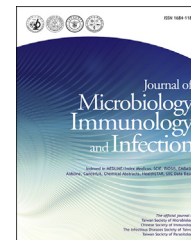




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Review Article

The *p53* gene with emphasis on its paralogues in mosquitoes



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Abstract The *p53* gene is highly important in human cancers, as it serves as a tumor-suppressor gene. Subsequently, two *p53* homologues, *i.e.*, *p73* and *p63*, with high identity of amino acids were identified, leading to construction of the *p53* family. The *p53* gene is highly important in human cancer because it usually transcribes genes that function by causing apoptosis in mammalian cells. In contrast, *p63* and *p73* tend to be more important in modulating development than inducing cell death, even though they share similar protein structures. Relatively recently, *p53* was also identified in mosquitoes and many other insect species. Uniquely, its structure lacks the sterile alpha motif domain which is a putative protein-protein interaction domain and exclusively exists at the C-terminal region in *p73* and *p63* in mammals. A phylogenetic analysis revealed that the *p53* gene derived from mosquitoes is composed of two paralogues, *p53-1* and *p53-2*. Of these, only *p53-2* is responsively up-regulated by dengue 2 virus (DENV2) in C6/36 cells which usually survive the infection. This indicates that the *p53* gene is closely related to DENV infection in mosquito cells. The specific significance of *p53-2*'s involvement in cell survival from virus-induced stress is described and briefly discussed in this report.

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Background

The eukaryotic cell cycle is normally divided into four distinct phases, G₁, S, G₂, and M; its progression can be downregulated through a p53-dependent pathway when stress-induced DNA damage occurs.¹ The p53 gene in mammal cells was demonstrated to be a critical mediator of the apoptotic response to DNA double-strand (ds) breaks via the transcriptional activation of proapoptotic genes.² Therefore, the genomic integrity of a cell population or organism can be maintained. Mutation of the p53 gene and/or a functional defect in the p53 pathway usually results in ineffectiveness in causing apoptosis which was found in most human tumor cells.³ About 50% of cancer cases are estimated to possess a mutation of the p53 gene, and almost all cancers exhibit inactivity of p53.⁴ p53 is genetically conserved in a broad spectrum from mammals to lower invertebrates.⁵ Two more homologs, *i.e.*, p63 and p73, were subsequently discovered as additional members of the p53 family.⁶ The common ancestor gene of p53 family members is supposed to be the first gene that duplicated to produce a p53 gene and a p63/p73 ancestor in cartilaginous fish.⁷ Bony fish and higher vertebrates contain all three genes with diverse functions despite their possessing preserved structural features.⁸

The p53 family

The basic structure of p53 is composed of four conserved domains (Fig. 1), including an amino-terminal transactivation domain (TAD) consisting of a proline-rich domain (PR), a central DNA-binding domain (DBD), and a carboxy-terminal oligomerization domain (OD).⁹ The TAD is highly associated with the cell fate, presumably governing genes involved in cellular senescence, DNA editing, and repair pathways.¹⁰ The DBD is located in the central region and is the target of most p53 mutations found in human cancers.⁹ The OD contains a nuclear export signal (NES) and contributes to form a dimer of two dimers of p53 in structure.⁹ The sterile alpha motif (SAM) is a putative protein-protein interaction domain that exclusively exists in the C-terminal region of p63 and p73.¹¹ The SAM domain is necessary to stabilize the OD structure in both p63 and p73.¹¹ In many

proteins, the SAM domain is involved in signaling and transcription, providing a structure which appropriately binds phosphotyrosine phosphatase and initiates downstream signaling events.¹²

It was reported that p53 independently duplicates, and therefore, it is a divergent ancestral gene from p63 and p73, although they have shared structural identities to each other.¹³ Comparing gene compositions, p63 and p73 are more similar to each other than each of them is to p53.⁷ As a result, p63 and p73 are thought to have more-ancient roots and are likely to be the ancestors of p53.⁶ However, there is increasing evidence showing that they have shared, overlapping functions. For instance, they may commonly induce cell-cycle arrest and apoptosis in cells.¹⁴ Nevertheless, distinct functions among them are also reported, such as involvement in regulating stress responses to suppress tumors, ectoderm development, and both.¹⁵ DNA damage usually activates p53 but not p63 or p73¹⁴, further revealing the existence of different physiological functions among members of the p53 family. In a study using p63 and p73 knockout in mice, developmental abnormalities but not cancer susceptibility were observed.¹⁶ Another study also showed that the combined loss of p63 and p73 caused failure of apoptosis in cells containing functional p53 in response to DNA damage.¹⁷ Mutations of p63 and p73 rarely being found in human cancers reflects that p63 and p73 are more important in modulating development than in inducing cancer.⁴ Nevertheless, p53, p73, and p63 may interact with each other, as p53 mutants with loss of the tumor-suppressing capacity were reported to inactivate p73.^{15,18} Studies on their interactions are required for further clarification of relationships among them.¹⁰

In a cell in a resting status, p53 is localized in the cytoplasm, while it accumulates in the nucleus following stress and functions as a transcription factor.¹⁹ According to a genome-wide investigation, 149 putative new p53 target genes were highly associated with cancer.²⁰ Another study further revealed that at least 125 protein-coding genes and noncoding RNAs are transcriptional targets directly regulated by p53 under a wide range of stress signals in cells.²¹ These results suggest that p53 is responsive to various stresses induced by chemical mutagens, irradiation, viral infections, etc.¹ In addition, diverse transcriptional co-regulators may be recruited to regulate cellular RNA

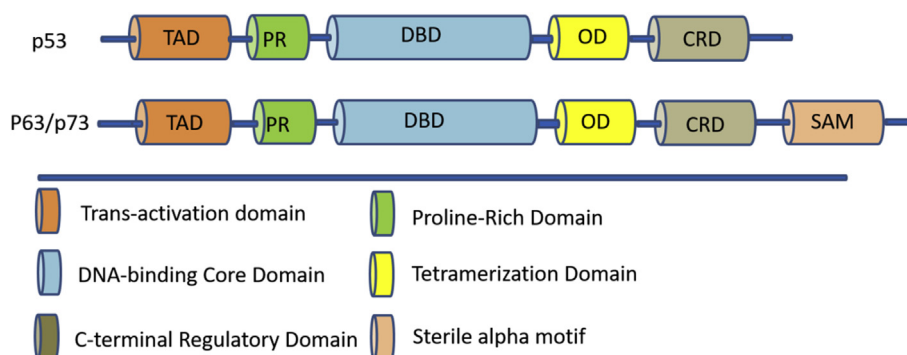


Fig. 1. Schematic structures of p53 and p63/p73 members of the p53 family. All of them are composed of a transactivation domain (TAD), proline-rich domain (PR), DNA-binding core domain (DBD), oligomerization domain (OD), and C-terminal regulatory domain (CRD) while an additional sterile alpha motif (SAM) exclusively exists at the C-terminus of p63 and p73.

polymerase II activity by stress-activated p53 modulation of transcription initiation and elongation at target gene promoters.²² The promoter selectivity and transcriptional regulation of p53 target genes are assumed to be the effects of diverse stresses.²³ It was noted that low levels of stress-induced DNA damage can be repaired unless the damage persists and becomes extensive.²⁴

p53 in insects

Genes in the p53 family are not detectable in prokaryotes or yeast.⁸ However, they exist in single-celled choanoflagellates which are believed to be the most primitive invertebrates possessing genes belonging to the p53 family.²⁵ *Caenorhabditis elegans* was reported to have a homologue of mammalian p53, indicating that this primitive multiple-celled organism also requires p53 for DNA damage-induced apoptosis in its germline.²⁶ However, it does not affect programmed cell death during development of the worm,²⁷ suggesting that p53-mediated transcriptional regulation in *C. elegans* follows an ancestral function as is now known invertebrates. Nowadays, p53 is known to be prevalent in a wide range of invertebrates including insects.²⁷ p53 from invertebrates/insects is structurally similar to that in vertebrates and mammals, consisting of a TAD (including the neighboring proline-rich region), DBD, and OD in sequence.²⁸ Very importantly, p53 found in invertebrates lacks the SAM domain, although the full length of the gene sequence generally shares similarity with p63/p73 homologues.¹¹ In addition, p53 of insects/invertebrates usually has a molecular weight lower than that of mammalian p53; for instance, it is 41.2 kDa in *Bombyx mori* and 42.5 kDa in *Spodoptera frugiperda*.²⁹

Thus far, p63/p73 homologues have not been identified in *Drosophila* or other insects although the biological functions of *Drosophila* p53 family genes have been mentioned to be closer to the vertebrate p63-like family genes. As a result, the *Drosophila* p53 gene is believed to have originated from a p53-like ancestor but not a duplicate of p67/p73 which is supposed to be the common ancestor of p53 genes in vertebrates.³⁷ However, p53 identified from squid was observed to be more similar to human p67/p73 in gene sequences.³⁰ Meanwhile, p53 found in mollusks has a structure either with or without the SAM domain.³¹ This implies that p53 of invertebrates or insects may be linked to p67/p73.

p53 paralogues in mosquitoes

The p53 gene has been identified in a number of insects, including species in the orders of Homoptera, Hymenoptera, Coleoptera, Lepidoptera, and Diptera.²⁹ However, information with respect to mosquito p53 is limited, while it has been widely investigated in the Diptera, particularly *Drosophila*.²⁷ Mosquitoes are important members of the Diptera; which serve as vectors of a great number of human diseases, such as malaria, filariasis, and various viral infections. Thus far, p53 has been identified in more than 20 species of mosquitoes including 19 *Anopheles* species in the subfamily Anophelinae and three species (*Aedes aegypti*, *Ae. albopictus*, and *Culex pipiens quinquefasciatus*) in the

subfamily Culicinae (available at the VectorBase webpage: 8~https://www.vectorbase.org/Culex_quinquefasciatus/Gene/Compara_Ortholog?db=core;g=CPIJ002758;r=supercont3.36:1214079-1215512;t=CPIJ002758-RA). Of these, *Ae. aegypti* and probably *Ae. albopictus* are considered to be principal vectors of dengue fever (DENV), Zika fever, and Chikungunya that are prevalent in most tropical countries while *Cx. quinquefasciatus* is the main vector of bancroftian filariasis.^{32,33} Therefore, relationships of arboviruses or other arthropod-borne pathogens with their mosquito hosts have attracted attention, as the fate of mosquito cells with respect to infections may determine the role of mosquitoes as transmission vectors. According to a previous report, p53 is one of the mosquito genes which positively responds to DENV infection.³⁴

A phylogenetic tree constructed on the basis of p53 amino acid sequences derived from 22 species of mosquitoes, a panel of insects, and the snail *Biomphalaria glabrata* (the outgroup) is shown at the VectorBase webpage: <https://www.vectorbase.org/Multi/GeneTree/Image?gt=VBGT00190000010787>. According to the constructed tree, p53 of ticks is evolutionarily distant from those of insects. p53 genes identified in non-dipteran insects, including bed bugs (*Cimex lectularius*) and cone-nose bugs (*Rhodnius prolixus*) (Hemiptera), and body lice (*Pediculus humanis*) (Anoplura), are grouped in a single clade with a distant evolutionary relationship from the dipterans. Uniquely, unlike those from vertebrates, p53 genes derived from currently selected insects are divided into two distinct clades. The first clade (at the upper portion in the tree) contains one p53 homologue derived from all mosquitoes and the sand fly *Lutzomyia longipalpis*, both of which belong to the suborder Nematocera in the order Diptera. Species belonging to the suborder Brachycera (*Musca domestica*, *Stomoxys calcitrans*, *Drosophila melanogaster*, and *Glossina* spp.) in the order Diptera are also in this clade. The second clade (at the lower portion of the tree) contains the other p53 homologues also derived from mosquitoes and a few genetically distant species of insects, including several species of tsetse flies (*Glossina* spp.), *C. lectularius*, *R. prolixus*, and *P. humanis*. Among them, *Glossina morsitans* is the only species of currently known insects that possesses two clades of p53 other than mosquitoes.

Isoforms of each member of the p53 family have been identified from many organisms³⁵; these may be created through multiple splicing events, alternative promoters, and different alternative initiation events of translation.¹⁸ Due to divergent biological properties among isoforms of p53, a complex network of functions may thus be constructed.³⁶ Isoforms may further be referred to as paralogues because of a predominance of substitutions.³⁷ Hypothetically, they are descendants of two different copies of the same gene through a duplication event in the common ancestor genome.³⁸ As mentioned, all p53 genes identified from mosquitoes and *G. morsitans* include two clades which are now referred to as two paralogues, *i.e.*, p53-1 and p53-2. Interestingly, most insects other than mosquitoes contain only a single homologue. With a few exceptions, p53 paralogues exclusively exist in the suborder Nematocera but not the suborder Brachycera, both of which taxonomically belong to the order Diptera.

Molecularly, p53-1 and p53-2 isoforms can be simultaneously identified in *Ae. aegypti*, *Ae. albopictus*, *Cx. quinquefasciatus*, and *Anopheles* species of mosquitoes. Based on a simplified phylogenetic tree constructed by the

Neighbor-joining method (Fig. 2a), both p53-1 and p53-2 are genetically closer between *Aedes* and *Culex*; however, they are more distant to *Anopheles* homologues. p53 genes from *D. melanogaster*, *Ceratitis capitata*, and

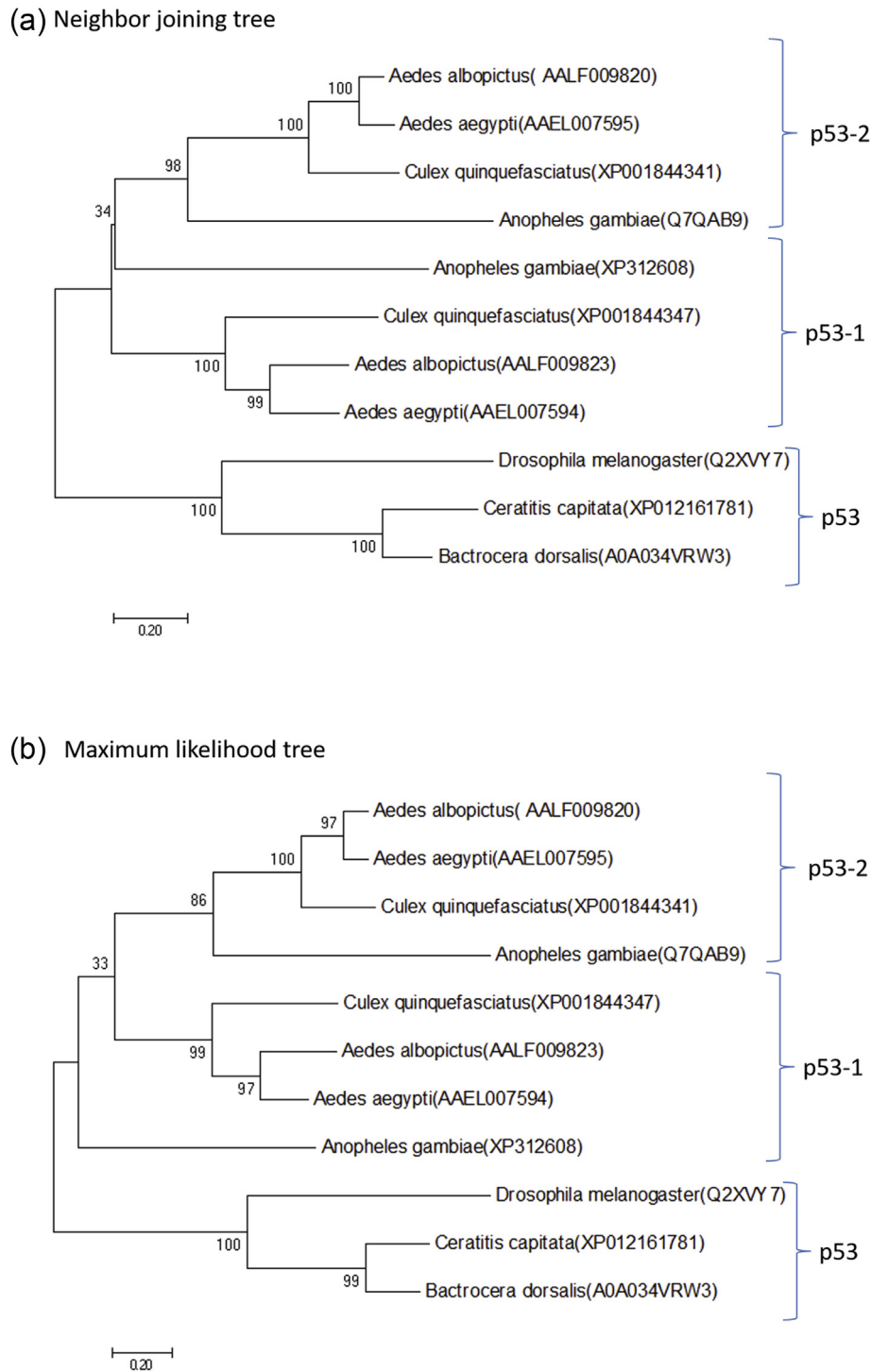


Fig. 2. Deduced amino acid sequence-based phylogenetic trees for selected p53 homologues were constructed by Neighbor-joining (a) and maximum-likelihood (b) methods, based on p53 homologues derived from seven dipterans including four species of mosquitoes (suborder Nematocera) and three species of flies (suborder Brachycera). All four mosquitoes possessed two paralogues of p53 (p53-1 and p53-2), while there was a single homologue in flies. Numbers on the branches are bootstrap proportions (1000 replicates).

Table 1 Distance estimations^a between aligned p53 paralogs (p53-1 and p53-2) derived from the deduced amino acid sequences of three species of culicine mosquitoes (*Aedes aegypti*, *Ae. albopictus*, and *Culex quinquefasciatus*) and one anopheline species (*Anopheles gambiae*).

	p53-1				p53-2			
	<i>Aedes aegypti</i> (AAEL007594)	<i>Aedes albopictus</i> (AALF010441)	<i>Culex quinquefasciatus</i> (CPIJ002764)	<i>Anopheles gambiae</i> (AGAP002352)	<i>Aedes aegypti</i> (AAEL007595)	<i>Aedes albopictus</i> (AALF009820)	<i>Culex quinquefasciatus</i> (CPIJ002758)	<i>Anopheles gambiae</i> (AGAP004319)
p53-1	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
1	<i>Aedes aegypti</i> (AAEL007594)	0.677	—	—	—	—	—	—
	<i>Aedes albopictus</i> (AALF010441)	0.501	0.524	—	—	—	—	—
	<i>Culex quinquefasciatus</i> (CPIJ002764)	0.216	0.223	0.223	—	—	—	—
	<i>Anopheles gambiae</i> (AGAP002352)	0.280	0.252	0.263	0.185	—	—	—
2	<i>Aedes aegypti</i> (AAEL007595)	0.296	0.268	0.263	0.189	0.823	—	—
	<i>Aedes albopictus</i> (AALF009820)	0.276	0.263	0.262	0.186	0.63	0.617	—
	<i>Culex quinquefasciatus</i> (CPIJ002758)	0.198	0.235	0.22	0.188	0.243	0.241	0.252
	<i>Anopheles gambiae</i> (AGAP004319)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—

^a The sequences used for the analysis were not automatically aligned before the procedure we ran. BioEdit offers ClustalW as a means of computer-aided alignment. The numbers of amino acids analyzed were 385–459, depending on the species in question.

Bactrocera dorsalis (all belonging to the suborder Brachycera) were used as outgroups and were shown to be the most distant from those of mosquitoes, either p53-1 or p53-2.³⁹ The phylogenetic tree constructed by the maximum-likelihood method reveals the same trend (Fig. 2b). It reflects that p53 has evolved along with the speciation of mosquitoes, from which at least two paralogs were created. Their individual functions remain as an attractive topic for study in the future.

The p53 gene of mosquitoes is composed of 431–459 amino acids according to VectorBase. An identity matrix showing the proportions of identical residues within or between p53 paralogs from three species of culicine and one species of anopheline mosquitoes was produced (Table 1). The estimation of their evolutionary distances revealed that the p53-1 paralog of *Ae. aegypti* (AAEL007594) shared 67.7% similarity with that from *Ae. albopictus* (AALF009820) and 50.1% with that from *Cx. quinquefasciatus* (CPIJ002764). However, it was as low as 21.6% in similarity with that from *Anopheles gambiae* (AGAP002352), the representative species of anopheline mosquitoes. The p53-2 paralog from *Ae. aegypti* (AAEL007595) shared 82.3% similarity with that from *Ae. albopictus* (AALF009820) and 63.0% with that from *Cx. quinquefasciatus* (CPIJ002758). However, it had only 24.3% similarity compared to that from *An. gambiae* (AGAP004319). Looking at the genetic distance between the p53-1 and p53-2 paralogs, there was a 28.0% similarity of *Ae. aegypti*, 26.8% with *Ae. albopictus*, 26.2% with *Cx. quinquefasciatus*, and 18.8% with *An. gambiae*. This suggests that evolutionary distances between the p53-1 and p53-2 paralogs are relatively great regardless of which species of mosquito were their origins. Looking at the same comparison focusing on the predicted DBD, a similar evolutionary trend was shown at the base of the p53-1 and p53-2 paralogs derived from the four mosquito species (Table 2). Results revealed that there was only 51.3% similarity between the predicted DBDs of the p53-1 and p53-2 paralogs even though they were all derived from *Ae. aegypti*.

Potential functions of the p53 paralogs in mosquitoes

It is beyond doubt that arboviruses modulate gene expressions in mosquitoes in response to stresses induced by insecticides.⁴⁰ Alterations in gene expressions are also shown in the midgut of female *Cx. quinquefasciatus* exposed to blood meals containing West Nile virus (WNV).⁴¹ This indicates that arboviruses may activate mosquito genes which interact with invading viruses and/or biological functions of mosquitoes themselves.⁴² Apoptosis-related genes are usually not upregulated in susceptible strains of *Aedes* mosquitoes with DENV infection.⁴³ This implies that arboviral infection does not cause a high level of endoplasmic reticular (ER) stress that is able to induce apoptosis of mosquito cells with infections. According to a meta-analysis of studies across a range of mosquito/virus systems, on some occasions, arboviruses may also be deleterious to their mosquito vectors,⁴⁴ leading to a function of determining vector competence.⁴⁵ More often, arboviruses rarely cause apoptosis even though they are pathogens harmful to humans due to their co-evolution towards a

Table 2 Distance estimations^a of the predicted DNA-binding domain between aligned p53 paralogues (p53-1 and p53-2) derived from the deduced amino acid sequences of three species of culicine mosquitoes (*Aedes aegypti*, *Ae. albopictus*, and *Culex quinquefasciatus*) and one anopheline species (*Anopheles gambiae*).

	p53-1				p53-2			
	<i>Aedes aegypti</i> (AAEL007594)	<i>Aedes albopictus</i> (AALF010441)	<i>Culex quinquefasciatus</i> (CPIJ002764)	<i>Anopheles gambiae</i> (AGAP002352)	<i>Aedes aegypti</i> (AAEL007595)	<i>Aedes albopictus</i> (AALF009820)	<i>Culex quinquefasciatus</i> (CPIJ002758)	<i>Anopheles gambiae</i> (AGAP004319)
p53-1	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
1	0.859	0.708	—	—	—	—	—	—
	0.773	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
	0.387	0.392	0.407	—	—	—	—	—
	0.513	0.491	0.484	0.357	—	—	—	—
2	0.535	0.508	0.484	0.357	0.921	—	—	—
	0.508	0.481	0.468	0.357	0.804	0.798	—	—
	0.333	0.343	0.326	0.312	0.387	0.398	0.382	—

^a The sequences used for the analysis were not automatically aligned before the procedure we ran. BioEdit offers ClustalW as a means of computer-aided alignment. The numbers of amino acids analyzed were 385–459, depending on the species in question.

benign relationship between the virus and its host vectors.⁴⁶ In such cases, mosquito cells may operate antiviral mechanisms or host defense, leading to a great help for self-protection of infected cells.^{42,47}

Both antioxidant defense and antiapoptotic effects were reported to be induced in mosquito cells with DENV infection via reducing the accumulation of intracellular reactive oxygen species (ROS).^{34,42} ROS are now known to act as upstream signals triggering p53 and its downstream factors in association with apoptosis.⁴⁸ p53 target genes, such as *reper* in *Drosophila* or *Michelob_x* in mosquito cells, may be transactivated following infection with pathogenic viruses and certain arboviruses,⁴⁹ leading to a cell-killing effect.⁵⁰ Despite apoptosis also appearing in mosquito cells with arboviruses,⁴⁶ the p53-mediated signaling pathway may play a significant role in protecting infected cells. Recently, we demonstrated that p53-2 (with a 2.27-fold increase in infected cells), but not p53-1 (with a 1.24-fold increase), was significantly upregulated in response to DENV infection for 24 h in C6/36 cells ($p < 0.05$; Student's *t*-test) (Fig. 3). This reflects that p53-2 in *Ae. albopictus* cells plays a more important role of overcoming oxidative stress and surviving DENV infection than does p53-1. When p53-2 was knocked down in C6/36 cells, the apoptosis rate was obviously enhanced at 24 h post-infection by the DENV (W. J. Chen, unpublished data). Presumably, p53-2 functions to create an environment beneficial for viral replication in mosquito cells. In the meantime, it helps mosquito cells survive DENV infection. Despite more results are needed, we have preliminarily confirmed a critical role of p53-2 in reducing ROS accumulation and the death rate of mosquito cells with DENV infection. Undoubtedly, a higher survival rate of mosquito cells is a prerequisite for prosperous production of viral progeny. This feature may account for the benign outcome of mosquito cells with infections of most arboviruses which are thus transmitted efficiently in nature.

Conclusions

Genes in the p53 family, *i.e.*, p53, p63, and p73, have been identified in most eukaryotic vertebrates. Of these, p53 is

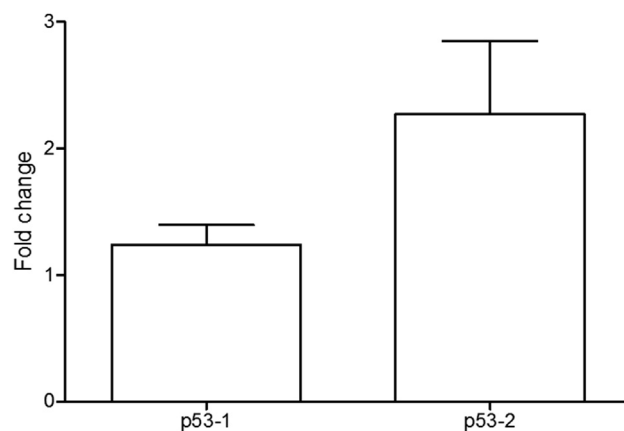


Fig. 3. p53-1 and p53-2 expression levels in *Aedes albopictus*-derived C6/36 cells in response to dengue 2 virus (DENV2) infection for 24 h. Results show that only p53-2, but not p53-1, was upregulated by DENV2 in mosquito cells.

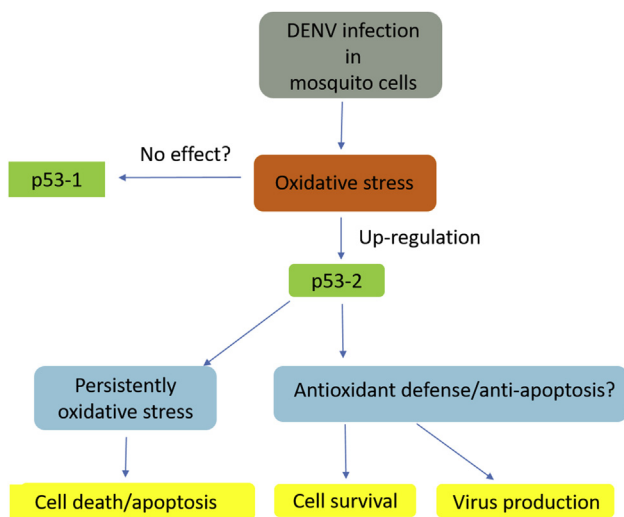


Fig. 4. The p53 pathway in mosquito cells with dengue 2 virus (DENV2) infection. DENV2-induced oxidative stress may result in upregulation of p53-2 in mosquito cells. Infected cells may end up dying if oxidative stress persists. On the other hand, upregulation of p53-2 may be involved in antioxidant defense and antiapoptotic effects, leading to the survival of infected cells in which the virus continually replicates.

believed to regulate apoptosis, while p63 and p73 tend to be involved in development. Thus far, p53 is the only member found in invertebrates; however, it lacks the SAM domain at the 3'-terminus. p53 identified from mosquitoes was demonstrated to consist of two paralogues (p53-1 and p53-2). However, only p53-2 is upregulated in response to ER stress induced by DENV infection and is very likely involved in protecting mosquito cells. Its target genes are primarily those responsible for antioxidant defense and antiapoptotic effects which were found to be induced (Fig. 4). In conclusion, p53-2 plays a role in mediating a balance between viral replication and mosquito survival, facilitating an elucidation of how arboviruses can be amplified in and successfully transmitted by mosquito vectors.

Conflicts of interest

All contributing authors declare no financial interests related to the material in the manuscript.

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