

GROWTH OF CELLS ON A PERFLUOROCARBON-MEDIUM INTERPHASE: A QUANTITATIVE ASSAY FOR ANCHORAGE-INDEPENDENT CELL GROWTH

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SUMMARY

A high density, purified, nontoxic solvent, heptacosafuorotributylamine (FC43), was successfully used as a culture surface for growing several normal and oncogene-transformed cell lines under anchorage-independent conditions. Normal rat kidney (NRK) fibroblasts and the normal mammary epithelial cell lines NMuMG and A1, clone N4, of murine and human origin, respectively, failed to grow at a FC43 growth medium interphase or in soft agar in the absence of transforming growth factor alpha (TGF α) and transforming growth factor beta (TGF β). However, NRK fibroblasts transformed with the Kirsten *ras* viral oncogene (K-NRK) or NMuMG cells transformed with a point-mutated *c-Harvey-ras* proto-oncogene or polyoma middle T-transforming gene (NMuMG-*ras*^H and NMuMG-*pyt*, respectively) exhibited rapid growth and formed large colonies when cultured on an FC43-medium interphase. In addition, NRK cells treated with TGF α and TGF β and K-NRK cells grown on FC43 exhibited a sensitivity to the growth inhibitory effects of 4-*cis*-L-hydroxyproline comparable to that observed for the same cells grown in soft agar. These results demonstrated that the two-phase assay system (FC43-growth medium interphase) may be superior to soft agar for monitoring the anchorage-independent growth of cells because of the ease of cell plating, the ability to recover cells and secreted products from the upper aqueous phase, and the shorter growth period required to complete the assay (3-4 days).

Key words: anchorage-independent cell growth; two-phase system; transforming growth factor response; 4-*cis*-L-hydroxyproline sensitivity.

INTRODUCTION

There is an intimate relationship between cell growth and the composition of substrate on which cells can propagate (2,5,6-9,14,15,17,20,22). For example, normal and transformed cells exhibit different patterns of growth and different requirements for specific growth factors if they are grown on solid surfaces (glass, plastic) or in semisolid medium (soft agar, methylcellulose) (1,3,21,27). Normal fibroblasts and epithelial cells not only require a hydrophilic surface but also a rigid scaffolding in order

to facilitate attachment, spreading, and growth (20). These requirements can be variably fulfilled by extracellular matrix components, such as collagen, fibronectin, and laminin (8,17). In addition, the mitogenic response to several different growth factors of certain cell types can be enhanced depending on the composition of the extracellular matrix on which the cells rest (24). Conversely, a variety of growth factors and hormones that behave as mitogens affect cellular proliferation by modulating the synthesis and/or the turnover of the extracellular matrix proteins (9,19).

The first attempt to grow cells on liquid surfaces (such as siliconated and fluorinated hydrocarbons) was made by Rosenberg in 1964 (21). He found that normal conjunctival cells were able to spread and grow on

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fluorocarbon fluids containing impurities. However, if a layer of lecithin was injected between the culture medium and the fluorocarbon phases, spreading of the cells was markedly reduced. Cells apparently did not directly interact with the fluorocarbon fluid surface but rather with a layer of denaturated serum proteins that were present in the culture medium. The active impurity found in fluorocarbon fluids was proposed to be an amphipathic molecule that could bind to serum proteins and thus promote the formation of a rigid surface on which cells could spread and grow as a monolayer.

Purified fluorocarbon fluids were found to be poor substrates for normal anchorage-dependent cell growth because the normal cells could not spread on the fluorocarbon surface. We now show that normal cells can grow on pure FC43, provided transforming growth factors are added.

Normal rat kidney (NRK) cells have been routinely utilized to screen for growth factors that induce anchorage-independent growth in soft agar (1,3,4,21). These cells were therefore selected to ascertain if growth factors such as transforming growth factor α (TGF α) and β (TGF β) could facilitate the growth of NRK cells on a fluorocarbon-medium interphase (two-phase assay). In addition, a comparison was also made between the growth of TGF-treated nontransformed cells, such as NRK cells, and two mammary epithelial cell lines and their oncogene-transformed counterparts on a fluorocarbon-medium interphase. Growth of NRK cells in soft agar requires the presence of both TGF α and TGF β (1,21). Moreover, TGF α is capable of stimulating the anchorage-independent growth of mammary epithelial cells (25). The anchorage-independent growth of a number of transformed rodent cell lines and of TGF-treated NRK cells can be inhibited by 4-cis-L-hydroxyproline (CHP). CHP is an analog of proline that can selectively block the synthesis and secretion of collagen when used at low concentrations (23,28) and can induce the regression of primary carcinogen-induced rat mammary adenocarcinomas through this mechanism (16,18).

The present study demonstrates that transformed NRK cells and transformed mouse mammary epithelial cells are able to actively grow as colonies on a heptacosafuorotributylamine (FC43)-medium interphase even in the absence of TGFs, while NRK cells or mammary epithelial cells exhibit a comparable set of requirements for TGF α and for TGF β for growth in soft agar and in the two-phase assay system. In addition, TGF-treated NRK or *Ki-ras*-transformed NRK cells, K-NRK, have an equivalent degree of sensitivity to the growth inhibitory effects of CHP in the two-phase assay system and in soft agar.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Cell culture. NRK fibroblasts, clone F49, were obtained from Dr. J. E. DeLarco, National Cancer Institute, FCRC,

Ft. Detrick (Frederick, MD). Kirsten murine sarcoma virus-transformed NRK cells (K-NRK) were kindly provided by Dr. R. E. Bassin, National Cancer Institute (Bethesda, MD). Normal murine mammary epithelial cells (NMuMG) and their transformed counterparts with an activated *c-Harvey-ras* and polyoma middle T oncogene, NmuMG-*ras*^h and NmuMG-*pyt*, respectively, were obtained from Dr. N. Hynes, the Ludwig Institute for Cancer Research (Bern, Switzerland). All cell lines were grown in Dulbecco's modified Eagle's medium (DMEM) supplemented with 10% fetal bovine serum (FBS), glutamine (4 mM), penicillin (100 U/ml), streptomycin (100 μ g/ml), and HEPES (20 mM). The normal human mammary epithelial cell line A1, clone N4, was originally derived from a reductive mammaplasty. The cells were immortalized by benzo- α -pyrene treatment of the primary human mammary epithelial cell cultures. The A1 cells were obtained from Dr. M. Stampfer, Lawrence Berkeley Laboratory (Berkeley, CA). They were grown in DMEM-F12, 1:1 mixture, supplemented with 0.5% FBS, insulin (10 μ g/ml), transferrin (10 μ g/ml), hydrocortisone (0.5 μ g/ml) epidermal growth factor (EGF), culture grade (10 ng/ml; Collaborative Research, Lexington, MA), penicillin (100 U/ml), and streptomycin (100 μ g/ml). The transformed cell lines (K-NRK, NmuMG-*ras*^h, and NmuMG-*pyt*) were capable of growing in soft agar and of

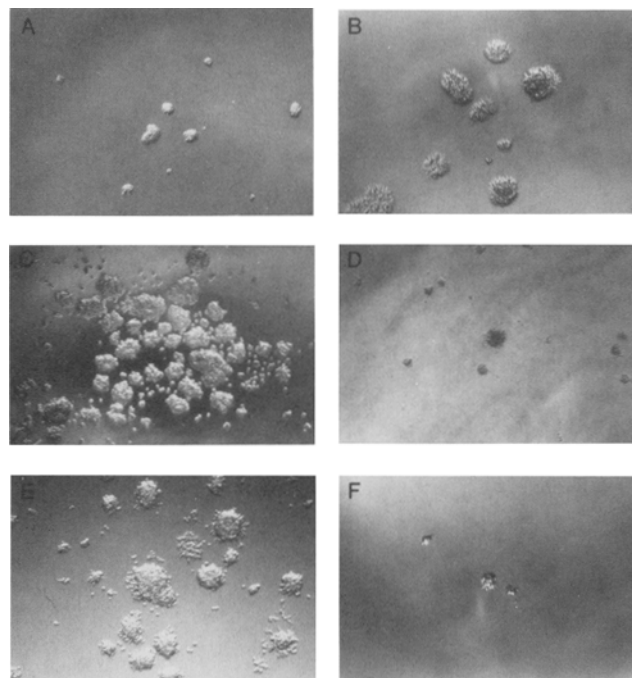


FIG. 1. Effect of TGFs on NRK cell growth and CHP sensitivity of K-NRK cells in two-phase assay system. NRK cells were grown on a fluorocarbon FC43 surface for 4 days, as described in "Materials and Methods," in the absence of TGFs (A) or in the presence of TGF α (2 ng/ml) (B), TGF α (2 ng/ml) and TGF β (1 ng/ml) (C), or TGF β (1 ng/ml) (D). K-NRK cells were grown for 4 d on FC43 in the absence of TGFs (E) or were treated with CHP (250 μ g/ml) (F). $\times 250$.

producing tumors when injected into nude mice. Neither of these properties was associated with the normal cell lines NRK, NMuMG, and A1N4 (25,26).

Fluorocarbon purification. Heptacosafuorotributylamine (FC43) was purchased from Sigma Chemical Co. (St. Louis, MO) and purified through columns of alumina (neutral Brockman activity I, 80–200 mesh, Fisher) as described by Keese and Giaever (14) to remove the amphipathic contaminant that facilitates cell spreading. Before use, FC43 was filtered through a 0.2- μ m Nalgene filter.

Preparation of two-phase system for anchorage-independent growth assay. After purification and filtration, 0.5 ml of FC 43 was added to cylindrical wells of a 48-well tissue culture cluster dish (Costar, Cambridge, MA). The same volume of cell suspension in culture medium (2.5×10^3 cells/ml) was gently pipetted on the top of the fluorocarbon phase to form a second phase. Because of the different densities and the different chemical characteristics, the two liquid phases do not mix, which allows the cells to grow at the fluorocarbon-medium interface under anchorage-independent conditions. In the two-phase assay system, the cells were cultured for 4 days at 37° C in a humidified atmosphere of 5% CO₂. Cell growth was monitored by determining the incorporation of labeled [¹⁴C]thymidine (50–60 mCi/mmol, 1 μ Ci/ml; Amersham, Arlington Heights, IL) into DNA after labeling of the cells for the last 48 h of culture.

Recovery of cells from the two-phase assay system and evaluation of [¹⁴C]thymidine incorporation. After 4 days of culture, the [¹⁴C]thymidine-labeled cells were recovered from the 48-multiwell tissue culture dishes by pipetting the aqueous culture medium phase onto 2.4 cm glass fiber filters (Whatman GF/C, Maidstone, England). The cells were trapped by the filters, and the filters were subsequently washed several times with phosphate-buffered saline (PBS) and 5% ice-cold trichloroacetic acid (TCA) containing 0.05% unlabeled thymidine (Calbiochem, San Diego, CA) and finally with absolute methanol. After 10 min at 80° C in a vacuum oven, the filters were counted in a toluene PPO-based counting solution.

Response of cells to TGFs and CHP in the two-phase system assay. Normal cells (NRK, NMuMG, and A1N4) were grown in the presence or absence of TGF α (human recombinant TGF α , 2 ng/ml), generously supplied by Dr. Ryk Derynck, Department of Molecular Biology, Genentech, Inc. (San Francisco, CA), and/or TGF β 1 from porcine platelets (1–2 ng/ml; R & D System, Inc., Minneapolis, MN), while transformed cells (K-NRK, NMuMG-*ras*^H, and NMuMG-*pyt*) were grown without TGFs. The sensitivity of NRK cells grown in the absence or presence of TGF α and TGF β and of K-NRK cells to different concentrations of CHP (5–100 μ g/ml) was tested in the two-phase assay system, in soft agar, and in monolayer cultures.

Soft agar assay. Cells (2×10^4 per well) were plated in 1 ml of 0.3 Difco nobel agar that was supplemented with DMEM

and 10% FBS. Cell suspensions were layered over 1 ml of a 0.66% agar medium base layer in 12-well cluster dishes (Costar). Anchorage-independent growth in soft agar of all the cell lines used for the two-phase assay system was tested in the presence or in the absence of TGF α (2 ng/ml) and/or TGF β (1–2 ng/ml). The sensitivity of growth factor-treated NRK cells and K-NRK cells to several concentrations of CHP (5–100 μ g/ml) was also assessed. The cells were maintained in culture, and every 3 days they were fed with 0.1 ml of culture medium; after 14 days they were stained with nitro blue tetrazolium (NBT; Sigma Chemical Co.) and quantitated on an Artek Model 880 colony counter. Colonies greater than 50 μ m in diameter were scored and counted.

Monolayer culture. NRK cells were seeded at a density of 15×10^4 cells/dish in 60-mm tissue culture dishes (Falcon, Lincoln Park, NJ). Several concentrations of CHP (5–100 μ g/ml) were tested in the presence or in the absence of TGF α (2 ng/ml) and/or TGF β (1 ng/ml). After 4 days of culture, the cells were trypsinized and counted in a Coulter counter (Coulter Electronics Inc., Hialeah, FL). A similar procedure was used for K-NRK cells, with the exception that no growth factors were added to the cultures.

RESULTS

Growth and morphology of cells cultured on FC43 fluorocarbon surfaces. To ascertain whether there were

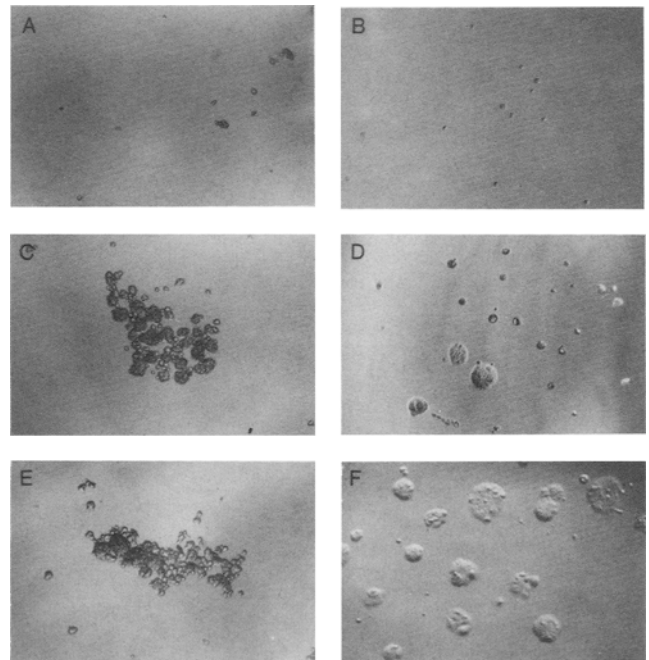


FIG. 2. NMuMG-*ras*^H, NMuMG, and A1N4 cell growth on FC43 in the absence or presence of TGFs. NMuMG cells were grown in the absence (A) or in the presence (C) of TGF α (2 ng/ml); NMuMG-*ras*^H cells were grown in the absence of TGFs (E); A1N4 cells were cultured in the absence (B) or in the presence (F) of TGF α (2 ng/ml) and TGF β (1 ng/ml) and in the presence of TGF α (2 ng/ml) alone (D). $\times 250$.

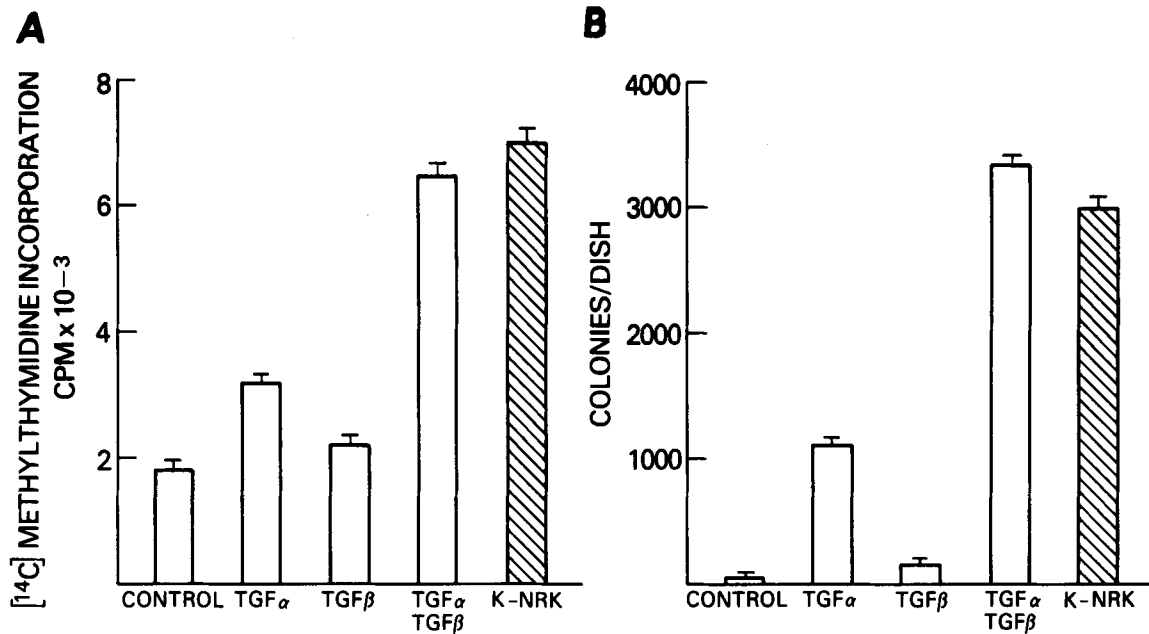


FIG. 3. [¹⁴C]methylthymidine incorporation into DNA and colony formation of NRK and K-NRK cells in two-phase assay system (A) and in soft agar cultures (B). Open bars represent NRK cell growth in the absence (control) or presence of TGF α (2 ng/ml) and/or TGF β (1 ng/ml). Dashed bars represent the growth of K-NRK cells in the absence of TGFs.

intrinsic differences in the ability of normal and transformed fibroblasts and epithelial cells to grow on a fluorocarbon-medium interphase, NRK cells and mouse and human mammary epithelial cells and their *ras*-transformed counterparts were cultured on FC43 for 4 days. As illustrated in Fig. 1A, nontransformed NRK cells seeded on a FC43-medium interphase in the two-phase assay system failed to form large colonies. However, when 2 ng/ml of TGF α was added to the

cultures, NRK cells were able to grow as distinct large colonies (Fig. 1B). This effect was markedly enhanced if 1 ng/ml of TGF β was simultaneously present in the medium (Fig. 1C). TGF β alone did not stimulate the growth of NRK cells as colonies on the FC43-medium interphase (Fig. 1D). In contrast to NRK cells, K-NRK cells grew as colonies on FC43 in the absence of added TGFs and exhibited a morphology similar to NRK cells grown in the presence of TGF α and TGF β (Fig. 1E). K-NRK cell growth

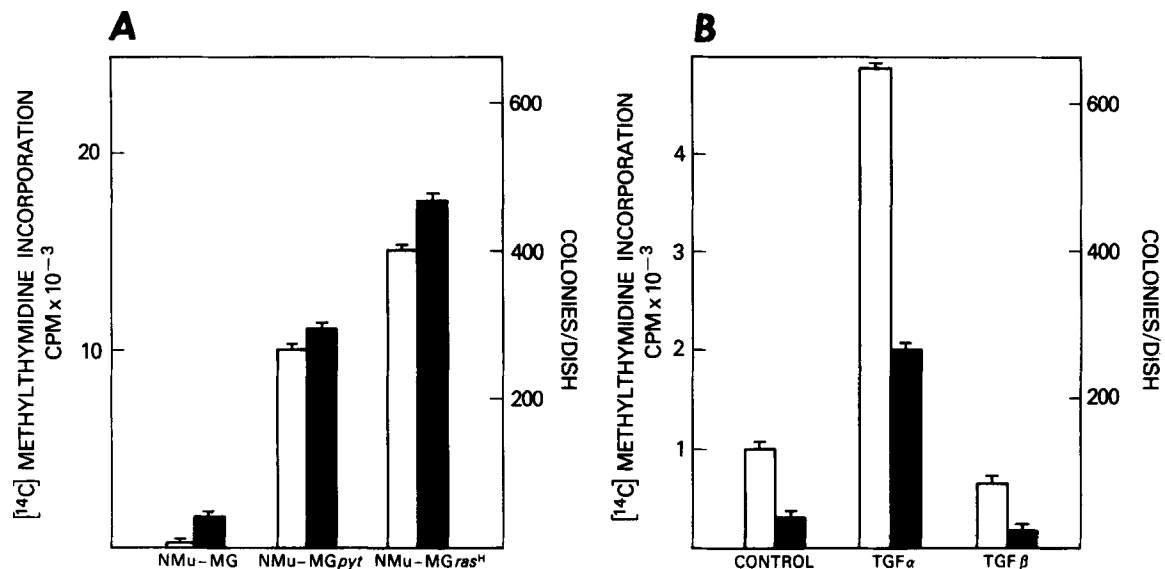


FIG. 4. (A) NMuMG, NMuMG-*pyt*, and NMuMG-*ras^H* cell growth on FC43 (open bars) and in soft agar (closed bars) in the absence of TGFs. (B) NMuMG cell growth in two-phase system (open bars) and in soft agar (closed bars) in the absence (control) or in the presence of TGF α (2 ng/ml) or TGF β (1 ng/ml).

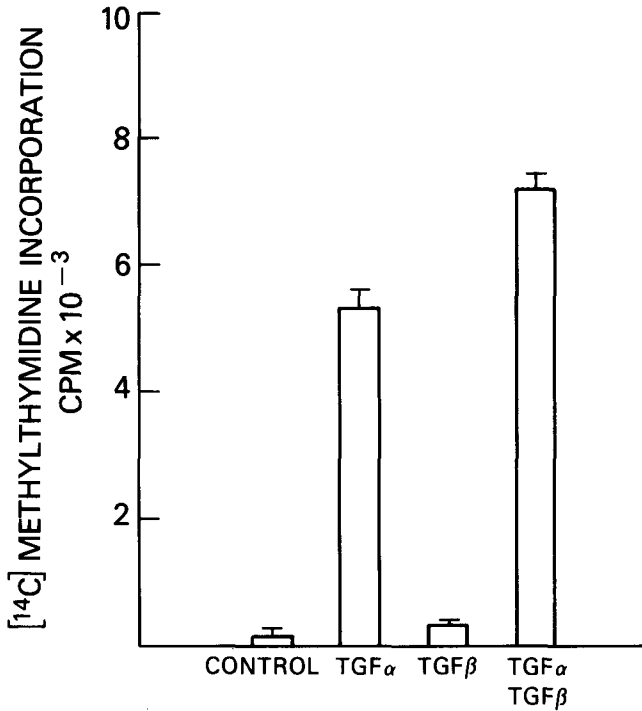


FIG. 5. AIN4 cell growth on FC43 in the absence (control) or in the presence of TGF α (2 ng/ml) and/or TGF β (2 ng/ml).

as colonies was completely inhibited when 25 μ g/ml of CHP was added to the cultures (Fig. 1F).

The ability of other types of cells to grow on the fluorocarbon-medium interface was then tested using mouse and human mammary epithelial cells. Fig. 2 demonstrates that, in the absence of exogenous growth factors, normal mouse mammary NMuMG epithelial cells (Fig. 2A) and benzo-a-pyrene immortalized human mammary epithelial AIN4 cells (Fig. 2B) did not grow as colonies on FC43. When 2 ng/ml of TGF α was added to the cultures, NMuMG cells and AIN4 cells (Fig. 2, C and D) grew as colonies. Addition of TGF β alone had no effect on promoting the growth of either NMuMG or AIN4 cells (data not shown). However, TGF β (1 ng/ml) was able to synergistically potentiate the growth promoting effects of TGF α on the AIN4 cells (Fig. 2F) but not on the growth of NMuMG cells (data not shown). NMuMG cells transformed with an activated *c-Ha-ras* proto-oncogene, NMuMG^H, were able to grow as colonies on the FC43 fluoro-carbon interface in the absence of exogenous growth factors and exhibited a morphology similar to TGF α -treated NMuMG cells (Fig. 2E).

Quantitation of growth factor response of cells growing in soft agar and on FC43. The mitogenic response of these various cell lines to TGF α and/or TGF β was quantitated by monitoring the incorporation of [¹⁴C]methylthymidine into DNA for growth on the FC43 fluorocarbon interface and was compared with the growth of these cells in soft agar as colonies. The colony formation ability for all the cell lines on FC43, as well as in the soft agar cultures, was quantified by

staining with NBT and counting the colonies on the colony counter (data not shown). Fig. 3A demonstrates that NRK cell growth on FC43 increased approximately 70% after the addition of TGF α (2 ng/ml). Addition of TGF β alone had no effect on growth but acted synergistically with TGF α to enhance NRK cell growth (approximately 3-fold and comparable to the level observed with K-NRK cells in the absence of growth factors). Fig. 3B demonstrates that qualitatively similar results were observed for the effects of TGF α and β on NRK and K-NRK cells grown in soft agar. Normal NRK cells did not grow in the absence of TGF α and TGF β or in the presence of TGF β alone. TGF α alone stimulated the anchorage-independent growth of NRK cells somewhat, whereas the addition of TGF α and TGF β induced colony formation of NRK cells to a level comparable to that observed for K-NRK cells.

The growth of normal and oncogene-transformed mouse mammary epithelial cells on FC43 and in soft agar was then compared (Fig. 4A). While normal NMuMG cells did not form colonies either in soft agar or on FC43, NMuMG-*pyt* and NMuMG-*ras*^H cells grew as colonies in both conditions. In addition, the degree of growth for both the NMuMG-*pyt* and NMuMG-*ras*^H cells was similar on FC43 and in soft agar. A similar cellular response in the two assays was observed when the growth of NMuMG cells was assessed in the absence or in the presence of TGF α or TGF β (Fig. 4B). Addition of TGF α (2 ng/ml) induced a 5-fold increase in labeled thymidine incorporation into DNA in NMuMG cells on FC43 and in colony formation in soft agar. TGF β (1 ng/ml) alone failed to stimulate NMuMG cell growth in either assay and was, in fact, slightly inhibitory in both assays. Fig. 5 illustrates a similar growth response of the AIN4 cells to

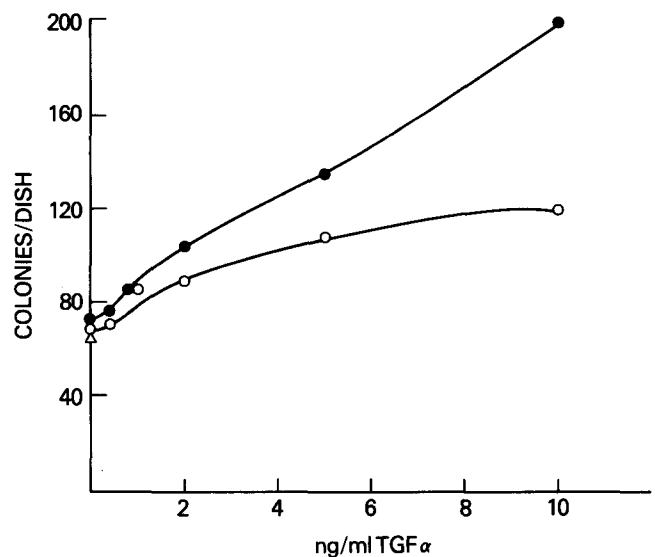


FIG. 6. Growth of AIN4 cells in soft agar. AIN4 cells were treated with different concentrations of TGF α (2-10 ng/ml) in the absence (○) or in the presence (●) of TGF β (2 ng/ml); AIN4 cell growth in the presence of TGF β only (△).

TGFs. Addition of TGF α (2 ng/ml) induced a 12-fold increase in the growth of the A1N4 cells, whereas TGF β (1 ng/ml) alone had no effect. Treatment of A1N4 cells with both TGF α and TGF β increased the growth of A1N4 cells over that seen with TGF α alone. Fig. 6 illustrates the growth of A1N4 cells in soft agar as colonies in response to varying concentrations of TGF α in the absence or in the presence of TGF β (2 ng/ml). TGF α (5–10 ng/ml) produced a 2-fold increase in A1N4 colony formation. Addition of TGF β alone had no effect on A1N4 growth in soft agar, whereas TGF β synergistically enhanced the anchorage-independent growth of A1N4 cells in response to different concentrations of TGF α . Under these conditions, there was approximately a 3-fold increase in the number of colonies in the presence of TGF α (10 ng/ml) and TGF β (2 ng/ml).

CHP-induced growth inhibition of NRK and K-NRK cells growing on FC43, in soft agar, and in monolayer cultures. As we recently found (F. Ciardiello et al., manuscript submitted), CHP-induced growth inhibition is more pronounced in a variety of transformed rodent cells and in cells, such as NRK cells, that have been grown in the presence of TGF α and TGF β . We therefore compared the sensitivity of growth factor-treated NRK and of K-NRK cells to different concentrations of CHP when cells were cultured on FC43, in soft agar, and in monolayer cultures (Fig. 7). Fig. 7A demonstrates that NRK cells cultured in the presence of TGF α (2 ng/ml) and TGF β (1 ng/ml) exhibit a similar degree of growth inhibition induced by different concentrations of CHP on

FC43 and in soft agar. A 50% inhibition of NRK cell growth in both assays is observed at a CHP concentration between 5 and 10 μ g/ml. K-NRK cells grown on FC43 and in soft agar also exhibited a comparable degree of sensitivity to the growth inhibitory effect of CHP and identical values as obtained for TGF α - and TGF β -treated NRK cells. It was also observed that NRK cells grown in monolayer culture are relatively insensitive to the growth inhibitory effects of CHP (Fig. 7B). However, when these cells grown on monolayers were treated with TGF α and TGF β , the cells exhibited a higher degree of sensitivity to CHP than untreated NRK cells. Inhibition was comparable to that observed with K-NRK cells under the same conditions. However, the CHP sensitivity of TGF α - and TGF β -treated NRK cells and K-NRK cells was lower in cells grown as monolayer cultures than for the same cells grown in soft agar or on FC43 (ID₅₀, approximately 50 μ g/ml).

DISCUSSION

Fluorocarbon fluids are a family of nontoxic compounds that exhibit a high solubility for gases such as oxygen and carbon dioxide (11,12). For these reasons, fluorocarbon emulsions have been utilized as a blood substitute (10), as microcarriers for mass culture of cells (15), and for maintaining the viability of organs for transplantation studies (13). The present experiments were designed to formulate an improved assay for rapidly measuring the anchorage-independent growth of transformed cells and of normal cells treated with TGFs, an assay that would be superior to the more conventional and time-consuming soft agar or methylcellulose assays. Our results demonstrate that purified FC43 represents a suitable growth surface on which normal cells cannot attach and spread significantly in the absence of TGFs.

The growth of nontransformed NRK fibroblasts and mouse and human mammary epithelial cells in the two-phase FC43 assay is shown to require the presence of TGF α and, in some instances (e.g., NRK cells), TGF β . In fact, the magnitude of growth in the two-phase assay system in response to these two growth factors for NRK cells and for the mammary epithelial cells is comparable to the degree of growth stimulation produced by these two growth factors in soft agar. Furthermore, the growth of TGF α - and TGF β -treated NRK and NMuMG mouse mammary epithelial cells is comparable in both assays to the amount of growth observed in *ras*-transformed NRK cells and *ras*-transformed NMuMG mouse mammary epithelial cells. These *ras*-transformed cell lines and the polyoma-transformed NMuMG cells exhibit equivalent growth in the absence of added growth factors in the two-phase assay system and in soft agar, supporting the observation that these two assays are approximately equivalent in their ability to monitor growth factor

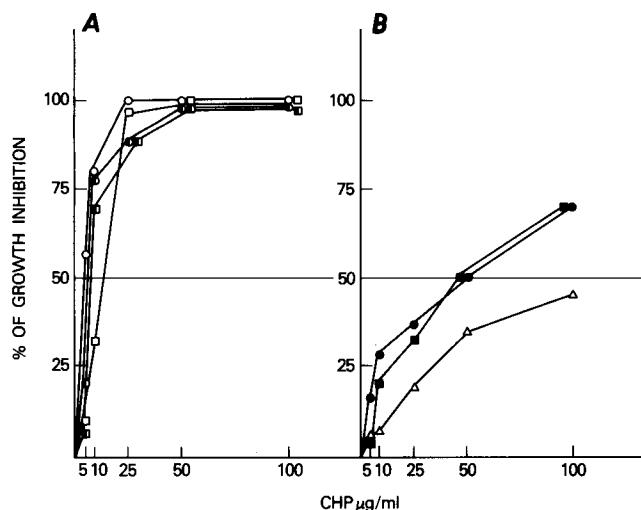


FIG. 7. CHP sensitivity of NRK and K-NRK cells grown in soft agar, in the two-phase system assay, and in monolayer cultures. (A) NRK and K-NRK cells were cultured on FC43 (●, ■) and in soft agar (○, □, respectively), and their sensitivity to several different concentrations (5–100 μ g/ml) of CHP was tested. NRK cells in the two-phase system and in soft agar were grown in the presence of TGF α (2 ng/ml) and TGF β (1 ng/ml). (B) NRK cell sensitivity to CHP in monolayer cultures in the presence (●) or in the absence (Δ) of TGFs. K-NRK cell sensitivity to CHP in monolayer cultures in the absence of TGFs (■).

stimulation of normal cell to grow as transformed cells. This observation is further supported, since the magnitude of growth inhibition produced by CHP at any given concentration in TGF α - and TGF β -treated NRK cells and in K-NRK cells is equivalent in the two-phase assay system and in soft agar.

The two-phase system offers several major advantages over the soft agar assay normally used for monitoring the anchorage-independent growth of cells. First, the recovery of cells and secreted cellular products from the two-phase assay system is relatively simple, since it only requires aspiration to harvest the conditioned medium and filtration to collect the cells. In contrast, recovery of cell colonies from soft agar is extremely tedious and requires melting and dilution of the agar while recovery of secreted cell products requires separation of the desired product from agar, a major problem. Second, the ease of cell plating is also a major advantage of the two-phase assay. Cells do not have to be resuspended in a semisolid medium since they are grown directly on a fluorocarbon-liquid interphase. Finally, the assay can be completed within 3-4 days compared with 10-14 days for routine soft agar assays. The rapidity of this assay over conventional soft agar or methylcellulose assays should also facilitate the routine screening of other growth factors that can promote the clonal or anchorage-independent growth of different indicator cells of mesenchymal or epithelial origin.

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EDITOR'S STATEMENT

This report describes the application of a novel technique that provides an alternative approach to assay of anchorage independence with some unique advantages over conventional methods.