

METHODS AND COMPOSITIONS FOR COMBINATORIAL-BASED PRODUCTION OF MULTIVALENT RECOMBINANT ANTIGENS

Related Application

[0001] This application relates to U.S. Provisional Application No. 60/619, 364, filed October 15, 2004, which is hereby incorporated by reference in its entirety.

Technical Field

[0002] The disclosed invention relates to the field of molecular biology and the production of multivalent vaccines against pathogenic organisms. One embodiment of the invention specifically provides methods and compositions that provide a population of antigen encoding nucleotide sequences in heterokaryotic filamentous fungi that can be used to produce a population of multivalent vaccines.

Background Art

[0003] Vaccines are currently produced by a variety of methods. Typically, influenza vaccines are produced using fertilized chicken eggs. In the United States, the Centers for Disease Control will select three virus strains which are thought to represent the most likely viruses to strike in a particular flu season. Samples of the selected viruses are provided to manufacturers as seed virus stocks which possess the desired antigenic characteristics. The seed viruses are injected into fertilized chicken eggs. These eggs are incubated while the influenza viruses multiply. After a suitable period of time the eggs are opened and the egg white is harvested. This sample contains the viruses. The viruses are purified from the egg material and inactivated. The individual virus stocks are then combined to create the common influenza vaccine, which is typically a trivalent vaccine.

[0004] There are a variety of problems which can occur which can compromise an entire vaccine batch. For example, problems with sterility lead to the decertification of Chiron's vaccine production facility in 2004. This situation illustrates how unreliable traditional vaccine production methods can be. Moreover, current influenza vaccine production methods employ the use of hundreds of millions of chicken eggs each year. The storage, handling, and processing steps are time consuming and labor intensive. Additionally, given the long

production times, if the if a new strain of influenza virus became predominant during a flu season, current egg based production methods would take several months for a new vaccine to be produced.

[0005] In view of these limitations, a more flexible and efficient method of producing antigenic material, such as an influenza vaccine is sorely needed.

Recombinant Fungal Expression of Proteins

[0006] The cloning and expression of heterologous genes in fungi has been used to produce a variety of useful proteins. For example: Lambowitz, U.S. Pat. No. 4,486,533, discloses the autonomous replication of DNA vectors for filamentous fungi by mitochondrial plasmid DNA and the introduction and expression of heterologous genes into *Neurospora*; Yelton et al., U.S. Pat. No. 4,816,405, discloses tools and systems that enable the modification of important strains of filamentous ascomycetes to produce and secrete large quantities of desired heterologous proteins; Buxton et al., U.S. Pat. No. 4,885,249, discloses the transformation of *Aspergillus niger* by a DNA vector that contains a selectable marker capable of being incorporated into the host *A. niger* cells; and McKnight et al., U.S. Pat. No. 4,935,349, discloses a method for expressing higher eukaryotic genes in *Aspergillus* involving promoters capable of directing the expression of a heterologous gene in *Aspergillus* and other filamentous fungi. Similar techniques have been used to clone the mtr gene involved with amino acid transport in *Neurospora crassa* ("*N. crassa*") and to verify the tight linking of the cloned DNA to genomic markers flanking this gene in vivo. Stuart, W. D. et al., *Genome* (1988) 30:198-203; Koo, K. and Stuart, W. D. *Genome* (1991) 34:644-651.

[0007] Filamentous fungi possess many characteristics which make them good candidates for use in producing eukaryotic proteins. Filamentous fungi can secrete complex proteins; correctly fold three dimensional proteins including disulfide bond formation; proteolytically clip proteins following translation; and glycosylate proteins using N-linked and O-linked glycosylation reactions. These abilities have made this group of organisms attractive hosts for the production of secreted recombinant proteins. (MacKenzie, D. A. et al., *J Gen Microbial* (1993) 139:2295-2307; Peberdy, J. F., *Trends in BioTechnology* (1994) 12:50-57).

[0008] *Neurospora crassa* has been used as a host cell for recombinant homologous and heterologous protein production. (Carattoli, A., et al., *Proc Nat Acad Sci USA*, (1995) 92:6612-6616; Yamashita, R. A. et al., *Fungal Genetics Newsletter* (1995 Suppl.) 42A; Kato, E. et al., *Fungal Genetics Newsletter* (1995 Suppl.) 42A; Buczynski, S. et al. *Fungal Genetics*

Newsletter (1995 Suppl.) 42A, Nakano, E. T. et al. Fungal Genetics Newsletter (1995 Suppl.) 40:54 0). In addition, *Neurospora crassa* has been used as a host cell for expressing recombinant heterodimeric and multimeric proteins by means of a heterokaryon, US Patent 5,643,745 July, 1997, Stuart 435/69. 1.

Summary of the Invention

[0009] The present invention provides heterokaryon filamentous fungus that produce multivalent vaccines.

[0010] The individual heterokaryons of the present invention are generated by fusing a first, and a second, and, in the case of trivalent vaccines, a third parent fungal strain and, in the case of higher levels of vaccine valences, one additional parent strain for each set of antigens added, each parent strain containing the necessary markers to maintain a heterokaryotic state as well as an expression unit that encodes a naturally occurring variant of an antigen of a multivalent vaccine, a rationally designed variant of an antigen of a multivalent vaccine, or a randomly generated variant of an antigen of a multivalent vaccine. Thus, in addition to natural variants, variants, generated through the use of chemical, physical or site-directed mutagenesis or other techniques can be produced.

[0011] The heterokaryons of the present invention are useful for selectively producing desired multivalent vaccines of defined antigens.

[0012] Based on the above, the present invention provides heterokaryons that produce variants of multivalent vaccines.

Brief Description of the Drawings

[0013] Figure 1 shows the nucleotide sequence (SEQ ID NO:1) of synthetic hemagglutinin 0 (HA0) gene (A/New Caledonia/20/1999/H1N1) and conceptual translation for fungal expression. The initiation codon is underlined.

[0014] Figure 2 shows the amino acid sequence (SEQ ID NO:2) encoded by the synthetic hemagglutinin 0 (HA0) gene. The fungal signal sequence is shown in **bold**.

[0015] Figure 3 shows the nucleotide sequence (SEQ ID NO:3) of synthetic hemagglutinin (HA) gene (A/Vietnam/1194/2004/H5N1). The initiation codon is underlined.

[0016] Figure 4 shows the amino acid sequence (SEQ ID NO:4) encoded by the synthetic hemagglutinin (HA) gene. The fungal signal sequence is shown in **bold**.

[0017] Figure 5 shows the nucleotide sequence (SEQ ID NO:5) of synthetic M1 matrix protein (A/Vietnam/1194/2004/H5N1). The initiation codon is underlined.

[0018] Figure 6 shows the amino acid sequence (SEQ ID NO:6) encoded by the M1 gene.

[0019] Figure 7 shows a western blot detection of expression of the synthetic HA O in *N.crassa*. Medium from 2 day shake-flask cultures of strains HAO5 and HAO8, as well as untransformed Control (C), and 50 and 200 ng of control HA (A/New Caledonia 20/99, Protein Sciences), were fractionated by SDS PAGE and blotted to nitrocellulose. Haemagglutinin was detected using a goat polyclonal anti-HA (H1N1) antibody (BioDesign), followed by anti-goat Ig-alkaline phosphatase conjugate and colorimetric detection.

[0020] Figure 8 shows a Coomassie brilliant blue stained gel of medium from 2 day shake-flask cultures of HAO5 and HAO8. Relatively little secreted protein is produced by 2 days in shake-flasks under these conditions.

[0021] Figure 9 shows static-culture expression of HAO5. Western blot of medium from a 6 day static culture of HAO5. HA proteins were detected as above in Fig.7. In this experiment, the major detected band is at ~ 57 kDa (the predicted size based on amino acid composition), versus 72 kDa for the control HA protein (C).

Disclosure of the Invention

[0022] A "heterokaryon" (or a heterokaryotic cell) is a cell formed from the fusion of two (or more) filamentous fungal parent strains, each heterokaryon cell thus containing two (or more) genetically different nuclei. Heterokaryons contain nuclei from parent strains that are generally homozygous for all heterokaryon compatibility alleles (except for the mating type allele when the *tol* gene is present). At least ten chromosomal loci have been identified for heterokaryon incompatibility: *het-c*, *het-d*, *het-e*, *het-i*, *het-5*, *het-6*, *het-7*, *het-8*, *het-9* and *het-10*, and more are inferred to exist. Peris et al., "Chromosomal Loci of *Neurospora crassa*", Microbiological Reviews (1982) 46:426-570, at 478.

[0023] The present invention advances the work of that disclosed in US Patents 5,643,745, 5,683,899 and 6,268,140 by providing methods and compositions for producing a population of multivalent vaccines using heterokaryotic filamentous fungi. Such methods and compositions are useful in the discovery and production of multivalent vaccines, such as antiviral vaccines, antibacterial vaccines and antifungal vaccines.

Description of the Preferred Embodiments

[0024] The present invention provides novel methods and compositions for generating a population of multivalent vaccines. The multivalent vaccines are generated from an ordered or a random combination of defined antigens. To obtain a multivalent vaccine, a heterokaryon is obtained in a method comprising the steps of introducing a first, a second, and sometimes a third or more populations of DNA molecules that encode defined antigens of a multivalent vaccine into a first, a second fungal and sometimes a third or more host parents, forming heterokaryotic fungal strains using the first, second and sometimes third or more host fungal parents, and then, if appropriate, culturing the resulting heterokaryon under conditions in which the subunit encoding DNAs are expressed and further screening the resulting heterokaryons for the production of a multivalent vaccine having the desired properties. Each of the elements, namely the fungal parents, the DNA molecules and the fusion methods are described in detail below.

Nature of Filamentous Fungi and Background Requirements for Heterokaryon

Formation

[0025] Fungi can occur in single mononucleated cells that yield filamentous multinuclear strands, yeast cells, fruiting bodies with diverse spores, and/or cells that are differentiated sexually. They can also exist in multinucleated forms. The principal element of the growing form of a fungus as a mold is the hypha, a branching tubular structure, about 2 μ m-10 μ m in diameter. Hyphae grow by elongation at their tips (apical growth) and by producing side branches. Thus, as a colony grows, its hyphae form a mass of intertwining strands.

[0026] Some hyphae penetrate into the culture medium on which the fungus is growing to absorb nutrients, while those hyphae that project above the surface of the medium constitute an "aerial mycelium." Most colonies grow at the surface of liquid or solid media as irregular, dry, filamentous mats. In most species, the hyphae are divided by cross-walls called "septa." These septa, however, have fine, central pores. Thus, even septate hyphae have nuclei that are embedded in a continuous mass of cytoplasm and, in effect, contain a multiplicity of nuclei in a transportable cytoplasm.

[0027] The term "filamentous fungi" refers to those fungi that can form a mycelium through a mass of branching, interlocking filaments and, although interrupted by cross walls, permit the passage of cytoplasm between compartments due to perforations in the cross walls.

Many of these fungi form meiotic spores within a sac when propagated sexually. With the appropriate stimulation, however, the mechanism of which is not entirely understood, reproduction can occur asexually. In this manner of reproduction, spores known as "conidia" are borne externally at the tips of budding projections formed at various locations along the filaments.

[0028] The filamentous fungi used to generate the heterokaryon panels of the present invention are generally Phycormycetes, Ascomycetes, Basidiomycetes, and Deuteromycetes. The Phycormycetes include all non-septate, as well as some septate, filamentous fungi. Their asexual spores are of various kinds and include sporangiospores contained within sacs formed at the end of specialized stalks. Different species have different sexual cycles.

[0029] Ascomycetes are distinguished from other fungi by the ascus, a saclike structure containing sexual spores, known as ascospores. The ascospores are the end product of mating, the fusion of male and female nuclei, two meiotic divisions, and usually one final mitotic division. Basidiomycetes are distinguished by sexual spores that form on the surface of a specialized structure. The Deuteromycetes are often referred to as "imperfect fungi" because no sexual phase has yet been observed. Their hyphae are septate, and conidial forms are similar to those of the Ascomycetes.

[0030] The preferred filamentous fungus is of the group Ascomycetes, more preferably, from the genera *Neurospora*, *Aspergillus*, *Fusarium*, *Tricoderma*, *Chrysosporium*, and *Penicillium*. Particularly useful species from *Neurospora* include *N. intermedia*, *N. crassa*, *N. sitopula*, and *N. tetraspora*, of which the most preferred species is *N. crassa*. Useful species of *Aspergillus* include *A. nidulans*, *A. niger*, *A. terreus*, and *A. fumigatus*.

[0031] The vegetative growth of filamentous fungi involves nuclear division with cell division (mitosis). This type of cell division consists of asexual reproduction, i.e., the formation of a new clone without the involvement of gametes and without nuclear fusion by way of conidia. For example, the species of *Neurospora* contain in their nuclei seven different chromosomes, each having a single copy, i.e., the vegetative organism is haploid. This haploid state is typically maintained during mycelial growth and during asexual reproduction through the formation of conidia.

[0032] Sexual reproduction can also occur, and then two haploid cells (hyphae or conidia) of different mating type fuse to form a dikaryotic cell containing two distinct nuclei. The two haploid nuclei thus coexist in the same cytoplasm and, for a time, divide more or less in synchrony. If a cell initiates ascospore formation, however, the two different haploid nuclei can

actually fuse to form a diploid nucleus, which contains pairs of homologous chromosomes. This diploid cell then begins meiosis.

[0033] A "heterokaryon" (or a heterokaryotic cell) is a cell with two (or more) genetically different nuclei. The heterokaryons of the invention must contain nuclei from cells that are homozygous for all heterokaryon compatibility alleles (except for the mating type allele when the *tol* gene is present). In *Neurospora* for example, at least ten chromosomal loci have been identified for heterokaryon incompatibility: *het-c*, *het-d*, *het-e*, *het-i*, *het-5*, *het-6*, *het-7*, *het-8*, *het-9* and *het-10*, and more are inferred to exist. Perkins et al., "Chromosomal Loci of *Neurospora crassa*", Microbiological Reviews (1982) 46:426-570, at 478.

[0034] If two strains carry different alleles at one or more *het* loci, they are unable to form stable heterokaryons. Protoplasmic killing occurs after fusion of unlike hyphae or after microinjection of cytoplasm or extracts into unlike strains. When duplications (partial diploids) are heterozygous for *het* one or more alleles, growth is inhibited and highly abnormal. A number of heterokaryon incompatibility loci (specifically, *het-c*, *-d*, *-e*, and *-i*) were first defined by heterokaryon tests. *Het-5* through *-10* loci were detected by using duplications, as differences at *het* loci are common in natural populations. Id.

[0035] Mating type alleles "A" and "a" also act as *het* genes in *N. crassa*, although some slow heterokaryotic growth may occur. Microinjection experiments have implicated proteins in the killing reaction. Thus, opposite mating types are also generally important for the complex events associated with the proliferation of heterokaryotic asexual hyphae. Id. at 436 and 478. However, if the *tol* gene is present, the vegetative (heterokaryon) incompatibility associated with opposite mating type alleles A and a is suppressed without sexual compatibility being affected. Thus, (*tol*; *A+a;a*) heterokaryons can be fully compatible and stable if the other *het* loci are of the same allele (or conallelic) and *A/a* duplications grow normally when the *tol* gene is present.

[0036] If hyphae from two different strains that are conallelic for the compatibility loci are provided, they may fuse when grown in the same medium, in particular when fusion is forced as described below. The resulting culture will then contain nuclei from both strains circulating in the shared cytoplasm of a common mycelial mat.

Construction of Expression Units Encoding a Mixed Population of Defined antigens

[0037] In describing the invention, the following terminology will be used in accordance with the definitions set out below:

[0038] The invention involves the production of "heterologous multivalent vaccines" in the filamentous fungal heterokaryon. In this context, "heterologous" means that the protein is not ordinarily produced by the fungus. "Multivalent" means that the ultimate vaccine product is made up of at least two antigens or antigen variants. The product may be a heteromultivalent vaccine, comprised of entirely different antigens or can be homomultivalent, made up of variants of a single subunit. Examples of multivalent vaccines include, but are not limited to, mixtures of recombinant antigens from cell surfaces, viral coat proteins, specific pathogenic protein antigens, and the like.

[0039] A "nucleotide sequence encoding an antigen" is that portion of a sequence for which the transcript is translated into a polypeptide when operably linked to appropriate control sequences. The boundaries of the coding sequence are determined by a start codon at the 5'(amino) terminus and a translation stop codon at the 3'(carboxy) terminus. This coding sequence can be derived from, for example, prokaryotic genes, cDNA from eukaryotic mRNA, genomic DNA sequences from eukaryotic DNA (such as fungal), or may include synthetic DNA. A polyadenylation signal and transcription termination sequence will usually be located 3' to the coding sequence.

[0040] A coding sequence is "operably linked to" control sequences when the control sequences effect the expression of the coding sequence in the appropriate host cell.

[0041] An "expression unit" is a DNA molecule that contains a coding sequence operably linked to a "control sequence or region" that directs the transcription and translation of the operably linked sequence in an appropriate host organism under appropriate conditions.

[0042] A cell has been "transformed" by exogenous DNA when such exogenous DNA has been introduced into the host cell membrane. For prokaryotes such as bacteria the exogenous DNA may be maintained on an episomal element such as a plasmid. Because filamentous fungi do have nuclei (are eukaryotic), most stably transformed fungus host cells contain the exogenous DNA integrated into a chromosome, so that it is inherited by daughter cells through chromosome replication.

[0043] A "recombinant host" refers to cells that have been, are or will be transformed with DNA sequences prepared by recombinant techniques, and includes the cell originally transformed and cultures and progeny thereof.

[0044] A variety of methods can be employed to generate a population of DNA molecules that encode 1) naturally occurring variants of an antigen subunit of a multivalent vaccine, 2) randomly generated or selected variants of an antigen of a multivalent vaccine, or 3) rationally

designed or selected variants of an antigen of a multivalent vaccine. In the following, an influenza vaccine is used as an illustrative example. A skilled artisan can readily use the methods outlined below, or an equivalent method known in the art, to generate the population of subunit encoding DNA molecules.

[0045] A population of DNA molecules that encode naturally occurring variants of an antigen of an antigen having natural heterogeneity can be produced using standard cDNA generation/cloning techniques. In general, a population of mRNA or viral genomic RNA is first isolated from the pathogen, or for example, in the case of influenza vaccines, directly from the genomic RNA of the virus itself. The isolated population of RNA molecules is then used as a template for the generation of cDNA molecules in art-known cloning methods such as RTPCR. The populations of cDNA molecules thus produced can be inserted into a suitable expression unit as described below.

[0046] Alternatively, for antigens whose protein sequence is known, an artificial cDNA sequence can be generated using methods known to the art, said sequence incorporating codons which are used in high frequency by the filamentous fungal host strain to produce its own endogenous proteins.

[0047] In addition, site directed or random mutagenesis can be performed on an isolated or artificial cDNA molecule that encodes an antigen of a multivalent vaccine to produce non-naturally occurring variants of the particular subunit. Procedures such as random or site-directed mismatched PCR priming, linker-scanning mutagenesis, or chemical and physical mutagenesis can readily be used to generate a population of DNA molecules that encode rationally designed or randomly generated variants of an antigen. For example, randomly generated or rationally designed PCR primers can be used to generate random or targeted heterogeneity in an antigen encoding sequence.

[0048] As used herein, a variant is said to be rationally designed when a selection criterion, such as protein folding or selecting a particular target residue or region, is used in generating the variant or selecting the variant-encoding DNA molecules. A variant is said to be randomly generated when a selection criterion is not used when generating or selecting the variant-encoding DNA molecules.

[0049] The preferred target site for generating heterogeneity in a multivalent vaccine subunit is the immunogenic epitope and surrounding amino acid sequences. In the case of the influenza antigen genes this type of creation of variation would center on the known naturally

variable regions of each antigen. As an example, one could change each amino acid in the variable region one by one to produce a library of known variation.

Construction of Expression Units Encoding Antigens of the Multivalent Vaccine

[0050] The expression units containing a nucleotide molecule encoding an antigen of a multivalent vaccine are constructed using well known techniques. In general, an expression unit is generated by placing the subunit coding sequences into operable linkage with control sequences that directs the expression of the subunit encoding sequences in the ultimate filamentous fungus host.

[0051] A variety of control elements are presently known in the art for directing the expression of an operably linked protein encoding sequence in either a constitutive or inducible fashion. The choice of a control sequence will be based on the fungal strain used, conditions employed for culturing the fungus, the level of protein expression desired, and the nature of expression required (for example, inducible versus constitutive). A skilled artisan can readily utilize art-known control sequences for generating the expression units used in the present heterokaryon panel.

[0052] In addition to sequences that direct the transcription and translation of the protein-encoding sequence, the expression units of the present invention may further control signal sequences, expression control elements that direct the export of an antigen outside the cell. A review of secretory signals that are known in filamentous fungus are provided by Dalbey R. E., et al., TIBS 17:474-478 (1992). The skilled artisan can readily generate expression units that contain secretory signals.

[0053] Another form of expression unit of the present invention may contain a fusion protein that directs the antigen to the cell membrane via fusion to a host cell or heterologous membrane anchor sequence or to the cell surface by fusion to a host cell or heterologous cell surface molecule.

[0054] In one application, recombination units are generated instead of the expression units. In such a use, the subunit encoding sequence, or fragment of an antigen encoding sequence, is flanked by regions of DNA that contain sequences that are homologous to an integration site in the host fungal strain. The homologous sequences are then used to stimulate and direct homologous recombination between the recombination units and the host chromosome. When recombination units are used, the host strain is preferably first transformed with an expression unit that contains an expression control element followed by sequences that

are used for targeted recombination. For example an influenza antigen can be introduced into a host fungus and then homologous recombination units can be used to introduce heterogeneity within a targeted region of the host chromosome.

[0055] Intermediate hosts are sometimes used to produce intermediate vectors capable of transforming the ultimate fungal cells. The intermediate bacterial transformants can then be grown to obtain the desired quantities of DNA, which can be used to transform a desired filamentous fungus host. Examples of commonly available bacterial vectors that can serve as intermediate vectors include, for example, pBR322, pUC8 and pUC9. Additional useful intermediate vectors include pHY201, pKBY2, pTZ18R, pX182 and pCVN2.9, pN807, pN846.

[0056] In another embodiment, the antigen or antigens of interest are expressed as a fusion protein with a fungal hydrophobin, such as EAS. Fungal hydrophobins are typically expressed and secreted in large quantities. The surfaces of the fungi are then coated with the hydrophobins. These proteins are also known to aggregate in solution. This aggregation feature allows for the preparation of aggregated recombinant proteins, which form antigenic particles. These proteins can be purified and used as antigens. When multiple antigens are expressed in the same culture, multivalent antigenic particles are produced.

[0057] It will be understood that this description and disclosure of the invention is intended to cover all embodiments that are within the spirit and scope of the invention. For example, it is within the knowledge of the art to insert, delete or substitute amino acids within the amino acid sequence of an open reading frame without substantially affecting the antigenicity of the molecule, and such multivalent antigens as can be generated with deletions, additions or substitutions to the naturally occurring subunit are included in the invention.

Nature of the Parent Strains

[0058] Since each of the parent fungal strains used in making the heterokaryons of the present invention will contain a member of a population of DNA molecules that encodes an antigen of a multivalent vaccine, one fungal parent will have a nucleus modified to contain a member of a first population of DNA molecules that encodes a first antigen or groups of antigens of a desired multivalent vaccine and each successive fungal parent will have a nucleus modified to contain a member of a different population of DNA molecules that encodes a different antigen or groups of antigens of a desired multivalent vaccine. For example, to produce a heterokaryon producing a divalent influenza vaccine, one fungal parent will produce

an antigen group from cDNA from influenza type A H1 N1 while the other fungal parent will produce an antigen group from cDNA from influenza type A H3 N2. To produce a trivalent influenza vaccine one fungal parent will produce an antigen group from cDNA from influenza type A H1 N1, the second fungal parent will produce an antigen group from cDNA from influenza type A H3 N2 and the third fungal parent will produce an antigen group from cDNA from influenza type B H N. Nucleotide and protein sequence are publicly available. For example, exemplary sequences for HA genes include H3N2 (AY738729), Influenza A virus (A/Leningrad/54/1(H1N1)) neuraminidase gene (M38309), Influenza A virus (A/Swine/Ontario/42729A/01 (H3N3)) neuraminidase (NA) gene (AY619975), Influenza A virus (A/Swine/Ontario/K01477/01 (H3N3)) neuraminidase (NA) gene (AY619966), Influenza A virus (A/Swine/Saskatchewan/18789/02 (H1N1)) neuraminidase (NA) gene (AY619960), Influenza A virus (A/Puerto Rico/8/34/Mount Sinai(H1N1)) segment 6 (NC 004523), Influenza A virus (A/mallard/Alberta/211/98(H1N1)) neuraminidase (NA) gene (AY633214), Influenza A virus (A/mallard/Alberta/99/91(H1N1)) neuraminidase (NA) gene (AY207541), and Influenza A virus (A/duck/Miyagil/9/77(H1N1)) neuraminidase (NA) gene (AY207534).

[0059] In addition to having been modified to contain a DNA molecule encoding the antigen or antigen group, as described above, the nuclei of each of the parent strains must contain a genome that results in a characteristic that renders the fungus dependent on the presence of a second nucleus, and/or a third nucleus and/or additional nuclei for survival under the conditions used to form the heterokaryon. Thus, the nucleus of each parent confers a characteristic which would result in the failure of the fungus in which it is contained to survive under the culture conditions unless the second nucleus, and/or third nucleus and/or additional nuclei are also present. For example, a parent that requires a particular nutrient may be cultured on a medium lacking the nutrient along with a parent that does not have this requirement. If hyphal fusion occurs, the nucleus of the second parent confers ability to survive in the absence of this nutrient. The second parent, in turn, may require a different nutrient, not required by the first. Only fungi containing both nuclei can then survive when both nutrients are lacking.

[0060] The required nutrient can be any substance which the fungus strain cell needs for growth or which, when absent, seriously impairs the ability of the fungus strain to grow or survive. Examples of useful nutrient requirements and the relevant mutants include:

- (1) amino acids such as histidine (his-1 through -7 mutants), proline (aga mutants), arginine (arg-11 mutants), citrulline (arg-11 mutants), asparagine (asn mutants), choline (chol-1 and chol-2 mutants), cysteine (cys-1 mutants), glutamine (gln-1 mutants),

- leucine (leu-1 through -4), lysine (lys-2, -4 and -5), methionine (mac mutants and met-6, -9 and -10 mutants), and threonine (thr-2 and -3 mutants);
- (2) mixtures of aromatic amino acids, such as a mixture of p-aminobenzoic acid, tyrosine, tryptophan, and phenylalanine (required by all aro strains except aro-6, aro-7 and aro-8), a mixture of tryptophan and phenylalanine (required for aro-6 mutants), a mixture of isoleucine and valine (required for ilv-1, -2 and -3), and a mixture of phenylalanine and tyrosine (required for pt mutants);
- (3) vitamins such as pantothenic acid (pan-1 mutants) and thiamine (thi-2 and thi-4 mutants);
- (4) purine bases such as adenine (ad-2 through ad-4 and ad-8 mutants), hypoxanthine (ad-2 and ad-3 mutants), inosine, and guanine or guanosine (gua-1 or -2 mutants);
- (5) pyrimidine bases such as uracil (pyr-1 through pyr-6);
- (6) saturated fatty acids (cel mutants) or unsaturated fatty acids such as C₁₆ or C₁₈ fatty acids having a double bond in the cis conformation at either the 9- or 11-position, fatty acids with a double bond in the trans configuration at the 9-position, and fatty acids with multiple cis double bonds interrupted by methylene bridges (ufa-1 and -2);
- (7) physiologically important ions such as potassium (trk);
- (8) sugar alcohols such as inositol (acu mutants and inl mutants) and glycerol; and
- (9) other organic entities such as acetate (ace mutants), L-ketoglutarate, succinate, malate, formate or formaldehyde (for mutants), p-aminobenzoic acid (pab-1, -2 and -3 mutants), and sulfonamide (sfo mutants at 35°C.).

[0061] One specific example based on a nutritional requirement is the Arg B+ gene coding for the enzyme ornithine transcarbamylase. This enzyme is present in wild type *A. niger*. Mutants lacking this enzyme (Arg B- strains) can be prepared by usual non-specific techniques, such as treatment with ultraviolet radiation, followed by screening based on an inability to grow on minimal medium, coupled with an ability to grow on a medium containing arginine. Fungi containing this genome will grow on minimal medium if they also include an Arg B+ nucleus.

[0062] Also useful for forcing heterokaryon formation are genes conferring a resistance to any one of a variety of cytotoxic agents. For example, in an alternative embodiment, one of the parents can have a requirement for a nutrient as well as a resistance to a toxic effect induced by a noxious chemical, an antibiotic or virus, or a harsh environmental condition such as a predetermined temperature range to which the other parent is sensitive.

[0063] Specific examples of noxious chemicals that can exert a toxic effect include acriflavine (resistance conferred by *acr* generally, with the presence of the *shg* gene being required for resistance by *acr-4* and *acr-6*); 3-amino-1,2,4-triazole (resistance conferred by *acr-2*, *atr-1*, *cpc*, *leu-1* or *leu-2*); dyes such as malachite green (resistance conferred by *acr-3*); caffeine (resistance conferred by *caf-1*); purine analogs (resistance to 8-azaadenine and 2,6-diaminopurine conferred by *aza-1*; resistance to 8-azaadenine and 8-azaguanine conferred by *aza-2*; resistance to 8-azaguanine and 6-mercaptopurine conferred by *aza-3*; resistance to 6-methylpurine conferred by *mep(3)* and *mep(10)*; cyanide (insensitivity conferred by *cni-1* in the first 24 hours of growth); tetrazolium (resistance conferred by *cya-6* and *cya-7*); cycloheximide (resistance conferred by *cyh-1*, *-2* and *-3*); chromate (resistance conferred by *cys-13*); 2-deoxy-D-glucose (resistance conferred by *dgr*); edeine (resistance conferred by *edr-1* and *-2*); ethionine (resistance conferred by *eth-1*, by *nap* in the presence of p-fluorophenylalanine, and by *oxD* if the ethionine is in the D form); fluoro compounds such as 5-fluorodeoxyuridine, 5-fluorouracil, and 5-fluorouridine (resistance to all three conferred by *fdv-2*; resistance to 5-fluorouracil being conferred by *uc-5* in an ammonia-free minimal medium; resistance to 5-fluorodeoxyuridine and 5-fluorouridine being conferred by *ud-1*), and fluorophenylalanine (resistance conferred by *fpr-1* through *-6* under certain conditions); 8-azaadenine (resistance conferred by *mts*); methyl methane sulfonate (insensitive or marginally sensitive for *upr-1*); surface-active agents such as dequalinium chloride, cetyltrimethyl ammonium bromide, and benzalkonium chloride (resistance conferred by *sur-1*); and metal ions such as vanadate (resistance conferred by *van*).

[0064] Examples of antibiotics typically exerting a toxic effect include benomyl (methyl-1-(butylcarbamolbenzimidazol-2-yl) carbamate) (resistance conferred by *Bml*); antimycin A (insensitivity conferred by *cni-1* in the first 24 hours of growth); polyene antibiotics such as nystatin (resistance conferred by *erg-1* and *3*); and oligomycin (resistance conferred by *oli*).

[0065] Also useful are genes conferring resistance to extremes in various environmental conditions such as a high or low temperature, the lack of oxygen (resistance conferred by *an*), constant light (resistance conferred by *lis-1*, *-2* and *-3*) or the absence of light, UV radiation, ionizing radiation, and high or low osmotic pressures. In a particularly preferred embodiment, the resistance to a toxic effect is a resistance to an antibiotic such as hygromycin.

[0066] Strains generally useful in the invention can be grown on 1X Vogel's Minimal Medium (N medium) in cotton-plugged test robes, with supplements being added depending on the phenotype of the strain, such as, for example, histidine, arginine and/or inositol. Typical

stains may be obtained, for example, from the Fungal Genetics Stock Center ("FGSC") and from D. D. Perkins, Stanford University. Another *N. crassa* strain believed to be useful is M246-89601-2A (obtained from Dr. Mary Case, University of Georgia, Athens). This strain is a derivative of wild-type 74A, which contains a stable qa-2 mutation (M246), an arom-9 mutation (M6-11), and an inos (io601) mutation. The double mutant qa-2, arom-9, lacks both the biosynthetic and catabolic dehydroquinase activities and is unable to grow on minimal medium without a supplement of aromatic amino acids, such as, for example, phenylalanine at a concentration of about 80 µg per ml.

[0067] Useful strains of *A. niger* (ATCC 46951) are also available from the Fungal Genetics Stock Center, as well as strains of *Fusarium*, *Gelasinospora*, and *Sordaria fimicola*, or can be prepared by mutagenizing with UV light to form an isolate that requires ornithine or arginine for growth in a defined minimal media. This strain, which lacks ornithine carbamoyl transferase, has been called arg B (350(-)52). Media for growing *A. niger* or *A. nidulans* are described by Cove, *Biochim Biophys Acta* (1966) 113:51-56.

[0068] Standard procedures are generally used for the maintenance of strains and the preparation of conidia (Davis and de Serres, *Methods Enzymol* (1971) 17A:79-141). Mycelia are typically grown in liquid cultures for about 14 hours (25°C.), as described in Lambowitz et al. *J Cell Biol* (1979) 82:17-31. Host strains can generally be grown in either Vogel's or Fries minimal medium supplemented with the appropriate nutrient(s), such as, for example, histidine; arginine; phe, tyr, and/or trp (each about 80 µg per ml); p-aminobenzoic acid (about 2 µg per ml); and inositol (about 0.2 mg per ml).

[0069] Many fungal strains with the desired characteristics are publicly available. If not readily available, however, one of ordinary skill in the art can use selection techniques well-known in the art for separating out either the desired mutants or the engineered nuclei providing the desired characteristic. Illustrative parental combinations are shown in the table below.

Table 1.

Diakaryon Combinations:

Phenotypes	Parent 1 requires histidine	Parent 2 tryptophane
or	requires arginine	lysine
or	requires uracil	thymidine

Trikaryon Combinations		Parent 1	Parent 2	Parent 3	
Phenotypes	requires and	histidine tryptophane	tryptophane arginine	arginine histidine	
(provides fusion partners with)		(arginine)	(histidine)	(tryptophane)	
Tetrakaryons		Parent 1	Parent 2	Parent 3	Parent 4
Phenotypes	requires and and	histidine tryptophane arginine	tryptophane arginine leucine	arginine leucine histidine	leucine histidine tryptophane
(provides fusion partners with)		(leucine)	(histidine)	(tryptophane)	(arginine)

[0070] As seen in the table, a variety of complementary characteristic/property combinations can be chosen to fit various fusion conditions. In general, the nutrient requirement is manifested by a mutant strain, while the ability to resist certain substances may more conveniently be conferred by modification of the nucleus with an expression system for the resistance gene. Alternatively, the nutritional requirement can be effected using recombinant techniques such as homologous recombination with a transforming vector and the resistance can be conferred by mutation under conditions where the toxic conditions are present.

[0071] In one embodiment of the invention, host cells are converted to spheroplasts for transformation. When spheroplasts are used, a preferred method of preparing them is by enzymatic digestion of the cell walls, for example, by using a chitinase/glutamase mixture. The selection of a suitable enzyme for enzymatic digestion is within the skill of the art. Useful enzymes are those capable of digesting complex polysaccharides, and are found among those known as effective in preparing fungal spheroplasts of a wide variety of fungal species. Specific examples of suitable enzymes include Novozyme 234 (an impure mixture of enzymes) and Beta-glucuronidase. Other suitable methods may be used to form spheroplasts. If suitable methods for cell wall penetration by the use of vectors are identified, however, whole cells of the fungal host may be used along with or instead of spheroplasts.

[0072] To modify the nucleus of a fungal host strain to contain an expression unit for a DNA encoding a particular subunit of multivalent vaccine, the practice of the invention employs, unless otherwise indicated, molecular biology, microbiology, and recombinant DNA techniques that is within the skill of the art. Such techniques are explained fully in the literature. See, e.g., Maniatis et al., *Molecular Cloning: A Laboratory Manual* (1982); D. N. Gover et al. *DNA Cloning: A Practical Approach* (1985) Volumes I and II; Oligonucleotide

Synthesis (M. J. Gait ed. 1984); Nuclei Acid Hybridization (Hames et al. eds. 1985); Transcription and Translation (Hames et al. eds. 1984); Animal Cell Culture (R.I. Freshhey ed. 1986); Immobilized Cells and Enzymes (IRL Press 1986); B. Perbat, A Practical Guide to Molecular Cloning (1984).

General Procedure for Transformation of *N. crassa*

[0073] Once the population of DNA molecules encoding the multivalent antigens is placed into expression units, the DNA molecules are used to transform parent host strains of a filamentous fungus, such as described by Smart, "Heterologous dimeric proteins produced in heterokaryons." Strains of *Neurospora crassa*, are publicly available from the Fungal Genetics Stock Center, but independently prepares strains can also be used. Mutants may be isolated de novo, as illustrated by Stadler et al. Genetics (1966) 54:677-685 and Haas et al. Genetics (1952) 37:217-26. Useful strains can also be obtained from D. D. Perkins from Stanford University. Strains are typically grown on 1X Vogel's Minimal Medium ("N medium") in cotton-plugged test tubes, with appropriate supplements being added depending on the strain's phenotype.

[0074] Spheroplasts are used as subjects for transformation. To form conidial spheroplasts, the fungus is inoculated onto 25 ml of solid N medium, with appropriate supplements in four to five 125-ml Erlenmeyer flasks, which have been plugged with cotton. The cultures are grown at room temperature for 5-7 days.

[0075] The conidia are harvested by adding 10 ml of N medium to each flask, replacing the cotton plug, and swirling the flask. The solids are allowed to settle for a few minutes. The conidial mixture is poured to an autoclaved cheesecloth bag hanging in the mouth of an Erlenmeyer flask and secured with one or more rubber bands. The filtrate is recovered, and the concentration of conidia is determined by a hemocytometer count, with chains being counted as one.

[0076] A volume of 2×10^9 conidia is added to 150 ml of liquid N medium containing 1.5% sucrose and appropriate supplements. The conidia are germinated in the cotton-plugged flask while shaking (150-200 rpm) for 5-6 hours at room temperature until more than 75% have germinated and the germ tubes are 1-4 conidial diameters in length. The cells are harvested by centrifuging at about 1500-2000 rpm for 10 minutes. The cell pellet is rinsed three times with water.

[0077] The pellet is then re-suspended in 10 ml of 1.0M sorbitol, and the spheroplasts are prepared by enzymatic removal of the tough conidial cell wall with an enzyme under isotonic conditions, to prevent the "bursting" of the spheroplasts as they are formed. The protocol is adapted from the method of Vollmer and Yanofsky, Proc Natl Acad Sci USA (1986) 83:4869-73.

[0078] Specifically, in a sterile 250 ml Erlenmeyer flask, the conidial suspension is generally added to 50 mg of a solid enzyme sold by Interspex under the trade name Novozyme 234. The mixture is shaken (100 rpm) at 30°C. for about an hour (4±10 minutes) to digest the cell wall. The spheroplast formation process is monitored by examining a small aliquot of the mixture microscopically under a cover slip. Spheroplasts can be detected because they lyse osmotically when water is applied to one end of the cover slip. The process should be monitored frequently at the later stages of spheroplast formation.

[0079] The spheroplast mixture is decanted into a sterile 15-ml conical centrifuge tube, and the spheroplasts are recovered by centrifuging at 500 rpm (10 minutes) in a swinging bucket table top centrifuge. The resulting pellet is rinsed twice with 10 of 1.0M sorbitol and then once with the following STC solution: 91 g sorbitol; 50 mM Tris. Cl; 50 mM CaCl₂; sufficient NaOH to adjust the pH to 8.0; and q.s. to 500 ml.

[0080] The final spheroplast pellet is suspended in a mixture of 16.0 ml STC, 200 µl DMSO, and 4 ml of the following PTC solution: 200 g polyethylene glycol sold under the trade name "4000" by Sigma; 50 mM Tris. Cl; 50 mM CaCl₂; sufficient NaOH to adjust the pH to 8.0; and q.s. to 50 ml.

[0081] The resulting suspension of spheroplasts can either be used directly or stored frozen in 1.0 ml aliquots at -80°C.

[0082] In a sterile, 15-ml screw-cap tube, 2.0 µl of 50 mM Spermidine solution, 5.0 µl of the plasmid DNA to be transfected, such as that containing the expression system for an antigen of the desired multivalent vaccine along with a selectable marker such as benomyl resistance (usually at a concentration of about 1.0 mg/ml) and 5.0 µl of a 5 mg/ml heparin solution are mixed by flicking the tube. The spermidine solution is prepared by dissolving 12.73 mg of spermidine in 1.0 ml TE and adjusting the pH to 8.0, and can be stored at -20°C. The heparin solution is prepared by dissolving 50 mg of the sodium salt of heparin in 10 ml of STC and can be stored in frozen aliquots.

[0083] The contents of the tube are briefly spun (pulsed) in a tabletop centrifuge and then placed in an ice bath. About 50-100 µl of thawed spheroplasts are added to the tube. The

mixture is then incubated on ice about 30 minutes, but incubation periods of about 20 minutes on ice have been successful. About 1 ml of PTC is added and mixed well by flicking the tube. The mixture is incubated further at room temperature for about 20 minutes.

[0084] A Regeneration "Top" Agar is prepared by mixing: 20 ml 50x Vogel's Minimal Medium; 825 ml of water; 182 g sorbitol; and 28 g agar. The top agar is autoclaved and 100 ml of a 10x FIGS solution (containing 5 g/l fructose, 2 g/l inositol, 2 g/l glucose, and 200 sorbose) is added. 15 ml of the top agar is incubated at 50°-55°C. and poured into the tube containing the spheroplasts and plasmid DNA. The contents are quickly mixed by flicking and inverting the tube 2-3 times and then uniformly poured onto a layer of plating "bottom" agar.

[0085] The "bottom" agar is prepared by mixing any required supplements, in 1xN medium; autoclaving; and adding 10x FIGS and benomyl (if benomyl resistance is used as a maker) to final concentrations of 1x and 0.5 µg/ml respectively. A volume of 25 ml of "bottom" agar is poured into a Petri plate and allowed to harden.

[0086] After the top agar has been poured over the bottom agar, bubbles are removed by flaming. The plates are kept in an upright position until the top agar has solidified (about 5 minutes). If the top agar tends to harden prematurely, the bottom agar plates can be prewarmed. Once the top agar has solidified, the plates are incubated in an inverted position at 30°C.

[0087] For selection of the *N. crassa* transformants, the host is thus cultured on the appropriate medium (having composition only the transformed cells can utilize or containing an antibiotic to which only transformed cells are resistant) and incubated at about 34°C. An indication of a successful transformation can be seen about 24-36 hours after plating. Stable transformants are generally scored after three days of growth. The incubation period to detect transformants will vary depending on the host strain and the phenotypic marker.

[0088] Selected transformants can be screened for, expression of the desired antigen subunit by standard methods, such as an appropriate ELISA, a colony blot immunoassay, restriction enzyme analysis, filter hybridization, nested deletion subcloning, and the like.

[0089] In the present invention, the above-described recombinant techniques are used to produce fungal host strains expressing a desired recombinant antigen or antigen group, each host strain having one or more characteristics that negatively affects growth under specified conditions but is correctable by a property conferred by a one or more other nuclei.

[0090] The resulting host strains are the parents used to form the heterokaryons of the invention.

[0091] Alternatively, electroporation procedures can be used to transform freshly harvested conidia of filamentous fungus such as *Neurospora crassa* (Van, D. C. Fungal Genetics Newsletter No. 42A (Supplement) (1995)). In general, conidia are harvested from 7-28 day old cultures. The cells are washed in 1 M sorbitol solution and suspended at a final concentration of 2.5×10^9 cells/ml. Approximately 5 μ g of linearized DNA is added to an aliquot of the conidial suspension and a portion of this is placed in the bottom of an electroporation cuvette, for example an electroporation cuvette with a 0.2 cm gap. An electroporator, such as an InVitrogen Electroporator II, is set with a voltage gradient of about 7.25 kb/cm and a setting of about 71 μ F and about 200 ohms. Following electroporation, the cells are plated on appropriate media with or without a top agar essentially as described above.

[0092] Following transformation, a stable production strain derived from each molecular variant is established by expanding the culture on selective media for the particular host cell and expression unit used in each individual case.

Production of the Heterokaryon

[0093] Because all of the fungal host strains are chosen to be conallelic with respect to all heterokaryon compatibility alleles (with the exception of the mating allele when the *tot* gene is present as explained above), when the host strains are cultured together under conditions wherein none of the host strains can survive alone the fungi are fused so that the heterokaryotic fungus of the invention is formed. By hyphal fusion, the different haploid nuclei of the host fungi come to coexist in a common cytoplasm. While not wishing to be bound by any theory, applicants believe membrane fusion results from the aggregation of intramembranous particles within each cell, making possible cell contacts between protein-free areas. Rearrangement of the lipids in the contact areas then leads to full fusion.

[0094] Because each of the parents contains a nucleus which produces different antigens of the multivalent vaccine, the resulting heterokaryon is capable of producing the completed multivalent vaccine comprising multiple antigens.

[0095] The heterokaryon thus generated is stable, with the nuclei dividing at about the same rate.

Generation of Heterokaryons Producing Defined Multivalent Vaccines

[0096] The compositions and methods of the present invention employ heterokaryons expressing immunogenic antigens derived from pathogenic organisms. As described above,

said heterokaryon is generated from two or more host strains, each heterokaryon producing a different multivalent vaccine.

[0097] One example is a heterokaryon that produces influenza antigen variants. To generate such a strain, conidial suspensions of each individual parent strain are mixed together on a solid media substrate without any nutritional supplements, or in the case of host cells with a resistance gene, in media containing the cytotoxic agent. A heterokaryon made from a predetermined combination of parent strains may be formed or a library of heterokaryons may be formed in a matrix using a microtiter plate or other convenient format. A few of the many combinations available are illustrated in the following table, Table 2, which is given by way of example and not meant to be limiting in any way.

Table 2. Generation of Heterokaryons For Production of Multivalent Vaccines

Parent host cells contain genes from Influenza Strains	AH1N1	or	AH3N2	or	BHN
with antigenic variants	a,b,c,...		d,e,f,...		g,h,i,...

A single vaccine production strain can be generated based on the choice of the user

Heterokaryon comprised of: strain c plus strain f plus strain h

Or a panel of vaccine production strains can be generated such as

Heterokaryon one comprised of:	strain a plus strain d plus	strain g
Heterokaryon two comprised of:	strain a plus strain e plus	strain h
Heterokaryon three comprised of:	strain b plus strain f plus	strain i

and so on in all possible combinations, if desired,

where: 'A'=influenza type A; 'B'=influenza type B; 'H'=hemagglutinin; 'N'=neuraminidase; "variants" = different combinations of antigenic classes of H and N antigens of Influenza types and strains.

[0098] A typical minimal medium contains: per liter, 5.0 g Dextrose, 50.0 mls of a Salt Solution (below), 1.0 ml trace elements (below), and 12.5 g Agar (adjusted pH 6.5) if the media is to be in solid form. The Salt Solution contains: 120.0 g NaNO₃, 10.4 g KCl, 10.4 g MgSO₄, and 30.4 g KH₂ PO₄.

[0099] The trace element solution contains: 1.1 g $(\text{NH}_4)_6\text{Mo}_7\text{O}_{24}\cdot 4\text{H}_2\text{O}$, 11.0 g H_3BO_3 , 1.6 g $\text{CoCl}_2\cdot 6\text{H}_2\text{O}$, 1.6 g CuSO_4 , 50.0 g Na_2EDTA , 5.0 g $\text{FeSO}_4\cdot 7\text{H}_2\text{O}$, 5.0 g $\text{MnCl}_2\cdot 4\text{H}_2\text{O}$, and 22.0 g $\text{ZnSO}_4\cdot 7\text{H}_2\text{O}$ (pH 6.5).

[00100] Thus, to maintain the heterokaryotic filamentous fungus in its heterokaryotic state, external forcing is maintained. Growing the heterokaryotic fungal cells on minimal media "forces" the strains to remain together. If mating types are opposite, the presence of the *tol* gene can be used to maintain stable (A+a) heterokaryons.

[00101] The multivalent vaccine is produced by culturing the heterokaryons of the invention under conditions favorable to production of the antigens. The multivalent vaccine antigens may be recovered from the culture and purified in accordance with standard techniques adapted, of course, as necessary to preserve the structure of the antigens.

[00102] Preferably, the heterokaryotic filamentous fungus carries an expression unit that allows the host being cultured to secrete the desired multivalent vaccine directly into a minimal growth medium, so that the multivalent vaccine(s) can be purified directly from cell-free medium. Or the heterokaryotic filamentous fungus carries an expression unit that directs the antigens to the cell surface. Intracellularly produced multivalent antigens can be isolated from cell lysates. Useful purification methods in accordance with known procedures are within the skill of the art, such as, for example, molecular size exclusion, ion-exchange chromatography, HPLC, affinity chromatography, hydrophobic interaction chromatography, and the like.

Antigens

[00103] The disclosed invention is directed to the preparation of antigenic compositions, such as vaccines, against pathogens, particularly against pathogens that demonstrate the ability to change their antigenic character. Eucaryotic, viral, bacterial and fungal antigens are all contemplated for use with the described invention. Another use for the invention is to prepare antigenic compositions against a number of different antigens simultaneously. A preferred embodiment of the invention relates to the preparation of multivalent influenza vaccines. The influenza virus is constantly mutating and generating new strains. Accordingly, listing individual genes for use in the disclosed invention would be unnecessarily limiting as the invention is applicable to any influenza strain, or any pathogen strain for that matter.

[00104] There are three types of influenza virus, A, B and C. Types A and B viruses cause epidemics of disease almost every winter, while type C viruses only cause a mild respiratory illness and are not considered clinically important. Influenza type A viruses are divided into

subtypes based on two proteins on the surface of the virus, the hemagglutinin (HA) and neuraminidase (NA). The current subtypes of influenza A viruses that infect humans are A (H1N1) and A (H3N2). There is currently a great deal of discussion about an avian influenza virus (H5N1) which is known to infect humans as well.

[00105] The influenza virus famously undergoes tremendous antigenic drift. A vast amount of effort is devoted around the world to monitor the antigenic drift of the virus, so that any new variant strains that arise can be identified and then used to produce updated vaccines which most closely match the strains likely to infect people in a given flu season. Upon identification of a strain of influenza of interest, the methods of the disclosed invention can be used to generate multivalent antigenic material which can then be used to prepare vaccines.

[00106] Another embodiment is directed to preparing multivalent vaccines against *Plasmodium*, a genus of protozoa that includes four species that cause malaria in human. Examples of the four include *Plasmodium vivax* and *Plasmodium falciparum*. A general list of pathogens against which multivalent vaccines are contemplated include human papilloma viruses 16, 18, and 31, human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) herpes varicella virus, measles virus, Epstein Barr virus, respiratory syncytial virus, parainfluenza 3, herpes simplex type 1 virus, and herpes simplex type 2 virus. Antigens suitable as targets for the disclosed invention include any protein from these organisms which is capable of eliciting an immune response in a host.

Assay for Secreted Antigens

[00107] Heterokaryon hosts can be stored on solid minimal media and also cultured on minimal liquid media under conditions favorable for expression of the multivalent antigens. Following 2-7 days of growth, the liquid media can then be collected under sterile conditions and tested for the presence of each specific desired antigen by standard analytical methods including but not limited to ELISA, PAGE, capillary electrophoresis, and spectrometry.

[00108] Upon identification of a culture that is producing the desirable variant of the multivalent vaccine, the cells stored on the solid media can be expanded to larger fermentation cultures by standard methods. When grown under whatever the optimal conditions are for the particular fungal host used, this expanded host culture will produce the desired product in sufficient quantities for further research evaluation and eventual use as a recombinant vaccine.

Assay for Cell Surface Directed Antigens

[00109] Heterokaryons can be constructed that express fusion proteins that display the viral antigens on the surface of the fungal spore. Native proteins that are normally directed to the fungal cell surface, for example hydrophobin proteins, such as the EAS protein of *Neurospora*, as well as permease proteins, such as the MTR protein of *Neurospora*. These proteins are useful as cell surface-directed fusion partners with the viral antigens. Fusion proteins are constructed and expressed by means well known to practitioners of the art. Individual strains that express the antigen on the cell surface can be assayed by standard analytical methods. These methods include, but are not limited to, direct or indirect cell labeling by antibodies specific to the viral antigen, followed by detection of specific binding by various means. Such means include, but are not limited to, ELISA, visual or fluorescence spectrometry, and flow cytometry. Individual strains that express antigens may then be fused, are retested for simultaneous expression of the individually expressed surface antigens, and thus result in a multivalent target for the immune system, useful for recombinant vaccines, either directly or after purification.

Assay for Non-Secreted Antigens

[00110] If the antigens are not secreted, the cell mass in each liquid culture can be removed, disrupted by standard methods and the cell supernatant and debris assayed for the multivalent vaccine with desirable characteristics. Once the strain that produces the desired variant has been identified by standard methods, the strains stored on solid media can be used to inoculate and to make an expanded culture. Again, when grown under optimal conditions for the particular heterokaryon, this expanded host culture will produce the desired product in sufficient quantities for further evaluation and use.

[00111] The following examples are offered to illustrate but not to limit the invention.

Example 1

Synthetic HA Gene Constructs

[00112] Synthetic genes (HA0 of A/New Caledonia/20/1999/H1N1, HA of A/Vietnam/1194/2004/H5N1, and M1 of A/Vietnam/1194/2004/H5N1), were designed by the following method:

[00113] For each gene the amino-acid sequence was taken from the public NCBI database. In the HA and HA0 genes, a fungal signal sequence was substituted for the native leader sequence. Using this sequence, a gene for fungal expression was reverse-translated and codon-optimized using *Neurospora crassa* codon preferences. The sequence was altered to a low free-energy form, which was computed to reduce secondary structure in the nascent mRNA. The resulting gene was string-searched for intron splicing donor and acceptor sites. After alteration of the sequence to remove such sites, the sequence was also checked for transcriptional termination sites, and any fortuitous sites were removed.

[00114] The optimized sequence was then sequenced. The resulting DNA was subcloned into *E. coli* and then sequenced to check for errors in the synthesis. After sequence confirmation, the DNA was subcloned into an expression vector (pHDKXL1 for the HA and HA0 genes, pALGAM for the M1 gene), and transformed into *Neurospora*. The HA and HA0 genes were targeted for integration at the *His-3* locus of *Neurospora*, and the M1 gene was targeted for integration at the *Am* gene of *Neurospora*.

Example 2

Expression of HA0 in *N. crassa*

[00115] An expression vector encoding the synthetic hemagglutinin 0 (HA0) gene with a fungal signal sequence attached to facilitate protein production was generated as discussed in Example 1.

[00116] Transformants were selected either for Histidine prototrophy (pHDKXL1/HA or HA0 transformants), or for Hygromycin B resistance (pALGAM/M1 transformants), using a host strain with a mutation at Histidine-3. After purification of the transformed strains by repeated streaking on selective medium, the transformants were screened for expression of the genes by ELISA. Secreted influenza antigens were detected in medium from shaker flasks. Flasks containing 25 ml of minimal Vogel salts plus 0.5% yeast extract in 125 ml Ehrlenmeyers were inoculated with approximately one million conidiospores/ml. Samples were either grown at 26 degrees C, shaking at 200 rpm, or in static culture at the same temperature. Samples taken after 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 days of growth. The ELISA was developed using antibodies against influenza proteins, purchased from BIODSIGN. Control antigens used as standards were purchased from Protein Sciences Corporation. ELISA-positive samples were rescreened by Western blots using standard methods and reagents.

[00117] Various growth conditions were tested. Specifically, shaking and static cultures were specifically tested. Typically, the yeast was cultured for 2 to 6 days and samples were harvested for analysis.

[00118] Samples were fractionated by SDS-PAGE and blotted to nitrocellulose for imaging. Hemagglutinin was detected using a goat polyclonal anti-HA (H1N1) antibody, followed by anti-goat Ig-alkaline phosphate conjugate. Binding was measured by colorimetric detection.

[00119] A western blot detection of expression of the synthetic HA0 in *N. crassa* in Figure 7. Figure 8 shows a Coomassie blue stained SDS-PAGE gel from two different HA0 clones. Figure 9 shows a western blot of static-culture expression of HA05. This data demonstrates the ability of the present system to recombinantly express influenza proteins in fungi.

Example 3

Multivalent expression of Influenza antigens in fungal Heterokaryons

[00120] Expression vectors are prepared according to the method discussed in Example 1. The DNA is introduced into *Neurospora* by electroporation and transformants are selected according to the methods of Example 2. A multi-valent mixture of influenza virus proteins is produced from the cultures since the expression vectors encode HA0, HA, and M1 matrix proteins.

Claims

1. Filamentous fungal heterokaryons wherein said heterokaryons produce a multivalent recombinant variant antigen, wherein the antigen comprises a complex of at least three different viral proteins, and wherein said heterokaryons are formed by fusing two or more fungal parent strains, wherein said heterokaryon requires the presence of all fungal parent nuclei for survival, said parent fungal strains each contain an exogenously supplied nucleic acid molecule that encodes antigens the at least three different viral proteins and where said fungal parent strains are homozygous for all heterokaryon compatibility alleles, and wherein the multivalent recombinant antigen is capable of immunoreacting with antibodies that bind to the at least three different viral proteins.
2. The heterokaryons of claim 1 wherein the multivalent antigens are secreted as soluble proteins into the culture media as a complex.
3. The heterokaryons of claim 1, wherein the multivalent antigens are secreted as soluble proteins into the culture and aggregate into the complex .
4. The heterokaryons of claim 2 wherein the multivalent antigens are retained within the cytoplasm of the fungal heterokaryons.
5. The heterokaryons of claim 1 wherein the viral protein is derived from a virus selected from the group consisting- influenza virus, human papilloma virus 16, human papilloma virus 18, human papilloma virus 31, herpes varicella virus, measles virus, Epstein Barr virus, respiratory syncytial virus, parainfluenza 3, herpes simplex type 1 virus, and herpes simplex type 2 virus.
6. The heterokaryons of claim 1 wherein the viral antigens are derived from influenza type A and influenza type B.
7. The heterokaryons of claim 6 wherein the antigens are comprised of variants of influenza type A and type B hemagglutinin and neuraminidase.
8. A method to produce a multivalent vaccine, said method comprising the step of culturing the heterokaryons of claim 1 under conditions in which the exogenously supplied nucleic acid molecules are expressed so as to form a multivalent vaccine.