Overlapping genes at the cheA locus of Escherichia coli

(bacterial chemotaxis/genetic complementation/protein synthesis)

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ABSTRACT The cheA locus of Escherichia coli, which is required for chemotactic behavior, encodes two polypeptide products designated p[cheA]L and p[cheA]s. The mode of synthesis of these two proteins was investigated by transferring various missense and nonsense mutations to a λ transducing phage and observing the mutant cheA products made after infection of ultraviolet-irradiated host cells. Missense mutations had no effect on either the size or the relative amounts of the two cheA polypeptides. Most nonsense mutations caused premature translational termination of both cheA products, indicating that p[cheA]_L and p[cheA]_S must be translated from the same coding sequence in the same reading frame. Two exceptional nonsense alleles at the promoter-proximal end of cheA made an intact p[cheA]s but no detectable p[cheA]L. These findings show that the *cheA* locus may contain two different sites for initiation of translation. The synthesis of both proteins can be effected by the same promoter, but it is not yet clear whether both are translated from identical mRNA molecules. Complementation studies of *cheA* mutants provided evidence for two functional activities, one associated with the amino terminus of $p[cheA]_{L}$ and the other with the common portions of $p[cheA]_{L}$ and $p[cheA]_{S}$. It is possible that each *cheA* product has a different function required for chemotaxis. The possible roles of these two products and the functional significance of bacterial genes with overlapping coding sequences are discussed.

Overlapping genes, which synthesize more than one polypeptide product from the same coding sequence, have been observed in a number of bacterial and animal viruses. Some overlapping gene pairs in bacteriophage-for example, A and A^{*} in ϕ X174 or C and Nu3 in λ —are transcribed from a common promoter and translated in the same reading frame, but from different initiation sites, yielding two related proteins (1, 2). The A₁ and coat proteins of phage Q β are also translated in the same phase but differ at their carboxyl ends due to an inefficient translation termination signal (3). Other overlapping genes in bacteriophages ϕ X174 and G4 are transcribed from independent promoters and then translated in different reading frames, yielding essentially unrelated products from the same coding sequence (4, 5). Animal viruses such as polyoma virus and simian virus 40 utilize messenger RNA splicing to synthesize several proteins, either in the same or different reading frames, from one coding sequence (6, 7).

Regardless of their mechanism of expression, overlapping genes are generally thought to have evolved as a means of increasing the coding capacity of viral genomes without a concomitant increase in overall genome size, which in most viruses is limited by the capacity of the virion. According to this view, the evolutionary constraints that accompany the use of the same nucleotide sequence by two different genes are offset by selective pressures to retain a particular genome size. If this were the only factor favoring the existence of overlapping genes, it seems unlikely they would have arisen in bacteria or higher cells, in which limitations on the amount of genetic material are much less severe than in viruses.

In this report we describe an apparent case of overlapping genes at the cheA locus in Escherichia coli. Mutants defective in cheA function are viable but nonchemotactic due to an inability to change directions as they swim (8, 9). Silverman, Simon, and coworkers (10, 11) constructed λ phages carrying the cheA region and showed that cheA complementation activity was associated with the presence of two polypeptides.[‡] In order to determine the nature of the relationship between these two cheA products, we examined the functional properties and the polypeptide products of a variety of cheA mutants. Our findings are consistent with a model in which both polypeptides are translated independently from the same coding sequence and in the same reading frame, but from different initiation sites. Moreover, each polypeptide may have a distinct function essential for chemotaxis. We suggest that overlapping genes may have evolved in bacteria for reasons that are totally unrelated to coding capacity considerations.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Media. Tryptone broth, plates, and swarm agar have been described (8). The sulfate-free medium used in labeling experiments contained 50 mM Tris-HCl, 25 mM Na₂HPO₄, 22 mM KH₂PO₄, 20 mM NH₄Cl, 3 mM MgCl₂, 0.1 mM CaCl₂, and 3 μ M FeCl₃ supplemented with thiamin-HCl at 1 μ g/ml, biotin at 1 μ g/ml, 1% glycerol, and 0.5% maltose. Limiting concentrations of sulfate (30 μ M NaSO₄) were added to support cell growth.

Strains. E. coli strain 159 was described by Hendrix (12) and was obtained along with its derivative 159 (λind^{-}) from C. Georgopoulos. Bacterial strains used for complementation and deletion analysis were all derived from RP495 [F⁻ rpsL thi thr(am) leu his met(am) eda srl:Tn10 (λ^{+})]. Various che mutations were introduced into this strain by transduction with P1 bacteriophage, using the eda locus as a selectable marker as described (8). RP495 derivatives were made recA⁻ for complementation tests by mating them with KL1699 [Hfr thi recA] (13), selecting for streptomycin-resistant sorbitol-positive recombinants, and subsequently testing individual colonies for sensitivity to 0.2 mM methyl methanesulfonate.

The transducing phage $\lambda fla52$ was obtained from M. Silverman. Its construction and genetic content have been described (see Fig. 1) (10). Deletion mutants of $\lambda fla52$ were obtained by selecting phage capable of forming plaques on tryptone plates containing 1 mM EDTA. Individual plaques were cycled twice on these selective plates and stocks were prepared by confluent lysis on RP3098, which carries a deletion

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[‡] Previous reports (10, 11) estimated the molecular weights of these two polypeptides to be 76,000 and 66,000. However, in our hands they appear closer to 78,000 and 69,000. These are the values we use in this report. The larger polypeptide is henceforth designated $p[cheA]_L$, and the smaller one $p[cheA]_S$.

of the *flaG* to *motA* region that prevents recombination between the bacterial chromosome and host sequences carried by λ *fla52*. The construction of λ *fla52* derivatives carrying *cheA* point mutations is described in the legend to Fig. 2. Such phage were also grown on RP3098.

Complementation and Mapping with λ fla52 Derivatives. The use of λ fla transducing phage to complement *che* mutants has been described (9, 11). Tryptone swarm plates containing λ fla phage were prepared prior to inoculation with the bacterial strains being tested. For recombinational assays, the phage were first treated with ultraviolet light ($\approx 2000 \text{ ergs/mm}^2$) and added to swarm agar at a final concentration of approximately 1×10^8 particles per ml. For complementation assays, the swarm plates contained nonirradiated phage at a concentration of about 1×10^9 per ml. All complementation tests were done with *recA* bacterial strains to preclude formation of wild-type recombinants. Bacterial testers for both sorts of tests were lysogenic for λ in order to prevent killing by the λ fla present in the swarm agar.

Radiolabeling of Polypeptides and Polyacrylamide Gel Electrophoresis. Cells were grown overnight with limiting sulfate in the salts medium described above. They were then diluted 1:4 with fresh medium, grown an additional 90 min, harvested by centrifugation, and resuspended at 2×10^9 cells per ml in 10 mM MgCl₂. Irradiation was performed 20 cm from a germicidal ultraviolet lamp for 5 min at a flux of 380 μ W/cm². Cells were then infected with phage at a multiplicity of infection of 10, incubated for 20 min at 35°C, then diluted to a concentration of 2×10^8 per ml with sulfate-free medium containing carrier-free H235SO4 (New England Nuclear) at 100 μ Ci/ml (1 Ci = 3.7 × 10¹⁰ becquerels). After a 90-min incubation at 35°C, the cells were centrifuged and resuspended in 1/10 vol of electrophoresis sample buffer [5% (vol/vol) 2mercaptoethanol, 3% sodium dodecyl sulfate, 62.5 mM Tris-HCl, pH 6.8] and placed in a boiling water bath for 1 min. Electrophoresis was carried out in discontinuous polyacrylamide gels as described by Laemmli (14).

RESULTS

Deletion Analysis of the cheA Region. In previous studies of E. coli chemotaxis, the cheA locus was defined on the basis of mapping and complementation tests with a large number of independent point mutations (8, 9). We chose a set of approximately 60 of these mutations in order to construct a finestructure map of the *cheA* region. Deleted derivatives of $\lambda fla52$. a plaque-forming transducing phage that carries the *cheA* locus and several neighboring E. coli genes (Fig. 1), were obtained by selecting for particles resistant to inactivation by chelating agent. Independent deletions were then tested for ability to yield wild-type recombinants when crossed to hosts with mutations in the cheA locus or in the adjacent motA, motB, cheW, tar, or cheX loci. These tests served to identify a number of deletion endpoints within the region and to orient the cheA map with respect to the adjacent markers. In Fig. 1 the cheA region has been subdivided into 10 deletion segments whose physical sizes have not yet been measured directly. We refer to this map in presenting subsequent results because it unambiguously establishes the relative positions of mutations within the cheA region.

The motA, motB, cheA, and cheW loci form a cotranscribed cluster (the "mocha" operon) whose promoter is located adjacent to motA (15). Several of the $\lambda fla52$ deletions mentioned above, for example $\lambda fla52\Delta 105$ (see Fig. 1), failed to recombine with mutant alleles in motA and motB but did recombine with all mutant sites in cheA and cheW. Nevertheless, $\lambda fla52\Delta 105$ was unable to complement cheA or cheW mutants, suggesting

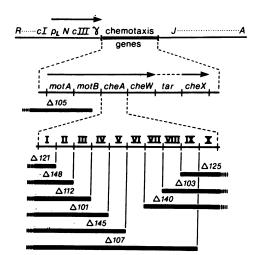


FIG. 1. Deletion map of the *cheA* locus. The structure of $\lambda fla52$ is shown in the top line. The bacterial sequences carried by this phage are located in the central, dispensable, segment of the λ chromosome and are shown in expanded form in the second line. Arrows indicate the orientation and extent of transcriptional units. The inserted *E. coli* material in $\lambda fla52$ is transcribed independently of the $\lambda p_{\rm L}$ promoter. The location of material missing in various deletion derivatives of $\lambda fla52$ is indicated by the horizontal bars. Deletion endpoints within the *cheA* locus are shown in the bottom line and serve to divide this region into 10 deletion segments (shown by roman numerals). The phage and bacterial sequences, genes, and deletion segments are not drawn to scale.

that the *cheA* locus may remain intact, but that a site essential for *cheA* complementation activity, presumably the "*mocha*" promoter, has been deleted.

Mechanism of Synthesis of p[cheA]L and p[cheA]s. The relationship between the two cheA products observed by Silverman and Simon (11) was investigated by using $\lambda fla52$ and its derivatives to program protein synthesis in host cells that had been irradiated with ultraviolet light to suppress synthesis from the host chromosome. Bacteria lysogenic for a noninducible strain of λ produce only a few proteins upon infection with λ fla52 because, due to the ultraviolet treatment and the presence of functional λ repressor in the cell, the only gene products made are those encoded by bacterial sequences carried on the transducing phage. As shown in Fig. 3, lane a, parental λ fla52 directs the synthesis of two cheA proteins with sizes of approximately 78,000 (p[cheA]_L) and 69,000 (p[cheA]_S) daltons detectable by electrophoresis on sodium dodecyl sulfate/ polyacrylamide gels. In order to prove that both of these polypeptides were encoded by the *cheA* locus, a series of λ fla52 derivatives carrying various types of cheA point mutations was constructed. Host mutations were recombined onto $\lambda fla52$ by stepwise integration and excision of a $\lambda fla52$ prophage mediated by homologous recombination between the bacterial sequences in the phage and host (Fig. 2). Examples of programming experiments using these mutant phage are shown in Fig. 3, lanes b-g. The data from all such experiments are summarized in Fig. 4, which also presents our model of how the cheA locus synthesizes two products from the same coding sequence. The results of these studies and our conclusions are discussed below.

(i) Both cheA products are read in phase from the same coding sequence. None of the 10 missense mutations tested in the λ fla52 programming system affected the appearance of either of the two *cheA* products on gels. However, *cheA* nonsense mutations (with the two exceptions discussed below) appear to affect the synthesis of both p[*cheA*]_L and p[*cheA*]_S: neither wild-type product was made, and, in several cases, two new

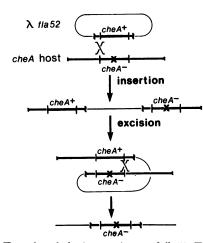


FIG. 2. Transfer of *cheA* mutations to $\lambda fla52$. Two reciprocal exchanges, one on each side of the mutant site, are required to recombine mutations from the host chromosome onto $\lambda fla52$. Exchanges were obtained in stepwise fashion by insertion and subsequent excision of a $\lambda fla52$ chromosome, as shown. The *cheA* host strain was first lysogenized with $\lambda fla52$ by selecting λ -immune chemotactic transductants after infection. Because $\lambda fla52$ lacks a functional attachment system, it can form stable lysogens only by utilizing the homology provided by its bacterial insert for integrative exchanges. Lysogens were induced at 42°C and individual plaques from the resultant lysate were tested for ability to complement and recombine with various *cheA* mutations. Stocks of phage that failed to recombine with the original host mutation, but that recombined with *cheA* mutations at other sites, were prepared on RP3098.

bands were observed (Fig. 3, arrows). We feel these represent nonsense fragments of $p[cheA]_L$ and $p[cheA]_S$ and conclude that a single nonsense codon is sufficient to terminate translation of both polypeptides. This could happen only if both were translated from the same DNA sequence in the same reading frame.

In general, the sizes of the nonsense fragments listed in Fig. 4 are consistent with the relative positions of the nonsense mutations; alleles at the promoter-proximal end of *cheA* make shorter fragments than those at the promoter-distal end. It is also interesting to note (see Fig. 4) that nonsense mutations that map in the middle of the *cheA* locus made no detectable protein

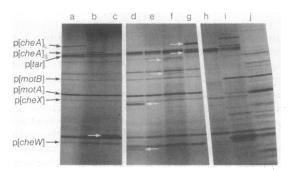


FIG. 3. Polypeptides made by different *cheA* mutations. Cells were irradiated with ultraviolet light, infected with phage, and incubated in radioactive medium. Cell extracts were subjected to electrophoresis in a 14% polyacrylamide gel containing sodium dodecyl sulfate. In lanes a-h, the bacterial host was 159(λ ind⁻); in lanes i and j, the nonlysogenic host 159 was used. The infecting phage were: lane a, λ fla52cheA⁺; lane b, λ fla52cheA169(am); lane c, λ fla52 *cheA116*(am); lane d, λ fla52cheA133(am); lane e, λ fla52cheA-107 (am); lane f, λ fla52cheA120; lane g, λ fla52cheA115(am); lanes h and i, λ fla52 Δ 105; lane j, wild-type λ . The six mutations are shown in their correct relative map order. Arrows indicate nonsense fragments of p[*cheA*]_L and p[*cheA*]_S. The products of bacterial genes carried by λ fla52 are labeled p[tar], p[motB], etc., according to the assignments of Silverman and Simon (11).

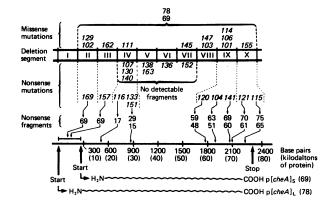


FIG. 4. (Upper) Polypeptides programmed by $\lambda fla52$ carrying cheA point mutations. The mutations studied are shown directly above (missense alleles) or below (nonsense alleles) the deletion segment in which they map. Missense mutations made two products indistinguishable from wild-type $p[cheA]_L$ and $p[cheA]_S$. Some nonsense mutations located in deletion segments IV-VII produced no detectable cheA polypeptides. Other nonsense mutations made one or two nonsense fragments, whose apparent molecular masses (kilodaltons) are shown. (Lower) Model of the cheA locus. The cheA coding sequence appears to contain two in-phase start sites for translation. The position of nonsense alleles within this sequence, based on the sizes of polypeptides they produce, is colinear with their relative order based on deletion mapping. The exceptional alleles am169 (segment II) and am157 (segment III) may fall between the two start sites.

fragments, whereas promoter-proximal and promoter-distal nonsense mutations did. Evidently fragments of intermediate length are particularly susceptible to proteolytic degradation. Note that the *cheA120* allele (Fig. 3, lane f) makes detectable fragments, but in reduced amounts. This mutation maps in the first deletion segment promoter-distal to mutations for which no fragments were observed (Fig. 4).

(ii) $p[cheA]_L$ and $p[cheA]_S$ are translated from different start sites. Those nonsense mutations that synthesized detectable polypeptide fragments appeared to shorten both cheA products by the same amount (Fig. 4). The size difference between the larger and smaller fragments of each pair varied between 9000 and 14,000 daltons, but we feel this variation was due to inaccuracies in our molecular weight estimates. We conclude that the entire size difference of the wild-type cheA proteins probably resides at their amino termini. This may account for the behavior of am116, which made only one detectable fragment, of 17,000 daltons (Fig. 3, lane c). Because this mutation maps in segment IV, near the promoter-proximal end of the cheA region (see Fig. 4), it seems likely that a second, smaller fragment may have been synthesized, but was not seen, perhaps because fragments of less than about 10,000 daltons are not resolved in our gel system.

The key to understanding the relationship between $p[cheA]_L$ and $p[cheA]_S$ is provided by two exceptional nonsense mutations, am169 and am157. These mutations map at the promoter-proximal end of the *cheA* region in segments II and III, respectively, and yet they both synthesize a 69,000-dalton product that appears to correspond to $p[cheA]_S$. In order to explain this result, we propose that the *cheA* locus contains two in-phase translation initiation sites separated by approximately 270 base pairs or enough to code for about 9000 daltons of protein (see Fig. 4). Translation of $p[cheA]_L$ begins at the promoter-proximal initiation site and proceeds to a termination site approximately 2400 nucleotides downstream. Translation of $p[cheA]_S$ begins at the promoter-distal initiation site and stops at the same termination signal. Thus the two proteins are identical except that $p[cheA]_L$ has approximately 90 additional amino acid residues at its amino terminus. According to this model, the exceptional nonsense mutations am 157 and am 169 are thought to lie between the two translation start sites. They probably make very short fragments of $p[cheA]_{\rm L}$ that we have been unable to detect, but they make a wild-type $p[cheA]_{\rm S}$ because they fall outside the $p[cheA]_{\rm S}$ coding sequence.

(iii) Both cheA polypeptides can utilize the same promoter for their expression. A programming experiment using λ fla52 Δ 105, which lacks the "mocha" promoter, is shown in Fig. 2, lane h. Although this phage most likely contains an intact cheA region, neither $p[cheA]_L$ nor $p[cheA]_S$ was produced, indicating that one or more promoters necessary for expression of these two polypeptides have been deleted in $\lambda fla52 \Delta 105$. As shown in Fig. 1, the λ promoter $p_{\rm L}$ is potentially able to control expression of the bacterial genes carried by $\lambda fla52$. Therefore, an attempt was made to utilize this promoter to achieve expression of the cheA sequences remaining in $\lambda fla52 \Delta 105$ by using this phage to program protein synthesis in a nonlysogenic host. The results of such an experiment are shown in Fig. 3, lane i. Under these conditions, $\lambda fla52\Delta 105$ programmed the synthesis of two polypeptides identical in size to the wild-type cheA products. These bands were not observed after infection with wild-type λ (Fig. 3, lane j). Note that the tar and cheX genes, which are not part of the same transcriptional unit as cheA (see Fig. 1), are expressed under both lysogenic and nonlysogenic conditions, whereas the motA and motB genes, which are deleted in $\lambda fla52\Delta 105$, are not expressed under either condition. Note also that the cheW gene, which is located "downstream" from cheA and in the same operon, had the same pattern of expression as did cheA. We conclude that both cheA polypeptides can be expressed from the same promotor (i.e., $\lambda p_{\rm L}$) and that they probably utilize a common promoter under normal conditions as well.

Complementation Analysis of *cheA* **Mutants.** In previous studies the *cheA* locus was assumed to be a single gene even though apparent "intragenic complementation" among *cheA* mutants had been observed. We reinvestigated this phenomenon by using $\lambda fla52$ derivatives carrying mutant *cheA* alleles to complement various *cheA* host mutants. Examples are shown in Fig. 5, and the results of this work are summarized in Fig. 6. Three complementation classes of *cheA* mutants were observed: all mutants in class 1 complemented all mutants in class 2 and vice versa; mutants in class 3 failed to complement any *cheA* mutants.

The fact that *cheA* mutants could be divided into discrete complementation types provides evidence for two different *cheA* functions. It seems unlikely that these patterns are due to "intragenic complementation" in its usual form because this

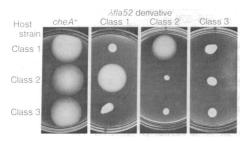


FIG. 5. Complementation among *cheA* alleles. Swarm plates containing $\lambda fla52cheA$ derivatives were inoculated with individual colonies of *cheA* recA bacterial strains and incubated at 35°C for approximately 20 hr. Examples of the three *cheA* complementation patterns found are shown. The following alleles were used in this example. Bacterial strains: class 1, *cheA142*; class 2, *cheA155*; class 3, *cheA151*. $\lambda fla52$ derivatives: class 1, *cheA167*; class 2, *cheA114*; class 3, *cheA107*.

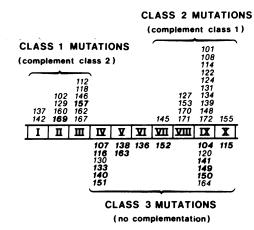


FIG. 6. Summary of *cheA* complementation behavior. Pairwise complementation tests, performed as shown in Fig. 5, were done for all the *cheA* mutations listed. Class 1 mutations map exclusively in deletion segments I–III and complement class 2 mutations in segments VII–X. The criterion for positive complementation was formation of a swarm with a diameter at least 1.5 times that of nonchemotactic control swarms. Class 3 mutations failed to show positive complementation with any *cheA* alleles. Mutations that are suppressed by amber suppressors are shown in bold face.

typically involves a complex pattern of interactions among a limited subset of mutations within a gene. Here the cheA complementation pattern seems to reflect two discrete functional entities and the clustering of mutant classes reinforces this impression (see Fig. 6). Class 1 mutations probably affect only the structure of the larger cheA polypeptide. This is clearly the case for amber mutations am157 and am169, which synthesize p[cheA]s intact and therefore must map upstream from the second translation start site (see Fig. 4). All other class 1 mutations map in the same deletion segment as am157 or in segments even more promoter proximal. Class 2 mutations map in segments of the cheA coding sequence common to both proteins and are predominately missense mutations. The class 3 mutations, on the other hand, which fail to exhibit complementation with any cheA mutants, are primarily nonsense mutations that map in the common coding sequences and have profound effects on the structures of both polypeptides.

DISCUSSION

Synthesis of p[cheA]L and p[cheA]s. Evidence has been presented that the two polypeptide products of the cheA locus in E. coli are translated from the same DNA sequence in the same reading frame but from different initiation sites. Our model predicts that these two polypeptides should be identical in primary structure, with the exception of approximately 90 additional amino acid residues at the amino terminus of the larger polypeptide. This is supported by previously published proteolytic digestion experiments, which indicated that $p[cheA]_{I}$ and $p[cheA]_{S}$ have similar primary structures (16). We believe that posttranslational processing is in no way involved in this phenomenon, primarily because we found that promoter-proximal nonsense mutations made an intact p[cheA]s but no p[cheA]L. Moreover, because radioactive label cannot be chased from one cheA product to the other (M. Silverman, personal communication), there is no evidence for a precursor-product relationship between the two.

A single promoter is sufficient for expression of both polypeptides; however, it is not clear whether both are made from the same mRNA molecules. In $\phi X174$, for example, the A and A* proteins may be translated from newly synthesized and partially degraded mRNA, respectively (17). It is possible that some mRNA processing event is involved in *cheA* expression. If mRNA processing is not involved and both *cheA* polypeptides are translated from the same mRNA species, one might expect that their relative proportions would be controlled by the relative accessibility of the two translation initiation sites to ribosomes. In this way, nonsense mutations that map between the two starts might be expected to enhance the accessibility of the downstream initiator and thus increase the amount of $p[cheA]_S$ produced. This hypothesis can be tested by quantitating the amount of $p[cheA]_S$ made by various *cheA* alleles.

Functional Significance of $p[cheA]_L$ and $p[cheA]_S$. The complementation behavior of *cheA* mutants provides evidence that this locus may encode two distinct functions involved in chemotaxis. The relationship between these two functions and the two *cheA* polypeptides is not yet clear, although the location of complementing mutations within the *cheA* coding sequence does indicate which portions of the sequence are functionally important. Class 1 mutations affect one of the proposed functions and all appear to map in the coding sequence unique to $p[cheA]_L$. Clearly, one of the *cheA* functions resides in the amino-terminal portion of this polypeptide. Class 2 mutations affect the other proposed function and are all missense mutations mapping in coding sequences common to both *cheA* products. Thus, this second function could reside in $p[cheA]_S$, in the carboxy-terminal portion of $p[cheA]_L$, or in both.

At least under some conditions, $p[cheA]_S$ is clearly capable of performing this second *cheA* function, because *cheA* nonsense mutants that made no $p[cheA]_L$ but an intact $p[cheA]_S$ were able to complement class 2 *cheA* mutants. This result could be ascribed to a type of fragment complementation similar to that seen with β -galactosidase mutants of *E. colt* (18). Note, however, that the polypeptides involved in *cheA* complementation seem to be the same size as the wild-type *cheA* products, unlike the mutant fragments involved in β -galactosidase complementation.

Because p[cheA]s and the carboxy-terminal portion of p[cheA]L have identical primary structures, only one of these proteins may be needed to perform the second cheA function. If both of the proposed *cheA* functions can be performed by $p[cheA]_L$, then $p[cheA]_S$ may not be needed for chemotaxis under normal conditions. However, the synthesis of two cheA products cannot be explained as an artifact of the ultraviolet programming system we describe here. Both polypeptides have also been observed by using plasmid templates in minicells (16) and two-dimensional gel analyses of total cell protein from wild-type bacteria (unpublished data). In all cases, p[cheA]L and p[cheA]s are made in roughly equal amounts, so neither can be considered a minor component. Furthermore, Salmonella typhimurium has a locus analogous to cheA that also encodes two polypeptides (19). It seems to us unlikely that both of these species would persist in synthesizing two *cheA* products if p[cheA]s were really superfluous.

If $p[cheA]_{s}$ is necessary for chemotaxis, it must perform some function not provided by $p[cheA]_{L}$. Presumably this is one of the functions defined by complementation between *cheA* mutants. Thus, there could be a direct correspondence between the two products and the two functions encoded by *cheA*. While class 1 mutations affect only $p[cheA]_{L}$, class 2 mutations may affect only the function of $p[cheA]_{L}$. This implies that only the amino-terminal portion of $p[cheA]_{L}$ is absolutely critical to its function, because most missense mutations in the coding sequence common to both polypeptides affect only one of the *cheA* functions. However, the carboxy terminus of $p[cheA]_{L}$ is not completely dispensable. Nonsense mutations that produce stable, nearly full-sized fragments of $p[cheA]_L$, lacking as few as 30 or so amino acids at the carboxy terminus, have no complementation activity with other *cheA* mutations.

Assuming that both *cheA* products play a role in chemotaxis, there are several possible reasons why they may be encoded in such an unusual fashion. The shared structural domains of $p[cheA]_{L}$ and $p[cheA]_{S}$ may enable them to form complexes by binding to each other. Shaw and Murialdo have suggested just such a role for the C and Nu3 proteins of phage λ , which are encoded in a manner similar to $p[cheA]_L$ and $p[cheA]_S(2)$. Another possibility is that the common portions enable both polypeptides to carry out a similar function, but the amino terminus of p[cheA]L enables it to interact with a different class of proteins or other cell components. For example, in ultraviolet programming experiments, p[cheA]s is found exclusively in the cytoplasmic fraction of the cell, whereas a significant portion of p[cheA]L appears associated with the cytoplasmic membrane (20). The amino end of $p[cheA]_L$ may function as a signal sequence that directs this polypeptide to the cell membrane but, unlike other signal sequences, is not removed by proteolytic cleavage. We hope that studies of the two cheA gene products will lead to a more general understanding of the phenomenon of overlapping genes.

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