A systematic review of the intergenerational aspects and the diverse genetic profiles of Huntington’s disease

L.A. Agostinho¹,², S.R. dos Santos¹, R.M.P. Alvarenga³ and C.L.A. Paiva¹,²

¹Departamento de Genética e Biologia Molecular, Instituto Biomédico, Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brasil
²Programa de Pós-Graduação em Neurologia, Universidade Federal do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brasil

Corresponding author: C.L.A. Paiva
E-mail: clapaival@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT. Huntington’s disease (HD) is a rare progressive and fatal neurogenetic degenerative disease, characterized by movement and personality disorders and by progressive dementia. Its prevalence varies by ethnic origin and different genetic profiles predisposing individuals to HD in each population. The prevalence of HD is 5-10 per 100,000 individuals in Caucasian populations of North America and Western Europe. It is an autosomal dominant disease associated with the expansion of CAG-type repetitive DNA sequences in the HTT gene. This gene, located on the short arm of chromosome 4, encodes the protein huntingtin. In this study, we reviewed 17 articles about HD that report data from 2400 affected individuals from various countries around the world, including Venezuela, China, Croatia, Turkey, Germany, Italy, Brazil, Spain, Taiwan, India, the Netherlands, Russia, and the USA, with a focus on genetic profiles and intergenerational expansions or contractions of expanded alleles responsible for causing HD. We discuss the genetic characteristics of HD in different
populations and any atypical cases reported in these studies.

**Key words:** Huntington's disease; CAG repeats; Intergenerational aspects

**INTRODUCTION**

Huntington’s disease (HD) is a rare progressive and fatal neurodegenerative disease, characterized by a lack of motor coordination of voluntary and involuntary muscles, known as choreic movement, personality disorders, and progressive dementia (Chandler et al., 1960). The genetic profiles of HD and the intergenerational aspects of expanded allele transmission vary across different regions of the world. The prevalence of HD varies with ethnic origin, with Caucasian populations of North America and Western Europe having 5-10 subjects affected by HD per 100,000 people (Lima et al., 2000; Hormozian et al., 2004; Gil and Rego, 2008). Together with literature reports of atypical cases of HD, the above-mentioned variations indicate that there is a need for a systematic review of the HD literature. To this end, this review aggregates information about the genetic profiles of HD in different populations and atypical cases.

HD is caused by a mutation triggered by variations in the number of CAG repeats in unstable DNA regions of the HTT gene, which is located on the short arm of chromosome 4 (4p16.3). The mutable region is located in the first exon of HTT and encodes a polyglutamine N-terminal tail of the encoded protein, huntingtin (Wexler et al., 2004). Alleles that bear 27 or fewer copies of the CAG repeat result in a normal phenotype. Intermediary alleles, which have 27-35 CAG repeats, are unstable and can be transmitted as an expanded allele to offspring; nevertheless, carriers of the intermediary allele type also have a normal phenotype. However, intermediary alleles get expanded mainly during male gametogenesis, which undergoes a greater number of cycles of division and duplication of genetic material than oogenesis. Hence, there is a greater probability of an error occurring in DNA replication during spermato genesis, which increases the risk of mutated alleles being inherited from the father (Wheeler et al., 2007).

Alleles with 36-39 CAG units have reduced penetrance and generate both a normal phenotype as well as some rare cases of HD. Alleles with >39 CAG copies show complete penetrance and inevitably cause, at some stage of life, the HD phenotype.

Classical studies examining the geographical distribution of HD, along with several epidemiological studies, suggest that the alleles responsible for causing HD originated from a single mutation in a common ancestor from Western Europe, and this mutation then spread to other regions of the world as a result of migration. Different haplotypes that include the CCG repeat region, which is adjacent to the CAG region, were identified in different populations and confirm the existence of mutations that had independent and distinct origins from that of a single common HD ancestor (Garcia-Planells et al., 2005).

In patients with HD, the onset of clinical symptoms usually starts between the ages of 35-55, although the disease can manifest after the age of 80, or much earlier, in teenagers or children, because of the phenomenon of anticipation, which occurs in 20% of cases of HD. Approximately 10% of patients with HD have onset of clinical manifestations before the age of 20, and 5% before the age of 14. If the expanded allele transmitted to the offspring is of maternal origin, an expansion of >20 units is very rare (Andrew et al., 1993; Nahhas et al., 2005).
The incidence of genetically confirmed cases of HD in individuals who have no family history of HD and who would therefore be the first confirmed case in the family is greater than 8%. These cases are caused by new, sporadic expansions of intermediary alleles. Such unstable alleles favor the emergence of mutated alleles in offspring, which leads to HD (Nahhas et al., 2005).

From the onset of initial symptoms, HD will progress to death within 15-20 years (Ho et al., 2001). Variability in clinical signs and symptoms of the disease often requires a precise molecular investigation at the genetic level to enable final diagnosis (Stevanin et al., 2003).

HD is an autosomal dominant genetic disease. Each child of an affected parent has a 50% chance of developing the disease; therefore, only one allele inherited from the mother, or from the father, is able to cause the disease in the offspring. However, although very rare, when in the homozygous state, the 2 expanded alleles result in increased physical deterioration of HD-affected individuals when compared to affected individuals bearing only one expanded allele. Studies further suggest that homozygosity in the expanded alleles does not lead to an earlier onset of the disease, but changes the severity of HD symptoms and their progression (Squitieri et al., 1994).

MATERIAL AND METHODS

A search was conducted on the Internet using databases related to the health sciences, such as Pubmed/Medline, Scielo, and Bireme. Articles were selected from these 3 databases. The key words used were “Huntington’s disease” and “CAG repeats”. Advanced search functions were used to restrict the search to articles published from 2000-2012.

RESULTS

We identified 616 scientific articles published from 2000-2012, and 41 of them were selected according to the chosen theme. Of the 41 articles, 17 were chosen because they reported detailed molecular investigations of HD, intergenerational analysis of expanded alleles in different regions of the world, and atypical cases of the disease (Table 1). The 2381 individuals investigated who were described in these papers are the subject of discussion in this systematic review. Of the selected articles, 8 reported anticipation in HD-affected patients, and 5 articles discussed cases of juvenile HD primarily caused by paternal inheritance.

Studies conducted in Venezuela on 112 individuals with HD confirmed the high instability of alleles transmitted through the father, as indicated by the higher frequency of juvenile HD with paternal inheritance (Wheeler et al., 2007). However, 2 studies of juvenile HD detected no significant difference in the frequency of HD between the paternal and maternal routes of inheritance (Nahhas et al., 2005).

In 2005, a molecular investigation was conducted on 2 individuals who had inherited HD with anticipation from the mother. She carried an allele with 70 CAG repeats, and had transmitted an allele containing 130 CAG copies (Nahhas et al., 2005).

Few articles have reported data on Brazilian HD patients. These articles reported investigations of CAG repeats-containing alleles at the molecular level (Lima et al., 2000; Raskin et al., 2000; Agostinho et al., 2012). One of these papers correlated genetic character-
Table 1. Selected articles of this review about diverse genetic profiles and intergenerational transmission of Huntington’s disease (HD) in different regions of word.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authors and years</th>
<th>Experimental mode</th>
<th>Study design</th>
<th>Number of individuals investigated</th>
<th>Methods</th>
<th>Objective</th>
<th>Place of study</th>
<th>Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Andresen et al., 2007)</td>
<td>HD-affected children</td>
<td>Experimental</td>
<td>443</td>
<td>Molecular analysis of polymorphic CAG region</td>
<td>Relate polymorphic CAG and CCG regions to age at onset of HD</td>
<td>Venezuela</td>
<td>Size of CAG repeats explain the variation in HD age of onset</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Wheeler et al., 2007)</td>
<td>Sperm and blood samples of individuals affected</td>
<td>Experimental</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>Molecular analysis of polymorphic CAG region</td>
<td>Investigate factors associated with intergenerational instability in paternal transmission</td>
<td>Venezuela</td>
<td>Intergenerational instability in paternal transmission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Akbas and Erginel-Unaltuna, 2003)</td>
<td>Adult individuals of both genders</td>
<td>Experimental (case control study)</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>Molecular analysis of polymorphic CAG region</td>
<td>Investigate CAG repeats of the HTT gene</td>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>Juvenile-onset HD occurs more frequently in paternal transmissions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Hečimović et al., 2002)</td>
<td>HD-affected individuals</td>
<td>Experimental</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Molecular analysis of 3 polymorphic regions related to HD</td>
<td>Investigate CAG and CCG regions of the HTT gene</td>
<td>Croatia</td>
<td>Genetic origin of the HTT gene in Croatia comes from Western Europe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Tang et al., 2006)</td>
<td>One family with HD history</td>
<td>Experimental (case control study)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Molecular analysis of polymorphic CAG region of HD family</td>
<td>Investigate the intergenerational transmission of the HTT gene</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>Expanded allele is more frequent in paternal transmission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Metzger et al., 2006)</td>
<td>HD-affected individuals</td>
<td>Experimental</td>
<td>980</td>
<td>Molecular analysis of polymorphic CAG and CCG regions</td>
<td>Relate polymorphic CAG and CCG regions to age at onset of HD</td>
<td>Germany, Italy, and other countries of Europe</td>
<td>Size of CAG and CCG repeats explain the variation in HD age of onset</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Wang et al., 2004)</td>
<td>HD-affected individuals</td>
<td>Experimental (case control study)</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>Molecular analysis of polymorphic CAG and CCG regions</td>
<td>Relate polymorphic CAG and CCG regions to age at onset of HD</td>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>Size of CAG repeats explain the variation in HD age of onset</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Garcia-Planells et al., 2005)</td>
<td>HD-affected individuals</td>
<td>Experimental</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>Molecular analysis of 6 polymorphic regions related to HD</td>
<td>Investigate the origin of the HTT gene in Spain</td>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>Size of CAG repeats is related to HD age of onset and the origin of the HTT gene of Spanish population comes from Western Europe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Andrich et al., 2008)</td>
<td>One HD-affected individual</td>
<td>Experimental (case control study)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Molecular analysis of polymorphic CAG region</td>
<td>Relate HD clinical symptoms in an individual with HD intermediary allele</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Supposes HD intermediary allele may cause HD phenotype</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Kartsaki et al., 2006)</td>
<td>Individuals with HD family history</td>
<td>Experimental</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Molecular analysis of polymorphic CAG region</td>
<td>Intergenerational study of HD families</td>
<td>Crete</td>
<td>Genetic profile of Crete population is 36-42 CAG repeats, the onset juvenile HD cases were caused by maternal and paternal transmission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Pramanik et al., 2000)</td>
<td>HD-affected individuals</td>
<td>Experimental</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Molecular analysis of polymorphic CAG and CCG regions</td>
<td>Investigate the origin of the HTT gene and genetic profile of India population</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>CCG allele with four repeats was found in Indian population and genetic profile is 41-56 CAG repeats</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Continued on next page
<table>
<thead>
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<th>Authors and years</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Nahhas et al., 2005)</td>
<td>HD-affected individuais</td>
<td>Experimental (case control study)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Molecular analysis of polymorphic CAG region of the HD gene</td>
<td>Investigate maternal transmission of the HD gene</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Very large expansions can also occur through the maternal lineage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Siesling et al., 2000)</td>
<td>HD-affected individuais</td>
<td>Experimental (case control study)</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>Molecular analysis of polymorphic CAG region</td>
<td>Investigate clinical diagnostic mistakes of HD</td>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>There are mistakes in clinical diagnosis of HD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Kartuz et al., 2004)</td>
<td>HD-affected individuais</td>
<td>Experimental</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>Molecular analysis of polymorphic CAG and CCG regions</td>
<td>Intergenerational study of HD families</td>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>High instability of the HD gene in paternal transmission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Rawkin et al., 2000)</td>
<td>HD-affected individuais</td>
<td>Experimental (case control study)</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>Molecular analysis of polymorphic CAG region</td>
<td>Investigate CAG repeats of the HTT gene</td>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>Expanded allele is more frequent in paternal transmission and Brazilian genetic profile is 39-88 CAG repeats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Lima et al., 2000)</td>
<td>HD-affected individuais</td>
<td>Experimental (case control study)</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Molecular analysis of polymorphic CAG region</td>
<td>Relate polymorphic CAG regions to age at onset of HD</td>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>Brazilian genetic profile is 43-51 CAG repeats and CAG size variation has no difference between paternal and maternal transmission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Agostinho et al., 2012)</td>
<td>HD-affected individuais</td>
<td>Experimental</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>Molecular analysis of polymorphic CAG and CCG regions</td>
<td>Investigate CAG and CCG repeats of the HTT gene</td>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>CAG expansion varied from 12 to 58 repeats in the 122 alleles tested and 86.9% of these alleles had 7 CCG repeats</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Huntington’s disease: a systematic review

HD is a disease of adults. Juvenile cases are rare (only approximately 10% of total cases), and the majority of the affected individuals inherit expanded alleles from their fathers.
However, one study showed no significant difference in the number of cases of juvenile HD between paternally or maternally inherited HD (Lima et al., 2000). The CAG repeat in a maternal allele usually does not expand to more than 20 copies (Nahhas et al., 2005; Kenney et al., 2007); however, a report in 2005 showed that an affected mother had transmitted a double-size allele to her daughter (Nahhas et al., 2005).

Two case reports in the literature have identified individuals who carried intermediary alleles and who were clinically diagnosed as being affected by HD. In one article, an individual who had an allele with 29 CAG repeats was diagnosed with HD by post-mortem autopsy (Andresen et al., 2007). Another article has reported that an individual who presented cortical atrophy, disorder of movement, and cognitive impairment carried an allele with only 34 copies of the CAG repeat (Andrich et al., 2008). However, neither study mentions any attempts by investigators to diagnose a Huntington-like disease.

Among the studies on HD, where differential diagnosis for other similar diseases was performed, the smallest number of CAG units associated with the HD phenotype was 37, identified in a patient of European descent. The absence of the clinical symptoms of HD has not yet been documented in any individual carrying an allele containing >39 CAG repeats.

Alleles with 7 CCG units were observed in 95% of cases. This finding might mean that those alleles had a genetic origin in Western Europe, the presumed location of a founder effect for HD. On the other hand, alleles containing 10 CCG units may have been the result of independent mutations that recently originated from other geographical regions. Usually these CCG alleles possess 7 or 10 repeats, with the exception of a case, reported by Pramanik et al. (2000), in which 4 CCG units were identified.

In conclusion, a molecular test that determines the length of a CAG repeat is essential because it can provide a definite diagnosis of HD. It is important to note that only about 40% of the carriers of the reduced penetrance allele may show the HD phenotype. Furthermore, during clinical investigation, the following procedures must be taken into account: differential diagnosis for atypical cases must be performed, along with paternity tests to confirm the origin of the disease alleles, mainly for new cases in the family.

In addition, it is difficult to define the smallest size of expanded CAG repeats responsible for the HD phenotype because there are many differences among individuals and populations. A definite clinical diagnosis often requires caution because the clinical presentation of signs and symptoms of HD is variable.

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Huntington’s disease: a systematic review


