

# Maturation-associated changes in the non-specific immune response against *Flavobacterium psychrophilum* in Ayu *Plecoglossus altivelis*

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1 **Maturation-associated changes in the non-specific immune response against**  
2 ***Flavobacterium psychrophilum* in Ayu *Plecoglossus altivelis***

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19 **ABSTRACT**

20 In this study, we investigated maturation-associated changes in non-specific  
21 immune responses of ayu against *Flavobacterium psychrophilum*. The gonadosomatic  
22 index was minimum on 16 June, began to increase on 17 July, and reached the maximum  
23 value during August. The highest phagocytic rate (16.3%) was observed on 16 June,  
24 which decreased significantly to 5.6% on 26 August. The number of viable bacteria after  
25 the serum treatment was highest during August, suggesting that bactericidal activity of  
26 the serum decreased along with the sexual maturation. Gene expression levels of  
27 interleukin-8, and tumor necrosis factor- $\alpha$  in the spleen did not change significantly  
28 during this period, whereas the level of suppressor of cytokine signaling (SOCS)3 was  
29 significantly higher on 26 August than that on 16 July ( $p < 0.05$ ). These results suggest  
30 that phagocytic activity of trunk kidney leukocytes and serum bactericidal activity against  
31 *F. psychrophilum* decreased with sexual maturation, and that SOCS3 may be related to  
32 the decrease in non-specific immune activity in ayu.

33

34 **Keywords:** *Plecoglossus altivelis*, *Flavobacterium psychrophilum*, sexual maturation,  
35 non-specific immunity, suppression of cytokine signaling 3

36

37 **1. Introduction**

38 Ayu *Plecoglossus altivelis* is the most economically important fish species in  
39 Japanese freshwater fisheries as a culinary delicacy and a popular game fish. Ayu have  
40 been cultured since 1904, and these fish are used for food and released into rivers as game  
41 fish targets. Production output amounts to one-third of the total value of the freshwater  
42 fishery and aquaculture production in Japan ([http://www.e-](http://www.e-stat.go.jp/SG1/estat/Xlsdl.do?sinfid=000023620693)  
43 [stat.go.jp/SG1/estat/Xlsdl.do?sinfid=000023620693](http://www.e-stat.go.jp/SG1/estat/Xlsdl.do?sinfid=000023620693), accessed 23 June 2017). However,  
44 bacterial diseases, such as bacterial cold water disease caused by *Flavobacterium*  
45 *psychrophilum* [1], edwardsiellosis caused by *Edwardsiella ictaluri* [2], and bacterial  
46 hemorrhagic ascites caused by *Pseudomonas plecoglossicida* [3] cause significant losses  
47 of fish.

48 Ayu has an approximate 1-year life span. Ayu larvae hatch in freshwater, migrate  
49 to the sea, and the juveniles return to freshwater habitats. Mature fish spawn during  
50 autumn in the lower reaches of a freshwater system and immediately die after spawning.  
51 The prevalence of *F. psychrophilum* has been reported to increase to > 90% between  
52 October and November [4]. *E. ictaluri* is most frequently isolated from river ayu in  
53 September and October [5]. Physiological changes associated with sexual maturation  
54 and/or ageing are considered the reason for the higher susceptibility of ayu to pathogens

55 during summer and autumn.

56 Leukocyte immune responses are suppressed in salmonids during the spawning  
57 season, along with elevated cortisol and testosterone levels. Sexually mature fish have  
58 high plasma cortisol titers and generate relatively fewer antibody-producing cells of  
59 peripheral blood leukocytes in chinook salmon *Oncorhynchus tshawytscha* [6] and  
60 rainbow trout *O. mykiss* [7]. Administering testosterone and cortisol reduces the plaque  
61 forming responses in primary cultured chinook salmon leukocytes [8]. In addition, steroid  
62 hormones, such as cortisol, testosterone, estradiol-17 $\beta$ , and 11-ketotestosterone reduce  
63 the number of IgM-secreting cells and specific antibody production *in vitro* [9]. The *in*  
64 *vitro* immunosuppressive effect of cortisol is also observed in common carp *Cyprinus*  
65 *carpio* [10]. However, the association between these immune responses and maturation  
66 remains unknown in the annual fish species ayu.

67 The non-specific innate immune system is thought to be more important than  
68 acquired immunity in ayu because it is a short living fish. Neutrophils account for 60–  
69 80% of **trunk** kidney leukocytes in ayu and display unusually high respiratory burst  
70 activities compared with those of other fish species [11,12]. In contrast, the percentage of  
71 B cells is only 4% of peripheral blood leukocytes [13], and only a few IgM- and IgT-  
72 mRNA-positive cells are detectable in the **trunk** kidney of ayu [14]. We hypothesized that

73 the suppressed non-specific immune responses are the cause for the high infection rate in  
74 sexually mature ayu. Therefore, we investigated the role of maturation-associated  
75 changes in the non-specific immune response of ayu against *F. psychrophilum* in this  
76 study.

77

## 78 **2. Materials and methods**

### 79 *2.1 Bacteria propagation*

80 *F. psychrophilum* strain GMA0330 isolated from wild diseased ayu in Gunma  
81 Prefecture [15] was used for this study. The bacteria were cultured on modified cytophaga  
82 (MCY) agar or broth at 15°C for 48 h [16]. The bacterial cultures were serially diluted  
83 and incubated on MCY agar at 15°C to count colony forming units (CFU).

84

### 85 *2.2 Fish rearing conditions*

86 A domesticated stock of ayu *P. altivelis*, that had been maintained by intrastock  
87 breeding for 45 and 46 generations at the Gunma Prefectural Fisheries Experimental  
88 Station (mean body weight = 16.6 g on 16 July 2015), was used in this study. Fish were  
89 reared in 5 or 50-ton tanks with flow-through water conditions under natural day length  
90 and water temperature of 15°C–16°C. Fish were fed every day with standard fish pellets

91 at the rate of 3% of fish body weight. Apparently healthy ayu were used in the experiments  
92 shown in below.

93

### 94 2.3 Sampling procedure

95 Ayu (45 generations) were collected on 16 June, 1, 17 and 29 July, and 5, 12, 19,  
96 and 26 August 2015. Five fish were collected randomly while their sex could not be  
97 distinguished (16 June and 17July). Three males and three females were collected  
98 randomly after their sex could be distinguished (after 17 July). The fish were weighed  
99 and anesthetized in FA 100 (final concentration = 20 ppm, DS Pharma Animal Health,  
100 Osaka, Japan). The gonads were removed and weighed to calculate the gonadosomatic  
101 index (GSI). GSI (%) was expressed as follows: [gonad weight/fish body weight] × 100.  
102 Blood was collected from each fish by venipuncture with a syringe. After coagulation,  
103 the blood samples were centrifuged at 3,000 rpm for 10 min, and the serum was collected  
104 and stored at -80°C until use. The trunk kidney was dissected from each fish and smashed  
105 on a 79 µm nylon mesh in RPMI 1640 (Nissui, Tokyo, Japan). The cell suspensions were  
106 centrifuged at 400 × g for 5 min and resuspended in the medium. The cell suspensions  
107 were immediately subjected to the phagocytic assay described below. The spleen was  
108 collected from each fish and stored in RNA later (Thermo Fisher Scientific, Waltham,

109 MA, USA) at  $-80^{\circ}\text{C}$  until use.

110 In addition, ayu (46 generations) were collected on 16 June ( $n = 3$ , sex was  
111 unidentified) and 16 September 2016 ( $n = 8$ , 4 females and 4 males), and GSI was  
112 calculated, as described above. The liver was collected in RNA later and stored at  $-80^{\circ}\text{C}$   
113 until use.

114

#### 115 2.4 Phagocytosis assay

116 Phagocytosis assay was performed as previously described in Wiklund and  
117 Dalsgaard (2003) [17]. Briefly, *F. psychrophilum* (1 mg wet weight) collected from MCY  
118 agar was added to  $3.0 \times 10^5$  trunk kidney cells and incubated at  $18^{\circ}\text{C}$  for 30 min. The  
119 mixture was spread on a glass slide, and the slide was stained using May-Grunwald's  
120 stain solution (Nacalai tesque, Kyoto, Japan) and Giemsa's stain solution (Nacalai tesque,  
121 Kyoto, Japan), according to the manufacturer's instructions. More than 1,000 leukocytes  
122 were observed at random under the microscope and the phagocytic rate was expressed as  
123 follows: phagocytic rate (%) = [number of leukocytes with phagocytized bacteria/number  
124 of observed leukocytes]  $\times 100$ .

125

#### 126 2.5 Colorimetric assay for serum bacteriolytic activity



127           A colorimetric assay was used to determine serum bacteriolytic activity as  
128 described previously by Ito et al. [18]. Lyophilized *Micrococcus luteus* cells ATCC No.  
129 4698 (Sigma-Aldrich, St. Louis, MO, USA) were stained with Remazol Brilliant Blue R  
130 solution and suspended in phosphate buffer (50 mM KH<sub>2</sub>PO<sub>4</sub>-NaOH, pH 7.0). Ayu serum  
131 was diluted 1:10 and inactivated by heating at 44°C in a water bath for 20 min. The  
132 inactivated serum was added to the stained *M. luteus* and incubated at 40°C for 4 h. After  
133 adding the stop solution (1 M NaOH), the supernatant was separated and collected by  
134 centrifugation. Absorbance (OD, 600 nm) was measured with the MPR-A4i microplate  
135 reader (TOSOH, Tokyo, Japan).

136

#### 137 *2.6 Serum bactericidal activity*

138           *F. psychrophilum* prepared as described above was added to serum (without  
139 inactivation), mixed thoroughly, and incubated at 15°C for 6 h. The serum-treated bacteria  
140 were collected by centrifugation, and the number of CFUs of bacteria was determined on  
141 an MCY agar plate as described above.

142

#### 143 *2.7 Expression levels of immune related genes in the spleen and liver*

144 Total RNA was extracted from the spleen and liver using ISOGEN (Nippon  
145 Gene, Tokyo, Japan), following the manufacturer's instructions. First-strand cDNA was  
146 synthesized with 2 µg of total RNA from each fish using MMLV reverse transcriptase  
147 (Thermo Fisher Scientific), following the manufacturer's instructions. CD83 (GenBank  
148 Accession Number, LC310721), granulocyte colony-stimulating factor (GCSF)  
149 (LC310723), interleukin (IL)-8 (KJ652902), suppressor of cytokine signaling (SOCS) 1  
150 (LC310869), SOCS3 (LC218425), and tumor necrosis factor- $\alpha$  (TNF- $\alpha$ ) (DD019003)  
151 gene expression levels in the spleen were determined by quantitative real-time-PCR  
152 (qPCR) analysis. In addition, the mRNA levels for G-type lysozyme (LC310722) and  
153 SOCS3 in the liver were also determined by qPCR. The gene expression level of  
154 elongation factor 1 $\alpha$  (EY510389) in each sample was used as an internal control. Gene  
155 specific primers (Table 1) were designed using Primer3Plus software  
156 (<http://primer3plus.com/cgi-bin/dev/primer3plus.cgi>, accessed 23 June 2017). The  
157 reaction mixtures containing each cDNA sample were prepared using THUNDERBIRD  
158 SYBR qPCR Mix (Toyobo, Tokyo, Japan), following the manufacturer's instructions.  
159 qPCR was performed using a LightCycler 480 II (Roche Diagnostics, Mannheim,  
160 Germany), following the manufacturer's instructions.  
161

162 2.8 Statistical analysis

163 Significant differences ( $p < 0.05$ ) among the experimental time points in the  
164 phagocytosis assay, colorimetric assay, and bactericidal activity test were assessed using  
165 one-way analysis of variance and Tukey's *post-hoc* test. Student's *t*-test was used to detect  
166 significant differences ( $p < 0.05$ ) in trunk kidney and liver gene expression between the  
167 value on 16 June and the others.

168

169 **3. Results**

170 3.1 GSI

171 The GSI increased beginning on 17 July (the age of ayu was 45 weeks old), and  
172 the maximum value was recorded in late August 2015 (Figure 1A and B). The changes in  
173 the GSI values in 2016 were similar to those in 2015 (data not shown).

174

175 3.2 Phagocytosis assay

176 *F. psychrophilum* was phagocytized by monocytes with a pale blue-stained  
177 cytoplasm (Figure 2A) and neutrophils that had segmented nuclei (Figure 2B). The  
178 phagocytic rate of these cells was 16.3% on 16 June; it decreased significantly to 10.8%  
179 on 17 July and to 6.3% on 5 August (Figure 2C).

180

### 181 *3.3 Serum bacteriolytic and bactericidal activities*

182           The colorimetric assay revealed that the bacteriolytic activity of ayu serum was  
183 highest on 16 June and then decreased gradually along with the experimental time course  
184 (Figure 3). Bacteriolytic activity on 26 August was significantly lower than the value on  
185 16 June ( $p < 0.05$ ). Consistently, serum bactericidal activity in August was lower than that  
186 detected during June and July (Figure 4). The number of CFU after the serum treatment  
187 was significantly higher on 5 and 19 August, compared with the values during June and  
188 July ( $p < 0.05$ ).

189

### 190 *3.4 qPCR of the immune related genes*

191           No significant differences in the CD83, G-CSF, IL-8, SOCS1, or TNF $\alpha$  gene  
192 expression were detected in the spleen among the eight time points (Figure 5). Whereas,  
193 the SOCS3 gene expression level in the spleen was higher in June than that in late August  
194 ( $p < 0.05$ ). Since SOCS3 gene is highly expressed also in the liver of teleost fish [19–21],  
195 we performed qPCR analysis using the liver samples collected in 2016, to complement  
196 the results in the spleen samples in 2015. The SOCS3 gene expression level in the liver  
197 on 16 September was 4.7-fold higher ( $p < 0.05$ ) than that on 16 June (Figure 6). G-type

198 lysozyme gene expression was significantly downregulated 0.6-fold in the liver on 16  
199 June ( $p < 0.05$ ), compared with that on 16 September (Figure 6).

200

#### 201 4. Discussion

202 The biological defenses of ayu have been believed to be weak after sexual  
203 maturation, based on experiences of the ayu culture industry. However, little is known  
204 about the changes in immune activities in ayu with maturation. In this study, we showed  
205 that non-specific immune activities of ayu against *F. psychrophilum* decreased with  
206 sexual maturation. The decrease in non-specific immune activities is probably one of  
207 the main causes of the high susceptibility to bacterial diseases during summer and  
208 autumn in ayu.

209 Based on the classification of ayu leukocyte subpopulations by Nakada et al.,  
210 [22] neutrophils and macrophages were the phagocytes containing *F. psychrophilum* in  
211 this study. Neutrophils account for 60–80% of total trunk kidney leukocytes in ayu [12]  
212 and these cells have an unusually high respiratory burst activity [11]. Macrophages plays  
213 important roles protecting against *F. psychrophilum* by producing reactive oxygen species  
214 in rainbow trout [23]. Phagocytic rates of leukocytes also decrease during winter in  
215 rainbow trout [24]. The increased affinity between leukocytes and maturation hormones

216 is a possible cause for the decreased phagocytic rates [25]. In this study, we showed that  
217 the phagocytic rates of **trunk** kidney leukocytes decreased significantly with maturation.  
218 Thus, the decrease in the phagocytic rate is probably one of the causes for the decreased  
219 resistance against bacterial infection in ayu. Moreover, the increase in the levels of  
220 maturation hormones may suppress phagocytic activity in ayu.

221 CD83 is a marker molecule of mature dendritic cells in mammals [26], and a  
222 homolog is highly expressed in phagocytes, such as macrophages and neutrophils, of  
223 gilthead seabream *Sparus aurata* [27], turbot *Scophthalmus maximus* [28], and ayu [13].  
224 The CD83 gene expression level remained unchanged with maturation in ayu, suggesting  
225 that the number of phagocytes remained unchanged during the time course. In addition,  
226 no significant change was observed in G-CSF, IL-8, or TNF $\alpha$  gene expression levels,  
227 suggesting that maturation did not affect expression of these cytokine genes in ayu.  
228 SOCS3 gene expression, but not SOCS1, was significantly upregulated after maturation.  
229 SOCS1 and SOCS3 play a key role in the negative regulation of interleukins by  
230 suppressing the Janus kinase/signal transducers and activators of transcription  
231 (JAK/STAT) pathway in mammals and teleost fish [29–31]. SOCS1 suppresses  
232 interferon- $\gamma$  expression by inhibiting STAT1 phosphorylation, whereas SOCS3  
233 suppresses IL-2 and IL-6 expression by inhibiting STAT3 phosphorylation in mammals

234 [32]. Furthermore, Gordon *et al.* (2016) demonstrated that SOCS3 knockdown  
235 significantly enhances the phagocytic capacity of human macrophages, indicating that  
236 SOCS3 suppress phagocytic activity of the macrophage [33]. Therefore, suppression of  
237 cytokines by SOCS3 might result in decreased neutrophil and macrophage activity in ayu.

238 Lysozyme was initially associated with defense against Gram-positive and  
239 Gram-negative bacteria [34]. In fish, lysozyme has broader activity than that in mammals  
240 [35]. Lysozyme is also an opsonin that activates the complement system and phagocytes  
241 [36]. *F. psychrophilum* is resistant to the action of complement activity present in rainbow  
242 trout [37] and ayu sera [38]. In this study, we showed that bacteriolytic and bactericidal  
243 activities decreased in serum during August. These data suggest that the decrease in  
244 lysozyme activity, rather than complement activity, affected the resistance to *F.*  
245 *psychrophilum* by ayu during maturation.

246 In conclusion, phagocytic activity of trunk kidney leukocytes against *F.*  
247 *psychrophilum* decreased during summer and autumn in ayu. Phagocytic activity is  
248 probably modulated by upregulation of SOCS3 during maturation. Furthermore, serum  
249 bactericidal and bacteriolytic activities also decreased during summer and autumn, with  
250 downregulation of lysozyme activity. The decrease in non-specific immune activities

251 may be one of the causes for the high susceptibility of ayu to pathogenic bacteria during  
252 summer and autumn.



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388

389



390 **Figure legends**

391 Figure 1

392 Changes in gonadosomatic index (GSI) of female ayu (A) and male ayu (B) during June–  
393 August 2015. Error bars represent standard deviation.

394

395 Figure 2

396 The change in phagocytic rates of ayu **trunk** kidney leukocytes against *Flavobacterium*  
397 *psychrophilum*. The main populations of **trunk** kidney leukocytes that phagocytized the  
398 bacteria: macrophages (A) and neutrophils (B). Scale bar, 10  $\mu\text{m}$ . Mean phagocytic rate  
399 values ( $n = 6$ ) of **trunk** kidney leukocytes against the bacteria are shown (C). Error bars  
400 represent standard deviation and different letters represent significant differences between  
401 the groups ( $p < 0.01$ ).

402

403 Figure 3

404 Changes in serum bacteriolytic activity against *Micrococcus luteus*. Error bars represent  
405 standard deviation, and different letters represent significant differences between the  
406 groups ( $p < 0.05$ ).

407

408

409 Figure 4

410 Changes in serum bactericidal activity against *Flavobacterium psychrophilum*. Colony  
411 forming units of *F. psychrophilum* treated with the serum collected at each time point. An  
412 increase in the CFU values indicates a decrease in serum bactericidal activity. Error bars  
413 represent standard deviation, and different letters represent significant differences  
414 between the groups ( $p < 0.05$ ).

415

416 Figure 5

417 Changes in the gene expression levels of CD83, granulocyte colony-stimulating factor  
418 (GCSF), interleukin (IL)-8 suppressor of cytokine signaling (SOCS)1, SOCS3, and tumor  
419 necrosis factor (TNF) $\alpha$  in the spleen. Error bars represent standard deviation. P-values  
420 calculated from the *t*-test are shown.

421

422 Figure 6

423 Changes in G-type lysozyme and suppressor of cytokine signaling (SOCS)3 gene  
424 expression levels in the liver. Error bars represent standard deviation. P-values calculated  
425 from the *t*-test are shown.