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γ H2AX foci analysis for monitoring DNA double-strand break repair

Strengths, limitations and optimization

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DNA double-strand breaks (DSBs) represent an important radiation-induced lesion and impaired DSB repair provides the best available correlation with radiosensitivity. Physical techniques for monitoring DSB repair require high, non-physiological doses and cannot reliably detect subtle defects. One outcome from extensive research into the DNA damage response is the observation that H2AX, a variant form of the histone H2A, undergoes extensive phosphorylation at the DSB, creating γ H2AX foci that can be visualized by immunofluorescence. There is a close correlation between γ H2AX foci and DSB numbers and between the rate of foci loss and DSB repair, providing a sensitive assay to monitor DSB repair in individual cells using physiological doses. However, γ H2AX formation can occur at single-stranded DNA regions which arise during replication or repair and thus does not solely correlate with DSB formation. Here, we present and discuss evidence that following exposure to ionizing radiation, γ H2AX foci analysis can provide a sensitive monitor of DSB formation and repair and describe techniques to optimize the analysis. We discuss the limitations and benefits of the technique, enabling the procedure to be optimally exploited but not misused.

Introduction

Recent research has provided a detailed understanding of the damage response mounted by the presence of a DNA

double-strand break (DSB).¹ The response involves an exquisitely orchestrated assembly of proteins. This knowledge has recently been exploited to develop DSB detection assays. γ H2AX foci analysis is one such assay that exploits an early step in the damage response, namely the phosphorylation of H2AX, a variant form of the histone, H2A.^{2,3} Since phosphorylated H2AX, designated γ H2AX, expands a large distance (Mbp) from the DSB site and since specific γ H2AX antibodies are available, the DSBs can be visualized as discrete foci. The assay is highly sensitive and can potentially detect all induced DSBs. However, sceptics have argued that γ H2AX occurs at lesions other than DSBs, that it is an indirect rather than a direct monitor of DSBs, and that the rate of DSB repair does not precisely correlate with the rate assessed by other methods. Notwithstanding some limitations, the assay has such potential utility that it is a shame to preclude its usage without serious considerations. Previous reviews have considered γ H2AX foci expansion from the chromatin perspective and its use in the analysis of cancer cells.⁴⁻⁶ We review and present data arguing that after ionizing radiation (IR) exposure, γ H2AX foci can represent a reliable and exquisitely sensitive monitor of DSB formation and repair. We review the procedures that we, and others, have developed to enhance the sensitivity of the technique. We discuss the limitations that have to be carefully evaluated and consider how the analysis can be exploited for specific end points notwithstanding these limitations.



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Comparison of γ H2AX Foci Analysis and Other Techniques

Traditional methods of DSB analysis rely on physical estimation of DNA size or on procedures that assess chromosome breakage. Of the physical methods, pulsed-field gel electrophoresis (PFGE) is the most widely used.⁷ Chromosome analysis is undertaken on mitotic cells but procedures causing premature chromosome condensation (PCC) can allow analysis of G_1 - or G_2 -phase cells. PCC analysis in G_0/G_1 requires fusion with mitotic cells whereas in G_2 -phase cells condensation can be promoted by calyculin A.⁸ Below we compare γ H2AX foci analysis with PFGE and chromosome analysis and consider questions that can be uniquely addressed by γ H2AX analysis.

Dose. The dose necessary for γ H2AX analysis primarily depends on endogenous foci levels. The technique has been utilized with mGy doses in primary fibroblasts and lymphocytes where endogenous foci numbers were low.⁹ However, transformed cells frequently have high endogenous foci numbers due to their genetic instability. Senescent cells can also harbour γ H2AX foci at uncapped telomeres and induced cellular senescence can produce γ H2AX foci without DNA damage.^{10,11} As well recognized, PFGE necessitates much higher doses (10 to 80 Gy; ~250 to 2,000 γ H2AX foci). Chromosome analysis has been utilized with doses from 0.5 Gy and, as for γ H2AX analysis, the sensitivity largely depends on the endogenous level of breakage. Current estimations have suggested that ~1 in 10 DSBs can be visualized as a mitotic chromosome break and 1 in 3–6 DSBs can be observed as PCC break (reviewed in ref. 12).

Sensitivity. Cell lines lacking ATM, Artemis and ATM-dependent signalling proteins (e.g., 53BP1) have a subtle DSB repair defect due to a failure to carry out the slow component of DSB repair, which represents ~15% of IR-induced DSBs.¹³ Further, it has been suggested that radiosensitivity correlates with DSB numbers remaining at 24 h post IR.¹⁴ Thus, the ability to detect a small number of persisting DSBs is important. One limitation of PFGE analysis for monitoring persisting DSBs is that the high doses required can

cause apoptosis at later times after IR, particularly in transformed cells and mouse embryo fibroblasts (MEFs). Indeed, this was likely the explanation for the failure to detect a repair defect in A-T cells using PFGE and, significantly, the study which described such a defect exploited primary A-T cells.¹⁵ Due to its sensitivity γ H2AX foci analysis is particularly suitable for detecting subtle and persisting DSB repair defects.

Cell cycle progression during analysis. An important consideration for both techniques is the progression of cells through the cell cycle during analysis. This can create further breakage in S phase and can also potentially lead to non-DSB γ H2AX formation. The use of non-cycling (G_0 phase) cells avoids this problem whilst transformed cells can be problematic given their rapid cell cycle progression and their inability to enter G_0 phase. The use of BrdU or other markers to identify cells that progress through the cycle can be exploited to preclude the analysis of replicating cells.

Individual cell and cell cycle phase analysis. γ H2AX and chromosome analysis can be exploited to study distinct cell cycle phases and individual cells. Procedures for discriminating cell cycle phases are discussed below. Although we developed a procedure to study DSB formation in G_2 by PFGE, the technique has limited sensitivity and is not readily applicable for assessment of DSB repair kinetics, partly because G_2 -phase cells irradiated with non-physiological doses are prone for apoptosis.¹² PFGE requires the analysis of 10^5 – 10^6 cells which is a further restriction if limited cell numbers are available.

Analysis of distinct genomic regions. Markers for specific genomic regions, such as heterochromatic chromocentres, allow the analysis of DSB repair in discrete chromatin regions that differ in condensation or transcriptional status.¹⁶ DSB repair can also be examined using siRNA knock-down techniques by analyzing specifically those cells of a population for which knock-down was most efficient.

Visualizing tracks of radiation particles. The ability to visualize the spatial organization of DSBs induced along a track of radiation particles will allow further questions of chromatin movement in a temporal manner to be addressed.¹⁷

Exploitation of live cell imaging. The generation of cells with fluorescent tagged proteins (such as GFP-labelled 53BP1) allows the visualization of damaged sites and their repair in living cells.^{18,19}

The DSB Signalling Response

ATM, ATR and DNA-PK, are the major kinases that phosphorylate H2AX following DNA damage. Extensive research using model organisms and mammalian cells has established the distinct parameters underlying the activation of each kinase. We briefly overview this here, since the detailed current understanding of these processes justifies our contention that γ H2AX analysis can be exploited for DSB assessment.

ATM and ATR represent the major damage response signalling kinases. ATM is activated by DNA DSBs whilst ATR is activated by single-stranded DNA (ssDNA) regions that arise from replication fork stalling or processing of bulky lesions. Although ATM can bind to DNA ends, current *in vivo*, *in vitro* and structural studies suggest that the Mre11/Rad50/NBS1 (MRN) complex is the DSB sensor that recruits ATM to the DSB, which occurs via its interaction with the C-terminus of NBS1.^{20–23} Activated ATM phosphorylates H2AX facilitating the recruitment of MDC1, the ubiquitin ligases RNF8 and RNF168, and the mediator protein, 53BP1.¹ A complex web of interactions between these proteins enhances their retention at the DSB. Studies have suggested that ATM can be activated by chromatin changes in the absence of DSBs but defined ATM-dependent foci only arise at DSBs.²⁴ Further, a defined and orchestrated process acts to prevent ATM activation at intact telomeres.²⁵

In contrast, ATR is activated by ssDNA regions via a process that requires the ATR interacting protein (ATRIP), RPA binding to ssDNA and TopBP1.²⁶ Efficient phosphorylation of ATR substrates also requires Rad17 and the so-called 9-1-1 complex of Rad9, Hus1 and Rad1. ATR is activated, at least to a low level, in normal S-phase cells, since they show a background lawn of ATR-dependent γ H2AX. Current evidence suggests that replication fork stalling leading to ssDNA generation

and ATR activation occurs frequently during normal S-phase progression either at endogenous lesions or at regions that are difficult to replicate.²⁷ Replication fork collapse may result in one-ended DSBs, which can activate ATM, but can also lead to the activation of homologous recombination without the induction of a DSB.²⁸ These mechanistic studies suggest that ATR activation requires a significant stretch of ssDNA for RPA binding and that ATR is not activated by single-stranded nicks or small gaps. The precise length of ssDNA required for ATR activation is unclear but is likely to be around, or even greater than, 30 nucleotides.

DNA-PK, encompassing the Ku heterodimer and a catalytic subunit, DNA-PKcs, is the end-binding complex that functions during DNA non-homologous end-joining (NHEJ).²⁹ Although DNA-PK functions in NHEJ, it has an overlapping role with ATM in phosphorylating H2AX at DSBs. However, it cannot substitute for ATM in phosphorylating other substrates such as Chk2 or p53.³⁰

Although ATM and ATR are activated by distinct substrates, there is interplay between them. Most importantly, ssDNA generated by DSB resection can cause ATR activation.³¹ Since resection at DSBs is ATM dependent, this results in ATM-dependent ATR activation in G₂ phase following IR. Interestingly, a recent study has suggested that ATM ceases to be activated following extensive resection, suggesting that there could be a switch from ATM to ATR activation in G₂ at resected DSBs.³² It is important to distinguish this process of ATR activation from ATR activation in cells which were irradiated in G₁ or S phase and subsequently progressed into G₂. In the latter case, ATR activation occurs in S phase and is ATM independent.

In summary, ATM and DNA-PK are activated by DSBs whilst ATR is activated by ssDNA regions. Further, single-stranded nicks, small gaps or base damage are not recognized by any of the PIKKs and do not appear to activate γ H2AX formation unless subsequent processing occurs.

IR-Induced γ H2AX Foci Analysis

G₀/G₁-phase cells. The lesions induced by IR can be broadly classified into DSBs,

SSBs and base damage. Cross link damages can also arise but represent less frequent lesions. The ratio of SSBs:DSBs induced by IR is 20:1. As discussed above, mechanistic studies strongly suggest that neither base damage nor SSBs activate damage response signalling and we provide evidence to support this contention below. We also discuss data that argue that γ H2AX foci formation after IR in G₀/G₁ cells represents DSBs and that the kinetics of γ H2AX foci loss allows researchers to monitor DSB repair.

The induction of γ H2AX foci numbers and estimated DSBs correlate. Although maximum foci numbers are observed by 3 min post IR, their detection is difficult at this time due to their small size and foci are more reliably scored 15–30 min post exposure. Since “simple” DSBs can be repaired rapidly, it is likely that repair occurs during this time and hence that foci numbers at 15–30 min underestimate DSB induction levels. Consistent with this, DSB repair-defective cells frequently harbour enhanced foci numbers at 15–30 min compared to control cells.³³ It has been argued that DSB induction levels estimated by PFGE may be overestimated due to the conversion of labile sites to

DSBs. Using human fibroblasts, we routinely observe 15–20 γ H2AX foci at 15 min post exposure to 1 Gy. Assuming that some repair occurs in 15 min post IR, this is consistent with the current estimation of 25 DSBs induced per Gy by PFGE.³⁴ It is worthwhile noting that X-irradiating cells attached to glass cover slides can have a dose doubling impact since photoelectrons arising in the glass material can enhance the damage to cells. This needs to be considered when comparing γ H2AX with PFGE data.³⁵ DNA content will also influence γ H2AX foci numbers and we have observed variable induction numbers in transformed cells. Most significantly, the number of γ H2AX foci formed is twenty times lower than the estimated SSB induction level.

High SSB induction does not cause γ H2AX foci formation. Hydrogen peroxide and other agents inducing oxidative damage produce 2,000 SSBs per DSB.³⁶ Treatment with 0.1 mM H₂O₂ caused high SSB numbers assessed by comet assay but only few γ H2AX foci (Fig. 1). Moreover, no foci were detected during repair incubation demonstrating that γ H2AX foci are not formed during the processing of SSBs. 1 Gy IR, in contrast,

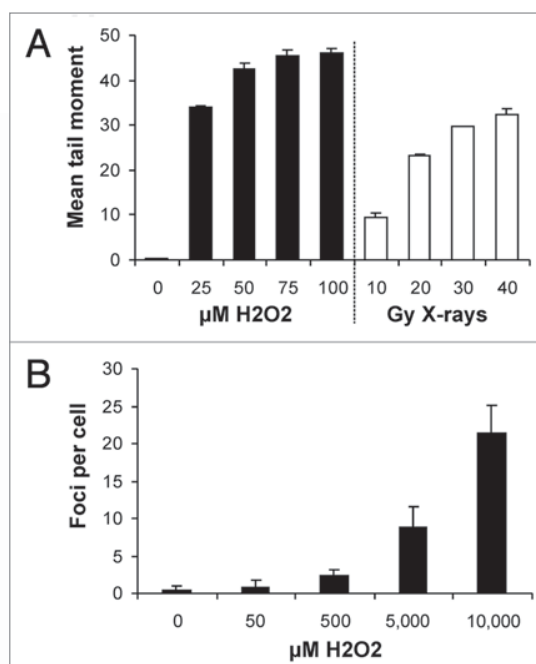


Figure 1. H₂O₂ at a concentration of 25 μ M induces a level of SSBs similar to 40 Gy IR, as assessed by the alkaline comet assay at 15 min post treatment (A). In strong contrast, a concentration of 10 mM H₂O₂ is required to induce 20–25 γ H2AX foci, a level which is reached after a dose of 1 Gy (B).

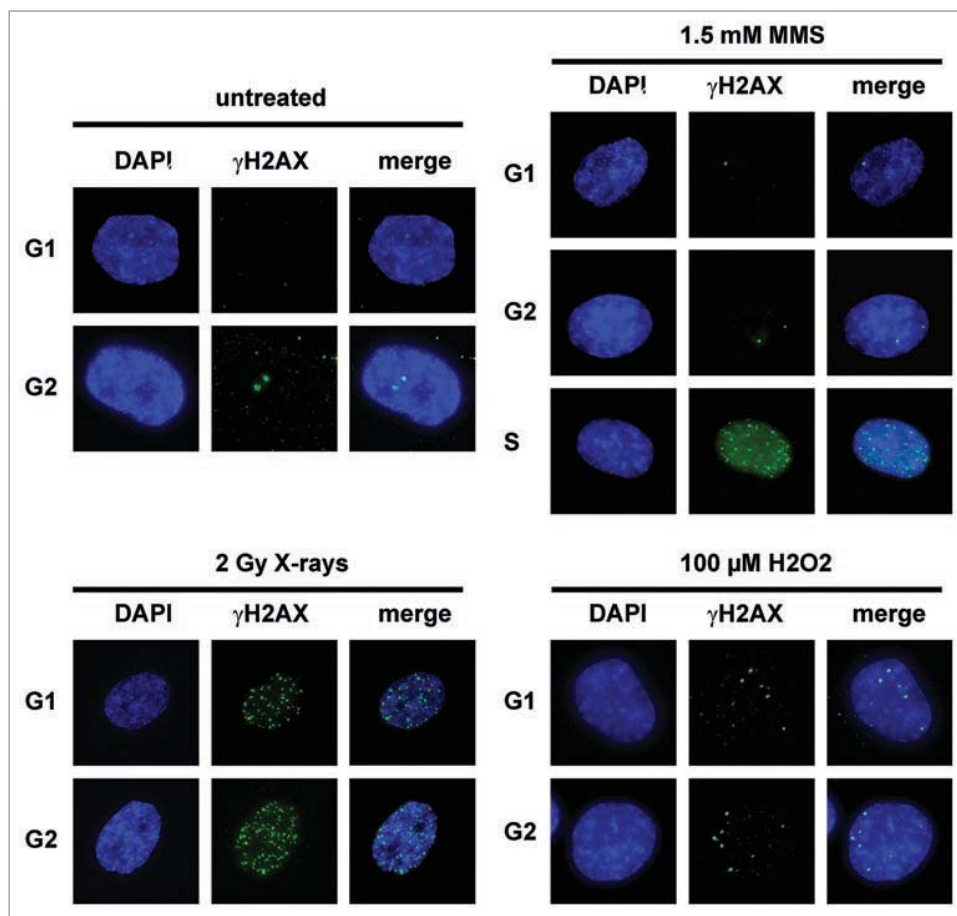


Figure 2. γ H2AX foci formation in G₁, S and G₂ human cells 15 min after treatment with various agents. Untreated cells exhibit usually 0 or 1 γ H2AX foci in G₁ and a slightly higher level in G₂. After 2 Gy of IR, clear distinct foci are observed which are twice the number in G₂ as in G₁. 1.5 mM of the alkylating agent MMS induces no or very few foci in G₁ or G₂ but significant H2AX phosphorylation in S-phase cells. The S-phase signal shows a pan nuclear lawn likely due to ATR activation at stalled replication forks and distinct foci possibly due to secondary DSBs arising when a replication fork encounters a SSB. 100 μ M H₂O₂ induces about 3–6 foci in G₁ and about 6–12 foci in G₂-phase cells. At this concentration of H₂O₂, several thousand SSBs are induced suggesting that overlapping SSBs can cause a few DSBs.

leads to 15–20 γ H2AX foci at 15 min but no detectable comet tails, consistent with the higher DSB:SSB induction ratio. At very high H₂O₂ doses, γ H2AX foci did form but likely represent DSBs arising from overlapping SSBs since their loss is dependent upon functional DSB repair (data not shown). Further, γ H2AX foci do not arise following treatment of G₀/G₁ cells with the alkylating agent, methyl methanesulphonate (MMS), although pan nuclear phosphorylation readily forms in S-phase cells (Fig. 2). These findings are consistent with the notion that γ H2AX foci in G₀/G₁ cells do not form at SSBs or at alkylation damage but can arise when such lesions are replicated.

IR-induced γ H2AX foci are ATM/DNA-PK dependent and ATR independent.

We have previously shown that in G₀/G₁ cells γ H2AX foci formation after IR is redundantly dependent upon ATM or DNA-PK, that loss of both kinases abolishes foci formation and that ATR deficiency is without impact despite its impact on H2AX formation after HU or UV treatment.³⁰

γ H2AX foci loss is dependent upon known DSB repair components. NHEJ represents the major process repairing DSBs in G₀/G₁ phase.³⁷ DNA ligase IV (LigIV) is an essential NHEJ protein and LigIV^{-/-} cells show little diminution of γ H2AX foci numbers up to 7 days post IR (Fig. 3).

γ H2AX foci loss closely correlates with the rate of DSB repair estimated by PFGE. Studies using a range of physical methods have shown that DSBs are repaired more

slowly than SSBs and with a fast and slow component. γ H2AX foci loss also occurs with two component kinetics with relative ratios that correlate with those estimated by PFGE studies (Fig. 3). The kinetics are quite distinct to the rate of SSB repair (half life < 30 min). Further, DSB repair-deficient cell lines show similar DSB repair defects when monitored by either PFGE or γ H2AX foci analysis.

S-phase cells. Although S-phase cells are characterized by weak pan-nuclear γ H2AX, defined foci can be discerned after IR. Since IR-induced lesions likely cause replication fork stalling or collapse, it is currently difficult and beyond the scope of this paper to evaluate the specificity of the γ H2AX foci assay after IR of S-phase cells. Nevertheless, we observed

that IR-induced foci in S (at 15 min post IR) are ATM and DNA-PK dependent and ATR independent whilst foci arising after agents which do not induce direct DSBs (e.g., MMS) are only abolished when all three kinases are inactivated (unpublished findings). This suggests that even in S phase the majority of IR-induced foci represent direct DSBs, at least at short times after IR.

G₂-phase cells. DSB formation and repair in G₂ differs from that in G₁ in several ways. Firstly, homologous recombination (HR) can function in G₂ due to cell cycle-dependent resection. Secondly, S-phase cells can progress into G₂ during repair analysis. As discussed above, ATR activation can occur in S-phase cells at stalled replication forks leading to non-DSB-dependent γ H2AX formation. Below we discuss the evidence that under conditions that avoid analysis of S-phase cells, IR-induced γ H2AX foci analysis in irradiated G₂-phase cells can be used to monitor DSB formation and repair.

γ H2AX foci induction in G₂-phase cells correlates with predicted DSB formation. γ H2AX foci number in G₂ are almost exactly double those obtained in G₁-phase cells, consistent with the doubling in DNA content.¹²

High SSB induction by H₂O₂ treatment yields few γ H2AX foci. Following exposure to 10 μ M H₂O₂, we observed no detectable γ H2AX phosphorylation in G₂ as in G₁ strongly suggesting that SSBs do not lead to γ H2AX formation in G₂. Exposure to higher doses (>100 μ M) produced foci numbers approximately double that observed in G₁. Similarly, MMS does not cause H2AX phosphorylation in G₂ (Fig. 2).

ATR contributes to γ H2AX formation at later times in G₂-phase cells. At 30 min post IR, γ H2AX foci formation was ATM and DNA-PK dependent and ATR independent, identical to the situation in G₁-phase cells. However, by 6 h post IR, foci were observed in ATM/DNA-PK inhibitor treated cells and, conversely, foci number or their size were reduced in ATR-deficient cells (Fig. 4). Although γ H2AX phosphorylation in G₂ is ATR dependent at 6 h, foci numbers are approximately double in G₂ versus G₁ cells and the rate of repair is similar (although subtly different). These

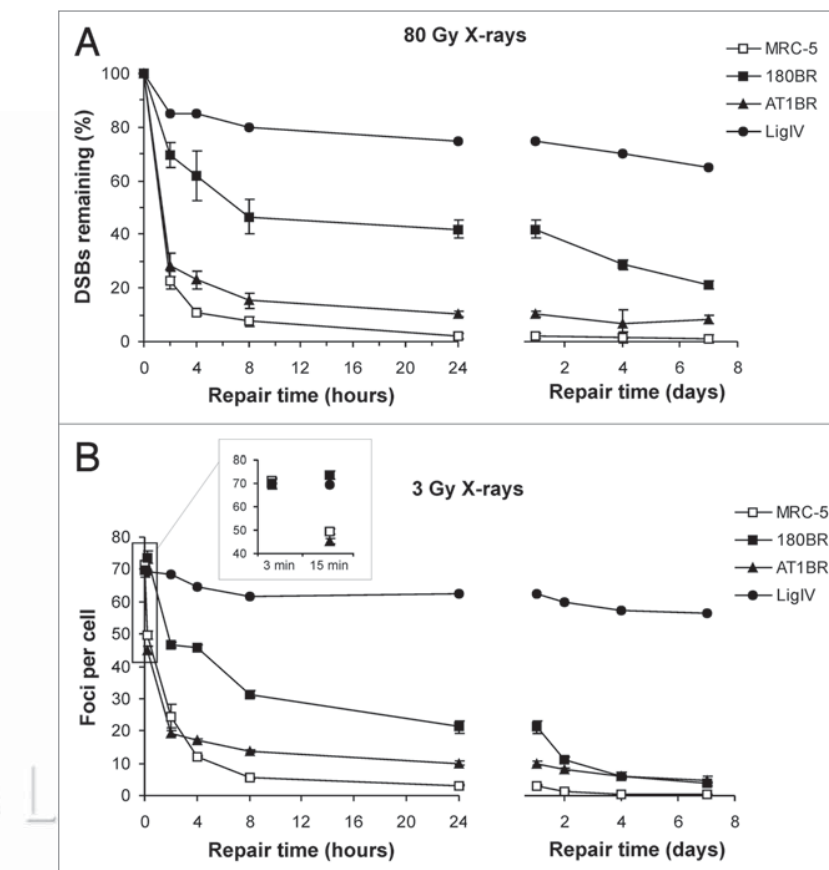


Figure 3. The rate of loss of γ H2AX foci correlates with the physical joining of DSBs assessed by PFGE. Cells were grown to confluency, irradiated with 80 or 3 Gy and analysed by PFGE (A) or with the γ H2AX foci assay (B). Wild-type human fibroblasts (MRC-5) exhibit a fast repair component during the first 2–4 h and a second much slower component during the following hours. Human A-T cells (AT1BR) fail to repair a subset of approximately 10–15% of the breaks which are repaired with slow kinetics in wt cells. Human cells with a hypomorphic mutation in DNA ligase IV (180BR), which compromises but does not abolish LigIV function, show substantially impaired repair. The residual rejoining is particularly obvious at prolonged repair times and lower doses. In contrast, LigIV knock-out mouse cells are nearly completely deficient in DSB repair. The data were redrawn from previous publications.^{13,33}

findings are consistent with the notion that γ H2AX foci in G₂ as in G₁ form only at DSBs and that ATR signalling can contribute as resection ensues. It is also noteworthy that, although ATR activation is ATM dependent at early times post IR, there appears to be ATR activation at later times in the absence of ATM suggesting that, although resection is largely ATM dependent, slow and inefficient resection can occur in its absence.

γ H2AX foci loss is substantially dependent upon LigIV in G₂ phase. The rate of γ H2AX foci loss in G₂-phase LigIV^{-/-} cells is similar to, although slightly greater than, that observed in G₁.³⁸ These findings suggest that NHEJ represents the major DSB

repair pathway in G₂ phase and substantiate the notion that radiation-induced γ H2AX foci in G₂ represent DSBs. The slightly greater rate of foci loss in G₂-phase LigIV^{-/-} cells likely represents repair by HR. Thus, although the analysis with LigIV^{-/-} cells cannot allow the conclusion that all γ H2AX foci in G₂ represent DSBs, the results are consistent and, indeed, supportive of that notion.

Persistent γ H2AX foci correlate with persistent DSBs and chromosome breaks analysed by PFGE and PCC, respectively. Although PFGE analysis in G₂-phase cells has limitations, it has demonstrated a subtle DSB repair defect in ATM and Artemis-deficient cells consistent with γ H2AX foci

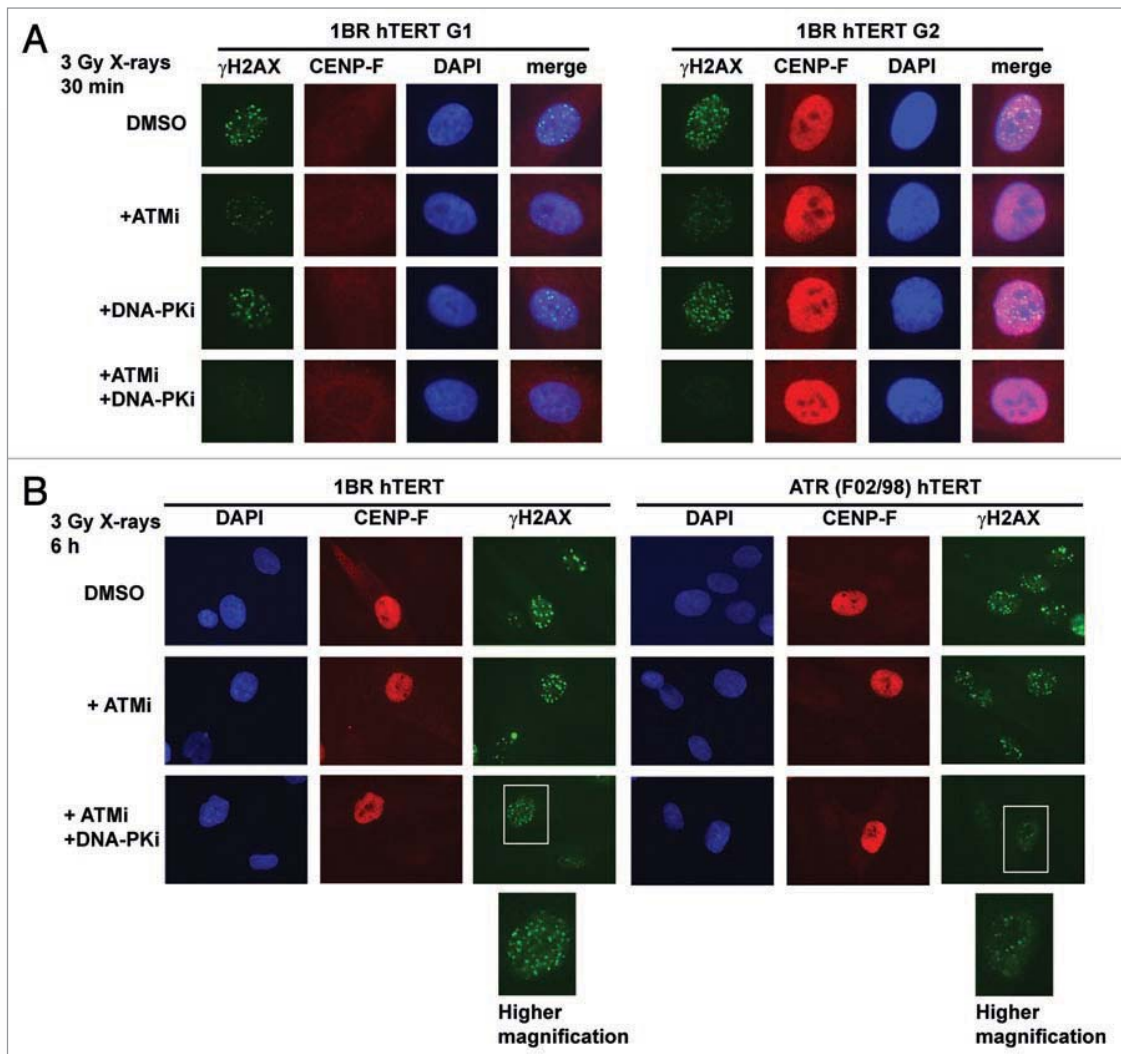


Figure 4. (A) γ H2AX foci formation at early times post IR is completely abolished in G_1 - and G_2 -phase wt cells (1BR hTert) treated with an ATM and DNA-PK inhibitor. (B) At later times post IR (6 h) foci arise in G_2 phase despite ATM and DNA-PK inhibition. These foci are significantly reduced in ATR-deficient cells (F02/98 hTert). ATR mutants show normal γ H2AX phosphorylation at early times.

data.¹² Furthermore, calyculin A-induced PCC analysis has also shown that unrepaired DSBs persist in G_2 -phase ATM and Artemis-deficient cells. Thus, genetic situations leading to γ H2AX foci persistence in G_2 also lead to persistent DSBs assessed by PFGE or PCC breakage.

Optimization of γ H2AX Foci Analysis

Below, we consider important parameters that we have found help to enhance the sensitivity of our analysis as well as to limit the analysis of non-DSB lesions.

Consideration of cell cycle progression. Following irradiation, cells can progress

from one cell cycle phase to another. This is important at prolonged times post irradiation when cells with γ H2AX activated by replication stalling, which may not represent DSBs, progress from S into G_2 phase. One way to avoid difficulties of cell cycle progression is to examine G_0 -phase cells. However, for studying G_2 -phase repair, cells have to be maintained in G_2 from the time of irradiation to analysis and the entry of S-phase cells into G_2 needs to be prevented. This has been achieved by using aphidicolin, an inhibitor of replication polymerases. Importantly, aphidicolin does not affect DSB repair in G_2 and does not appear to inhibit polymerases involved in homologous recombination.³⁸ A second

consideration for studying repair in G_2 for prolonged times is the duration of G_2 checkpoint arrest, which is dependent on dose and repair capacity with checkpoint release occurring at a threshold level of 10–20 DSBs.^{39,40} This allows the analysis of G_2 -phase cells irradiated with 1 Gy for up to 8 h. Studies of longer repair times require higher doses.

Identification of cell cycle phases. Since most methods to synchronize cells induce γ H2AX foci, we utilize asynchronous populations and cell cycle specific markers. Established G_2 markers are CENP-F or serine 10 phosphorylation of histone H3 (pH3), the latter providing a focal signal in G_2 which is distinct from

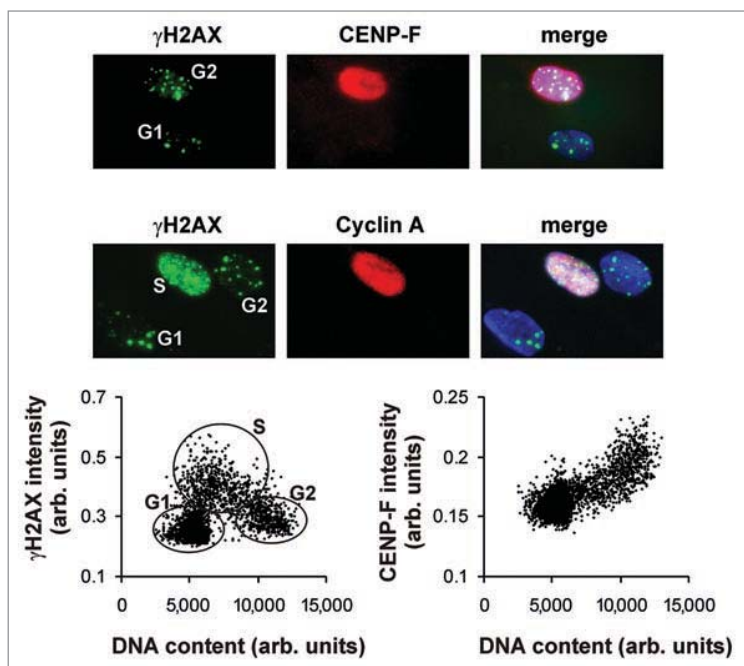


Figure 5. Cell cycle phases are readily distinguished using specific markers or by quantifying the DAPI signal intensity. G₂-phase human cells are positive for CENP-F, G₁ cells are negative. S-phase cells are positive for cyclin A. The images shown represent a cell population treated with aphidicolin, an inhibitor of replicative polymerases. As a consequence of this, S phase cells show pronounced γ H2AX phosphorylation. The DAPI signal can also be quantified under the microscope. A typical dot-blot showing γ H2AX signal as a function of DAPI is shown in the lower left panel. The G₁-, S- and G₂-phase populations can be readily distinguished which is confirmed by the lower right panel showing that cells with higher DAPI content are high in CENP-F signal. The picture was redrawn from a previous publication.^{1,2}

the pronounced pan-nuclear pH3 signal of mitotic cells. Cyclin A is a marker of S-phase cells. However, S-phase cells can usually be readily identified by pan-nuclear γ H2AX signal, most particularly when aphidicolin is used. Cell cycle phases can also be identified under the microscope by assessing the magnitude of the DAPI signal, which is particularly useful if limited antibody combinations are available for cell cycle phase identification and foci measurements (Fig. 5).

Concomitant analysis of G₁- and G₂-phase cells. The analysis of cells in distinct cell cycle phases (and the usage of appropriate cell lines which can be maintained in specific cell cycle phases) is particularly important to improve the accuracy of measurement as even a low percentage of G₂-phase cells in a population (with twice the number of foci) will significantly enlarge the error bars (Fig. 6).

Choice of cell line. Primary cells with low background numbers of γ H2AX foci

are particularly beneficial for analysis. However, they are less suitable for siRNA experiments. For such approaches, transformed cells are used but they can have significant problems of causing high background foci numbers. We have successfully exploited hTert lines, which normally have lower background foci numbers than transformed cells but are suitable for siRNA analysis. Since γ H2AX foci form at uncapped telomeres, care should be taken with senescent cells. A further difficulty of using tumour or transformed cells, particularly if they are p53 deficient, is their rapid cell cycle progression and failure to remain for prolonged times in a single cell cycle phase.

Foci scoring and data evaluation. The statistical error obtained from several independent experiments provides a measure for the reproducibility of the data. However, statistical analysis, such as the student's t-test, should be performed at critical time points to evaluate the significance of differences in foci

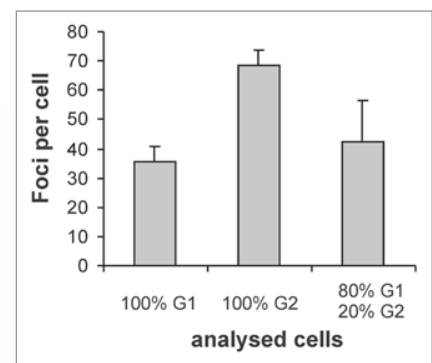


Figure 6. A cell population of 80% G₁- and 20% G₂-phase cells is compared with a population of only G₁-phase or only G₂-phase cells. The mixed population exhibits considerably higher error bars (standard deviation) demonstrating the benefit of a cell cycle specific analysis. The foci values were taken from a typical experiment analyzing 40 human cells at 15 min after 2 Gy IR.

level. Another important aspect is that samples are scored in a blinded manner to avoid bias. Alternatively, software approaches are now available providing the opportunity to perform automated foci scoring. The microscopic facility used also determines the foci limit up to which scoring can be performed reliably and reproducibly. Pilot experiments measuring foci numbers as a function of dose can be performed to evaluate the dose range yielding linearity between foci number and dose.

Limitations of γ H2AX Foci Analysis

γ H2AX foci do not always represent DSB formation. This limitation has been discussed in detail above. This review has focused on the use of the technique for monitoring radiation-induced DSBs. For other agents, a careful consideration of the lesions formed and their repair needs to be considered.

γ H2AX foci analysis represents an indirect monitor of DSB formation. Whilst this is a valid concern, it need not limit the utility of the procedure. It is important to consider, however, that genetic factors may influence the ability to form γ H2AX (e.g., the presence of H2AX) and to remove the phosphorylated residues after repair (e.g., protein phosphatases).

The timing of foci loss does not fully correlate with DSB repair. Currently, it is unclear whether loss of visible foci precisely correlates with the final step in the rejoining process or whether a delay of 1–2 h occurs due to the additional time required to fully reconstitute the chromatin status.⁴ However, this does not negate the utility of the analysis to monitor the process of DSB repair as long as the caveats are considered carefully during interpretation.

Summary

γ H2AX foci analysis is an important outcome of many years of research into the DNA damage responses. It has enhanced our ability to detect DNA damage in individual cells enormously and has led to novel insight into the DNA damage response. Laboratories are now trying to exploit the technique for bio-monitoring purposes and for further research avenues. The approach, however, can be readily misused. Nonetheless, it is far too valuable a technique to be disregarded. A detailed understanding of the molecular steps leading to γ H2AX formation is important to allow a rational exploitation of the technique. We argue that the approach has the capacity to monitor DSB formation and repair after exposure to ionizing radiation and should be exploited provided careful consideration is given to the restraints of the procedure.

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