Research Article

Characterization of a hypersporulating strain derivative *of Clostridioides*

***difficile* R20291**

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R20291 strain

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Abstract

Clostridioides difficile is a Gram-positive and obligate anaerobe pathogen capable of forming

spores, which are essential for the transmission and recurrence of *C. difficile* infections. A

major challenge in sporulation studies in *C. difficile* is the low yield and asynchronous nature

of this process. In this work, a hypersporulating strain, derivative of R20291, with an early

sporulation onset and enhanced sporulation efficiency was isolated by serendipity. It showed

up to a 1000-fold higher sporulation efficiency than the parental R20291 strain in sessile

culture conditions. Electron micrographs reveal that spores of both strains have similar hair-

like projections, electron-dense outer exosporium layer features. Whole genome sequencing

and genomic analyses revealed that the hypersporulating strain had a deletion of 2356 bp

spanning three ORF, including a non-essential *proC1* involved in proline metabolism, and a

missense mutation in *rsbV*, an anti-anti-SigB factor of RsbW. These observations suggest

that RsbV-variant might contribute to constitutive repression of the SigB-dependent general

stress response, and therefore, derepressing sporulation.

Introduction

Clostridioides difficile is an anaerobic, Gram-positive, spore-forming pathogen and the principal etiologic agent of *C. difficile* infection (CDI), as well as, currently being the most frequent healthcare-associated cause of infectious diarrhea in industrialized countries (1, 2). CDI typically occurs after antibiotic-mediated disruption of the normal gut microbiota, enabling endogenous or ingested *C. difficile* spores to germinate and colonize (3, 4). Clinical manifestations range from mild diarrhea to pseudomembranous colitis, toxic megacolon and, in severe cases, death (3, 4). Moreover, recurrent CDI (R-CDI) remains a major public-health challenge, which affects 20-30% of CDI patients and may increase to nearly 60% after multiple episodes (5, 6).

The infection cycle of *C. difficile* is primarily driven by its ability to produce metabolically dormant and environmentally resilient spores (7). After ingestion, spores survive passage through the stomach and germinate in the gastrointestinal tract in response to bile acids and other cues (7, 8), leading to colonization, toxin production, and disease development (9). A subset of cells initiate sporulation, generating new spores that can persist in the host and are shed into the environment (10).

Although the core regulatory stages of sporulation have been characterized in *C. difficile*, sporulation-related studies are challenging. Several studies have shown that *C. difficile* sporulates at relatively low frequencies under laboratory conditions (11-14), and that cultures undergo sporulation in an inherently asynchronous manner (12, 15). Unlike other genetically trackable organisms such as *B. subtilis* and *C. perfringens*, this heterogeneity complicates

detailed investigations of sporulation-specific phenotypes, limits the ability to obtain stage-

enriched populations, and reduces yields of purified spores for biochemical, structural, or

high-throughput assays. Attempts to create high sporulating strains have met partial success,

such as overexpression of Spo0A (11), however, tunning sporulation commitment requires

consideration of additional regulators such as the phosphatase Spo0E and RtsA, both shown

to act as repressors sequestering Spo0A (16, 17).

In the context of unrelated culturing of *C. difficile*, we serendipitously identified a derivative

of the epidemic lineage strain R20291 that exhibits a distinguishable hypersporulation

phenotype. In this study we characterize this hypersporulating strain (R20291$_{CM196}$) and

assess its potential as a laboratory tool for generating high-yield and more synchronous spore

preparations. We observed that R20291$_{CM196}$ presented a 30 to 1,000-fold increase in ethanol-

resistant CFU, depending on the sporulation media composition, and reached a total of ~ 60

% sporulating cells after 24 h of incubation in 70:30 agar plates. Moreover, electron

micrographs show that hyper sporulating spores are identical to the parental strain. Whole

genome sequence revealed the presence of a ~2000 bp deletion including a pyrroline-

carboxylate reductase, *proC1*, involved in proline biosynthesis and a single nucleotide

polymorphism in *rsbV*, an antianti-SigB factor, involved in the general stress response and

inhibition of sporulation by Spo0E activation. Because this sporulation phenotype occurs

under *in vitro* conditions, the strain offers a practical platform for detailed studies of *C.*

difficile sporulation and spore physiology.

Materials and Methods

Bacterial strains and growth conditions

C. difficile strains were routinely grown at 37 °C under anaerobic conditions in a Coy Vinyl

Anaerobic chamber (COY laboratory products, USA) in BHIS medium: 3.7% weight vol^{-1}

brain heart infusion (BD, USA) supplemented with 0.5% weight vol^{-1} yeast extract (BD,

USA) and 0.1% weight vol^{-1} L-cysteine (Thermo Fisher Scientific, USA); TY medium: 3%

weight vol^{-1} trypticase (BD, USA) with 0.5% weight vol^{-1} yeast extract (BD, USA) or 70:30

medium: 6.3% weight vol^{-1} peptone (BD, USA), 0.35% weight vol^{-1} protease peptone (BD,

USA), 0.07% weight vol^{-1} ammonium sulfate $(NH_4)_2SO_4$ (Merck USA), 0.106%

weight vol^{-1} Tris base (Omnipur, Germany), 1.11% weight vol^{-1} brain heart infusion (BD,

USA) and 0.15% weight vol^{-1} yeast extract (BD, USA). To grow strains in plates, 1.5%

weight vol^{-1} agar (VWR, USA) was added to medium. Strains used in this work are

summarized in Table S1.

Growth assays

C. difficile strains were cultured anaerobically on pre-reduced BHIS broth supplemented with

0.1% sodium taurocholate (NaTC, Sigma, USA) and 0.5% glucose (BHISG + NaTC) for 16

h at 37 ºC to prevent sporulation. Overnight culture was diluted 1:3 with pre-warmed BHISG

+ NaTC broth and incubated for 2 h at 37 ºC to allow cells to enter exponential phase.

Subsequently, culture was diluted 1:100 in fresh BHIS and 100 μL were added to wells in a

96-well plate. Optical density (OD_{600}) was measured every 3 minutes for 22 hours at 37 ºC

using Cerillo's Alto^{TM} microplate reader. Three independent biological replicates with four

technical replicates each, were performed per sample.

Biofilm formation

Biofilm formation was measured as previously described (18, 19). Briefly, *C. difficile* inoculated BHISG broth was diluted 1:50, 1 mL aliquots were added to 24-well plate and incubated at 37 °C in anaerobic conditions for 24 h. Biofilm biomass was stained with 0.1% crystal violet (CV) for 1h, gently washed with 1X PBS and extracted with 100% ethanol for 2 h at room temperature. Solubilized CV was diluted 1:10 and absorbance was measured at OD_{570} with plate reader (BioTek, Synergy H1).

Spore purification

As previously described (19, 20), 250 μL of a *C. difficile* inoculated BHISF (0.2% Fructose) + NaTC broth was plated on pre-reduced 70:30 agar plates (35 mL) and incubated for 5 days at 37 °C in a COY anaerobic chamber. Sporulating culture was harvested and cleaned with ice-cold sterile Milli-Q water. Nycodenz (Axell USA) 45% solution was used to purified spores by centrifugation at 18,400 × g for 20 min, cellular debris was removed, spore pellet separated and washed with sterile Milli-Q water and stored at −80 °C until use.

Whole genome sequence

C. difficile strains were whole genome sequenced (SeqCenter, USA) and Illumina data was analyzed using Geneious Prime® 2025.1.3. Reads were mapped to *C. difficile* R20291 reference genome (GenBank: CP029423) using Bowtie2 v7.2.2, with default parameters. Whole genome variant calling was performed by Geneious variant finder with a minimum coverage of five reads and a minimum variant frequency of 0.95 and long INDEL (insertion or deletion) regions were predicted using Find Low/High Coverage tool.

Sporulation assay by ethanol resistance and phase-contrast microscopy

C. difficile sporulation efficiency was assayed as previously described (19, 21). Briefly, plating was performed as previously described in spore purification methods in BHIS, TY and 70:30 agar plates. Cells were harvested after 24 h in 1X PBS, OD_{600} was measured and absorbance of sporulating culture was adjusted to 1. An aliquot of 250 μL was treated with 100% ethanol for 15 minutes at room temperature, serially diluted and spot plated in triplicate onto BHIS + NaTC plates under anaerobic conditions. Sporulation frequency was calculated as the proportion of spores that germinated after ethanol treatment, divided by the total number of CFU in the untreated sample. The ratio of vegetative cells vs spores/sporulating cells was also determined using phase contrast microscopy (Leica DMRX; Germany).

For sporulation timing, cultures were plated in 70:30 plates and incubated at 37 ºC under anaerobic conditions. Samples were harvested after 8, 10, 12, 14, 16, 18, 20 and 24 h into 1 mL 1X PBS. Cells were centrifuged at $18,400 \times g$ for 5 min and fixed with 4% paraformaldehyde. Vegetative and spores/sporulating cells count was determined using phase contrast microscopy (Leica DMRX; Germany).

Transmission electron microscopy (TEM)

As previously described with some modifications (10, 22), spores were fixed overnight with 2.5% glutaraldehyde and 1% paraformaldehyde in 0.1 M cacodylate buffer. Secondary fixation was performed with 1% osmium tetroxide for 2 h, followed by 30 min staining with 1% tannic acid. Samples were serially dehydrated 30 min each with acetone 30% (with 2% uranyl acetate), 50%, 70%, 90%, and twice with 100% acetone, after which samples were

embedded in Spurr resin (22, 23). Thin sections (90 nm) were obtained using a microtome,

placed on glow-discharge carbon-coated grids, and double-stained with 2% uranyl acetate

followed by lead citrate. Spores were analyzed using a Philips Tecnai 12 Bio Twin

microscope at the Unidad de Microscopía Avanzada, Pontificia Universidad Católica de

Chile.

Statistical analyses

Statistical significance was determined by Welch's t-test in GraphPad Prism v9.0. <0.05

(*), <0.01 (**), <0.001 (***), <0.0001 (****), ns: no significance. All experiments were

performed in triplicate with at least three technical replicates.

Results and discussions

Hyper-sporulating R20291 derivative.

A canonical feature of *C. difficile* spore formation is its asynchronous nature and low

efficiency yield, therefore, a major challenge in *C. difficile* spore-related research, is the

production of enough mass of said spores. By serendipity, it was observed in a routine

experiment that an isolate of *C. difficile* R20291 (from here on address as $R20291_{CM196}$)

presented a marked increase in the number of spores after 24 h incubation in 70:30

sporulation media in comparison with the usual levels obtained in lab with this strain (wild-

type strain from here on address as $R20291_{CM210}$) (**Fig. 1A**).

To confirm and evaluate if the increased amounts of spores observed in $R20291_{CM196}$ strain

were confined to specific nutritional conditions, a sporulation efficiency assay by ethanol

resistance of cells grown in three different media widely used in *C. difficile* research; BHIS,

TY and 70:30, was performed. There was no significant difference in the amount of ethanol-

resistant CFU obtained by the two strains when they were grown in any broth media ($p > 0.5$)

(**Fig. 1B,1D and S1**). However, when cells were plated in 70:30 and BHIS, but no in TY,

agar plates, a significant difference ($p < 0.01$ and $p < 0.05$, respectively) was observed in

ethanol-resistant CFU of $R20291_{CM196}$ reaching ~92% and 1% in comparison with a 3% and

0% of $R20291_{CM210}$, respectively (**Fig. 1E, 1G and S2**), reaching sporulation levels more

than 30-times higher with 70:30 media.

This phenotype was confirmed by phase contrast microscopy counts of vegetative cells and

spores/sporulating cells of cultures grown in broth and agar plates. It was observed that

R20291$_{CM196}$ strain grown in 70:30 broth had a total of 4.9% cells that were phase bright

spores but reached 65% when grown in 70:30 agar plates. As for R20291$_{CM210}$ strain, the

percentage of spores/sporulating cells ranged from 0.21% in broth and 4.5% cells in agar

plate (**Fig. 1C and 1F**). The difference between ethanol-resistance CFU and micrograph

counts could be attributed to R20291$_{CM196}$ vegetative cells in the sporulating culture being

prone to lyse, during being in ethanol resistance assay by spot plating and counting of cells

by phase contrast microscopy (92% vs 65%, respectively), could be due to loss of viability

of vegetative cells.

R20291$_{CM196}$ exhibits an early onset of sporulation

To determine if the sporulation process of R20291$_{CM196}$ and R20291$_{CM210}$ initiated at the

same time or deferred, a sporulation timing assay was conducted. Strains were grown in

70:30 agar plates and harvested at 8 and 24 h and analyzed by phase contrast microscopy.

Free spores were observed first at 12 h incubation time in R20291$_{CM196}$ strain, at least 2 h

before R20291$_{CM210}$ and with ~7 times more spores (6.5% vs 0.9%, respectively) (**Fig. 2A**

and 2B). At 14 h, the amount of R20291$_{CM196}$ spores reached 31% compared to 1% in

R20291$_{CM210}$, accounting for an increase of 4.8% vs a 1.1%, respectively. By 24 h,

R20291$_{CM196}$ sporulating culture had more than half (57.4%) of phase bright spores, 10-times

higher than observed in R20291$_{CM210}$ (5.3%) sporulating cultures (**Fig. 2A and 2B**). This

validated that the onset of sporulation of R20291$_{CM196}$ was not only earlier but that more cells

committed to this process in waves than in the case of R20291$_{CM210}$ strain. Unfortunately, the

speed of sporulation cannot be measured, so this attribute remains unknown.

Ultrastructural analysis of R20291$_{CM196}$ spores.

Furthermore, to determine if the organization of the spore ultrastructure was affected,

transmission electron microscopy images were analyzed. R20291$_{CM196}$ spores remained

seemingly unchanged, with the presence of hair-like projections on top of the electron-dense

outer coat (ED-OC) layer and lamellae structure within the coat (Ct) of thin and thick spores

morphotypes (**Fig. 2C**). Therefore, the hypersporulation trait of R20291$_{CM196}$ appears to only

affect the onset and quantity of sporulating cells but not the structure of the spores.

R20291$_{CM196}$ exhibit differences in growth and biofilm formation

To gain more insight into the physiology of R20291$_{CM196}$ strain, planktonic growth and

biofilm formation phenotypes were assayed. Growth of R20291$_{CM196}$ reached a lower optical

density, with a maximum OD$_{600}$ of 0.1082 in comparison with R20291$_{CM210}$ that had a

maximum OD$_{600}$ of 0.2259. Additionally, the decline phase in R20291$_{CM196}$ appears to begin

approximately at 10 h after inoculation, meanwhile R20291$_{CM210}$ is at 18 h, 8 hours after (**Fig**

3A). Biofilm formation was also significantly decreased in R20291$_{CM196}$, with a value of

OD$_{570}$ 0.31 in comparison with R20291$_{CM210}$ of OD$_{570}$ 0.59 ($p < 0.0001$) (**Fig. 3B**).This data

suggests that the differences in commitment to sporulate observed in R20291$_{CM196}$, might be

impacting planktonic growth and the ability to form sessile communities.

Whole genome sequencing of R20291$_{CM196}$ reveals unique polymorphism.

To evaluate if the aforementioned differences in sporulation commitment in R20291$_{CM196}$

was attributed to genetic differences, R20291$_{CM196}$ and R20291$_{CM210}$ were whole genome

sequenced, and performed comparative genomics against *C. difficile* reference genome

CP029423. Five mutations are shared between these two R20291 isolates. Two missense

mutations, one in *rsbW* (G82V, CDIF27147_00009), a serine protein kinase that acts as the

anti-sigma factor of SigB and the second one in *vncR* (D202G, CDIF27147_02036), a two-

component system response regulator (Fig. 4A). As well as two nonsense mutations by single

nucleotide deletions in ribokinase, *rbsK* (CDIF27147_00429) and a two-component sensor

histidine kinase (CDIF27147_02733) (Fig. 4A); additionally, a single nucleotide insertion in

a non-coding region between the end of two ORF; i) 336 bp from CDIF27147_00700 and ii)

144 bp from CDIF27147_00701 were observed (**Fig. 4A**).

Notably, R20291$_{CM196}$ possess two additional polymorphisms. The first one being a missense

mutation (L20F) in *rsbV*, that encodes for an anti anti-SigB, that plays a crucial role in the

general stress response against pH, antimicrobial peptides and reactive oxygen species (ROS)

(24, 25). In *B subtilis*, its function is to sequester RsbW, detaching it from the complex

RsbW-SigB, allowing for the activation of the SigB regulon (26). The induction of SigB has

been shown to reduce the sporulation process in *B. subtilis* (27), by the positive regulation of

Spo0E, an aspartyl phosphatase that dephosphorylates the master of sporulation Spo0A (27,

28). In *C. difficile* it has been shown that *spo0E* mutants sporulated twice wild-type levels,

indicating that sporulation is being repressed by Spo0E as seen in *B. subtilis* (16). Sporulation

is a high energy process, utilized as a last resource to survive an unfavorable environment;

endosporeformers it will try to survive by first by activating the general stress response before

committing to sporulation (29). The mutation in RsbV, could therefore hinder binding to

RsbW, in which case SigB will remain sequestered by its anti-sigma factor, inhibiting the

activation of the SigB regulon and its impact in sporulation repression.

The second mutation present in R20291$_{CM196}$ is a 2,356 bp deletion affecting a transcriptional

regulator   (CDIF27147_01521),   a   pyrroline-5-carboxylate   reductase   (*proC1*,

CDIF27147_01522) involved in the last step of L-proline biosynthesis obtained from

glutamate, and the last 284 bp of an uncharacterized protein (CDIF27147_01523) (**Fig. 4A**

and 4B). In *B. subtilis*, that only the absence of the three genes that encode for pyrroline-5-

carboxylate reductase (*proG*, *proH*, and *proI*) render a proline auxotroph (30), but

individually they are not essential genes. *C. difficile* R20291 genome encodes two pyrroline-

5-carboxylate reductase *proC1* and *proC2* (CDIF27147_03465) that share an identity

between 29 to 33% with the *B. subtilis proH/proI*, but only a 23% identity to *proG*. This

suggests that the single deletion of *proC1* may not affect R20291$_{CM196}$ ability to produce

proline, since *proC2* is still intact. Moreover, while this deletion also included

CDIF27147_01521, the putative response regulator, and CDIF27147_01523, their roles

remains unclear and are matter of current work in the lab.

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Figure legends

Fig. 1. Hypersporulating *C. difficile* R20291 derivative strain. (A) Phase contrast microscopy

of a 24 h sporulating culture. Sporulation efficiency evaluated by ethanol resistant sporulation

assay of 24 h sporulating cultures grown in BHIS, TY or 70:30 media (B) broth or (E) agar.

Sporulation efficiency evaluated by phase contrast microscopy images of 24 h sporulating

cultures grown in BHIS, TY or 70:30 media (C) broth or (F) agar. At least 800 spores/cells

were counted from each sample. Representative images of serial spot dilution of ethanol

resistant sporulation assay in (D) broth and (G) agar plate. Cells were spotted at 10-fold serial

dilutions on BHIS agar plates supplemented with 0.1% sodium taurocholate. ND: no data.

Welch's t-test. < 0.05 (*), < 0.01 (**), ns: no significance.

Fig. 2. Early sporulation onset and spore ultrastructure analysis of R20291$_{CM196}$. (**A**)

Sporulation timing in 70:30 agar plates. Sporulating culture was monitored at 8, 10, 12, 14,

16, 18, 20 and 24 h. (**B**) Representative phase contrast microscopy images of sporulation

timing assay. Numbers on the lower right corner corresponds to the percentage of

spores/sporulating cells in the sample at that time. (**C**) Transmission electron microscopy

(TEM) of R20291$_{CM196}$ and R20291$_{CM210}$ spores. ED-OC: Electron-dense outer coat. Ct:

Coat.

Fig. 3. R20291$_{CM196}$ physiology traits. (**A**) Growth curve of R20291$_{CM196}$ (teal) and

R20291$_{CM210}$ (yellow) in BHIS media over 22 h. (**B**) Biofilm formation was evaluated at 24

h by crystal violet staining and measured at OD_{570}. Welch's t-test. < 0.0001 (****)

Fig. 4. Mutations in hypersporulating *C. difficile* R20291$_{CM196}$ strain. (A) Description of

single nucleotide variants and INDELs present in R20291$_{CM196}$ and R20291$_{CM210}$ strains in

comparison with *C. difficile* R20291 reference genome (CP029423). **(B)** Genetic deletion in

R20291$_{CM196}$ vs wildtype region in R20291$_{CM210}$.

Fig. S1. Ethanol-resistant cells grow in broth media. Representative images of serial spot

dilution of ethanol resistant sporulation assay of R20291$_{CM196}$ and R20291$_{CM210}$. Cells were

spotted at 10-fold serial dilutions on BHIS agar plates supplemented with 0.1% sodium

taurocholate. U: untreated cells, T: ethanol-treated cells.

Fig. S2. Ethanol-resistant cells grow in agar media. Representative images of serial spot

dilution of ethanol resistant sporulation assay of R20291$_{CM196}$ and R20291$_{CM210}$. Cells were

spotted at 10-fold serial dilutions on BHIS agar plates supplemented with 0.1% sodium

taurocholate. U: untreated cells, T: ethanol-treated cells.

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Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

Figure 4

A

locus_tag	Gene name	Description	Genome position (pb)	Polymorphism type	Mutation	nucleotide change	Amino acid change	Coverage	Variant frequency (%)	Genomes CM196	CM210
Coding region polymorphisms											
CDIF27147_00009	*rsbV*	anti-sigma-B factor antagonist	9,186	SNV	Missense	C -> T	L20F	213	99.5	X	-
CDIF27147_00010	*rsbW*	serine-proteine kinase	9,694	SNV	Missense	G -> T	G82V	189	99.7	X	X
CDIF27147_00429	*rbsK*	ribokinase	371,626	Deletion	Nonsense	(A)5 -> (A)4	V55=fs*2	165	95.3	X	X
CDIF27147_02036	*vncR*	two-component system response regulator	2,134,234	SNV	Missense	A -> G	D202G	173	100	X	X
CDIF27147_02733	-	two-component sensor histidine kinase	2,895,029	Deletion	Nonsense	(T)7 -> (T)6	K436=fs*12	162	96.2	X	X
Non-coding region polymorphisms											
-	-	-	685626	Insertion	-	(A)5 -> (A)6	-	177	96.9	X	X
-	-	-	2090870	Deletion	-	- C	-	281	97.9	-	X
INDEL											
CDIF27147_01521	-	Transcriptional regulator	1,602,931 - 1,605,287	Deletion	-	-	-	-	100	X	-
CDIF27147_01522	*proC1*	pyrroline-5-carboxylate reductase									
CDIF27147_01523	-	Uncharacterized protein									

fs: frame shift

: Stop codon. Number after "" denotes new stop codon position after indel event.

B