and
27.25%, respectively (Fig.2A and B). Sanger sequencing following RT-PCR was then performed to
determine the editing of neighbouring m⁵C sites by DRAM system in these two mRNA. Notably,
adenine close to the m⁵C site in RPSA mRNA was mutated into guanine, resulting in an A-to-G
editing rate of 14.7% by DRAM-ABE, whereas this was rarely observed with TadA-8e or
DRAM[mut]-ABE (Fig.2C). DRAM-CBE induced C to U editing in the vicinity of the m⁵C site in
AP5Z1 mRNA, with 13.6% C-to-U editing, while this effect was significantly reduced with
APOBEC1 or DRAM[mut]-CBE (Fig.2D). Subsequently, in order to investigate whether the DRAM
system can detect other types of RNA, such as tRNA, 28S rRNA, or others, we performed PCR
amplification of the flanking sequences of the m⁵C sites 3782 and 4447 on 28S rRNA and several
m⁵C sites on tRNA, such as the m⁵C48 and m⁵C49 sites of tRNA[Val], the m⁵C48 and m⁵C49 sites of
tRNA[Asp], and the m⁵C48 site of tRNA[Lys]. But Sanger sequencing showed that there was no valid A-
to-G/C-to-U mutation detected, which is most likely due to the fact that ALYTEF and YBX1 are
mainly responsible for the mRNA m⁵C binding proteins, and thus the DRAM system is more
suitable for the mRNA m⁵C detection (Fig. S3). Taken together, the fusion of m⁵C reader and
deaminase can effectively and selectively deaminate cytosine/adenine in the vicinity of the mRNA
m⁵C sites.

NSUN2[43] and NSUN6[44], two family members of NOL1/NSUN protein, were both identified
as m⁵C methyltransferase of mRNA[45]. To verify that the detection of DRAM occurs in the presence
of m⁵C, we performed knockdown experiments of NSUN2 and NSUN6 in HEK293T cells by base
deletion, resulting in frameshift mutations that led to reduced expression of NSUN2 and NSUN6.
These cells were then transfected with DRAM. The knockout efficiency has been confirmed by
western blotting (Fig.2E, 2F and Fig. S4A,4B). It has been previously demonstrated that m⁵C
methylation of AP5Z1 and RPSA is catalyzed by NSUN2 and NSUN6, respectively[21,46]. In line with
this, sanger sequencing following RT-PCT showed a significant reduction in C-to-U or A-to-G
mutations near the m⁵C sites in methyltransferase-deficient cells compared with WT cells (Fig. 2G
and H). Overall, these findings suggest that the DRAM detection system is assayed in an m⁵C-
dependent form.

DRAM enables transcriptome-wide analysis of m⁵C methylation

Subsequently, we performed RNA-seq analysis after DRAM transfection by detecting C-to-
U/A-to-G editing events to accomplish transcriptome-wide detection of m⁵C (Fig.3A). To serve as
positive controls, two previously published BS-seq datasets were also integrated[5,21]. Mutations were
detected near the m⁵C site in RPSA as A-to-G by DRAM-ABE (Fig.3B), and DRAM-CBE detected
the presence of C-to-U mutations near the AP5Z1 m⁵C site (Fig.3C). However, the DRAM[mut] and

Deaminase systems induced few effective mutations close to these sites. Examination of multiple
reported high-confidence RNA m⁵C sites showed that DRAM-seq editing events were also enriched
in the vicinity of the BS-seq sites (Fig.3B, 3C and Fig. S5).

DRAM-seq analysis further confirmed that mutations in AP5Z1 and RPSA mRNA were
reduced in methyltransferase knockout cells compared to wild-type cells (Fig. 3D, 3E). Moreover,
the knockout cells exhibited overall rare DRAM-seq editing events close to m⁵C sites in other
mRNAs (Fig. S6). These indicated that DRAM-seq analysis was detected in an m⁵C-dependent
manner. Unfortunately, motif analysis failed to identify any sequence preferences or consensus
motifs associated with DRAM-edited sites mediated by loci associated with NSUN2 or NSUN6.
(Fig. S4D).

A comparison of three biological replicates from each experimental group revealed a strong
reproducibility of A-to-G/C-to-U mutations in HEK293T cells expressing DRAM-ABE and
DRAM-CBE (Fig. S7). Moreover, the DRAM-edited mRNAs revealed a high degree of overlap
across the three biological replicates (Fig. S4C). And a recent study by Wang et al. showed that
ALYREF deletion affects the expression of 94 mRNAs[47], and only 55.32% of these ALYREF-
regulated mRNAs can be detected by the DRAM system (Fig. S4E). These findings suggest that
DRAM selectively targets specific RNAs for editing, exhibiting a high degree of consistency across
samples.

To obtain information on a set of high-confidence DRAM-seq data, we filtered the list of sites
transfected with deaminase alone and screened the sequencing results with methyltransferase
depleted, pooled editing events occurring in at least 10% of reads across multiple samples to obtain
a set of high-confidence editing sites (Fig. 3F and Supplementary Table 2), and integrated genes
with editing sites occurring in DRAM-ABE and DRAM-CBE (Fig. 3F and Supplementary Table 3).

Previous studies have indicated that m⁵C sites are predominantly distributed in the coding
sequences (CDS) and notably enriched near the initiation codon[5,25,26,48-50]. To further delineate the
characteristics of the DRAM-seq data, we compared the distribution of DRAM-seq editing sites
within the gene structure, specifically examining their occurrences in the 5'untranslated region
(5'UTR), 3' untranslated region (3'UTR), CDS and Intergenic/Intron region. Our analysis revealed
that DRAM-seq editing events in cells expressing DRAM-ABE and DRAM-CBE were primarily
located in the CDS and 3'UTR, indicating a non-random distribution of m⁵C (Fig.3G, Fig. S8A and
8B). Moreover, plotting the distribution of DRAM-seq editing sites in mRNA segments (5'UTR,
CDS, and 3'UTR) highlighted a significant enrichment in the CDS (Fig.3H). In contrast, cells
expressing the deaminase exhibited a distinct distribution pattern of editing sites, characterized by
a prevalence throughout the 3'UTR (Fig.3H). This finding reaffirms that the specific editing pattern
observed in DRAM-seq across the transcriptome depends on its capacity to bind m⁵C.

Comparative analysis of the DRAM-seq editing sites with the previously published BS-seq
m⁵C sites indicated that the likelihood of editing was notably higher in closer proximity to the m⁵C
sites (Fig.3I). Furthermore, the editing window of DRAM exhibited enrichment approximately 20bp
before and after the m⁵C site (Fig.3I). Investigation into the sequences surrounding the editing
window revealed that AC motifs were the most significantly enriched in DRAM-CBE, whereas
(U/C) A motifs were most notably enriched in DRAM-ABE. In contrast, the APOBEC1 and TadA-
8e samples displayed no significantly enriched motifs, with mutations being more randomly
orientated (Fig.3J, 3K).

DRAM-seq provides stable and comprehensive identification of m⁵C loci

Subsequently, we then evaluated the ability of DRAM-seq to detect m⁵C across the entire transcriptome and compared its performance to that of the previously reported BS-seq. Although both previous studies employed bisulfite treatment, the resulting data obtained significant discrepancies due to variations in their treatment and analysis methodologies. We first complied the overall distribution of mutant regions identified by DRAM-seq, presenting both the mutant sites detected by the DRAM system and those reported in previous studies[5,18] across each chromosome (Fig.4A). Our results indicated that DRAM-seq identified the presence of m⁵C modifications covering 79.6% of the genes detected by Yang et al.[5] and 91.9% of the genes detected by Zhang et al.[21] (Fig.4B and D). Remarkably, certain pivotal regulators with diverse biological functions, such as ATG16L1(coordinats autophagy pathway)[51] and ARHGEF25 (plays an important role in actin cytoskeleton reorganisation)[52], were identified by Zhang et al. and DRAM-seq, but not by Yang et al. (Fig.4C). Conversely, FANCD2 (Maintains chromosome stability)[53] and RPL15(components of the large ribosomal subunit)[54,55], were discovered by Yang et al. and DRAM-seq, but not by Zhang et al. (Fig.4E). Hence, DRAM-seq appears to offer a more stable and comprehensive identification of the m⁵C loci.

To provide functional insights into m⁵C RNA-modified genes in HEK293T cells, we conducted Gene Ontology (GO) and Kyoto Encyclopedia of Genes and Genomes (KEGG) analyses. These results highlighted the involvement of these genes in the regulation of diverse key biological processes, such as cell division, cell cycle, mRNA splicing, protein processing in the endoplasmic reticulum, nucleocytoplasmic transport, translation, DNA repair and others (Fig.4F, 4G, Fig. S8C and S8D).

DRAM enables low-input m⁵C profiling

A significant challenge in m⁵C detection lies in the specificity of antibodies and the substantial amount of input RNA required for sequencing. RNA is susceptible to degradation during denaturation, sodium bisulfite treatment and desulfurization steps in the BS-seq assay[56]. Immunoprecipitation-based m⁵C assays and LC-MS/MS also impose high demand for sample input[7,25,57]. Several experiments have highlighted the requirement of 100-500 ng of RNA for m⁵C-RIP-seq, while BS-seq necessitates an even more demanding 750-1000 ng of RNA[21,25,58]. To assess the detection limits of DRAM-Sanger, we attempted to amplify two representative m⁵C-containing sites in the RPSA and AP5Z1 transcripts from diluted RNA samples.

Remarkably, we successfully generated PCR products of these two mRNAs from cDNAs corresponding to 250 ng, 50 ng, and 10 ng of total RNA. Quantitative analysis by Sanger sequencing demonstrated nearly identical Sanger traces across these dilutions (Fig.5A and B). This finding underscores that the specificity of DRAM editing depended on its ability to bind m⁵C, and DRAM is proficient in low-input m⁵C analyses. Furthermore, cell viability was determined by CCK8 assay on HEK293T cells transfected with DRAM (Fig.5C). Importantly, there was no significant difference in the relative proliferative capacity of the cells compared to untransfected cells (NC), indicating that DRAM expression did not adversely affect cell viability (Fig.5D).

Transfection of the DRAM system in cells results in the transient overexpression of fusion proteins. To investigate how varying expression levels of these proteins influence A-to-G and C-to-U editing within the same m⁵C region, we conducted a gradient transfection using plasmid concentrations of 1500 ng, 1000 ng and 500 ng. This approach allowed us to progressively reduce

254 the expression levels of the fusion proteins (Fig. 5E and 5F). Sanger sequencing revealed that the
255 editing efficiency of A-to-G and C-to-U within the m⁵C region significantly decreased as fusion
256 protein expression diminished (Fig. 5G and 5H). These findings suggest that the transfection
257 efficiency of the DRAM system is concentration-dependent and that the ratio of editing efficiency
258 to transfection efficiency may assist in the quantitative analysis of m^5C using the DRAM system.
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Discussion

In recent years, m^5C methylation modifications have received increasing attention, with
multiple reports detailing the distribution of RNA m^5C methylation modifications across various
species and tissues, elucidating their characteristics. Despite the relatively low abundance of m^5C,
its highly dynamic changes hold significant implications for the regulation of physiological and
pathological processes[5,21,44]. However, due to the limitations of sequencing methods and the
variability of data processing, there remains ample room for progress in the study of m^5C detection
methods.

In this study, we developed a site-specific, depth-sequencing-free m^5C detection method using
DRAM-Sanger. This workflow relies on conventional molecular biology assays such as RT-PCR
and Sanger sequencing, eliminating the need for specialized techniques and thereby simplifying the
process of m^5C detection.

DRAM-seq introduces a novel strategy for transcriptome-wide m^5C detection, overcoming
inherent limitations in existing methods. Notably, DRAM-seq covered around 80% of the high-
confidence m^5C-modified genes detected by BS-seq and identified more potential m^5C sites. This
can be attributed to the avoidance of bisulfite treatment by DRAM-seq, preventing RNA damage
and ensuring a more comprehensive representation of RNA samples. This feature also likely
contributes to the observed stability of DRAM-seq in comparison to BS-seq. Additionally, DRAM-
seq is not limited by antibody specificity and is resistant to chemical-induced damage.

A prominent challenge in existing m^5C profiling methods is their reliance on substantial
amounts of input RNA samples. In contrast, DRAM operates through the deamination activity of
deamination activity of deaminase, preserving RNA integrity and preventing degradation. The
notable advantage of DRAM lies in its capacity for low-input m^5C detection. Our analysis
demonstrates that DRAM requires as low as 10ng of total RNA for m^5C detection. While DRAM is
currently well-suited for detecting m^5C on a transcriptome-wide scale, the potential for future
applications involving third-generation sequencing could extend its utility to individual mRNAs,
particularly m^5C heterogeneity on mRNA splicing variants. In addition, the DRAM system depends
on the specific recognition of m^5C modifications on ssRNA by the reader protein, theoretically
avoiding the false-positive effects of 5-hydroxymethylation modifications in other assays, such as
BS-seq[21-23]. This potential feature could enhance the accuracy of the DRAM assay, albeit it still
requires careful validation.

In our study, m^5C detection was performed following the transient transfection of the DRAM
detection system into mammalian cells, which might result in a lower mutation rate at the
corresponding site. Therefore, employing lentiviral-mediated transfection into cell lines of interest
could potentially enhance the efficiency of m^5C detection. Our results confirm that YBX1 and
ALYREF exhibit specificity as m^5C readers, binding preferentially to RNAs with m^5C modifications,

thereby validating the reliability of the DRAM detection system. However, mutations in the key
amino acids responsible for m5C binding reduced their affinity while retaining some binding
capacity. DRAM-seq analysis identified a substantial number of m5C sites. However, we cannot
exclude the potential existence of false positive sites resulting from non-specific binding of the m5C
reader. Further elucidation of the key amino acids directing ALYREF and YBX1's binding to m5C
methylation sites should enable more accurate and sensitive m5C detection by DRAM-seq. Due to
the lack of a fixed base composition for characterizing all m5C modification sites, DRAM has an
apparent limitation in achieving single-base resolution for detecting m5C. This technical constraint
may explain the absence of identifiable sequence specificity in our analysis of m5C sites catalyzed
by NSUN2 and NSUN6, despite previous reports associating these methyltransferases with "G"-
rich sequences and the "CUCCA" motif[59]. However, our present study proved that the measuring
resolution of DRAM is around 40nt, which facilitates higher precision than that of m5C-RIP-seq
(~100nt). In the future, with more in-depth analyses of m5C reader structures and the identification
of new potential m5C readers, we expect to achieve more precise m5C localization and more
comprehensive m5C modification detection. Moreover, the substitution of deaminases, such as A3A
and A3G (the family members of APOBEC), could also potentially enhance the efficiency of the
DRAM detection [60-62].

Although the m5C assay can be performed using the DRAM system alone, comparing it with
the DRAM^mut and deaminase controls could enhance the accuracy of m5C detection in specific
regions. Given that the expression of DRAM fusion proteins significantly influences m5C detection,
it is advisable to transfect the same batch of cells during the assay to ensure consistent transfection
efficiency across experimental groups and thus can better standardize the detection.

One future direction of endeavour is the purification of DRAM fusion proteins to facilitate *in*
vitro detection of RNA m5C methylation, which could extend the scope of DRAM-seq to diverse
sample types. Another potential application for DRAM-seq could be the expression of drug-
inducible DRAM systems *in vivo* using various animal models for m5C analysis. These will together
provide novel insights into m5C modifications for biological and clinical research.

Conclusions

In summary, we developed a novel deaminase and reader protein-assisted RNA m5C
methylation approach that detects the m5C region by deaminating As or Cs in close proximity to the
m5C sites, which does not rely on antibodies or bisulfite, thus leading to unprecedently
comprehensive transcriptome-wide RNA m5C methylation profiling. We anticipated that this system
could pave the way for uncovering further biological functions of m5C modifications and facilitate
the development of therapeutic interventions for associated diseases.

Materials and methods

Plasmid construction

ALYREF and YBX1 expression plasmids were purchased from MIAOLING BIOLOGY
(http://www.miaolingbio.com/), and the ALYREF and YBX1 fractions were then amplified using
specific primer. The ALYREF and YBX1 portions were amplified using pCMV-APOBEC1-YTH
(Addgene plasmid no. 131636; https://www.addgene.org/131636/) and ABE8e (Addgene plasmid

no. 138489; https://www.addgene.org/ 138489/) to amplify the deaminase portion and the essential
plasmid construct proxies, and finally the fragments were recombined by the ClonExpress Ultra
One Step Cloning Kit to complete the plasmid vector construction. Both DRAM^{mut}-ABE and
DRAM^{mut}-CBE related vectors were obtained by introducing the corresponding key amino acid
mutations using Fast Site-Directed Mutagenesis Kit (TIANGEN Biotech). The primer sequences
used are listed in Supplementary Table 4.

Cell culture and plasmid transfection

HEK293T cell line (ATCC) was cultured in Dulbecco's Modified Eagle Medium (DMEM)
supplemented with 10% fetal bovine serum (CLARK BIOSCIENCE) and 1% penicillin (100 U/ml)-
streptomycin (100μg/ml). The cells were seeded in 12-well plates and transfected using Hieff
Trans™ Liposomal Transfection Reagent (Yeasen).

NSUN2-depleted cell lines were generated by cloning NSUN2-targeting single guide RNA
sequences into the pSpCas9(BB)−2A-Puro (PX459) V2.0 plasmid (Addgene plasmid no. 62988;
http://n2t.net/addgene:62988). Plasmids were then transfected into HEK293T cells and Puromycin
(Meilunbio) was added at a final concentration of 3 μg/ml to enrich the positively transfected cells
24 h after transfection. After 72 h, the cells were collected and used for genotyping by Sanger
sequencing. NSUN6-depleted cell lines were generated in the same way. The primers used for
genotyping and single guide RNA sequences are listed in Supplemental Table 4.

Cell viability measurements

HEK293T cells were transfected with DRAM plasmid and cultured at 37°C for 24 h.
Subsequently, 1000 cells were seeded in 96-well plates. After waiting for the cells to attach to the
wall, the cell activity was detected by Cell Counting Kit-8 (Meilunbio). Cell Counting Kit-8
contains WST-8, which in the presence of the electronically coupled reagent 1-Methoxy PMS can
be reduced by mitochondrial dehydrogenase to the orange-colored metazan product Formazan, the
absorbance of which is measured at 450 nm to analyze cellular activity.

Western blotting

For protein blotting, samples were lysed in RIPA Lysis Buffer (Meilunbio) with
Phenylmethanesulfonyl fluoride (PMSF) and the BCA protein assay kit (Beyotime Biotechnology)
was used to Protein concentration was measured. Total protein extracts were separated by SDS-
PAGE on a 10% gel and then transferred to 0.22 nm polyvinylidene fluoride membranes (Boster).
Subsequently, the proteins were probed with specific antibodies after the blot was blocked with 5%
non-fat milk (Boster). Images were quantified using ImageJ software and all data are expressed as
mean ± SEM.

The following antibodies and concentrations were used: NSUN2 Polyclonal antibody
(Proteintech; Cat No.20854-1-AP; 1:7500), NSUN6 Polyclonal antibody (Proteintech; Cat No.
17240-1-AP; 1:2000), RabbitAnti-GAPDH antibody (Bioss; bs-41373R; 1:2000), Alpha Tubulin
Polyclonal antibody (Proteintech; Cat No. 11224-1-AP; 1:2000), HRP-labeled Goat Anti-Rabbit
IgG(H+L) (Beyotime Biotechnology; A0208; 1:2000).

cDNA synthesis and Sanger sequencing

Total cellular RNA was extracted with TRIzol reagent (TIANGEN Biotech) and cDNA was
synthesized using PrimeScript™ II 1st Strand cDNA Synthesis Kit (Takara Bio) according to the
manufacturer's recommendations. PCR was then performed using $2 \times$ Taq PCR MasterMix II
(TIANGEN Biotech) and primers flanking m^{5}C target sites, and the purified PCR products were
directly sequenced by Sanger sequencing. The Sanger sequencing results were analyzed using EditR

1.0.10 to calculate the mutation frequency[63]. The primers used in this study are shown in
Supplemental Table 4.

Real-time quantitative PCR

cDNA was synthesized using FastKing RT kit (with gDNase) (TIANGEN Biotech) according
to the manufacturer's recommendations. RT-qPCR assay was performed using SuperReal PreMix
Plus (SYBR Green) (TIANGEN Biotech). GAPDH was used as an endogenous control, and the
expression levels were normalized to the control and calculated by the $2^{-\Delta\Delta Ct}$ formula. All samples
were analyzed in triplicate and each mRNA quantification represents the average of at least three
measurements. All data are expressed as mean ± SEM. The primers used in this study are shown in
Supplemental Table 4.

Protein structure modelling

Protein structure simulations were performed using the SWISS-MODEL online website
(https://swissmodel.expasy.org/interactive)[64]. The SWISS-MODEL database is able to provide up-
to-date annotated 3D protein models, which are generated from automated homology modelling of
related model organisms and experimental structural information for all sequences in UniProtKB,
with reliable structural information, and subsequently protein structure observations were
performed using PyMOL[65].

Bisulfite sequencing PCR

We referenced bisulfite sequencing PCR, an assay established by Matthias Schaefer et al. We
chemically deaminated cytosine in RNA using the EZ RNA methylation kit (50) (ZYMO
RESEARCH) and then quantified m^5C methylation levels based on PCR amplification of cDNA
combined with deep sequencing[23].

RNA Conversion Reagent was premixed with prepared RNA samples, and the RNA was
denatured at 70°C for 5 minutes, followed by a reaction period of 45 minutes at 54°C. Finally, the
purified RNA samples were recovered after desulfurization by RNA Desulphonation Buffe. cDNA
was synthesized using PrimeScript™ II 1st Strand cDNA Synthesis Kit (Takara Bio) according to
the manufacturer's recommendations. PCR was then performed using 2× EpiArt HS Taq Master Mix
(Dye Plus) (Vazyme) and m^5C target site-specific Bisulfite Primer (primer sequences were designed
at https://zymoresearch.eu/pages/bisulfite-primer- seeker), the products were purified by TIANgel
Midi Purification Kit (TIANGEN Biotech), and the connectors for second-generation sequencing
were attached at both ends of the products for sequencing. Finally, deep sequencing was performed
by HiTOM analysis to detect the methylation level (The number of reads >1000 in deep sequencing)
[66]. The primers used in this study are shown in Supplemental Table 4.

Library construction and next-generation sequencing

1μg of total cellular RNA was used for sequencing library generation by NEBNext Ultra RNA
Library Prep Kit for Illumina (NEB, USA, Catalog #: E7530L) following manufacturer's
recommendations and index codes were added to attribute sequences to each sample. Briefly, mRNA
was purified from total RNA using poly-T oligo-attached magnetic beads. Fragmentation was
carried out using divalent cations under elevated temperature in NEB Next First Strand Synthesis
Reaction Buffer(5X). First-strand cDNA was synthesized using random hexamer primer and M-
MuLV Reverse Transcriptase (RNase H). Second-strand cDNA synthesis was subsequently
performed using DNA Polymerase I and RNase H. Remaining overhangs was converted into blunt
ends via exonuclease/polymerase activities. After adenylation of 3' ends of DNA fragments, NEB
Next Adaptor with hairpin loop structure was ligated to prepare for hybridization. To select cDNA

fragments of preferentially 370~420 bp in length, the library fragments were purified with AMPure
XP system (Beverly, USA). Then 3 μL USER Enzyme (NEB, USA) was used with size selected,
adaptor-ligated cDNA at 37°C for 15 min followed by 5 min at 95 °C before PCR. Then PCR was
performed with Phusion High-Fidelity DNA polymerase, Universal PCR primers and Index (X)
Primer. At last, PCR products were purified (AMPure XP system) and library quality was assessed
on the Agilent 5400 system(Agilent, USA)and quantified by QPCR (library concentration $\geqslant$ 1.5
nM). The qualified libraries were pooled and sequenced on Illumina platforms with PE150 strategy
in Novogene Bioinformatics Technology Co., Ltd (Beijing, China), according to effective library
concentration and data amount required.

DRAM-seq analysis and calling of edited sites

The raw fastq sequencing data were cleaned by trimming the adapter sequences using Fastp
(v0.23.1) and were aligned to the human genome (hg19) using STAR (v2.7.7) in paired-end mode.
The aligned BAM files were sorted and PCR duplicates were removed using Samtools (v1.12). The
cite calling pf DRAM-seq was performed using Bullseye, a previously customized pipeline to look
for C-to-U or A-to-G edited sites throughout the transcriptome[40]. Briefly, the sorted and
deduplicated BAM files were initially parsed by parseBAM.pl script.

Then, Find_edit_site.pl script was employed to find C-to-U or A-to-G editing events by
DRAM-seq with at least 10 reads of coverage, an edit ratio of 5%-95%, an edit ratio at least 1.5-
fold higher than NSUN2 or NSUN6-knockout samples, and at least 2 editing events at a given site.
Sites that were only found in one replicate of each DRAM protein variant were removed. Editing
events appeared in cells expressing merely APOBEC1 or TadA8e were also removed. For high
confidence filtering, we further adjusted the Find_edit_site.pl parameters to the edit ratio of 10%-
60%, an edit ratio of control samples at least 2-fold higher than NSUN2 or NSUN6-knockout
samples, and at least 4 editing events at a given site.

Metagene and motif analyses

Metagene analysis was performed using hg19 annotations according to previously reported
tool, MetaplotR[67]. For motif analysis, the 20bp flanking sequence of each DRAM-seq editing site
was extracted by Bedtools (v2.30.0)[68]. The motif logos were then plotted by WebLogo (v3.7.12)[69].

Replicates analysis

Independent biological replicates of DRAM-ABE or DRAM-CBE in DRAM-seq analysis were
separately compared by computing the Pearson correlation coefficient between the number of C-to-
U mutations per mRNA between any two replicate experiments.

GO and KEGG analysis

GO and KEGG analysis of DRAM-seq edited mRNAs was performed using the DAVID
bioinformatic database [70]. GO terms with a P value of less than 0.05 were considered statistically
significant.

RNA pulldown assay

The biotin-labeled RNA oligonucleotides with (Oligo-m⁵C) or without m⁵C (Oligo-C) were
prepared in advance: 5′-biotin-GAGGUAUGAAXUGUAAGTT-3′ (X = C or m⁵C, used in the
ALYREF and ALYREF^{mut} group) and 5′-biotin-GAAAGGAGAUXGCCAUUAUCC-3′ (X = C or
m⁵C, used in the YBX1 and YBX1^{mut} group). Protein lysates were then isolated from HEK293T
cells transfected with DRAM-YBX1, DRAM-YBX1^{mut}, DRAM-ALYREF or DRAM-
ALYREF^{mut} for 24 h using lysis buffer.   RNA pull-down assays were performed with the Pierce™
Magnetic RNA-Protein Pull-Down Kit (Thermo) following the manufacturer's instructions, and the

results were finally analyzed by Western blotting.

Statistical analysis

All data are expressed as mean ± S.E.M of three independent determinations. Data were

analyzed through a two-tailed t-test. A probability of $P < 0.05$ was considered statistically significant;

∗, $P < 0.05$, ∗∗, $P < 0.01$, *, $P < 0.05$, **, $P < 0.01$, ***, $P < 0.001$ and ****, $P < 0.0001$ denote the

significance thresholds; ns denotes not significant.

Data and Materials Availability

478   The data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article and its

479 Supplementary Information. Other data and reagents are available from the corresponding authors

480 upon reasonable request.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Conceptualization: JZ, YH, LL, ZL

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Investigation: JZ, DZ, JL, DK, XL, RZ, YL

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Competing Interests

494   All other authors declare they have no competing interests.

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FIGURES LEGENDS

Fig.1: **Development of DRAM system for m⁵C detection.**

(A) Schematic diagram of the DRAM assay. DRAM, DRAM^mut and Deaminase system were transfected into HEK293T cells separately. After DRAM transfection, the deaminase was directed by m⁵C reader to the vicinity of the m⁵C site and induce C-to-U/A-to-G mutations, whereas transfection of the DRAM^mut or Deaminase system failed to effectively induce similar mutations due to the absence of the m⁵C-recognition-binding domain.

(B) The overall design of DRAM, DRAM^mut and Deaminase system.

Fig.2: DRAM detection system was assayed in an m⁵C -dependent form.

(A, B) Two m⁵C sites from RPSA (A) and AP5Z1 (B) mRNA detected by deep sequencing of bisulfite sequencing PCR in HEK293T cells. The m⁵C sites are highlighted by red color. The m⁵C fraction of RPSA and AP5Z1 were 75.5% and 27.25% (The number of reads is greater than 1000).

(C, D) Sanger sequencing following RT-PCR verified two m⁵C sites from RPSA (C) and AP5Z1 (D) mRNAs in DRAM-transfected HEK293T cells, respectively. HEK293T cells only expressing DRAM^mut or Deaminase were served as negative controls. The left panel illustrates the location of DRAM induced mutation sites, which is highlighted in red asterisk. The right panel shows the corresponding quantification of sanger sequencing.

(E, F) The knockout efficiency of NSUN2 (E) and NSUN6 (F) in HEK293T cell lines verified by Western blotting. The protein level of α-Tubulin and GAPDH were served as loading controls, separately.

715   **(G, H)** DRAM induced mutations close to m^{5}C sites in AP5Z1 (**G**) and RPSA (**H**) mRNAs after
716   NSUN2 and NSUN6 knockout in HEK293T cells. The left panel illustrates the location of DRAM
717   induced mutation sites, which is highlighted in red asterisk. The right panel shows the corresponding
718   quantification of sanger sequencing.
719

Fig.3: DRAM enables transcriptome-wide analysis of m5C methylation.

(A) Schematic of the DRAM-seq method.

(B, C) Integrative genomics viewer (IGV) browser traces of DRAM-seq data expressing the indicated constructs in RPSA (**B**, left panel), TARBP2 (**B**, right panel), AP5Z1(**C**, left panel), and TRAF7 (**C**, left panel) mRNAs. C-to-U or A-to-G mutations found in at least 10% of reads are indicated by coloring. The previously published RNA BS-seq datasets from two individual studies were displayed as panel "Yang et al." and "Zhang et al.". (n(DRAM)=3 independent samples, n(Deaminase)=2 independent samples, and n(DRAM^mut)=1 independent sample.)

(D, E) Integrative genomics viewer (IGV) browser traces of DRAM-seq data in wildtype and methyltranferases knockout cells in AP5Z1 (**D**) and RPSA (**E**) mRNAs. C-to-U or A-to-G mutations were found in at least 10% of reads are indicated by coloring. The previously published RNA BS-seq datasets from two individual studies were displayed as panel "Yang et al." and "Zhang et al.". n=3 independent samples.

(F) Screening process for DRAM-seq assays and principles for screening high-confidence genes.

(G) The pie chart shows the distribution of editing sites in different transcript region in cells expressing DRAM (n=3 independent samples).

(H) The density map showing the distribution of editing events across the mRNA transcripts detected by DRAM-seq.

(I) The frequency plot shows the distribution of the distances of edit events in DRAM-seq relative to the m5C sites from the published BS-seq datasets. The position of each m5C site of BS-seq is determined as 0, and the relative distance of each site to the nearest edit event in DRAM-seq is calculated and plotted. The plots are presented separately based on the cutoff of upstream and downstream 3000bp (above) and 80bp (below) windows.

(J, K) Motif analysis discovered within the ±20nt region around the C-to-U or A-to-G editing site

in cells expressing DRAM-CBE **(J)**, APOBEC1**(J)**, DRAM-ABE **(K)** and TadA-8e **(K)**.

Fig.4: Stable and comprehensive cellular identification of m⁵C loci by DRAM-seq.

(A) Comparison of the overall distribution of genes with m^5C modifications detected by DRAM-
seq, Yang et al. and Zhang et al. on chromosomes. The mutation sites detected by DRAM-seq on
each gene are categorized into dual-colored short lines, with positive strand mutations shown in
orange and negative strand mutations in dark green. The line graph and kernel density plot in the
inner ring represent the locations and distributions of overlapping genes detected by DRAM-seq
(red), Yang et al. (blue) and Zhang et al. (light green).

(B) Venn diagram showing the overlap between DRAM-seq and Yang et al.'s edited genes.

(D) Venn diagram showing the overlap between DRAM-seq and Zhang et al.'s edited genes.

(C, E) Integrative genomics viewer (IGV) browser traces of DRAM-seq data expressing the
indicated constructs in the ATG16L1(**B**), ARHGEF25(**B**), FANCD2(**D**), and RPL15(**D**) mRNAs. C-
to-U/A-to-G mutations found in at least 10% of reads are indicated by coloring, and the m^5C site
found by BS-seq is also labelled.

(F) Genes with DRAM-seq editing events were analyzed for KEGG bioprocess enrichment.

(G) GO biological processes enrichment analysis of genes with DRAM-seq editing events.
Statistical analyses were performed using the DAVID tool.

Fig.5: Low-input m⁵C detection and transfection efficiency of DRAM system.

(A, **B)** DRAM analysis of RPSA (**A**) and AP5Z1 (**B**) mRNAs with 250 ng, 50 ng, and 10 ng of input

RNA. Representative Sanger sequencing plots are shown on the left panel, with mutation sites

marked with asterisks. The mutation rates are quantified on the right panel.

(C) Flowchart illustrating Cell viability analysis by CCK8 reagent after DRAM transfection in

HEK293T cells.

(D) Quantitative comparison of the relative proliferative capacity of DRAM-expressing and

untransfected cells.

(E, **F)** The expression levels of DRAM-CBE **(E)** and DRAM-ABE **(F)** systems different plasmid

transfection concentrations were verified by Western blotting.

(G, **H)** Editing of RPSA **(G)** and AP5Z1 **(H)** mRNA at varying concentrations of DRAM protein

expression. The left panels indicate Sanger sequencing results following RT-PCR, while the

corresponding quantifications of DRAM-induced mutations are shown in the right panels.