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(57) Abstract:



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**HYBRID HEPADNAVIRUS CORES CARRYING MULTIPLE
MALARIA PARASITE EPITOPES**

STATEMENT REGARDING FEDERALLY SPONSORED RESEARCH

[0001] This invention was made in part with government support under Grant No. RO1AI082740 awarded by the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, of the National Institutes of Health. The government has certain rights in the invention.

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

[0002] This application claims benefit of U.S. Provisional Application No. 62/330,137, filed April 30, 2016, the contents of which are hereby incorporated by reference in their entirety.

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[0003] None.

FIELD

[0004] The present disclosure relates to rodent hepadnavirus core antigens including one or more B cell and T cell epitopes of a malaria parasite antigen. More specifically, the present disclosure relates to hybrid woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigens that have been modified to diminish the antibody response to the core antigen so as to enhance the antibody response to fragments of malaria antigen(s) included therein.

BACKGROUND

[0005] Malaria is an important tropical parasitic disease that kills more people than any other communicable disease with the exception of tuberculosis. The causative agents in humans are four species of *Plasmodium* protozoa: *P. falciparum*, *P. vivax*, *P. ovale* and *P. malariae*. Of these, *P. falciparum* is the most lethal. The vast majority of deaths occur among young children in Africa. *P. vivax* is the most prevalent species outside of sub-Saharan Africa and is responsible for approximately 50% of all malaria cases worldwide (Guerra et al., Trends Parasitol, 22:353-358, 2006). Malaria is a public health problem today in more than 100 countries, inhabited by over half of the world's population. Worldwide prevalence of the disease is extraordinarily high and malaria mortality is estimated to be about 500,000 per year (Murray et al., The Lancet, 379:413-431, 2012). *P. falciparum* malaria has 14 chromosomes, an estimated 5,300 genes (many of which vary extensively between strains) and a complex four-stage life cycle as it passes from a mosquito vector to humans and back again.

Furthermore, the natural *P. falciparum* infection does not result in sterile immunity, and partial immunity occurs only after years of recurring infections and illnesses. Therefore, a useful human vaccine must out perform the immune response to the natural infection. This complexity and the lack of suitable animal models has impeded vaccine development against both *P. falciparum* and *P. vivax*.

[0006] All stages of the *P. falciparum* life cycle have been targeted for malaria vaccine development, however, only preerythrocytic stage immunogens (i.e., the circumsporozoite protein and the multiepitope-thrombospondin-related adhesion protein) have been shown to elicit significant clinical efficacy (Stoute et al., J Infect Dis, 178:1139-44, 1988; and Webster et al., Proc Natl Acad Sci USA, 102:4836-4861, 2005). Only one circumsporozoite (CS) protein vaccine candidate, known as RTS,S or Mosquirix™ developed by GSK (London, United Kingdom) has reached phase III clinical trials. RTS,S is a recombinant subunit vaccine, which includes a fusion protein produced by fusing a fragment of a single allele (e.g., 3D7) of the CS protein fused to the hepatitis B surface antigen (HBsAg). RTS,S has been in development for over two decades and tested in multiple experimental and field trials (see, e.g., Alonso et al., Lancet, 364:1411-20, 2004; and Aponte et al., Lancet, 370:1543-51, 2007). In brief, protective efficacy of three doses of RTS,S formulated in a combination of three relatively potent adjuvants is reported to be between 30 and 50% as judged by prevention of clinical and severe malaria, although the level of protection is dependent on malaria transmission intensity, age and time since vaccination (Olotu et al., N Engl J Med, 368:1111-1120, 2013). Development of RTS,S is a significant achievement and demonstrates that a recombinant subunit vaccine containing only isolated B and T cell epitopes from a single CS protein delivered on a heterologous carrier can elicit protection in humans. However, it is generally acknowledged that “second generation” vaccines will be necessary for full implementation of a malaria vaccine intended for all at-risk populations (i.e., endemic populations, travelers to endemic regions and the military). The search for second generation preerythrocytic vaccine candidates has included use of the entire CS protein, addition of other preerythrocytic antigens, new adjuvants, DNA delivery, viral vectors, prime-boost strategies, etc., with little success to date (Duffy et al., Expert Rev Vaccines, 11:1261, 2012).

[0007] Thus what the art needs are more immunogenic malaria vaccine candidates that target one or both of the pre-erythrocyte and erythrocyte stages of *Plasmodium*. Specifically, next generation malaria vaccines that confer protection in a greater proportion of vaccinated

subjects are desirable. Particularly desirable malaria vaccine candidates targeting the pre-erythrocyte stage contain B cell epitopes of two or more alleles of the CS protein. Malaria vaccine candidates targeting both *P. falciparum* and *P. vivax* are especially desirable. Ideally the protection conferred would be long-lived.

SUMMARY

[0008] The present disclosure relates to rodent hepadnavirus core antigens including one or more B cell and T cell epitopes of a malaria parasite antigen. More specifically, the present disclosure relates to hybrid woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigens that have been modified to diminish the antibody response to the core antigen so as to enhance the antibody response to fragments of malaria antigen(s) included therein.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0009] FIG. 1A-B shows B and T cell epitopes of the circumsporozoite coat protein (CS). FIG. 1A is a schematic representation of the Pf and hybrid Pb/Pf sporozoites. Native *P. berghei* sequence is indicated by light shading and transgenic *P. falciparum* sequence by dark shading. Neutralizing B-cell epitopes are denoted by black bars and CD4+ T cell epitopes by white bars. The “repeats” epitope (140-159) is part of a much larger motif, delineated by the dotted line. Numbering is based on the amino acid sequence of CSP from the 7G8 clone. FIG. 1B lists virus like particles (VLPs) described in the examples. In summary, Mal: NANP and NVDP repeats; Mal5: NANP repeat only; Ct: carboxy-terminal; TH: TH.3R and UTC epitopes; 3T: insertion of all 3 T cell epitopes; C61S: Cys-to-Ser mutation at position 61 of WHcAg; Pv: *P. vivax* B cell repeats. Each of the epitopes is genetically inserted into the sequence of the VLP gene and a fully-assembled VLP consists of 120 homodimers. Thus each VLP includes 240 copies of the inserted epitope(s).

[0010] FIG. 2 is a comparison of protective efficacy of WHc-CS VLPs. Groups of mice were immunized with WHc-HBV negative control and CS-repeat (WHc-Mal-78) VLPs (2 doses of 20 µg and 10 µg in IFAd): CS-non-repeat VLPs (3 doses of 20 µg, 10 µg, 10 µg in IFAd). From 2 to 3.5 months after the last immunization dose all mice were challenged with 10,000 Pb/Pf sporozoites. Parasite 18S rRNA copy number in the liver was determined by qPCR 40 hours after infection. Circles represent individual mice and the bars represent mean values. % protection is based on mean values in comparison to the WHc-HBV negative control.

[0011] FIG. 3A-C shows immunogenicity of WHc-Mal-78-UTC in rabbits and protective efficacy of anti-VLP sera. In FIG. 3A animals were primed with 200 µg of WHc-Mal-78-UTC emulsified in IFAd and boosted at week 6 with 100 µg emulsified in IFAd (rabbit 73) or 200 µg in saline (rabbit 74). Serum was collected at the indicated time points and endpoint titers against NANP, NVDP and rCSP determined by ELISA. The sporozoite-specific IFA assay was performed on 18 week antisera and is represented by a star-shaped point. FIG. 3B shows protection against liver stage Pb/Pf infection. Mice were injected with 500 µl of indicated rabbit antisera and challenged with 10,000 sporozoites i.v. shortly after receiving the antisera. Liver burden was determined by qPCR 40 hours after challenge. Control, normal mouse sera. P values are for Mann-Whitney U-test comparing in each case the 5 mice per group, ns = not significant at the 0.05 significance level. FIG. 3C shows protection against blood stage Pb/Pf infection. 200 µl of sera from rabbit #74 or from a control naïve rabbit were passively transferred to groups of 7 or 4 mice, respectively, by i.v. injection. Mice were then challenged by allowing 3, 5, 6 or 12 mosquitoes infected with Pb/Pf sporozoites to feed on the mice for 5 min. Mice were bled daily starting on day 4 post-challenge and blood-stage infection assessed by microscopy on stained blood smears.

[0012] FIG. 4 shows that WHc-Ct-3T primes malaria-specific as well as WHcAg-specific CD4+ T cells. To assess T cell priming, three mice were immunized with WHc-Ct-3T (a single 20 µg dose in IFAd) and 10 days later spleen cells were harvested and cultured as pools with varying concentrations of the indicated recall antigens. Culture supernatants were collected at day 2 for determination of IL-2 and day 4 for determination of IFN γ . The minimum concentration of each antigen necessary to yield detectable cytokine is shown. For antibody production, mice were immunized (20 µg/IFAd) and boosted (10 µg/IFAd).

[0013] FIG. 5A-B is a comparison of protective efficacy and serology for WHc-Mal5-78 (Mal5) vs WHc-Mal-78-3T (Mal-3T). Groups of 6 mice each were immunized with WHc-Mal5-78 or WHc-Mal-78-3T formulated in either saline, alum or Montanide ISA-720 and given a single booster injection. After the boost mice were challenged with 10,000 hybrid sporozoites. FIG. 5A shows liver burden as assessed by determining parasite 18S rRNA copies in the liver. Circles represent individual mice, boxes represent mean values. P values are for Mann-Whitney U-test between groups for each formulation, with each group having six mice, except the Mal-3T in alum group, which had five mice. FIG. 5B shows post-boost antibody levels in pooled sera were determined by ELISA using rCSP, NANP or NVDP peptides as solid phase ligands. IFA titers were performed on dry Pb/Pf sporozoites.

[0014] FIG. 6A-C shows protective efficacy of WHc(C61S)-Mal-78-3T immunization against *P. berghei*/*P. falciparum* blood stage malaria infection. Groups of ten mice were primed and boosted with 100 µg of WHc(C61S)-Mal-78-3T formulated in alum (250 µg/dose), alum + QS21 (20 µg/dose) or emulsified in Montanide ISA720 (50% vol/vol) and boosted in alum as indicated. FIG. 6A is a time line showing schedule of prime, boost and challenge with 12 mosquitoes infected with Pb/Pf hybrid sporozoites allowed to feed on the mice for 5 min. After feeding, mosquitoes were examined for blood in the gut, confirming that multiple mosquitoes had fed on each animal. FIG. 6B is a graphic representation of the percentage of mice remaining protected (i.e., free of blood stage parasites) during the 14 day monitoring period. FIG. 6C is a summary of results. One mouse from the Alum+QS21 group died before challenge.

[0015] FIG. 7A-C shows protective efficacy of WHc-Pv-78 (VLP-206) immunization against *P. berghei*/*P. vivax* malaria infection. Mice were primed and boosted with 100 µg of WHc-Pv-78 or WHcAg emulsified in IFAd (50% vol/vol). In FIG. 7A mice were challenged with 10,000 Pb/Pv sporozoites injected in the tail vein and liver infection determined by qPCR. P value is for the Mann-Whitney U-test with four mice in the WHc-Pv-78 group and five mice in the control WHc group. In FIG. 7B-C mice were exposed to the bites of 10 Pb/Pv-infected mosquitoes for 5 min, after which, mosquitoes were examined for blood in the gut to confirm that multiple mosquitoes had fed on each animal. Malarial infection was determined by blood smear during the 14 day monitoring period. The amino acid sequence of VLP-206 is set forth as SEQ ID NO:85.

[0016] FIG. 8 shows that anti-CS repeat antibodies protect against a sporozoite challenge. Mice were immunized with rCS and sera either unadsorbed or adsorbed with NANP/NVDP-containing VLPs (Δ NANP, NVDP) were incubated with 10,000 sporozoites prior to challenge. NMS, normal mouse sera.

[0017] FIG. 9 is a comparison of WHc-CS VLPs containing malaria-specific T cell epitopes. Groups of 3 mice were immunized (2 doses: 20 µg and 10 µg in IFAd) with the indicated WHcAg hybrid VLPs. Secondary antisera were pooled and serially diluted and analyzed by ELISA for binding to solid-phase WHcAg, NANP and NVDP. End-point titers of pooled sera are shown.

[0018] FIG. 10A shows the resulting amino acid sequence of the hybrid CS protein (SEQ ID NO:21), which includes N-terminal sequence derived from *P. berghei* (ANKA) and C-

terminal sequence derived from *P. falciparum* (3D7). FIG. 10B shows an alignment illustrating conservation of T cell epitopes on *P. berghei* CS (SEQ ID NO:22) and *P. falciparum* CS (SEQ ID NO:23). The *P. falciparum* T cell domain was incorporated into the WHc(C61S)-Mal-78-3T VLP (VLP-162). The percentages represent identities and similarities (homologies) between the two sequences.

[0019] FIG. 11 shows selection criteria for hybrid woodchuck hepadnavirus cores carrying multiple epitopes of multiple malaria parasite stages.

[0020] FIG. 12 is a comparison of vaccine features of WHc(C61S)-Mal-78-3T (VLP-162) versus previous generation malaria VLPs RTS,S (MOSQUIRIX™ malaria vaccine of GlaxoSmithKline Biologicals, S.A., of Rixensart, Belgium) and ICC-1132 (MALARIVAX™ malaria vaccine developed by of Immune Complex Corporation, later Apovia Inc., San Diego, CA).

[0021] FIG. 13 provides an alignment of amino acid sequences of woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigen (WHcAg) and derivatives thereof. Asterisks denote amino acid identity. The amino acid sequences of the woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigens are set forth as follows: WHcAg as SEQ ID NO:1; delta2WHcAg as SEQ ID NO:2; delta3WHcAg as SEQ ID NO:3; delta4WHcAg as SEQ ID NO:4; delta5WHcAg as SEQ ID NO:5; delta6WHcAg as SEQ ID NO:6; delta7WHcAg as SEQ ID NO:7. The amino acid sequence of various other hepadnavirus core antigens are also provided herein: GScAg as SEQ ID NO:8, AGScAg as SEQ ID NO:9; and HBcAg as SEQ ID NO:10. FIG. 14A is a schematic representation of WHc(C61S)-Mal-78-3T (also referred to herein as VLP-162). FIG. 14B provides an alignment of the amino acid sequences of the wild type full length WHcAg (SEQ ID NO:1) and VLP-162 (SEQ ID NO:20).

[0022] FIG. 15A provides an alignment of the amino acid sequences of the wild type full length WHcAg (SEQ ID NO:1) and VLP-206 (SEQ ID NO:85). FIG. 15B provides an alignment of the amino acid sequences of the wild type full length WHcAg (SEQ ID NO:1) and VLP-245 (SEQ ID NO:86).

DESCRIPTION

[0023] The present disclosure relates to rodent hepadnavirus core antigens including one or more B cell and T cell epitopes of a malaria parasite antigen. More specifically, the present disclosure relates to hybrid woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigens that have been modified to diminish the antibody response to the core antigen so as to enhance the antibody response to fragments of malaria antigen(s) included therein.

[0024] In order to design *P. falciparum* preerythrocytic vaccine candidates, a library of circumsporozoite (CS) T and B cell epitopes displayed on the woodchuck hepatitis virus core antigen (WHcAg) VLP platform was produced. To test the protective efficacy of the WHcAg-CS VLPs, hybrid CS *P. berghei/P. falciparum* (Pb/Pf) sporozoites were used to challenge immunized mice. VLPs carrying one or two different CS repeat B cell epitopes and three VLPs carrying different CS non-repeat B cell epitopes elicited high levels of anti-insert antibodies (Abs). VLPs carrying CS repeat B cell epitopes conferred 98% protection of the liver against a 10,000 Pb/Pf sporozoite challenge. In contrast, VLPs carrying the CS non-repeat B cell epitopes were minimally-to-non-protective. One-to-three CS-specific CD4/CD8 T cell sites were also fused to VLPs, which primed CS-specific, as well as WHcAg-specific T cells. However, a VLP carrying only the three T cell epitopes failed to protect against a sporozoite challenge, indicating a requirement for anti-CS repeat Abs. A VLP carrying two CS repeat B cell epitopes and three CS T cell epitopes in alum adjuvant elicited high titer anti-CS Abs (endpoint dilution titer $>1 \times 10^6$) and provided 80-100% protection against blood stage malaria. Using a similar strategy, VLPs were constructed carrying *P. vivax* CS repeat B cell epitopes (WHc-Pv-78), which elicited high levels of anti-CS Abs and conferred 99% protection of the liver against a 10,000 Pb/Pv sporozoite challenge and elicited sterile immunity to blood stage infection. These results indicate that immunization with epitope-focused VLPs carrying selected B and T cell epitopes from the *P. falciparum* and *P. vivax* CS proteins can elicit sterile immunity against blood stage malaria. Thus, hybrid WHcAg-CS VLPs are suitable for use as a bivalent *P. falciparum/P. vivax* malaria vaccine.

Rodent Hepadnavirus Core Antigens

[0025] Exemplary rodent hepadnavirus core antigens of the present disclosure include woodchuck (WHcAg), ground squirrel (GScAg), arctic ground squirrel (AGScAg) hepadnavirus core antigens. Rodent hepadnavirus core antigens have been chosen as carriers in part because they are multimeric, self-assembling, virus-like particles (VLP). The basic subunit of the core particle is a 21 kDa polypeptide monomer that spontaneously assembles into a 240 subunit particulate structure of about 34nm in diameter. The tertiary and quaternary structures of hepadnavirus core particles have been elucidated (Conway et al., *Nature*, 386:91-94, 1997). The immunodominant B cell epitope on hepadnavirus core particles is localized around amino acids 76-82 (Schodel et al., *J Exp Med*, 180:1037-1046, 1994) forming a loop connecting adjacent alpha-helices. This observation is consistent with the finding that a heterologous antigen inserted within the 76-82 loop region of HBcAg was significantly more antigenic and immunogenic than the antigen inserted at the N- or C-termini and, importantly, more immunogenic than the antigen in the context of its native protein (Schodel et al., *J Virol*, 66:106-114, 1992).

[0026] Full length and truncated wild type WHcAg cores, as well as recombinant WHcAg cores containing various mutations are suitable for use as carriers for malaria antigens for production of hybrid VLPs. Some preferred recombinant WHcAg cores are listed in Table I. The WHcAg particles were designed to include either a heterologous B cell epitope within the WHcAg immunodominant loop extending from residues 76-82 of wild type WHcAg ($\Delta 1$ mutation), or alter endogenous WHcAg-specific B cell epitopes in order to reduce WHcAg-specific antigenicity and/or immunogenicity without negatively affecting the antigenicity and/or immunogenicity of heterologous B cell epitopes inserted within the WHcAg. The mutations designed to decrease WHcAg-specific antigenicity and/or immunogenicity are designated as $\Delta 2$ - $\Delta 7$ mutations or modifications. These modified WHcAg carrier platforms provide an advantageous system for presentation of heterologous antigens (hAg), such as malaria antigens.

[0027] In some embodiments, the woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigen with reduced antigenicity comprises one, two, three, four or five modifications of the group consisting of the $\Delta 2$ - $\Delta 7$ modifications. Exemplary combinations of modifications include: $\Delta 2$ and one or more of $\Delta 3$, $\Delta 4$, $\Delta 5$, $\Delta 6.x$ and $\Delta 7.x$; $\Delta 3$ and one or more of $\Delta 2$, $\Delta 4$, $\Delta 5$, $\Delta 6.x$ and $\Delta 7.x$; $\Delta 4$ and one or more of $\Delta 2$, $\Delta 3$, $\Delta 5$, $\Delta 6.x$ and $\Delta 7.x$; $\Delta 5$ and one or more of $\Delta 2$, $\Delta 3$, $\Delta 4$, $\Delta 6.x$ and

Δ7.x; Δ6 and one or more of Δ2, Δ3, Δ4, Δ5.x and Δ7.x; and Δ7 and one or more of Δ2, Δ3, Δ4, Δ5.x and Δ6.x.

[0028] In some embodiments, the present disclosure provides a woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigen with reduced antigenicity, which comprises SEQ ID NO:12, SEQ ID NO:13, or a variant thereof that is at least 90% identical (e.g., at least 90%, 91%, 92%, 93%, 94%, 95%, 96%, 97%, 98%, or 99% identical) to SEQ ID NO:12 or SEQ ID NO:13. In some preferred embodiments, the variant is at least 95% identical to SEQ ID NO:12 or SEQ ID NO:13, but does not comprise SEQ ID NO:11 or SEQ ID NO:1. In some embodiments, the woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigen with reduced antigenicity comprises one of the amino acid sequences selected from the group consisting of SEQ ID NO:2, SEQ ID NO:3, SEQ ID NO:4, SEQ ID NO:5, SEQ ID NO:6 and SEQ ID NO:7.

Table I. WHcAg Mutations Affecting Antigenicity and/or Immunogenicity

Designation	Description
Δ1	WHcAg/insertion of a heterologous antigen within the immunodominant loop
Δ2	WHcAg/L21A, D26A, L27A, N28A, A29V, V31A substitutions
Δ3	WHcAg/N136P, A137P substitutions
Δ4	WHcAg/C61S substitution
Δ5	WHcAg/replacement of residues 62-85, 65-88 or 64-87 with a heterologous antigen
Δ6	WHcAg/R150A, R151A, R152A, R156A, R159A, R162A, R163A, R164A, R169A, R170A, R171A, R177A, R178A, R179A, R180A substitutions
Δ6.1	WHcAg/R150A, R151A, R152A, R156A, R159A, R162A, R163A, R164A, R169A, R170A, R171A substitutions
Δ7	WHcAg/N75A, I76A, T77A, S78A, E79A, Q80A, V81A, R82A, T83A substitutions
Δ7.1	WHcAg/N75A, I76S, T77S, S78E, E79L, Q80E, V81L, R82E, T83L substitutions

Heterologous Antigens

[0029] A heterologous antigen (hAg) of the present disclosure is a polypeptide that is different from a woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigen. In particular, when used to refer to a portion of a fusion protein or a hybrid core antigen comprising a woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigen and a heterologous antigen, the term heterologous antigen refers to the portion, which is not derived from or does not otherwise correspond to the woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigen. In some embodiments, the heterologous antigen is a polypeptide of from 4 to

120 amino acids in length. Unless otherwise indicated, the term heterologous antigen refers to a malaria antigen throughout the present disclosure.

[0030] In some embodiments, the heterologous antigen comprises one B cell epitope, while in others it comprises two, three, four or five B cell epitopes, or even a larger plurality of B cell epitopes. In some preferred embodiments, the heterologous antigen further comprises one T cell epitope, or it comprises two, three, four or five T cell epitopes, or even a larger plurality of T cell epitopes. In some embodiments, the T cell epitope is a helper T (Th) cell epitope (MHC class II-restricted epitope). In some embodiments, the T cell epitope is a cytotoxic T cell (CTL) epitope (MHC class I-restricted epitope). Determination as to whether a given heterologous antigen of a hybrid core antigen comprises a B cell epitope can be made by analyzing heterologous antigen-specific antibody-binding of serum of a subject immunized with the hybrid core antigen (or polynucleotide encoding the hybrid core antigen). Determination as to whether a given heterologous antigen of a hybrid core antigen comprises a Th cell epitope can be made by analyzing heterologous antigen-induced proliferation or cytokine secretion by peripheral blood lymphocytes (PBL) of a subject immunized with the hybrid core antigen (or polynucleotide encoding the hybrid core antigen). Determination as to whether a given heterologous antigen of a hybrid core antigen comprises a CTL cell epitope can be made by analyzing heterologous antigen-specific lysis of a target cell that expresses the heterologous antigen by CTL expanded from PBL of a subject immunized with a polynucleotide encoding the hybrid core antigen. Other methods of determining whether a heterologous antigen or fragment thereof comprises B, Th and/or CTL epitopes are known in the art.

[0031] The heterologous antigen of the hybrid VLPs of the present disclosure may comprise a fragment of a surface protein. In other embodiments, the heterologous antigen comprises a fragment of a secreted protein. In other embodiments, the heterologous antigen comprises a fragment of a cytosolic protein. In still further embodiments, the heterologous antigen is itself a fusion protein comprising fragments of two, three, four or five different polypeptides.

[0032] The hybrid VLPs of the present disclosure comprise at least one malaria antigen as the heterologous antigen. In some embodiments, the malaria antigen has the amino acid sequence of an antigen derived from *P. falciparum*, *P. vivax*, *P. ovale* or *P. malariae* or is at least 90% identical thereto (e.g., at least 90%, 91%, 92%, 93%, 94%, 95%, 96%, 97%, 98%, or 99% identical to a malaria antigen or fragment thereof). In some preferred embodiments, the malaria antigen is at least 95% identical to an antigen derived from *P. falciparum*, *P.*

vivax, *P. ovale* or *P. malariae*. In some embodiments, the malaria antigen is inserted at a position within the woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigen selected from the group consisting of N-terminal, 44, 71, 72, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85, 92, 149 and C-terminal as numbered according to SEQ ID NO:1. In some embodiments, the malaria antigen is inserted between pairs of amino acids that are noncontiguous within the wild type sequence prior to deletion of the intervening amino acids of the woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigen. For instance, in some embodiments the malaria antigen is inserted between the following amino acids 69/79, 70/80, 71/81, 72/82, 73/83, or 75/81 of the woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigen as numbered according to SEQ ID NO:1. In some preferred embodiments, the malaria antigen comprises two or more polypeptides. In some particularly preferred embodiments, the two or more polypeptides comprises a B cell domain (polypeptide of from 4 to 60 amino acids in length containing at least one B cell epitope) and a T cell domain (polypeptide of from 8 to 120 amino acids in length containing at least one T cell epitope). In some embodiments, the B cell domain is inserted in or adjacent to the immunodominant loop of the woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigen, preferably at a position within the woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigen selected from the group consisting of 61, 71, 72, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85, and 92 as numbered according to SEQ ID NO:1. In some embodiments, the T cell domain is inserted at the carboxyl end of the woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigen or truncated variant thereof.

[0033] One preferred malaria antigen is the circumsporozoite (CS) protein. Exemplary B cell domains and flanking linkers for polypeptide inserts within or adjacent to the immunodominant loop of WHcAg are listed in Table II. Exemplary T cell domains for polypeptide inserts at the C-terminus of WHcAg are listed in Table III.

Table II. Malaria Polypeptides Containing B Cell Epitopes

Name	N-linker	Malaria Sequence	C-linker	SEQ ID NO.
Mal [^]	GIL	NANP NVDP NANP NANP NANP	L	24
Mal1	GIL	DP NANP NVDP NANP NV	L	25
Mal2	GIL	NP NVDP NANP NVDP NA	L	26
Mal3	GIL	NVDP NANP NVDP	L	27
Mal4	GIL	NANP NVDP NANP NVDP	L	28
Mal5	GILE	NANP NANP NANP NANP	EL	29
Krich(93-113)	GILEE	DEDKRDGNNEDNEKLRKPKHKKL	EEL	30
N1(112-123)	GILE	KLKQPGDGNPDP	EL	31
CSP(298-315)	GIL	HNMPNDPNRNVDENANAN	L	32
PfCSP(81-91) 3D7	GILE	EDNEKLRKPKH	EL	33
PfCSP(77-91) 3D7	GILE	DGNNEDNEKLRKPKH	EL	34

Name	N-linker	Malaria Sequence	C-linker	SEQ ID NO.
PfCSP (81-94) 3D7	GILEEE	EDNEKLRKPKHKKL	EEEL	35
PfCSP (81-97) 3D7	GILEEE	EDNEKLRKPKHKKLKQP	EEEL	36
PfRH5 (26-36) 3D7	GILE	ENAIKKTKNQE	EL	37
5A08Mimo	GILEE	SAIKKPVT	EEL	38
PfRH5 (200-213A) 3D7	GILE	YGKAIIVDAFIKKINE	EL	39
PfRH5 (353-360A) 3D7	GILD	TNGIRYAYD	L	40
CSP (81-97) 2KA	GILEE	EDNEALRAPKHKKLKQP	EEL	57
CSP (81-97) 3KA	GILE	EDNEALRAPKHKALKQP	EL	58
CSP (81-97) 4KA93	GILE	EDNEALRAPKHAALKQP	EL	59
CSP (81-97) 4KA95	GILE	EDNEALRAPKHAKLAQP	EL	60
CSP (81-97) 5KA	GIL	EDNEALRAPKHAALAQP	L	61
CSP (82-92) Gly1	GIL	ADNEGLRKPCHA	EEL	62
CSP (82-92) Gly2	GIL	ADNEGLRKGKHA	EEL	63
CSP (82-92) Gly3	GIL	ADNEGGRGGKHA	EL	64
CSP (81-92) K85A		EDNEALRKPCHK		65
Rh5 (194-213A)	GILEE	YHKSSTYGKAIIVDAFIKKI	EEL	66
Rh5 (346-360)	GILE	YNNNFCNTNGIRYHYD	EL	67
Rh5 (353-360)	GILE	TNGIRYHYDEYIH	EL	68
Pv (VK210)	GIL	DRADGQPAGDRADGQPAGDRAAGQPAGDRAAGQPAGD	L	69
Pv (VK247)	GIL	ANGAGNQPANGAGNQPANGAGDQPANGAGDQPG	L	70
CSP (81-97) con		XDNEXRXXXK HXXXXXX where X @ position: 1 = E or A, 5 = A or G, 6 = L or G, 8 = A, K or G, 9 = P or G, 12 = K or A, 13 = K, A or absent, 14 = L or absent, 15 = K, A or absent, 16 = Q of absent, and 17 = P or absent.		71

^ Mal was inserted many places. Minimally, 74, 75, 77, 78, 75/81, 92, Cterm, Nterm, where in 75/81 the malaria sequence inserted between WHc amino acids 75 and 81 with 76-80 deleted.

Table III. Malaria Polypeptides Containing T Cell Epitopes

Name	Malaria Sequence	SEQ ID NO.
PfUTC (333-352)	EYLNKIQNSLSTEWSPCSVT	41
PfTH.3R (354-378)	GNGIQVRIKPGSANKPKDEL DYEN	42
PfCS.T3 (378-392)	DIEKKICKMEKCSSV	43
PbUTC (333-352)	EFVKQIRDSITEEWSQCNVT	44
PbTH.3R (354-378)	GSGIRVRKRKGSNKAEDLTLEDI	45
PBCS.T3 (378-392)	DTEICKMDKCSSIFN	46
7G8-3TC	QYLKKIKNSISTEWSPCSVT C GNGIQVRIKPGSANKPKDEL DYEN DIEKKICKMEKCSSV	47
3D7-3TC	EYLNKIQNSLSTEWSPCSVT C GNGIQVRIKPGSANKPKDEL DYAN DIEKKICKMEKCSSV	48
3TC	EYLNKIQNSLSTEWSPCSVT S GNGIQVRIKPGSANKPKDEL DYEN DIEKKICKMEKCSSV	49
3TCcon	XYLXKIXNSXSTEWSPCSVT X GNGIQVRIKPGSANKPKDEL DYXN DIEKKICKMEKCSSV where X @ position: 1 = Q or E, 4 = K or N, 7 = K or Q, 10 = I or L, 21 = C or S, and 44 = E or A.	50

[0034] Nucleic acid sequences encoding polypeptide inserts were either designed to contain unique enzyme restriction sites, or overlapping oligonucleotides were designed to insert the sequence into the pUC-WHcAg vector. For some inserts, the restriction sites utilized result in the inclusion of N-terminal and C-terminal linkers flanking the malaria polypeptide insert.

[0035] The standard linker/insert combination of hybrid VLPs comprising a malaria antigen within or adjacent to the immunodominant loop of WHcAg is GIL-Xn-L, where Xn is an insert, X is any amino acid, and n is 60 or less (SEQ ID NO:17). The malaria antigen is optionally flanked on one or both sides by one or more negatively charged amino acids glutamic acid (E) or aspartic acid (D) such that Xn can be represented by the formula [E/D]^y-MaAg-[E/D]^z in which both y and z are integers independently selected from the group consisting of 0, 1, 2, 3 and 4, and MaAg is a malaria antigen of up to 60 amino acids in length.

[0036] The linker/insert combination of hybrid VLPs comprising a malaria antigen at the N-terminus of WHcAg is X_n -WLWG, where X_n is an insert, X is any amino acid, and n is 60 or less (SEQ ID NO:18). The linker/insert combination of hybrid VLPs comprising a malaria antigen at the C-terminus of WHcAg is [D] y [I] z - X_m in which both y and z are integers independently selected from the group consisting of 0, 1 and 2, where X_m is an insert, X is any amino acid, and m is up to 120 amino acids in length (SEQ ID NO:19).

[0037] As indicated above, the B cell domain (containing at least one B cell epitope) is from 4 to 60 amino acids in length, preferably 5 to 55 amino acids in length, preferably 10 to 50 amino acids in length, preferably 15 to 45 amino acids in length, or preferably 20 to 40 amino acids in length. In some embodiments, the length of the B cell domain is within any range having a lower limit of 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19 or 20 amino acids and an independently selected upper limit of 60, 55, 50, 45, 40, 35, 30, 25 or 20 amino acids in length, provided that the lower limit is less than the upper limit.

[0038] Likewise as indicated above, the T cell domain (containing at least one T cell epitope) is from 8 to 120 amino acids in length, preferably 10 to 110 amino acids in length, preferably 20 to 100 amino acids in length, or preferably 25 to 50 amino acids in length. In some embodiments, the length of the T cell domain is within any range having a lower limit of 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 25 or 30 amino acids and an independently selected upper limit of 120, 110, 100, 90, 80, 70, 60, 55, 50, 45, 40, 35 or 30 amino acids in length, provided that the lower limit is less than the upper limit.

Development of Fusion Proteins and Hybrid Particles

[0039] A problem inherent to the insertion of heterologous epitope sequences into VLP genes is that such manipulation can abolish self-assembly. This assembly problem is so severe that several groups working with the HBcAg or with other VLP technologies (e.g., the L1 protein of the human papillomavirus and Q β phage) have opted to chemically link the foreign epitopes to the VLPs rather than inserting the epitopes into the particles by recombinant methods. The need to chemically conjugate heterologous antigens has been circumvented by development of combinatorial technology (Billaud et al., *J Virol*, 79:13656-13666, 2005). This was achieved by determining 17 different insertion sites and 28 modifications of the WHcAg C-terminus that together favor assembly of chimeric particles, as well as the identification of a number of additional improvements (see, e.g., U.S. Patent Nos. 7,144, 712; 7,320,795; and 7,883,843). Table IV lists categories of hybrid particles, based on whether

modifications to the hAg insert sequence, the WHcAg carrier sequence, the linker sequence (residues separating WHcAg and hAg sequences), insert position and/or replacement of carrier with insert sequence are present. ELISA-based screening systems have been developed that measure expression levels, VLP assembly, and insert antigenicity using crude bacterial lysates, avoiding the need to employ labor-intensive purification steps for hybrid VLPs that do not express and/or assemble well.

Table IV. Categories of Hybrid, WHcAg-hAg VLP Mutants

Category	Description
standard	heterologous polypeptide inserted at position 78 within the immunodominant loop
epitope-modified	alterations affecting the heterologous polypeptide
carrier-modified	alterations affecting the WHcAg carrier
linker-modified	addition or deletion of heterologous polypeptide linkers
varied position	insertion of the heterologous polypeptide at a position tolerant of assembly other than position 78 of the WHcAg carrier
replacement	replacement of WHcAg carrier residues with a heterologous polypeptide

Antigenic and Immunogenic Characterization of Hybrid, WHcAg-hAg VLPs

A. Antigenicity

[0040] Prior to immunogenicity testing, hybrid WHcAg-hAg VLPs are characterized for expression, particle assembly, and ability to bind a hAg-specific antibody. The same capture ELISA system used to detect hybrid VLPs in bacterial lysates may be used for purified particles. In brief, expression, particle assembly, and antibody binding are assayed by ELISA. SDS-PAGE and Western blotting are used to assess the size and antigenicity of hybrid VLPs.

B. Immunogenicity

[0041] The immune response to hybrid VLPs is assessed. In addition to anti-insert, anti-hAg-protein and anti-WHcAg antibody endpoint titers, antibody specificity, isotype distribution, antibody persistence and antibody avidity are monitored. Immune sera are compared to the activity of a reference antibody by ELISA and neutralization assays.

Immune responses are tested *in vivo* in various mammalian species (e.g., rodents such as rats and mice, nonhuman primates, humans, etc.).

Compositions

[0042] The compositions of the present disclosure comprise a hybrid woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigen or a polynucleotide encoding the hybrid core antigen, wherein the hybrid core antigen is a fusion protein comprising a heterologous polypeptide and a woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigen, wherein the fusion protein is capable of assembling as a hybrid virus-like particle (VLP). In some embodiments, the heterologous polypeptide comprises at least one B cell epitope (e.g., capable of being bound by an antibody). In preferred embodiments, the composition is an antigenic composition. In some embodiments, the composition further comprises a pharmaceutically acceptable carrier. The term “carrier” refers to a vehicle within which the hybrid core antigen or polynucleotide encoding the antigen is administered to a mammalian subject. The term carrier encompasses diluents, excipients, adjuvants and combinations thereof. Pharmaceutically acceptable carriers are well known in the art (see, e.g., Remington’s Pharmaceutical Sciences by Martin, 1975).

[0043] Exemplary “diluents” include sterile liquids such as sterile water, saline solutions, and buffers (e.g., phosphate, tris, borate, succinate, histidine, etc.). Exemplary “excipients” are inert substances include but are not limited to polymers (e.g., polyethylene glycol), carbohydrates (e.g., starch, glucose, lactose, sucrose, cellulose, etc.), and alcohols (e.g., glycerol, sorbitol, xylitol, etc.).

[0044] Adjuvants are broadly separated into two classes based upon their primary mechanism of action: vaccine delivery systems (e.g., emulsions, microparticles, iscoms, liposomes, etc.) that target associated antigens to antigen presenting cells (APC); and immunostimulatory adjuvants (e.g., LPS, MLP, CpG, etc.) that directly activate innate immune responses. The WHcAg platform provides a delivery system that targets antigen specific B cells and other primary APC, as well as efficient T cell help for antigen-specific B cells. Additionally, the core platform functions as an immunostimulatory adjuvant by directly activating antigen-specific B cells by virtue of cross-linking membrane immunoglobulin (mIg) receptors for induction of B7.1 and B7.2 costimulatory molecule expression on naive resting B cells (Milich et al., Proc Natl Acad Sci USA, 94:14648-14653, 1997).

A. Traditional and Molecular Adjuvants

[0045] Although adjuvants are not required when using the WHcAg delivery system, some embodiments of the present disclosure employ traditional and/or molecular adjuvants. Specifically, immunization in saline effectively elicits anti-insert antibody production. However, formulation in non-inflammatory agents such as IFA (mineral oil), Montanide ISA 720 (squalene), and aluminum phosphate (AIP04), enhance immunogenicity. Additionally, administration of WHcAg results in the production of all four IgG isotypes, regardless of which if any adjuvant is employed. Inclusion of a CpG motif also enhances the primary response. Moreover, use of an inflammatory adjuvant such as the Ribi formulation is not more beneficial than is the use of non-inflammatory adjuvants, indicating that the benefits of the adjuvants result from a depot effect rather than from non-specific inflammation. Thus, the core platform is used with no adjuvant or with non-inflammatory adjuvants depending upon the application and the quantity of antibody desired. In some embodiments of the present disclosure, IFA is used in murine studies, whereas alum or squalene is used in human studies. In instances where it is desirable to deliver hybrid WHcAg particles in a single dose in saline, a molecular adjuvant is employed. A number of molecular adjuvants are employed to bridge the gap between innate and adaptive immunity by providing a co-stimulus to target B cells or other APCs.

B. Other Molecular Adjuvants

[0046] Genes encoding the murine CD40L (both 655 and 470 nucleic acid versions) have been used successfully to express these ligands at the C-terminus of WHcAg (*See*, WO 2005/011571). Moreover, immunization of mice with hybrid WHcAg-CD40L particles results in the production of higher anti-core antibody titers than does the immunization of mice with WHcAg particles. However, lower than desirable yields of purified particles have been obtained. Therefore, mosaic particles containing less than 100% CD40L-fused polypeptides are produced to overcome this problem. The other molecular adjuvants inserted within the WHcAg, including the C3d fragment, BAFF and LAG-3, have a tendency to become internalized when inserted at the C-terminus. Therefore tandem repeats of molecular adjuvants are used to resist internalization. Alternatively, various mutations within the so-called hinge region of WHcAg, between the assembly domain and the DNA/RNA-binding region of the core particle are made to prevent internalization of C-terminal sequences. However, internalization represents a problem for those molecular adjuvants such as CD40L, C3d, BAFF and LAG-3, which function at the APC/B cell membrane. In contrast,

internalization of molecular adjuvants such as CpG DN is not an issue as these types of adjuvants function at the level of cytosolic receptors.

[0047] Another type of molecular adjuvant or immune enhancer is the inclusion within hybrid core particles of a CD4+ T cell epitope, preferably a “universal” CD4+ T cell epitope that is recognized by a large proportion of CD4+ T cells (such as by more than 50%, preferably more than 60%, more preferably more than 70%, most preferably greater than 80%), of CD4+ T cells. In one embodiment, universal CD4+ T cell epitopes bind to a variety of human MHC class II molecules and are able to stimulate T helper cells. In another embodiment, universal CD4+ T cell epitopes are preferably derived from antigens to which the human population is frequently exposed either by natural infection or vaccination (Falugi et al., Eur J Immunol, 31:3816-3824, 2001). A number of such universal CD4+ T cell epitopes have been described including, but not limited to: Tetanus Toxin (TT) residues 632-651; TT residues 950-969; TT residues 947-967, TT residues 830-843, TT residues 1084-1099, TT residues 1174-1189 (Demotz et al., Eur J Immunol, 23:425-432, 1993); Diphtheria Toxin (DT) residues 271-290; DT residues 321-340; DT residues 331-350; DT residues 411-430; DT residues 351-370; DT residues 431-450 (Diethelm-Okita et al., J Infect Dis, 1818:1001-1009, 2000); *Plasmodium falciparum* circumsporozoite (CSP) residues 321-345 and CSP residues 378-395 (Hammer et al., Cell, 74:197-203, 1993); Hepatitis B antigen (HBsAg) residues 19-33 (Greenstein et al., J Immunol, 148:3970-3977, 1992); Influenza hemagglutinin residues 307-319; Influenza matrix residues 17-31 (Alexander et al., J Immunol, 164:1625-1633, 2000); and measles virus fusion protein (MVF) residues 288-302 (Dakappagari et al., J Immunol, 170:4242-4253, 2003).

Methods of Inducing an Immune Response

[0048] The present disclosure provides methods for eliciting an immune response in an animal in need thereof, comprising administering to the animal an effective amount of an antigenic composition comprising a hybrid woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigen, wherein the hybrid core antigen is a fusion protein comprising a heterologous antigen and a woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigen with reduced antigenicity, and wherein said fusion protein assembles as a hybrid virus-like particle (VLP). Also provided by the present disclosure are methods for eliciting an immune response in an animal in need thereof, comprising administering to the animal an effective amount of an antigenic composition comprising a polynucleotide encoding a hybrid woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigen, wherein the hybrid core antigen is a fusion protein comprising a heterologous antigen and a

woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigen with reduced antigenicity, and wherein said fusion protein assembles as a hybrid virus-like particle (VLP). Unless otherwise indicated, the antigenic composition is an immunogenic composition.

[0049] The immune response raised by the methods of the present disclosure generally includes an antibody response, preferably a neutralizing antibody response, preferably a protective antibody response. Methods for assessing antibody responses after administration of an antigenic composition (immunization or vaccination) are well known in the art. In some embodiments, the immune response comprises a T cell-mediated response (e.g., heterologous antigen-specific response such as a proliferative response, a cytokine response, etc.). In preferred embodiments, the immune response comprises both a B cell and a T cell response. Antigenic compositions can be administered in a number of suitable ways, such as intramuscular injection, subcutaneous injection, and intradermal administration. Additional modes of administration include but are not limited to intranasal administration, and oral administration.

[0050] Antigenic compositions may be used to treat both children and adults, including pregnant women. Thus a subject may be less than 1 year old, 1-5 years old, 5-15 years old, 15-55 years old, or at least 55 years old. Preferred subjects for receiving the vaccines are the elderly (e.g., >55 years old, >60 years old, preferably >65 years old), and the young (e.g., <6 years old, 1-5 years old, preferably less than 1 year old).

[0051] Administration can involve a single dose or a multiple dose schedule. Multiple doses may be used in a primary immunization schedule and/or in a booster immunization schedule. In a multiple dose schedule the various doses may be given by the same or different routes, e.g., a parenteral prime and mucosal boost, a mucosal prime and parenteral boost, etc. Administration of more than one dose (typically two doses) is particularly useful in immunologically naive subjects or subjects of a hyporesponsive population (e.g., diabetics, subjects with chronic kidney disease, etc.). Multiple doses will typically be administered at least 1 week apart (e.g., about 2 weeks, about 3 weeks, about 4 weeks, about 6 weeks, about 8 weeks, about 10 weeks, about 12 weeks, about 16 weeks, and the like.). Preferably multiple doses are administered from one, two, three, four or five months apart. Antigenic compositions of the present disclosure may be administered to patients at substantially the same time as (e.g., during the same medical consultation or visit to a healthcare professional) other vaccines.

[0052] In general, the amount of protein in each dose of the antigenic composition is selected as an amount effective to induce an immune response in the subject, without causing significant, adverse side effects in the subject. Preferably the immune response elicited is a neutralizing antibody, preferably a protective antibody response. Protective in this context does not necessarily mean the subject is completely protected against infection, rather it means that the subject is protected from developing symptoms of disease, especially severe disease associated with the pathogen corresponding to the heterologous antigen.

[0053] The amount of hybrid core antigen (e.g., VLP) can vary depending upon which antigenic composition is employed. Generally, it is expected that each human dose will comprise 1-1500 μg of protein (e.g., hybrid core antigen), such as from about 1 μg to about 1000 μg , for example, from about 1 μg to about 500 μg , or from about 1 μg to about 100 μg . In some embodiments, the amount of the protein is within any range having a lower limit of 10, 20, 30, 40, 50, 60, 70, 80, 90, 100, 110, 120, 130, 140, 150, 160, 170, 180, 190, 200, 210, 220, 230, 240 or 250 μg , and an independently selected upper limit of 1000, 950, 900, 850, 800, 750, 700, 650, 600, 550, 500, 450, 400, 350, 300 or 250 μg , provided that the lower limit is less than the upper limit. Generally a human dose will be in a volume of from 0.1 ml to 1 ml, preferably from 0.25 ml to 0.5 ml. The amount utilized in an immunogenic composition is selected based on the subject population. An optimal amount for a particular composition can be ascertained by standard studies involving observation of antibody titers and other responses (e.g., antigen-induced cytokine secretion) in subjects. Following an initial vaccination, subjects can receive a boost in about 4-12 weeks.

Kits

[0054] Also provided by the present disclosure are kits comprising a hybrid woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigen and a woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigen, wherein the hybrid core antigen is a fusion protein comprising a heterologous antigen and a woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigen with reduced antigenicity, and wherein said fusion protein assembles as a hybrid virus-like particle (VLP), and wherein the core antigen lacks the heterologous antigen. In some embodiments, the kits further comprise instructions for measuring heterologous antigen-specific antibodies. In some embodiments, the antibodies are present in serum from a blood sample of a subject immunized with an antigenic composition comprising the hybrid woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigen.

[0055] As used herein, the term “instructions” refers to directions for using reagents (e.g., a hybrid core antigen and a core antigen) contained in the kit for measuring antibody titer. In some embodiments, the instructions further comprise the statement of intended use required by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in labeling in vitro diagnostic products. The FDA classifies in vitro diagnostics as medical devices and required that they be approved through the 510(k) procedure. Information required in an application under 510(k) includes: 1) The in vitro diagnostic product name, including the trade or proprietary name, the common or usual name, and the classification name of the device; 2) The intended use of the product; 3) The establishment registration number, if applicable, of the owner or operator submitting the 510(k) submission; the class in which the in vitro diagnostic product was placed under section 513 of the FD&C Act, if known, its appropriate panel, or, if the owner or operator determines that the device has not been classified under such section, a statement of that determination and the basis for the determination that the in vitro diagnostic product is not so classified; 4) Proposed labels, labeling and advertisements sufficient to describe the in vitro diagnostic product, its intended use, and directions for use, including photographs or engineering drawings, where applicable; 5) A statement indicating that the device is similar to and/or different from other in vitro diagnostic products of comparable type in commercial distribution in the U.S., accompanied by data to support the statement; 6) A 510(k) summary of the safety and effectiveness data upon which the substantial equivalence determination is based; or a statement that the 510(k) safety and effectiveness information supporting the FDA finding of substantial equivalence will be made available to any person within 30 days of a written request; 7) A statement that the submitter believes, to the best of their knowledge, that all data and information submitted in the premarket notification are truthful and accurate and that no material fact has been omitted; and 8) Any additional information regarding the in vitro diagnostic product requested that is necessary for the FDA to make a substantial equivalency determination.

Definitions

[0056] As used herein, the singular forms “a”, “an”, and “the” include plural references unless indicated otherwise. For example, “an” excipient includes one or more excipients. The term “plurality” refers to two or more.

[0057] The phrase “comprising” as used herein is open-ended, indicating that such embodiments may include additional elements. In contrast, the phrase “consisting of” is closed, indicating that such embodiments do not include additional elements (except for trace

impurities). The phrase “consisting essentially of” is partially closed, indicating that such embodiments may further comprise elements that do not materially change the basic characteristics of such embodiments.

[0058] The practice of the present disclosure will employ, unless otherwise indicated, conventional techniques of molecular biology (including recombinant techniques), microbiology, cell biology, biochemistry and immunology, which are within the skill of the art. Such techniques are explained fully in the literature, such as, *Molecular Cloning: A Laboratory Manual*, second edition (Sambrook et al., 1989); *Current Protocols in Molecular Biology* (Ausubel et al., eds., 1987); *PCR: The Polymerase Chain Reaction*, (Mullis et al., eds., 1994); *Culture of Animal Cells: A Manual of Basic Technique* (Freshney, 1987); Harlow et al., *Antibodies: A Laboratory Manual* (Harlow et al., 1988); and *Current Protocols in Immunology* (Coligan et al., eds., 1991).

[0059] As used herein, the terms “virus-like particle” and “VLP” refer to a structure that resembles a virus. VLPs of the present disclosure lack a viral genome and are therefore noninfectious. Preferred VLPs of the present disclosure are woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigen (WHcAg) VLPs.

[0060] The terms “hybrid” and “chimeric” as used in reference to a hepadnavirus core antigen, refer to a fusion protein of the hepadnavirus core antigen and an unrelated antigen (e.g., bacterial polypeptide, and variants thereof). For instance, in some embodiments, the term “hybrid WHcAg” refers to a fusion protein comprising both a WHcAg component (full length, or partial) and a heterologous antigen or fragment thereof.

[0061] The term “heterologous” with respect to a nucleic acid, or a polypeptide, indicates that the component occurs where it is not normally found in nature and/or that it originates from a different source or species.

[0062] An “effective amount” or a “sufficient amount” of a substance is that amount necessary to effect beneficial or desired results, including clinical results, and, as such, an “effective amount” depends upon the context in which it is being applied. In the context of administering an immunogenic composition, an effective amount contains sufficient antigen (e.g., hybrid, WHcAg-hAg VLP) to elicit an immune response (preferably a measurable level of hAg pathogen-neutralizing antibodies). An effective amount can be administered in one or more doses.

[0063] The term “dose” as used herein in reference to an immunogenic composition refers to a measured portion of the immunogenic composition taken by (administered to or received by) a subject at any one time.

[0064] The term “about” as used herein in reference to a value, encompasses from 90% to 110% of that value (e.g., about 200 µg VLP refers to 180 µg to 220 µg VLP).

[0065] As used herein the term “immunization” refers to a process that increases an organisms’ reaction to antigen and therefore improves its ability to resist or overcome infection.

[0066] The term “vaccination” as used herein refers to the introduction of vaccine into a body of an organism.

[0067] A “variant” when referring to a polynucleotide or a polypeptide (e.g., a viral polynucleotide or polypeptide) is a polynucleotide or a polypeptide that differs from a reference polynucleotide or polypeptide. Usually, the difference(s) between the variant and the reference constitute a proportionally small number of differences as compared to the reference (e.g., at least 90%, 91%, 92%, 93%, 94%, 95%, 96%, 97%, 98% or 99% identical). In some embodiments, the present disclosure provides hybrid WHcAg-hAg VLPs having at least one addition, insertion or substitution in one or both of the WHcAg or hAg portion of the VLP.

[0068] The term “wild type” when used in reference to a polynucleotide or a polypeptide refers to a polynucleotide or a polypeptide that has the characteristics of that polynucleotide or a polypeptide when isolated from a naturally-occurring source. A wild type polynucleotide or a polypeptide is that which is most frequently observed in a population and is thus arbitrarily designated as the “normal” form of the polynucleotide or a polypeptide.

[0069] Amino acids may be grouped according to common side-chain properties: hydrophobic (Met, Ala, Val, Leu, Ile); neutral hydrophilic (Cys, Ser, Thr, Asn, Gln); acidic (Asp, Glu); basic (His, Lys, Arg); aromatic (Trp, Tyr, Phe); and orientative (Gly, Pro). Another grouping of amino acids according to side-chain properties is as follows: aliphatic (glycine, alanine, valine, leucine, and isoleucine); aliphatic-hydroxyl (serine and threonine); amide (asparagine and glutamine); aromatic (phenylalanine, tyrosine, and tryptophan); acidic (glutamic acid and aspartic acid); basic (lysine, arginine, and histidine); sulfur (cysteine and methionine); and cyclic (proline). In some embodiments, the amino acid substitution is a conservative substitution involving an exchange of a member of one class for another

member of the same class. In other embodiments, the amino acid substitution is a non-conservative substitution involving an exchange of a member of one class for a member of a different class.

[0070] The percent identity between the two sequences is a function of the number of identical positions shared by the sequences, taking into account the number of gaps, and the length of each gap, which need to be introduced for optimal alignment of the two sequences. For sequence comparison, typically one sequence acts as a reference sequence, to which test sequences are compared. When using a sequence comparison algorithm, test and reference sequences are entered into a computer, subsequence coordinates are designated, if necessary, and sequence algorithm program parameters are designated. Default program parameters can be used, or alternative parameters can be designated. The sequence comparison algorithm then calculates the percent sequence identities for the test sequences relative to the reference sequence, based on the program parameters. When comparing two sequences for identity, it is not necessary that the sequences be contiguous, but any gap would carry with it a penalty that would reduce the overall percent identity. For blastn, the default parameters are Gap opening penalty=5 and Gap extension penalty=2. For blastp, the default parameters are Gap opening penalty=11 and Gap extension penalty=1.

[0071] A “recombinant” nucleic acid is one that has a sequence that is not naturally occurring or has a sequence that is made by an artificial combination of two otherwise separated segments of sequence. This artificial combination can be accomplished by chemical synthesis or, more commonly, by the artificial manipulation of isolated segments of nucleic acids, e.g., by genetic engineering techniques. A “recombinant” protein is one that is encoded by a heterologous (e.g., recombinant) nucleic acid, which has been introduced into a host cell, such as a bacterial or eukaryotic cell. The nucleic acid can be introduced, on an expression vector having signals capable of expressing the protein encoded by the introduced nucleic acid or the nucleic acid can be integrated into the host cell chromosome.

[0072] An “antigen” is a compound, composition, or substance that can stimulate the production of antibodies and/or a T cell response in a subject, including compositions that are injected, absorbed or otherwise introduced into a subject. The term “antigen” includes all related antigenic epitopes. The term “epitope” or “antigenic determinant” refers to a site on an antigen to which B and/or T cells respond. The “dominant antigenic epitopes” or “dominant epitope” are those epitopes to which a functionally significant host immune response, e.g., an antibody response or a T-cell response, is made. Thus, with respect to a

protective immune response against a pathogen, the dominant antigenic epitopes are those antigenic moieties that when recognized by the host immune system result in protection from disease caused by the pathogen. The term “T-cell epitope” refers to an epitope that when bound to an appropriate MHC molecule is specifically bound by a T cell (via a T cell receptor). A “B-cell epitope” is an epitope that is specifically bound by an antibody (or B cell receptor molecule).

[0073] “Adjuvant” refers to a substance which, when added to a composition comprising an antigen, nonspecifically enhances or potentiates an immune response to the antigen in the recipient upon exposure. Common adjuvants include suspensions of minerals (alum, aluminum hydroxide, aluminum phosphate) onto which an antigen is adsorbed; emulsions, including water-in-oil, and oil-in-water (and variants thereof, including double emulsions and reversible emulsions), liposaccharides, lipopolysaccharides, immunostimulatory nucleic acids (such as CpG oligonucleotides), liposomes, Toll-like Receptor agonists (particularly, TLR2, TLR4, TLR7/8 and TLR9 agonists), and various combinations of such components.

[0074] An “antibody” or “immunoglobulin” is a plasma protein, made up of four polypeptides that binds specifically to an antigen. An antibody molecule is made up of two heavy chain polypeptides and two light chain polypeptides (or multiples thereof) held together by disulfide bonds. In humans, antibodies are defined into five isotypes or classes: IgG, IgM, IgA, IgD, and IgE. IgG antibodies can be further divided into four subclasses (IgG1, IgG2, IgG3 and IgG4). A “neutralizing” antibody is an antibody that is capable of inhibiting the infectivity of a virus. Accordingly, a neutralizing antibodies specific for a virus are capable of inhibiting or reducing infectivity of the virus.

[0075] An “immunogenic composition” is a composition of matter suitable for administration to a human or animal subject (e.g., in an experimental or clinical setting) that is capable of eliciting a specific immune response, e.g., against a pathogen, such as a malaria parasite. As such, an immunogenic composition includes one or more antigens (for example, polypeptide antigens) or antigenic epitopes. An immunogenic composition can also include one or more additional components capable of eliciting or enhancing an immune response, such as an excipient, carrier, and/or adjuvant. In certain instances, immunogenic compositions are administered to elicit an immune response that protects the subject against symptoms or conditions induced by a pathogen. In some cases, symptoms or disease caused by a pathogen is prevented (or reduced or ameliorated) by inhibiting replication of the pathogen (e.g., virus) following exposure of the subject to the pathogen. In the context of this disclosure, the term

immunogenic composition will be understood to encompass compositions that are intended for administration to a subject or population of subjects for the purpose of eliciting a protective or palliative immune response against a virus (that is, vaccine compositions or vaccines).

[0076] An “immune response” is a response of a cell of the immune system, such as a B cell, T cell, or monocyte, to a stimulus, such as a pathogen or antigen (e.g., formulated as an immunogenic composition or vaccine). An immune response can be a B cell response, which results in the production of specific antibodies, such as antigen specific neutralizing antibodies. An immune response can also be a T cell response, such as a CD4+ response or a CD8+ response. B cell and T cell responses are aspects of a “cellular” immune response. An immune response can also be a “humoral” immune response, which is mediated by antibodies. In some cases, the response is specific for a particular antigen (that is, an “antigen-specific response”). If the antigen is derived from a pathogen, the antigen-specific response is a “pathogen-specific response.” A “protective immune response” is an immune response that inhibits a detrimental function or activity of a pathogen, reduces infection by a pathogen, or decreases symptoms (including death) that result from infection by the pathogen. A protective immune response can be measured, for example, by the inhibition of viral replication or plaque formation in a plaque reduction assay or ELISA-neutralization assay, or by measuring resistance to pathogen challenge in vivo. Exposure of a subject to an immunogenic stimulus, such as a pathogen or antigen (e.g., formulated as an immunogenic composition or vaccine), elicits a primary immune response specific for the stimulus, that is, the exposure “primes” the immune response. A subsequent exposure, e.g., by immunization, to the stimulus can increase or “boost” the magnitude (or duration, or both) of the specific immune response. Thus, “boosting” a preexisting immune response by administering an immunogenic composition increases the magnitude of an antigen (or pathogen) specific response, (e.g., by increasing antibody titer and/or affinity, by increasing the frequency of antigen specific B or T cells, by inducing maturation effector function, or any combination thereof).

[0077] The term “reduces” is a relative term, such that an agent reduces a response or condition if the response or condition is quantitatively diminished following administration of the agent, or if it is diminished following administration of the agent, as compared to a reference agent. Similarly, the term “protects” does not necessarily mean that an agent completely eliminates the risk of an infection or disease caused by infection, so long as at

least one characteristic of the response or condition is substantially or significantly reduced or eliminated. Thus, an immunogenic composition that protects against or reduces an infection or a disease, or symptom thereof, can, but does not necessarily prevent or eliminate infection or disease in all subjects, so long as the incidence or severity of infection or incidence or severity of disease is measurably reduced, for example, by at least about 50%, or by at least about 60%, or by at least about 70%, or by at least about 80%, or by at least about 90% of the infection or response in the absence of the agent, or in comparison to a reference agent.

[0078] A “subject” refers to a mammalian subject. In the context of this disclosure, the subject can be an experimental subject, such as a non-human mammal (e.g., mouse, rat, rabbit, non-human primate, etc.). Alternatively, the subject can be a human subject.

[0079] The terms “derived from” or “of” when used in reference to a nucleic acid or protein indicates that its sequence is identical or substantially identical to that of an organism of interest.

[0080] The terms “decrease,” “reduce” and “reduction” as used in reference to biological function (e.g., enzymatic activity, production of compound, expression of a protein, etc.) refer to a measurable lessening in the function by preferably at least 10%, more preferably at least 50%, still more preferably at least 75%, and most preferably at least 90%. Depending upon the function, the reduction may be from 10% to 100%. The term “substantial reduction” and the like refers to a reduction of at least 50%, 75%, 90%, 95% or 100%.

[0081] The terms “increase,” “elevate” and “elevation” as used in reference to biological function (e.g., enzymatic activity, production of compound, expression of a protein, etc.) refer to a measurable augmentation in the function by preferably at least 10%, more preferably at least 50%, still more preferably at least 75%, and most preferably at least 90%. Depending upon the function, the elevation may be from 10% to 100%; or at least 10-fold, 100-fold, or 1000-fold up to 100-fold, 1000-fold or 10,000-fold or more. The term “substantial elevation” and the like refers to an elevation of at least 50%, 75%, 90%, 95% or 100%.

[0082] The terms “isolated” and “purified” as used herein refers to a material that is removed from at least one component with which it is naturally associated (e.g., removed from its original environment). The term “isolated,” when used in reference to a recombinant protein, refers to a protein that has been removed from the culture medium of the host cell (e.g.,

bacteria) that produced the protein. As such an isolated protein is free of extraneous compounds (e.g., culture medium, bacterial components, etc.).

EXAMPLES

[0083] Abbreviations: Ab (antibody); AGScAg (arctic ground squirrel hepadnavirus core antigen); BSA (bovine serum albumin); CS (circumsporozoite); ELISA (enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay); GScAg (ground squirrel hepadnavirus core antigen); HBcAg (human hepatitis B virus core antigen); (hAg) heterologous antigen; IFA (immunofluorescence assay); MAb or mAb (monoclonal antibody); Mal (malaria); OD (optical density); PBS (phosphate buffered saline); Pb (*P. berghei*); Pf (*P. falciparum*); Pv (*P. vivax*); VLP (virus-like particle); WHcAg (woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigen); and WT (wild type).

Example 1 – Hybrid Woodchuck Hepadna Virus Core Antigens Containing Malaria Epitopes Elicit Sterile Immunity to Blood Stage Infections

[0084] This examples describes the production and testing of *P. falciparum* preerythrocytic vaccine candidates, which comprise B and T cell epitopes of the circumsporozoite (CS) protein displayed on woodchuck hepadna virus core antigen (WHcAg) virus-like particles (VLPs).

Materials And Methods

[0085] *Animals.* The (B10xB10.s) F1 mice used in VLP screening and immunogenicity evaluation were obtained from the breeding colony of the Vaccine Research Institute of San Diego (VRISD). The B6 mice used for protection studies were obtained from NCI (Fredrick, MD). The rabbits used for immunogenicity testing were New Zealand White rabbits obtained from ProSci Inc. (Poway, California). All animal care was performed according to National Institutes of Health standards as set forth in the Guide for the Care and Use of Laboratory Animals (2011).

[0086] *Recombinant WHcAg hybrid VLP Construction.* The woodchuck hepadnavirus genome has previously been described (Cohen et al., Virology, 162:12-20, 1998), GENBANK Accession No. NC_004107 (SEQ ID NO:16). The WHcAg and hybrid WHcAg VLPs were expressed from the pUC-WHcAg vector expressing the full-length WHcAg protein codon optimized for expression in *E. coli* [18]. For inserting heterologous B cell epitopes, EcoRI-XhoI restriction sites were engineered into the open reading frame between amino acids 78 and 79 of the core protein gene. The engineered restriction sites add a Gly-Ile-Leu linker on the N-terminal side and a Leu linker on the C-terminal side of the inserted

epitopes. For fusing heterologous T cell epitopes, an EcoRV restriction site was engineered at the 3' end of the WHcAg gene, which adds an Asp-Ile linker between the WHcAg gene and the fused epitopes. Epitopes were cloned into the VLP gene using synthetic oligonucleotides comprising the desired epitope coding sequence and the appropriate engineered restriction sites. The WHc(C61S) point mutation to reduce carrier antigenicity was constructed by PCR using primer mismatches to create point mutations. All WHcAg constructs were transformed into Alpha-Select competent *E. coli* (Bioline USA, Inc.) and confirmed by DNA sequencing. Inserted B cell epitope sequences were exactly matched to the CSP sequence from clone 7G8 of *P. falciparum* used in the construction of the CS(Pf) or the VK210 repeat from Salvador I strain of *P. vivax* used in the construction of the Pb/Pv hybrid sporozoites, respectively. The inserted T cell epitopes had only one conservative mismatch, i.e., Cys 283 of the CS protein in the new Pb-Pf-CSP-CT hybrid sporozoites is a Ser in the VLPs with the TH and 3T T cell epitope sequences.

[0087] Some of the hybrid WHcAg VLPs were constructed on full length (SEQ ID NO:1) or truncated WHcAg cores (SEQ ID NO:2), while others were constructed on full length or truncated WHcAg cores comprising modifications. Some WHcAg modifications were previously described in U.S. Patent No. 7,320,795. Other WHcAg modifications were made so as to reduce carrier-specific antigenicity, and include:

Δ 2-WHcAg, Δ 3-WHcAg, Δ 4-WHcAg, Δ 5-WHcAg, Δ 6-WHcAg, Δ 6.1-WHcAg, Δ 7-WHcAg, and Δ 7.1-WHcAg (described above in Table I).

[0088] *Purified Proteins and Synthetic Peptides.* The VLP particles were expressed in Alpha-Select *E. coli* cells grown in Terrific Broth (Teknova, Hollister, CA). Cells were lysed by passage through an EmulsiFlex-C3 (Avestin, Ottawa, ON, Canada) and the lysate heated to 65°C for approximately 10 min, then clarified by centrifugation. The WHcAg particles were selectively precipitated by the addition of solid ammonium sulfate to approximately 45% saturation (277 g/L) and the precipitates were collected by centrifugation. Precipitated VLPs were re-dissolved in minimum buffer (10mM Tris, pH 8), dialyzed against the same buffer and applied to a Sepharose CL4B column (5x100cm). Finally, VLPs were formulated in 20mM Tris, pH8, 100mM NaCl. Endotoxin was removed from the core preparations by phase separation with Triton X-114 [19,20]. Briefly, the VLP solution was made 1% Triton X-114 and incubated at 4°C for 30 min with mixing, incubated at 37°C for 10 min, centrifuged at 20KxG for 10 min and the protein recovered in the upper phase. This was repeated for 4 extractions. The purified VLPs were 0.2um sterile-filtered, characterized and

aliquoted. Characterization typically includes custom ELISA, native agarose gel electrophoresis, PAGE, heat stability, circular dichroism and dynamic light scattering as previously described [18,21].

[0089] Recombinant CS protein was produced from the CS27 IV C clone (MRA-272, MR4, ATCC Manassas, VA) obtained through the Malaria Research and Reference Reagent Resource Center (www.mr4.org) and deposited by Photini Sinnis [22]. The open reading frame was moved to the pQE-60 vector (Qiagen) and transformed into M15 *E. coli* cells (Qiagen). Integrity of the gene was confirmed by DNA sequencing before purification by standard methods. Briefly, LB medium, supplemented with 2 g/L glucose, 25 µg/ml Kanamycin and 50 µg/ml Ampicilin, was inoculated with a 1:40 dilution of overnight culture. Bacteria were grown at 37°C to an A600 of 0.8-1.0, isopropyl β-D-1-thiogalactopyranoside added to a concentration of 100 mg/L, grown 3 hours longer and harvested by centrifugation. Cells were suspended in lysis buffer (25 mM Tris, pH 8, 0.3 M NaCl, 10 mM imidazole) and lysed by a single passage through an Avestin EmulsiFlex-C3 (Ottawa, ON, Canada). The lysate was clarified by centrifugation at 48,000 X G for 30 min, and applied to a nickel column (BioRad Profinity IMAC). Unbound proteins were removed by elution with the lysis buffer, then bound proteins were eluted in the same buffer containing 100 mM imidazole. This procedure yielded approximately 10mg of pure protein per liter of cultured bacteria.

[0090] Synthetic peptides derived from the WHcAg or CS sequences were synthesized by Eton Biosciences (San Diego, CA).

[0091] *Immunizations and serology.* Groups of mice were immunized intraperitoneally (i.p.) with the WHcAg hybrid VLPs (usually 10–20 µg) emulsified in incomplete Freund's adjuvant (IFAd) for both antibody production and T cell experiments. The dose was varied when other adjuvants were used, i.e., saline (200 µg) and alum (100 µg). For antibody experiments, mice were bled retro-orbitally and sera pooled from each group. Periodically individual mouse sera were tested to confirm the fidelity of the pooled sera results. Anti-WHc and anti-insert immunoglobulin G (IgG) antibodies were measured in murine sera by an indirect solid-phase ELISA by using the homologous WHcAg (50 ng/well) or synthetic peptides (0.5 µg/well), representing the inserted sequence, as solid-phase ligands as described previously [15]. Serial dilutions of both test sera and pre-immunization sera were made and the data are expressed as antibody titers representing the reciprocals of the highest dilutions of sera required to yield an optical density at 492 nm (OD 492) three times an equal dilution of pre-immunization sera. IgG isotype-specific ELISAs were performed by using IgG1-,

IgG2a-, IgG2b- and IgG3 -specific peroxidase-labeled secondary antibodies (Southern Biotechnology, Birmingham, AL). Rabbits were immunized with WHcAg hybrid VLPs (200 µg in IFAd) and boosted either with 200 µg in saline or 100 µg in IFAd.

[0092] *IFA*. Indirect immunofluorescence assays (IFA) using both live and air-dried sporozoites were used to characterize and titrate antibody responses. Briefly, for live-sporozoite IFAs, 40,000 parasites were incubated on ice with different sera dilutions. Sporozoites were then washed 3 times with cold PBS with 1% BSA, suspended in 0.2 ml and placed into the well of a Lab-Tek chambered coverglass (Thermo Scientific Nunc, Rochester, NY). The chamber was then spun at 300 x G for 2 min and, after discarding the supernatant, 0.2 ml of PBS with 4% Paraformaldehyde (Sigma, Saint Louis, MO) were added. Samples were incubated for 1 h at room temperature, washed 3 times with PBS and incubated with secondary antibody [AlexaFluor 488 F(ab')₂ fragment of goat anti-mouse IgG(H+L); 2 mg/ml; Invitrogen] for 30 min. Samples were then washed and green-fluorescent sporozoites were visualized using a Nikon Eclipse 90i fluorescent microscope. IFAs using air-dried sporozoites were performed as previously described [17].

[0093] *In vitro T cell cytokine assays*. Spleen cells from groups of 3 each of (B10xB10.s) F1 mice were harvested and pooled 4–6 weeks after immunization with the various WHcAg hybrid VLPs. Spleen cells (5×10^5) were cultured with varying concentrations of WHcAg, CS or synthetic peptides derived from WHcAg or CS protein. For cytokine assays, culture supernatants were harvested at 48 h for IL-2 determination and at 96 h for interferon-gamma (IFN γ) determination by ELISA. IFN γ production was measured by a two-site ELISA using mAb 170 and a polyclonal goat anti-mouse IFN γ (Genzyme Corp., Boston, MA).

[0094] *Development of P. berghei chimeric parasites expressing the C-terminal region of the P. falciparum CS protein (Pb/Pf-CSP-CT)*. The new transgenic strain derived from *P. berghei* ANKA strain expressing the C-terminus of *P. falciparum* was generated using the plasmid pR-CSPfCT, which carries the C-terminal region of the *P. falciparum* CSP. This plasmid was derived from plasmid pIC-CSPfCT, which resulted from the replacement of the *P. berghei* CSP C-terminus with the C-terminal region of the 3D7 strain of *P. falciparum* CSP. Briefly, a 306-bp restriction fragment encompassing base pairs 715 to 1020 of the *P. berghei* CSP gene was excised from a modified version of pIC-CSwt [23] using the restriction enzymes SexAI and PacI and then replaced with a fragment comprising the *P. falciparum* CSP C-terminal region. The *P. falciparum* CSP C-terminus was excised as a 312-bp SexAI-PacI restriction fragment from plasmid pPfCT (Genescript, Piscataway Township,

NJ), synthesized to comprise the *P. falciparum* CSP C-terminal region. Thus, the CSP gene in the resulting plasmid, pIC-CSPPfCT, consists of the *P. berghei* N-terminal and repeat regions (base pairs 1 to 786) and the remainder of the *P. falciparum* CSP (base pairs 787 to 1026). We then excised the hybrid CSP gene from pIC-CSPPfCT as a KpnI-XhoI fragment and inserted it into the transfection plasmid, pR-CSPfCT. KpnI and SacI were used to release the inserted fragment from pR-CSPfCT prior to transfection of WT *P. berghei* (ANKA strain) parasites, as previously described [24]. Transgenic parasites were selected in Swiss Webster mice (NCI, Frederick, MD) by treatment with pyrimethamine (MP Biomedicals, Solon, OH) in drinking water (0.07 mg/ml). Pyrimethamine-resistant parasites were then cloned by limiting-dilution.

[0095] Successful recombination at the 5' and 3' ends of the locus was verified by PCR. The primers used to confirm 5' integration were 5'-F (TCACCCTCAA GTTGGGTAAA A set forth as SEQ ID NO:51) and PbPfCT-R (GCAGAGCCAG GCTTTATTCT set forth as SEQ ID NO:52); the primers to verify integration at the 3' end were 3'-F (TGTA AAAATG TGTATGTTGT GTGC set forth as SEQ ID NO:53) and 3'-R (GTGCCCATTA CGACTTTGCT set forth as SEQ ID NO:54). To verify that the cloned parasite population did not have contaminating WT *P. berghei* parasites, we developed a PCR assay using primers that flank the SexAI restriction site and then digested the resulting product with this enzyme. This restriction site is not present in the WT *P. berghei* CSP sequence but was inserted by replacement with our synthetic construct. The primers used for this PCR analysis were PbWT NT-F (TGTTACAATG AAGGAAATGA TAATAAATTG TAT set forth as SEQ ID NO:55) and Pb 3'UTR-R (TCTTTTGGAC ATATATTCAT TTTAGCA set forth as SEQ ID NO:56). Lastly, DNA isolated from the cloned chimeric parasites was sequenced to confirm the replacement of the *P. berghei* C-terminal region with the *P. falciparum* CSP C-terminus sequence. The sequence of the hybrid CS protein is provided in FIG. 10A.

[0096] *In vivo protection assays.* To measure liver parasite load, C57Bl/6 mice were challenged i.v. with 10,000 Pb/Pf or Pb/Pv hybrid sporozoites. Forty-eight hours later livers were harvested to assess the parasite load by RT-PCR as previously described [25]. We assessed sterile protection by monitoring the mice for development of blood-stage parasites after feeding by infected *Anopheles stephensi* mosquitoes. Briefly, prior to challenging mice, the percentage of infected mosquitoes was determined by choosing at least 10 mosquitoes from the pool and examining each salivary gland for the presence of sporozoites. Based on this information, the number of sporozoites used for the challenge was determined. The mice

were anesthetized by i.p. injection of 250 µl of 2% avertin prior to feeding Pb/Pf- or Pb/Pv-infected *A. stephensi* mosquitoes for five minutes. After feeding, all mosquitoes were examined for the presence of blood in their gut to determine the number that took a blood meal. Daily blood smears were performed starting at 4 days after challenge. For measuring protection mediated by antibodies, Pb/Pf (described as CS(Pf) in [16]) or Pb/Pv [17] hybrid sporozoites were used for the challenge when VLPs targeting *P. falciparum* and *P. vivax* epitopes, respectively, were used as immunogens. For assessing protective efficacy of T cell epitopes, the new Pb-Pf-CSP-CT hybrid sporozoites described above were used for the challenge.

Results

[0097] *Immunogenicity of VLPs carrying repeat versus non-repeat CS B cell epitopes.* A number of interesting candidate epitopes outside the CS repeat domain have been described. For example, non-repeat CS B cell epitopes which have been shown to elicit in vitro neutralizing antibodies include: aa93-113 (lysine (K)-rich region), aa112-123 (conserved N1), and aa298-315 [26–28]. Similarly, a high percentage of adults and lesser numbers of children living in malaria endemic areas possess antibodies specific for CS C-terminal sequences that represent CD4+ and CD8+ recognition sites for human and murine T cells (i.e., UTC, TH3.R and CS.T3 regions) [29]. For several reasons the consideration of these non-repeat, CS B cell epitopes for vaccine design has been marginalized. Firstly, the immunodominance of the NANP and NVDP repeats and the established neutralizing efficacy of anti-CS repeat antibodies has reduced interest in non-repeat B cell epitopes somewhat [30–32]. Secondly, the induction of high titer CS-specific antibodies to non-repeat epitopes has been difficult with most immunogens. Our WHcAg platform technology allows insertion of virtually any CS sequence onto WHcAg. The resulting immunogens elicit high titer antibody even if the CS sequence is cryptic on the native CS protein. The Pb/Pf sporozoite technology allows evaluation of efficacy of these candidate vaccines by inserting the Pf B and T cell candidate epitopes in the CS protein of Pb sporozoites. The combination of these technologies permitted us to overcome the problems that have prevented analysis of the protective efficacy of CS non-repeat B and T cell sites in the past.

[0098] We produced, characterized and examined the immunogenicity of hybrid-WHcAg VLPs carrying the NANP/NVDP repeat epitopes and three selected non-repeat CS-specific B cell epitopes: the N1 region (aa 112-123); the K-rich region (aa 93-113); and the aa 298-315 region (see FIG. 1A-B) in comparison to full length rCS protein. Although the T cell

response to CS protein is highly genetically restricted in mice and humans [33,34], we avoided this problem by immunizing a high responder strain (H-2b). Immunization with the full length rCS protein elicited very high antibody production to the 2 repeat epitopes, NANP and NVDP. However, consistent with a cryptic nature of the non-repeat CS B cell epitopes, immunization with rCS protein elicited no antibody to the CS298-315 region, extremely low antibody production to the N1 region (i.e., 1:1000 titer) and relatively low antibody production to the K-rich region (i.e., 1:125,000 titer) after primary and secondary immunization (Table 1). In contrast, both repeat and non-repeat B cell regions “excised” from the CS protein and inserted onto hybrid WHcAg VLPs elicited high levels of anti-insert antibodies (i.e., at least 1.3×10^6 titers) (Table 1). Furthermore, the repeat and non-repeat anti-insert antibodies bound rCS protein in ELISAs. The repeat and non-repeat anti-insert antibodies also bound dry, hybrid Pb/Pf sporozoites to varying degrees as demonstrated by immunofluorescence assays (IFA) (Table 1). Interestingly, only the repeat-specific anti-insert antibodies (i.e., NANP/NVDP-specific) bound live sporozoites. These observations suggest that the three non-repeat B cell epitopes on the CS protein may be cryptic on intact, viable sporozoites.

Table 1-1. Endpoint Dilution Titers of WHc-CS VLPs carrying B cell epitopes.

CS (Insert)	anti-WHc	anti-NANP	anti-NVDP	anti-N1	anti-K rich	anti-CS (298-315)	anti-CSP	IFA dry hybrid	IFA viable hybrid	↓ Liver Stage
NANP/NVDP	6×10^6	$> 10^7$	6×10^6	–	–	–	$> 10^7$	16,000	++ >300	98%
N1 (112-123)	3×10^6	–	–	3×10^6	–	–	6×10^6	1,800	–	18%
K rich (93-113)	625,000	–	–	–	3×10^6	–	6×10^6	600	–	0%
CS (298-315)	6×10^6	–	–	–	–	3×10^6	$> 10^7$	16,000	–	44%
CSP Full	0	6×10^6	625,000	1,000	125,000	0	6×10^6	ND	ND	ND

↓ Reduction in liver parasite load.

[0099] In Table 1-1, the listed WHcAg hybrid VLPs and full length rCS protein were used to immunize mice (2 doses; 20 μ g and 10 μ g in IFAd). Secondary antisera were pooled, serially diluted and analyzed by ELISA for binding to: solid phase WHcAg; repeat peptides (NANP)₅ and (DPNANPNV)₂; non-repeat peptides N1, Krich, CSP298-315; and rCS. Antisera were also evaluated by IFA on dry or viable sporozoites. The protective efficiency after in vivo challenge with 10,000 Pb/Pf sporozoites of mice immunized with the listed WHc-CS VLPs is also shown.

[00100] *Protective efficacy of VLPs carrying repeat versus non-repeat CS B cell epitopes.*

We also performed immunization/challenge experiments to determine the protective efficacy of hybrid WHcAg VLPs carrying the 2 repeat B cell epitopes (NANP/NVDP) and the three non-repeat B cell epitopes described above. As shown in FIG. 2, immunization (2 doses of 20 and 10 µg) with VLPs carrying the repeat B cell epitopes protected mice challenged with 10,000 Pb/Pf sporozoites at a level of 98% in terms of parasite 18S rRNA copies detected in liver compared to mice immunized with a control hybrid WHcAg VLP carrying an irrelevant insert from the hepatitis B virus (HBV). In contrast, immunization (3 doses of 20, 10, and 10 µg) with the hybrid WHcAg VLPs carrying each of the three non-repeat B cell epitopes provided little to no protection (0-44%) against Pb/Pf sporozoite challenge despite the fact that high levels of anti-insert antibodies were present in the immunized mice (FIG. 2, Table 1). These results suggest that the non-repeat B cell epitopes may be cryptic on viable sporozoites in vivo. The results also suggest that it may not be productive to include these three non-repeat B cell epitopes in a CS-VLP vaccine candidate. A caveat to this interpretation is that the non-repeat B cell epitopes in the context of the VLPs may not represent the epitope structures present within the native CS protein, although anti-non-repeat Abs do bind rCS and dry sporozoites. An exception may be the non-CS repeat epitope recognized by mAb 5D5.

[00101] *Confirmation that CS repeat antibodies are predominant in providing protection.*

As an alternate approach to addressing the question of the importance of repeat vs. non-repeat CS-specific antibodies, we performed an experiment using rCS as the immunogen rather than hybrid VLPs. Mice were immunized with 2 doses of rCS (20 µg/10 µg) and the resulting antisera were pooled and pre-incubated with the 10,000 Pb/Pf sporozoites used for the challenge. This antisera provided significant protection compared to sporozoites pre-incubated in normal mouse sera (NMS). However, if the anti-rCS antisera was pre-adsorbed with repeat-containing VLPs (Δ NANP, NVDP) prior to being added to the 10,000 sporozoites, the protective efficacy was largely lost (FIG. 8).

[00102] *WHc-Mal-78-UTC elicits protective Abs in rabbits.* To examine protective efficacy of antisera from a second species, two rabbits were immunized with a VLP carrying the 2 CS repeat B cell epitopes and a malaria-specific human T cell epitope (UTC), designated WHc-Mal-78-UTC (FIG. 3A). The antisera were passively transferred into naïve murine recipients. The recipients of anti-VLP rabbit sera were either challenged intravenously (i.v.) with 10,000 Pb/Pf sporozoites and parasite burden in the liver determined (FIG. 3B) or

challenged by the bites of infected mosquitoes and blood-stage parasitemia monitored over a 10-14 day period (FIG. 3C). Both rabbits (#73 and #74) produced high titer anti-NANP, anti-NVDP and anti-rCS Abs detected by ELISA and by IFA on hybrid sporozoites (FIG. 3A). Antisera (0.5 ml) from both rabbits were passively transferred (i.v.) to naïve mice and the mice were immediately challenged with 10,000 Pb/Pf sporozoites (i.v.). Forty hours later the parasite liver burdens were determined. Passively transferred anti-VLP sera from both rabbits significantly reduced the parasite liver burden as compared to control rabbit sera, although rabbit #74 sera was most effective (FIG. 3B). It is notable that rabbit #74 was primed with WHc-Mal-78-UTC emulsified in IFA_d but boosted with the VLP in saline, whereas, rabbit #73 was primed and boosted in IFA_d. This suggests that there may be no advantage to the use of potent adjuvants after the primary injection of the VLPs. Rabbit #74 serum was chosen to passively transfer (0.2 ml) to murine recipients, which were challenged with the bites of from 3 to 12 Pb/Pf-infected mosquitoes over a five minute time frame. Blood stage parasitemia was monitored for the next 10-14 days. All 21 mice receiving the anti-WHc-Mal-78-UTC rabbit sera were totally protected from blood stage parasitemia regardless of exposure to 3, 6 or 12 infected mosquitoes. The 8 control mice exposed to 3 or 6 infected mosquitoes demonstrated infection by day 4 or 5 (FIG. 3C). However, it is interesting to note that the adoptive transfer of 0.2 ml of a 1:3 dilution of rabbit #74 sera failed to protect mice against blood stage infection. These studies demonstrate that the protective efficacy elicited by WHc-Mal-78-UTC VLPs can be mediated solely by anti-CS repeat Abs, but a threshold level of protective Abs is required.

[00103] *Addition of CS-specific T cell domains.* An important goal is to add CS-specific T cell sites to vaccine candidates in order to prime CS-specific CD4⁺/CD8⁺ T cells as well as elicit CS-specific neutralizing antibodies. For this purpose, we added 1, 2 or all 3 (i.e., UTC, TH.3R, and CS.T3) well characterized human T cell domains to a standard hybrid WHcAg VLP carrying the 2 CS specific repeats (i.e. WHc-Mal-78). The T cell domains were added to the C-terminus of the hybrid WHcAg VLPs and all 3 hybrid VLPs were successfully produced and were shown to be approximately equally immunogenic in terms of anti-NANP and anti-NVDP antibody production (FIG. 9). In order to determine the contribution of CS-specific T cells to the protective efficacy of candidate VLP vaccines, the established protective efficacy of anti-NANP/NVDP antibodies had to be excluded. For that purpose, we constructed a hybrid WHcAg VLP carrying only the 3 T cell regions and devoid of the neutralizing CS repeat B cell epitopes designated WHc-Ct-3T. As shown in FIG. 4,

immunization with WHc-Ct-3T primed both WHcAg-specific and CS protein-specific CD4+ T cells as determined by cytokine production elicited by splenic T cells cultured with a panel of WHcAg and CS protein-specific proteins and peptides. Also note that WHc-Ct-3T immunization elicited low level Ab production to rCS and the TH.3R site, which is also a B cell epitope in addition to a CD4+ T cell epitope. Because the Pb/Pf hybrid sporozoites used in the previous studies do not contain the *P. falciparum* T cell domains, a new transgenic Pb sporozoite (Pb/Pf-CSP-CT) containing the complete C-terminus (i.e., aa318-397) from the Pf CS protein was produced (FIG. 1A). Therefore, we were able to perform an immunization/challenge experiment with WHc-Ct-3T VLPs. Although WHc-Ct-3T was immunogenic for both CS-specific B and CD4+ T cell epitopes (FIG. 4), no protection against a 10,000 Pb/Pf-CSP-CT sporozoite challenge was elicited.

[00104] *Effect of the 3 CS-specific T cell domains on protective efficacy.* Because anti-NANP-specific Abs play a dominant role in protection, we compared the protective efficacy of a standard VLP (WHc-Mal5-78) containing only the 4 NANP repeats, which was previously shown to elicit significant protection against a Pb/Pf sporozoite challenge, with a VLP containing the NANPNVDP(NANP)₃ B cell insert in the loop of WHcAg plus all 3 T cell domains (WHc-Mal-78-3T) inserted at the C-terminus of WHcAg. Groups of 6 mice were primed and boosted with WHc-Mal5-78 or WHc-Mal-78-3T formulated either in saline only (200 µg VLPs), alum (100 µg VLPs) or Montanide ISA720 (50 µg VLPs). Both VLPs elicited significant reduction in parasite liver burden (at least 90% reduction in parasite 18S rRNA copies in liver) in all three formulations compared to naïve challenged control mice (FIG. 5A). However, the VLP carrying the three T cell domains (WHc-Mal-78-3T) elicited statistically superior protection in saline (99.1% vs 95% protection) and in alum (99.2% vs 91.7% protection) compared to the (NANP)₄ B cell only-containing VLP (WHc-Mal5-78). Both VLPs were equally protective when formulated in Montanide ISA720 (FIG. 5A). Anti-CS, anti-NANP, and anti-NVDP antibodies were measured by ELISA and IFAs were performed to determine if differential antibody levels would explain the superior protective efficacy of the WHc-Mal-78-3T VLP formulated in saline and alum (FIG. 5B). No significant serological differences were noted between the two VLPs. However, there was a trend towards higher titer anti-NVDP repeat antibodies in the WHc-Mal-78-3T-immunized groups, especially when formulated in alum. This was expected because the WHc-Mal5 VLP does not contain the NVDP repeat. However, the polyclonal anti-NANP antibodies elicited by the WHc-Mal5 VLP demonstrated cross-reactivity for the (NVDP)₂ peptide. IgG isotype

testing also revealed no significant differences between anti-CS antibodies elicited by WHc-Mal5 and WHc-Mal-78-3T VLPs. This suggests that malaria-specific CD4+ T cells primed by immunization with the WHc-Mal-78-3T VLP may have contributed to the greater efficacy either indirectly by providing an additional source of T helper cell function or, more likely, by directly exerting a negative effect on liver stage development via cytokine production. Although the hybrid sporozoites used for challenge did not contain the Pf T cell domains engineered into the WHc-Mal-78-3T VLPs, the 3 T cell domains of *P. falciparum* and *P. berghei* share a significant degree of homology as shown in FIG. 10B. In any event, the superior performance of the WHc-Mal-78-3T VLP elevated this VLP to a primary vaccine candidate.

[00105] A WHcAg-CS VLP in alum elicits sterile immunity to blood stage malaria. WHc-Mal-78-3T performed well in terms of reducing parasite load in the liver after a 10,000 Pb/Pf sporozoite challenge (up to 99.98% reduction, FIG. 5B), however, to determine if this level of reduction in liver burden is sufficient to yield full protection from blood stage parasitemia an immunization/challenge experiment monitoring blood stage parasitemia as the final endpoint is required because a single surviving sporozoite infecting the liver can result in a blood stage infection [35]. For this experiment we modified WHc-Mal-78-3T by a point mutation (C61S) in the WHcAg, which eliminated the intermolecular disulfide bond at residue 61. The C61S mutation in WHcAg-hybrid VLPs was chosen because it can reduce anti-WHc (carrier-specific) antibody production and/or increase anti-insert antibody production.

[00106] Groups of 10 mice each were immunized and boosted with 100 µg of the WHc(C61S)-Mal-78-3T VLP either formulated in alum, alum+QS-21, or primed with an emulsion of Montanide ISA 720 (50%) and boosted in alum. The control group was primed with 100 µg of WHcAg (no insert) emulsified in Montanide ISA 720 and boosted in alum (FIG. 6A). Six weeks after the boost mice were challenged by exposure to the bites of 12 Pb/Pf-infected mosquitoes for 5 minutes. This method of challenge was chosen because it represents a more physiologically relevant route of infection as compared to i.v. injection of sporozoites. Blood was sampled over the next 14 days and examined for parasitemia (FIG. 6B). As shown in FIG. 6C, 10 of 10 WHcAg-immunized control mice became positive for blood stage malaria within a mean of 4.4 days. In contrast, 0 of 9 mice immunized with WHc(C61S)-Mal-78-3T formulated in alum+QS-21 became infected; 1 of 10 mice immunized in Montanide/alum became infected; and 2 of 10 mice immunized in alum

became infected. The 3 of 29 mice in the experimental groups that did become infected demonstrated delayed parasitemia (mean of 6.0 days), suggesting a possible elimination of 99% of sporozoites given that 90% elimination is required to obtain a one day delay in developing a patent blood stage infection. The serology of each group pre-challenge and of the survivors three months post-challenge is shown in Table 2. Although anti-CS Ab titers decreased over time, anti-CS Abs were still in excess of 1×10^6 endpoint titers three months post-challenge in all adjuvant groups. The apparent lack of a boost to the anti-CS Ab titers may reflect the low immunogenicity of the protein in the context of the parasite infection.

Table 1-2. Kinetics of IgG Ab titers through primary immunization (1°) with WHc(C61S)-Mal-78-3T, at the boost (2°) and at 3 months post-challenge.

Immunogen	Formulation		Endpoint Titer (1/dilution)			
			α -rCSP	α -NANP	α -NVDP	α -WHc
WHc(C61S)- Mal-78-3T	Alum	1°	82.5K	43K	5.5K	125K
		2°	4.7×10^6	4×10^6	900K	3.5×10^6
		3 mo post-challenge	2.2×10^6	1.6×10^6	540K	875K
WHc(C61S)- Mal-78-3T	Alum+QS-21	1°	103K	68K	13.5K	125K
		2°	4.5×10^6	4.8×10^6	1.5×10^6	3×10^6
		3 mo post-challenge	1.25×10^6	925K	242K	1.7×10^6
WHc(C61S)- Mal-78-3T	ISA-720 Alum	1°	183K	113K	17.6K	475K
		2°	4.3×10^6	4.3×10^6	1.3×10^6	2.6×10^6
		3 mo post-challenge	1.25×10^6	1.1×10^6	160K	708K
WHcAg	ISA-720 Alum	1°	0	0	0	625K
		2°	0	0	0	11.7×10^6
		3 mo post-challenge	na	na	na	na

Mean endpoint dilution titers from 8-10 mice in each group are shown.

[00107] *Preliminary evaluation of a VLP carrying P. vivax CS epitopes.* A hybrid WHcAg VLP carrying 2 copies each of both variants of type 1 (VK210) CS repeat epitopes from *P. vivax* parasites (SEQ ID NO:69) was constructed (WHc-Pv-78, also referred to as VLP-206). In vivo protective efficacy was evaluated using hybrid *P. berghei/P. vivax* (Pb/Pv) sporozoites expressing the repeat region of the *P. vivax* CS protein (both VK210 variants) [17]. Immunization with 2 doses of varying amounts of WHc-Pv-78 VLPs in either incomplete Freund's adjuvant (IFAd) or alum elicited high titer anti-CS PV repeat antibodies as detected on solid phase peptide and verified by IFA assay on Pb/Pv hybrid sporozoites (Table 3). Immunization with 100 μ g of WHc-Pv-78 in IFAd elicited extremely high titer anti-CS Pv repeat antibodies (1.5×10^8). This immunization schedule was chosen to examine

the protective efficacy of WHc-Pv-78 VLPs against experimental liver infection as well as blood stage infection with hybrid Pb/Pv sporozoites in mice. As shown in FIG. 7A, immunization with WHc-Pv-78 VLPs provided 99% protection in terms of parasite 18S rRNA copies detected in the liver compared to mice immunized with the WHcAg carrier after challenge with 10,000 Pb/Pv sporozoites. To determine if this level of reduction in liver parasite burden was sufficient to provide sterile immunity to blood stage infection, WHc-Pv-78 VLP-immunized and WHcAg-immunized mice were challenged by exposure to the bites of 10 Pb/Pv-infected mosquitoes for 5 minutes. Whereas 4 of 5 control mice became infected in a pre-patent period of 4.5 days, 0 of 4 WHc-Pv-78-immunized mice were infected over an observation period of 14 days (FIG. 7B). Given these positive protective efficacy results with VLP-206 and the sequence similarity of the VK-210 and VK-247 CS repeat sequences, the insertion of the VK-247 CS repeat sequence (SEQ ID NO:70) onto the WHcAg carrier is expected to elicit protective antibodies against the VK-247 strain of *P. vivax*. Immunization of subjects with an antigenic composition comprising a VLP with both CS repeats of a VK-210 strain and CS repeats of a VK-247 strain will increase the diversity of protective antibodies against *P. vivax*. Similarly, immunization of subjects with an antigenic composition comprising a first VLP with CS repeats of a VK-210 strain, and second VLP with CS repeats of a VK-247 strain, will also result in a broadly reactive antibody response against *P. vivax*.

Table 1-3. Immunogenicity of WHc-Pv-78 VLPs.

Immunogen	Adjuvant	Dose	1/2°	Antibody Titer (1/dilution)		
				α-WHc	α-Pv1a	IFA
WHc-Pv-78 n=9	Alum	100 µg	1°	80.5K	24.5K	-
		100 µg	2°	9.5x10 ⁶	2.2x10 ⁶	8.1K
WHc-Pv-78 n=3	iFAd	20 µg	1°	250K	250K	-
		10 µg	2°	3x10 ⁶	3x10 ⁶	-
WHc-Pv-78 n=8	iFAd	100 µg	1°	3x10 ⁶	9x10 ⁶	-
		100 µg	2°	6.5x10 ⁷	1.5x10 ⁸	72.9K
WHcAg n=10	iFAd	100 µg	1°	6x10 ⁶	0	-
		100 µg	2°	2.2x10 ⁸	0	0
Mab 2F2 (mg/ml)	-	-	-	0	45x10 ⁶	-

Mean endpoint dilution Ab titers shown. 1°, primary, 2°, secondary antisera. IFA assay used Pb/Pv dry sporozoites.

Discussion

[00108] An epitope-focused approach was utilized to present selected epitopes from the CS protein of the *P. falciparum* and *P. vivax* malaria parasites on the WHcAg carrier platform. Two repeat and three non-repeat B cell epitopes from the *P. falciparum* CS protein were inserted into the WHcAg carrier. Although all hybrid VLPs elicited high levels of anti-insert Abs, only hybrid VLPs carrying the CS repeat B cell epitopes (NANP and NVDP) provided significant protection of the liver (98%) against an experimental challenge with hybrid Pb/Pf sporozoites in mice. Whereas, anti-CS repeat and anti-CS non-repeat Abs bound dry Pb/Pf sporozoites, only anti-CS repeat Abs bound viable sporozoites. This data suggests that the three non-repeat B cell epitopes are poorly expressed or cryptic on viable sporozoites. Addition of three well-defined malaria-specific human T cell domains to the hybrid VLPs enhanced protective efficacy in the liver as well as primed malaria-specific CD4+ T cell cytokine production. However, immunization with hybrid VLPs carrying only the three malaria-specific T cell domains was unable to provide protection, indicating that anti-CS repeat Abs are necessary for protection. In fact, anti-CS repeat Abs are sufficient for protection against liver stage as well as blood stage infection as demonstrated by sterile immunity to blood stage infection following adoptive transfer of rabbit anti-VLP antiserum. Furthermore, active immunization with a hybrid VLP, designated WHc(C61S)-Mal-78-3T (VLP-162), elicited sterile immunity to blood stage infection in 26 of 29 mice and delayed parasitemia in the remaining three mice, depending on adjuvant formulation. The alum + QS-21 formulation was the most efficient adjuvant and yielded 100% protection from blood stage infection. The results indicate that immunization with an epitope-focused VLP containing selected B and T cell epitopes from the *P. falciparum* CS protein formulated in adjuvants acceptable for human use can elicit sterile immunity against blood stage malaria if sufficient anti-CS protective Abs are produced.

[00109] In this current study we developed a species variant of the HBcAg, the WHcAg, as a platform for *P. falciparum*/*P. vivax* CS epitopes in order to avoid the disadvantages of using a carrier derived from a human pathogen [36-38]. This is especially important for a malaria vaccine because HBV and malaria are co-endemic in many regions of the world and chronic HBV carriers are often immune tolerant to both HBcAg and HBsAg (note that the HBsAg is used as a carrier in the RTS,S vaccine). Additional modifications to the WHc(C61S)-Mal-78.3T vaccine candidate compared to ICC1132 are: the use of the full length WHcAg to accommodate the encapsidation of ssRNA as a TLR7 ligand, which enhances

immunogenicity [39]; incorporation of additional malaria-specific T cell domains; and mutation of the WHcAg cysteine 61, which eliminates intermolecular disulfide bonds common to both WHcAg and HBcAg. The C61S mutation in hybrid VLPs can reduce anti-WHc (carrier-specific) Ab production and/or increase anti-insert Ab production. For these reasons the WHcAg is a superior choice to the HBcAg as a VLP platform for malaria CS epitopes. Figure 12 provides a comparison of WHc(C61S)-Mal-78-3T (VLP-162) with ICC.1132.

[00110] A number of CS-based vaccines have been developed recently [40–43]. Typically, protective efficacy has been determined using different challenge methods and different chimeric rodent parasites, making comparisons difficult. For example, hybrid Pb/Pf parasites used herein express an extended CS repeat region from the Pf CS protein [16], whereas, other hybrid Pb/Pf parasites used for challenge experiments [40,42] contain the full-length Pf CS protein [44].

[00111] In the absence of head-to-head comparative studies to date, the WHc(C61S)-Mal-78-3T candidate embodies a number of unique characteristics that may be advantageous in comparison to other CS-vaccine candidates. The enhanced immunogenicity and protective efficacy of WHc(C61S)-Mal-78-3T suggests that the suboptimal performance of a preerythrocytic vaccine candidate is not likely due to the selection of the CS repeat region as a target or to a paucity of B cell epitopes, but rather to insufficient production of protective Abs. For example, the RTS,S vaccine shares similar CS-specific B and T cell epitopes with WHc(C61S)-Mal-78-3T but the carrier moieties are markedly different. WHc(C61S)-Mal-78-3T efficiently self-assembles into hybrid VLPs, which are stable even at 65°C, whereas the HBsAg-based RTS,S requires the addition of excess native HBsAg particles. Compared to the HBsAg, hepadnavirus nucleocapsids are inherently more immunogenic in mice and humans during natural infection or after immunization [45–48], are less susceptible to MHC restricted non-responsiveness and can function as T cell-independent immunogens [45,48]. Finally, use of the WHcAg would circumvent HBV-specific immune tolerance present in populations endemic for HBV that are often endemic for malaria as well [38]. As a practical matter, WHcAg-CS VLPs are produced in high yields in bacteria and are extremely heat stable, therefore, production costs are relatively low and no cold-chain is required. Figure 12 provides a comparison of WHc(C61S)-Mal-78-3T (VLP-162) with RTS,S.

Example 2 – Hybrid Woodchuck Hepadna Virus Core Antigens Containing A Malaria Non-Repeat CS Protein Epitope

[00112] The basic structure of the malaria circumsporozoite (CS) protein consists of an immunodominant, central repeat domain flanked by a highly charged N-terminal portion that binds heparin sulfate proteoglycans, contains a conserved proteolytic cleavage site and a C-terminal flanking region containing a type I thrombospondin repeat motif (Plassmeyer et al., J Biol Chem, 284:26951-26963, 2009). Recently mAb 5D5 was found to bind an epitope located in the N-terminal region of the CS protein (Esoinosa et al., J Infect Dis, 212:1111-1119, 2015). mAb 5D5 has several noteworthy characteristics. It binds an epitope mapped to CS(81-91), which is highly conserved. mAb 5D5 binds to live sporozoites and inhibits proteolytic processing at the N-terminus of the CS protein. Passive transfer of mAb 5D5 produces a 1-2 log reduction in parasite load within the liver after challenge with Pb-Pf sporozoites, which is equivalent to the standard, CS repeat-specific mAb 2A10. Importantly, combining mAb 5D5 and mAb 2A10 results in enhanced protection compared to either mAb alone.

[00113] Given these impressive characteristics, we endeavored to develop a VLP capable of eliciting a 5D5-like antibody response. Previously, the N-terminal region has been described as immunologically inert, cryptic and inaccessible due to reversible conformational changes that mask some epitopes until the sporozoite interacts with the hepatocyte membrane. We addressed the problem of accessibility of the 5D5 epitope by presenting it on the exposed loop or N-terminus of the WHcAg. Unless otherwise noted, materials and methods as described in Example 1 were employed in Example 2. Interestingly, inserting CS(81-91) on VLPs was immunogenic, but the fine specificity of the Abs produced differed from that of 5D5.

[00114] We produced 10 VLPs carrying various lengths of the mAb 5D5 epitope from 72-94, 81-91, to 81-97, inserted at various positions in the WHcAg (78, 81, N-Terminus) (see Table 2-1). mAb 5D5 bound all 10 solid phase VLPs to varying degrees (Table 2-1 column a). The VLPs were relatively immunogenic and raised anti-CS Ab with end point titers between 1:125,000-1:3x10⁶ after 2 doses (Table 2-1 column b). The anti-VLP Abs inhibited mAb 5D5 binding of CS (Table 2-1 column c). All anti-VLP Abs recognized sporozoites in immunofluorescence assays (IFA) (Table 2-1 column d). However, when the anti-VLP antisera were tested for protective efficacy by adoptive transfer into mice challenged with Pb/Pf transgenic sporozoites, protection of the liver from infection varied from 0-65%

reduction in parasite load in the liver (Table 2-1 column e). VLP-245 elicited the greatest protective efficacy (i.e., 65% reduction in liver parasite load). Therefore, three additional VLPs consisting of variants of VLP-245 were produced bearing CS residues 82-91 with one, two, or four glycine substitutions for K85, K85/P89, and K85/L86/K88/P89, respectively (SEQ ID NOs:62-64). The glycines substituted for non-essential, non-contact residues of the 5D5 Mab epitope. These epitope-modified hybrid, WHcAg-hAg VLPs are expected to elicit a polyclonal antibody response with greater protective efficacy than the corresponding hybrid, WHcAg-hAg VLPs lacking epitope modifications. Those VLPs capable of eliciting sera resulting in 50% or greater reduction in parasite load in the liver upon adoptive transfer are suitable for use in preferred antigenic compositions and vaccines of the present disclosure. Similarly, VLPs comprising the insert amino acid sequence and position combination of the exemplary VLPs having a desirable level of liver protective efficacy are suitable for use in preferred antigenic compositions and vaccines of the present disclosure.

[00115] Surprised by the partial protective efficacy given that all anti-VLP Abs bound CS and competed with mAb 5D5 for binding to CS, we examined the fine specificity of the anti-VLP Abs compared to mAb 5D5 using a panel of alanine substituted peptides. The contact residues for mAb 5D5 were: D⁸², N⁸³, E⁸⁴, R⁸⁷, K⁹⁰, H⁹¹. Note that of the six lysines only K⁹⁰ was critical for mAb 5D5 binding. Analysis of anti-VLP sera revealed that fine specificity mapping was not as definitive, most likely due to the polyclonal nature of the anti-VLP sera. Nevertheless, distinct differences were apparent between anti-VLP sera and mAb 5D5. For example, the six residues critical for mAb 5D5 binding were variable and much less critical for anti-VLP sera binding as shown in Table 2-2. Interestingly, the inverse was true for anti-VLP and mAb 5D5 binding to the lysine-substituted peptides. Whereas, K⁹⁰ was the only lysine critical for mAb 5D5 binding, it was not necessary for binding by any of the anti-VLP sera, and conversely, the other five lysines were important for anti-VLP binding but not for mAb 5D5 binding. Note that the peptide in which five of the six lysines were substituted by alanines (except K⁹⁰) was recognized by mAb 5D5 (41% of WT peptide) and minimally by two anti-VLP sera and not at all by the other eight anti-VLP sera. Therefore, to more faithfully mimic the fine specificity of mAb 5D5, mutant CS(81-91) sequences were designed by substituting the five lysines with alanines to “re-direct” antibody production to the six known contact residues of mAb 5D5. The amino acid sequences of the multiply-substituted inserts and insert positions within the WHcAg are shown in Table 2-3.

Table 2-1. Initial 5D5 VLP Library

VLP	Insert & position	VLP antigens	Anti-VLP Abs			
		SD6 (ng/ml) Direct Binding to VLP (a)	α -CSP titer (1/dil) (b)	α -VLP inhib SD6-CSP 50% binding (c)	IFA (d)	1:1 Spzt Liver Load (0.25-0.3ml passive) (e)
VLP245	81-91 @78	2.0	3M	1:130K	1:900	66%
VLP248	77-91 @78	4.0	625K	1:30K	1:2700	--
VLP248	81-97 @78	90	125K	1.3K	1:900	0
VLP249	81-91 @78	18	625K	1.5K	1:2700	0
VLP250	77-91 @78	460	625K	1:25K	1:2700	37%
VLP251	81-94 @78	2300	125K	1.5K	1:900	20%
VLP255	81-94 @81	0.7	625K	1:30K	1:2700	85%
VLP256	81-97 @81	0.7	625K	1:150K	1:900	57%
VLP257	81-94 @N-term	0.7	625K	1:25K	1:900	55%
K-rich	72-94 @78	4.0	625K	1:25K	1:900	50%

Table 2-2. Anti-CS(81-95) VLP Antibody Specificity

Peptide Panel	anti-SD6 VLP Sera										K-rich	Mean SD6
	245	246	248	250	248	251	255	256	257	K-rich		
EDNEALRPFPHKHLKQP	+	+	+++	+	+++	++	+++	+++	++	-	-	+
EDNEALRPFPHKLLKQP	-	+	+++	-	++	+	++	++	++	-	-	-
EDNEALRPFPHKPLKQP	+	+	++	+	++	++	+	+	-	-	-	+++
EDNEALRPFPHKSLKQP	+++	+++	+++	++	+++	+++	+++	+++	+++	+++	+++	-
EDNEALRPFPHKTLKQP	+++	+++	+++	+++	+++	+++	+++	+++	+++	+++	+++	-
EDNEALRPFPHKVLKQP	+++	++	++	++	++	++	++	+++	+++	+++	+++	+++
EDNEALRPFPHKWLKQP	++	+	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	+++
EDNEALRPFPHKXALKQP	-	-	-	-	+	+	-	-	-	-	-	++

The amino acid sequences of the CS(81-95) peptide panel are set forth as SEQ ID NOs:72-79.

Table 2-3. Subsequent 5D5 VLP Library With Multiply-Substituted Inserts

Insert Name	Insert Sequence	SEQ ID NO:	Position	VLP
CSP(81-97)2KA	EDNEALRAPKHKLLKQP	80	81	307
			N-term	312
CSP(81-97)3KA	EDNEALRAPKHKALKQP	81	81	308
			N-term	313
CSP(81-97)4KA93	EDNEALRAPKHAALKQP	82	81	309
			N-term	314
CSP(81-97)4KA95	EDNEALRAPKHAKLAQP	83	81	310
			N-term	315
CSP(81-97)5KA	EDNEALRAPKHAALAQP	84	81	311
			N-term	316

[00116] VLP-313, VLP-314, and VLP-316 have been produced. These VLPs contain three, four and five K-to-A substitutions within aa 81-91, respectively, inserted at the N-terminus of WHcAg (Table 2-3). Although these VLPs may elicit alanine-dependent antibodies in addition to mAb 5D5-like antibodies, the alanine-dependent antibodies are less likely to cross-react with native CS and most importantly less likely to block mAb 5D5-like antibody activity. Preliminary evidence indicates that VLP-313, VLP-314, and VLP-316 are all recognized by mAb 5D5 and inhibit mAb 5D5 binding to CS equivalently to VLP-257, which contains the WT 81-94 sequence at the N-terminus of WHcAg. Importantly, anti-VLP-257 sera binding to CS is only inhibited by VLP-257 and not by VLP-313, VLP-314, and VLP-316. This indicates that while VLP-313, VLP-314, and VLP-316 have preserved the mAb 5D5 epitope, the lysine-dependent epitope(s) recognized by the polyclonal anti-VLP-257 sera have been functionally eliminated. Therefore, immunization with VLP-313, VLP-314, and VLP-316 is likely to elicit mAb 5D5-like antibodies as opposed to the lysine-dependent antibody responses elicited by full length CS or the VLPs carrying the non-mutated 81-91/97 sequences.

Example 3 – Hybrid Woodchuck Hepadna Virus Core Antigens Containing A Malaria RH Epitope

[00117] Pf reticulocyte-binding protein homolog 5 (RH5) is a recently identified merozoite protein. The RH5 protein is known to mediate a critical non-redundant interaction with the human red blood cell surface protein basigin during invasion (Crosnier et al., Nature, 480:534-537, 2011). Antibodies induced by RH5 in mice and rabbits block erythrocyte invasion more efficiently than antibodies to all other known antigens and cross-inhibit all strains and field isolates tested to date. Most recently, a recombinant RH5 vaccine protected monkeys against a virulent heterologous *P. falciparum* challenge and the protection was associated with anti-RH5 Ab titer and in vitro parasite-neutralizing activity, indicating that the growth inhibition assay will be useful in predicting in vivo efficacy (Douglas et al., Cell Host Microbe, 17:130-139, 2015).

[00118] Several linear RH5 epitopes have been identified that are recognized by mAbs capable of blocking the RH5-basigin interaction and erythrocyte invasion in vitro. The minimal specificity of mAb QA5 was defined as RH5(200-213) and the minimal specificity of mAb 9AD4 was defined as RH5(353-361) (Williams, et al., PLoS Pathogen, 8:e1002991, 2012). Additionally, the minimal specificity of mAb 5A08 was defined as a mimetope

sequence present in native RH5(25-36) (Ord et al., *Maral J*, 13:326, 2014). Based on the known neutralizing capabilities of these three mAbs, the minimal epitopes are displayed on the WHcAg carrier platform (see Table 4) as described for the CS-specific epitopes. Initial ELISAs of bacterial lysates using these three mAbs represent the first screen to determine WHcAg expression levels (WHc-conformation-independent mAb), VLP assembly (WHc-conformation-dependent mAb) and RH5 epitope antigenicity (RH5 mAb). Purified WHc-RH5 hybrid VLPs are also tested in a growth inhibition assay.

[00119] In a preliminary experiment the RH5(25-36) epitope inserted onto the WHcAg (VLP-270) elicited anti-RH5 antibodies capable of 75% inhibition in the growth inhibition assay at an IgG concentration of 1.0 mg/ml. Therefore, the presentation of these RH5 epitopes on hybrid VLPs is expected to yield candidates effective against the blood stage.

[00120] The disclosure of US Publication No. 2016-0022801 of Milich and Whitacre is hereby incorporated by reference in its entirety. In particular, the examples of US Publication No. 2016-0022801, are hereby incorporated by reference.

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EXEMPLARY EMBODIMENTS

1. An antigenic composition comprising a hybrid woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigen, wherein

the hybrid core antigen is a fusion protein comprising a malaria antigen and a woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigen,

the woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigen comprises the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO:12 or 14

the malaria antigen comprises a B cell domain of from 4 to 60 amino acids in length and a T cell domain of from 8 to 120 amino acids in length,

the B cell domain is inserted at a first position and the T cell domain is inserted at a second position, and the first position is not adjacent to the second position within the core antigen, and

the fusion protein is capable of assembling as a hybrid virus-like particle (VLP).

2. The antigenic composition of embodiment 1, wherein the first position is an internal position of the core antigen selected from the group consisting of 61, 71, 72, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85 and 92 as numbered according to SEQ ID NO:1, or wherein the first position is at position 78.

3. The antigenic composition of embodiment 1 or embodiment 2, wherein the second position is a terminal position of the core antigen selected from the group consisting of N-terminal, 149 (truncated C-terminal), 187 and 188 as numbered according to SEQ ID NO:1, or wherein the second position is at position 188.

4. The antigenic composition of embodiment 1, wherein the first position is 78 and the second position is 188.

5. The antigen composition of any of the preceding embodiments, wherein the core antigen is a modified woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigen comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO:13, but does not comprise SEQ ID NO:1 or SEQ ID NO:11.

6. The antigenic composition of embodiment 5, wherein the modified woodchuck hepadnavirus comprises one of the amino acid sequences selected from the group consisting of SEQ ID NO:2, SEQ ID NO:3, SEQ ID NO:4, SEQ ID NO:5, SEQ ID NO:6 and SEQ ID NO:7, or wherein the modified woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigen comprises the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO:4 or a variant of SEQ ID NO:4 with a R164G substitution.

7. The antigenic composition of embodiment 5, wherein the modified woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigen comprises one, two, three, four or five modifications of the group consisting of:

$\Delta 2$ = WHcAg/L21A, D26A, L27A, N28A, A29V, V31A substitutions;

$\Delta 3$ = WHcAg/N136P, A137P substitutions;

$\Delta 4$ = WHcAg/C61S substitution;

$\Delta 5$ = WHcAg/replacement of residues 62-85, 65-88 or 64-87 with a heterologous antigen;

$\Delta 6$ = WHcAg/R150A, R151A, R152A, R156A, R159A, R162A, R163A, R164A, R169A, R170A, R171A, R177A, R178A, R179A, R180A substitutions; and

$\Delta 7$ = WHcAg/N75A, I76A, T77A, S78A, E79A, Q80A, V81A, R82A, T83A substitutions;

wherein the modifications are numbered according to SEQ ID NO:1.

8. The antigenic composition of any of the preceding embodiments, wherein the malaria antigen comprises a fragment of a circumsporozoite antigen of one or more parasite species selected from the group consisting of *P. falciparum*, *P. vivax*, *P. ovale* and *P. malariae*.

9. The antigenic composition of any of the preceding embodiments, wherein one or both of the B cell domain and the T cell domain is a fusion protein comprising fragments of two, three, four or five different polypeptides.

10. The antigenic composition of any of the preceding embodiments, wherein the B cell domain comprises the amino acid sequence of one or more of the group consisting of SEQ ID NOs:24-40 and 57-71, or wherein the B cell domain comprises the amino acid sequence of one or more of the group consisting of SEQ ID NOs:24-40.

11. The antigenic composition of any of the preceding embodiments, wherein the T cell domain comprises the amino acid sequence selected from the group consisting of SEQ ID NOs:41-50.

10. The antigenic composition of any of the preceding embodiments, wherein the B cell domain comprises the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO:24 or is at least 95% identical thereto.

11. The antigenic composition of any of the preceding embodiments, wherein the T cell domain comprises the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO:49 or is at least 95% identical thereto.

12. The antigenic composition of any of the preceding embodiments, wherein the T cell domain is inserted at the carboxy-terminal end of the core antigen as a linker/insert combination according to the formula [D]y[I]z-X_m in which both y and z are in integers independently selected from the group consisting of 0, 1, and 2, and wherein X_m is the T cell domain.

13. The antigenic composition of any of the preceding embodiments, wherein the hybrid woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigen comprises the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO:20 (VLP-162) or is at least 95% identical thereto.

14. The antigenic composition of any one of embodiments 8 to 13, wherein the hybrid VLP competes with a native, or recombinant soluble form of the circumsporozoite protein for binding to a circumsporozoite protein-specific antibody.

15. The antigenic composition of any one of embodiments 8 to 14, wherein the hybrid VLP elicits a high titer, antibody response against the circumsporozoite protein or against a sporozoite of a malaria parasite that expresses the circumsporozoite protein.

16. The antigenic composition of any one of embodiments 8 to 15, wherein the hybrid VLP elicits a measurable neutralizing antibody response against a sporozoite of a malaria parasite that expresses the circumsporozoite protein.

17. The antigenic composition of any one of embodiments 8 to 16, wherein the hybrid VLP elicits a protective immune response against blood stage malaria parasite infection.

18. The antigenic composition of any one of embodiments 8 to 17, wherein the hybrid VLP elicits a protective immune response against liver stage malaria parasite infection.

19. An antigenic composition comprising a hybrid woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigen, wherein

the hybrid core antigen is a fusion protein comprising a malaria antigen and a woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigen,

the woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigen comprises the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO:12 or 14,

the malaria antigen comprises a B cell domain of from 4 to 60 amino acids and length,

the B cell domain is inserted at a position of the core antigen selected from the group consisting of 1, 61, 71, 72, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85, 92, 149, 187, and 188, as numbered according to SEQ ID NO:1, and

the fusion protein is capable of assembling as a hybrid virus-like particle (VLP).

20. The antigenic composition of embodiment 19, wherein the position is an internal position of the core antigen selected from the group consisting of 61, 71, 72, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85 and 92 as numbered according to SEQ ID NO:1, or wherein the position is at 78.

21. The antigen composition of embodiment 19 or embodiment 20, wherein the core antigen is a modified woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigen comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO:13, but does not comprise SEQ ID NO:1 or SEQ ID NO:11.

22. The antigenic composition of embodiment 21, wherein the modified woodchuck hepadnavirus comprises one of the amino acid sequences selected from the group consisting of SEQ ID NO:2, SEQ ID NO:3, SEQ ID NO:4, SEQ ID NO:5, SEQ ID NO:6 and SEQ ID NO:7, or wherein the modified woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigen comprises the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO:4 or a variant of SEQ ID NO:4 with a R164G substitution.

23. The antigenic composition of embodiment 21, wherein the modified woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigen comprises one, two, three, four or five modifications of the group consisting of:

$\Delta 2$ = WHcAg/L21A, D26A, L27A, N28A, A29V, V31A substitutions;

$\Delta 3$ = WHcAg/N136P, A137P substitutions;

$\Delta 4$ = WHcAg/C61S substitution;

$\Delta 5$ = WHcAg/replacement of residues 62-85, 65-88 or 64-87 with a heterologous antigen;

$\Delta 6$ = WHcAg/R150A, R151A, R152A, R156A, R159A, R162A, R163A, R164A, R169A, R170A, R171A, R177A, R178A, R179A, R180A substitutions; and

$\Delta 7$ = WHcAg/N75A, I76A, T77A, S78A, E79A, Q80A, V81A, R82A, T83A substitutions;

wherein the modifications are numbered according to SEQ ID NO:1.

24. The antigenic composition of any one of embodiments 19-23, wherein the malaria antigen comprises a fragment of a reticulocyte-binding protein homolog 5 (RH5) of one or more parasite species selected from the group consisting of *P. falciparum*, *P. vivax*, *P. ovale* and *P. malariae*.

25. The antigenic composition of embodiment 24, wherein the B cell domain comprises the amino acid sequence of one or more of the group consisting of SEQ ID NOs:37, 38, 39, 40, 66, 67 and 68.

26. The antigenic composition of embodiment 24, wherein the B cell domain comprises the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO:37 or is at least 95% identical thereto.

27. The antigenic composition of embodiment 24, wherein the hybrid woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigen comprises the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO:87 (VLP-270) or is at least 95% identical thereto.

28. The antigenic composition of any one of embodiments 19-23, wherein the malaria antigen comprises a fragment of a circumsporozoite antigen of one or more parasite species selected from the group consisting of *P. falciparum*, *P. vivax*, *P. ovale* and *P. malariae*.

29. The antigenic composition of embodiment 28, wherein the B cell domain comprises the amino acid sequence of one of the group consisting of SEQ ID NOs:33-36, 57-65 and 71.

30. The antigenic composition of embodiment 28, wherein the B cell domain comprises the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO:33 or is at least 95% identical thereto.

31. The antigenic composition of embodiment 28, wherein the hybrid woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigen comprises the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO:86 (VLP-245) or is at least 95% identical thereto.

32. The antigenic composition of any one of embodiments 19-23, wherein the malaria antigen comprises a fragment of a circumsporozoite antigen of *P. vivax*.

33. The antigenic composition of embodiment 32, wherein the B cell domain comprises the amino acid sequence of one or both of SEQ ID NO:69 and SEQ ID NO:70.

34. The antigenic composition of embodiment 32, wherein the B cell domain comprises the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO:69 or is at least 95% identical thereto.

35. The antigenic composition of embodiment 32, wherein the hybrid woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigen comprises the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO:85 (VLP-206) or is at least 95% identical thereto.

36. The antigenic composition of any one of the preceding embodiments, wherein the composition comprises a combination of two, three, four, or five different hybrid VLPs.

37. The antigenic composition of embodiment 36, wherein the combination of different hybrid VLPs comprises a first VLP and a second VLP, wherein the first VLP is of the antigen composition of embodiment 1, the second VLP is of the antigenic composition of embodiment 24.

38. The antigen composition of embodiment 36, wherein the combination of different hybrid VLPs comprises a first VLP and a second VLP, wherein the first VLP is of the antigen composition of embodiment 1, and the second VLP is of the antigenic composition of embodiment 32.

37. The antigenic composition of embodiment 36, wherein the combination of different hybrid VLPs comprises a first VLP, a second VLP, and a third VLP, wherein the first VLP is of the antigen composition of embodiment 1, the second VLP is of the antigenic composition of embodiment 24, and the third VLP is of the antigenic composition of embodiment 32.

38. The antigenic composition of embodiment 36, wherein the combination of different hybrid VLPs comprises a first VLP, a second VLP, and a third VLP, wherein the first VLP is of the antigen composition of embodiment 13, the second VLP is of the antigenic composition of embodiment 27, and the third VLP is of the antigenic composition of embodiment 35.

39. The antigenic composition of embodiment 36, wherein the combination of different hybrid VLPs comprises a first VLP and a second VLP, and a third VLP, wherein the first VLP comprises a fragment of a *P. falciparum* circumsporozoite antigen, the second VLP comprises a fragment of a *P. vivax* circumsporozoite antigen, and the third VLP comprises a fragment of a *P. falciparum* reticulocyte-binding protein homolog 5.

40. A vaccine comprising the antigenic composition of any one of the preceding embodiments, and an adjuvant.

41. A method for eliciting a malaria antigen-reactive antibody response, comprising administering to a mammal an effective amount of the vaccine of embodiment 40.

42. A method for reducing malaria parasite infection or preventing malaria in a mammal in need thereof, comprising administering to the mammal an effective amount of the vaccine of embodiment 40 according to a vaccine regimen comprising an initial immunization and one or more subsequent immunizations.

43. A polynucleotide encoding the hybrid woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigen of any one of embodiments 1 to 35.

44. An expression construct comprising the polynucleotide of embodiment 43 in operable combination with a promoter.

45. An expression vector comprising the expression construct of embodiment 44, for expression of the hybrid woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigen in bacterial cells or yeast cells.

46. A host cell comprising the expression vector of embodiment 45.

47. A method for screening anti-malaria antigen antibodies comprising:

- a) measuring binding of an antibody or fragment thereof to the hybrid woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigen of any one of embodiments 1 to 35;
- b) measuring binding of the antibody or fragment thereof to a woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigen devoid of the malaria antigen; and
- c) determining that the antibody or fragment thereof is specific for the malaria antigen when the antibody or fragment thereof binds to the hybrid core antigen but not the core antigen devoid of the malaria antigen.

SEQUENCES (not already listed above)

SEQ ID NO:1

>WHcAg full length

MDIDPYKEFGSSYQLLNFLPLDFFPDNLALVDTATALYEEELTGREHCSPHHTAIRQALVCWDELTKLIAW
MSSNITSEQVRTIIIVNHVNDTWGLKVRQSLWFHLSCLTFGQHTVQEFVLSFGVWIRTPAPYRPPNAPILST
LPEHTVIRRRGGARASRSPRRRTPSPRRRRSQSPRRRRSQSPSANC

SEQ ID NO:2

>WHcAg Δ2

MDIDPYKEFGSSYQLLNFLPADFFPAAAVLADTATALYEEELTGREHCSPHHTAIRQALVCWDELTKLIAW
MSSNITSEQVRTIIIVNHVNDTWGLKVRQSLWFHLSCLTFGQHTVQEFVLSFGVWIRTPAPYRPPNAPILST
LPEHTVIRRRGGARASRSPRRRTPSPRRRRSQSPRRRRSQSPSANC

SEQ ID NO:3
 >WHcAg Δ3
 MDIDPYKEFGSSYQLLNFLPLDFFPDLNALVDTATALYEEELTGREHCSPHHTAIRQALVCWDELTKLIAW
 MSSNITSEQVRTIIIVNHVNDTWGLKVRQSLWFHLSCLTFGQHTVQEFVLSFGVWIRTPAPYRPPPPP ILST
 LPEHTVIRRRGGARASRSPRRRTPSPRRRRSQSPRRRRSQSP SANC

SEQ ID NO:4
 >WHcAg Δ4
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 MSSNITSEQVRTIIIVNHVNDTWGLKVRQSLWFHLSCLTFGQHTVQEFVLSFGVWIRTPAPYRPPNAP ILST
 LPEHTVIRRRGGARASRSPRRRTPSPRRRRSQSPRRRRSQSP SANC

SEQ ID NO:5
 >WHcAg Δ5
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 XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXHVNDTWGLKVRQSLWFHLSCLTFGQHTVQEFVLSFGVWIRTPAPYRPPNAP ILST
 LPEHTVIRRRGGARASRSPRRRTPSPRRRRSQSPRRRRSQSP SANC

SEQ ID NO:6
 >WHcAg Δ6
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 LPEHTVIAAAGGAAASASPAAATPSPAAARSQSPAAAASQSP SANC

SEQ ID NO:7
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 LPEHTVIRRRGGARASRSPRRRTPSPRRRRSQSPRRRRSQSP SANC

SEQ ID NO:8
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SEQ ID NO:9
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 LPEHTVIRRRGSARVRSPPRRRTPSPRRRRSQSPRRRRSQSPASNC

SEQ ID NO:10
 >HBcAg
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 VGVNLEDPASRDVVS YVNTNMGLKFRQLLWFHLSCLTFGRET VIEYLVSGVWIRTPPAYRPPNAP ILST
 LPETTIVRRRGRSPRRRTPSPRRRRSQSPRRRRSQSRESQC

SEQ ID NO:11
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 LPEHTVI

SEQ ID NO:12

>WHcAg dB truncated (X is any amino acid or missing)
MDIDPYKEFG SSYQLLNFLP XDFFPXXXXL XDTATALYEE ELTGREHCSP HHTAIRQALV
XXXXXXXXXX XXXXXXXXXXXX XXXXXXXXHVN DTWGLKVRQS LWFHLSCLTF GQHTVQEFV
SFGVWIRTPA PYRPPXXPIL STLPEHTVIX XXXXXXXXXXXX XXXXXXXXXXXX XXXXXXXXXXXX
XXXXXXXXXX

SEQ ID NO:13

>WHcAg dB full length (X is any amino acid or missing)
MDIDPYKEFG SSYQLLNFLP XDFFPXXXXL XDTATALYEE ELTGREHCSP HHTAIRQALV
XXXXXXXXXX XXXXXXXXXXXX XXXXXXXXHVN DTWGLKVRQS LWFHLSCLTF GQHTVQEFV
SFGVWIRTPA PYRPPXXPIL STLPEHTVIX XXGGAXASXS PXXTPSPXX XRSQSPXXXX
SQSPSANC

SEQ ID NO:14

>WHcAg hybrid dB and dC
MDIDPYKEFG SSYQLLNFLP XDFFPXXXXL XDTATALYEE ELTGREHCSP HHTAIRQALV
XXXXXXXXXX XXXXXXXXXXXX XXXXXXXXHVN DTWGLKVRQS LWFHLSCLTF GQHTVQEFV
SFGVWIRTPA PYRPPXXPIL STLPEHTVIX XXGGAXASXS PXXTPSPXX XRSQSPXXXX
SQSPSANK

SEQ ID NO:15

>WHcAg CDS
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TTGCTCTCCGCACCATAACAGCTATTAGACAAGCTTTAGTATGCTGGGATGAATTAACATAAATTGATAGCT
TGGATGAGCTCTAACATAACTTCTGAACAAGTAAGAACAATCATAGTAAATCATGTCAATGATACCTGGG
GACTTAAGGTGAGACAAAGTTTATGGTTTCATTTGTCTGCTCACTTTTGGACAACATACAGTTCAAGA
ATTTTTAGTAAGTTTTGGAGTATGGATCAGAACTCCAGCTCCATATAGACCTCCTAATGCACCCATTCTC
TCGACTCTTCCGGAACATACAGTCATTAGGAGAAGAGGAGGTGCAAGAGCTTCTAGGTCCCCCAGAAGAC
GCACTCCCTCTCCTCGCAGGAGAAGATCTCAATCACCGCGTCGCAGACGCTCTCAATCTCCATCTGCCAA
CTGCTGA

SEQ ID NO:16

>WHV genome
1 aattcggggac ataccacgtg gtttagttcc gcctcaaaact ccaacaaatc gagatcaagg
61 gagaaagcct actcctccaa ctccacctct aagagatact cacccccact taactatgaa
121 aatcagact tttcatctcc aggggttcgt agacggatta cgagacttga caacaacgga
181 acgccaacac aatgcctatg gagatccttt tacaacacta agccctgcyg ttcctactgt
241 atccaccata ttgtctcctc cctcgacgac tggggaccct gcactgtcac cggagatgtc
301 accatcaagt ctctaggac tctcgcagg attacaggtg gtgtatttct tgtggacaaa
361 aatcctaaca atagctcaga atctagattg gtgggtggact tctctcagtt ttccaggggg
421 cataccagag tgcactggcc aaaattcgca gttccaaact tgcaaacact tgccaacctc
481 ctgtccacca acttgcaatg gctttcgttg gatgtatctg cggcgtttta tcatatacct
541 attagtcctg ctgctgtgcc tcatcttctt gttggttctc ctggactgga aaggtttaat
601 acctgtctgt cctcttcaac ccacaacaga aacaacagtc aattgcagac aatgcacaat
661 ctctgcacaa gacatgtata ctctcctta ctggtgtgtt ttaaaccta cggcaggaaa
721 ttgcacttgt tggcccatcc ctctcatcat ggcttttagga aattacctat gggagtgggc
781 cttagcccgt ttctcttggc tcaatttact agtgcccttg cttcaatggt taggaggaat
841 ttccctcatt gcgtggtttt tgcttatatg gatgatttg ttttgggggc ccgcaactct
901 gagcatctta ccgccattta ttcccatatt tgttctggtt ttcttgattt gggatatacat
961 ttgaatgtca ataaaacaaa atgggtggggc aatcatctac atttcatggg atatgtgatt
1021 actagttcag gtgtattgcc acaagacaaa catgttaaga aaatttcccg ttatttgcgc
1081 tctgttcctg ttaatcaacc totggattac aaaatttgtg aaagattgac tggattctct
1141 aactatgttg ctcttttac gctatgtgga tacgctgctt taatgccttt taatcatgct
1201 attacttccc gtacggcttt cattttctcc tecttgata aatcctggtt gctgtctctt
1261 tatgaggagt tgtggcccg tgtcaggcaa cgtggcgtgg tgtgcactgt gtttgctgac
1321 gcaaccccca ctggttgggg cattgccacc acctatcaac tctttcccg gactttcgt

```

1381 ttccccctcc ctattgccac ggcggaactc attgccgcct gccttgcccg ctgctggaca
1441 ggggctcggc tgttggggcac tgacaattcc gtgggtgtgt cggggaagct gacgtccttt
1501 ccatggctgc tcgcctgtgt tgccaactgg attctgcgcg ggacgtcctt ctgctacgct
1561 ccttcggccc tcaatccagc ggaccttcc tcccggggcc tgctgccggt tctgcccct
1621 cttccgctc ttcgccttcg ccctcagaag agtcggatct ccctttgggc cgctccccg
1681 cctgtttcgc ctccgctcc ggtccgtgtt gcttggctct cacctgtgca gaattgcgaa
1741 ccatggattc caccgtgaac tttgtctcct ggcatgcaaa tcgtcaactt ggcattgcaa
1801 gtaaggacct ttggactcct tatataaaag atcaattatt aactaaatgg gaggagggca
1861 gcattgatcc tagattatca atatttgtat taggaggctg taggcataaa tgcattgctc
1921 ttctgtaacc atgtatcttt ttcacctgtg ccttggtttt gectgtgttc catgtcctac
1981 ttttcaagcc tccaagctgt gccttggatg gctttggggc atggacatag atccctataa
2041 agaatttggg tcatcttatc agttgttgaa ttttcttct ttggacttct ttctgacct
2101 taatgctttg gtggacactg ctactgcctt gtatgaagaa gagctaaca gtagggaaca
2161 ttgctctccg caccatacag ctattagaca agctttagta tgctgggatg aattaactaa
2221 attgatagct tggatgagct ctaacataac ttctgaacaa gtaagaacaa tcatagtaaa
2281 tcatgtcaat gatacctggg gacttaagggt gagacaaagt ttatggtttc atttgtcatg
2341 tctcactttt ggacaacata cagttcaaga atttttagta agttttggag tatggatcag
2401 aactccagct ccatatagac ctccaatgac acccattctc tcgactctc cggaacatac
2461 agtcattagg agaagaggag gtgcaagagc ttctagggtc cccagaagac gcaactccctc
2521 tcctcgcagg agaagatctc aatcaccgag tcgcagagc tctcaatctc catctgcaa
2581 ctgctgatct tcaatgggta cataaaacta atgctattac aggtctttac tctaaccaag
2641 ctgctcagtt caatccgat tggattcaac ctgagtttcc tgaacttcat ttacataatg
2701 atttaattca aaaattgcaa cagtattttg gtcctttgac tataaatgaa aagagaaaat
2761 tgcaattaaa ttttctgccc agatttttcc ccaaagctac taaatattc ctttaatta
2821 aaggcataaa aaacaattat cctaattttg ctttagaaca tttctttgct accgcaaatt
2881 atttgtggac tttatgggaa gctggaattt tgtatttaag gaagaatcaa acaactttga
2941 cttttaaagg taaaccatat tcttgggaac acagacagct agtgcaacat aatgggcaac
3001 aacataaaaag tcaccttcaa tcagacaaa atagcagcat ggtggcctgc agtgggcaac
3061 tattacacaa ccacttatcc tcagaatcag tcagtgtttc aaccaggaat ttatcaaaca
3121 acatctctga taaatcccaa aaatcaacaa gaactggact ctgttcttat aaacagatac
3181 aaacagatag actggaacac ttggcaagga tttctgtgg atcaaaaatt accattggctc
3241 agcaggggac ctccccaaa accttatata aatcaatcag ctcaaacttt cgaaatcaaa
3301 cctgggccta taatagttcc cgg

```

SEQ ID NO:17
>internal linker/insert combination
GIL-Xn-L
where X is any amino acid, n is 60 or less

SEQ ID NO:18
>N-terminal linker
WLWG

SEQ ID NO:19
>Malaria epitope
NANP NVDP NANP NANP NANP

SEQ ID NO:20
>VLP-162
MDIDPYKEFGSSYQLLNFLPLDFFPDNLALVDTATALYEEELTGREHCSPHHTAIRQALV
SWDELTKLIAWMSSNITSGILNANPNVDPNANPNANPNANPLEQVRTIIIVNHVNDTWGLK
VRQSLWFHLSCLTFGQHTVQEFVSVFGVWIRTPAPYRPPNAPILSTLPEHTVIRRRGGAR
ASRSPRRGTPSPRRRRSQSPRRRRSQSPANCDIEYLNKIQNSLSTEWSPCSVTSGNGIQ
VRIKPGSANKPKDELDDYENDIEKKICKMEKCSSV

SEQ ID NO:21

>Hybrid CSP

MKKCTILVVA SLLLVNSLLP GYGQNKSIQA QRNLNELCYN EGNDNKLYHV 50
 LNSKNGKIYN RNTVNRLAD APEGKKNEKK NEKIERNK KL KQPPPPPNPN 100
 DPPPNDPNDP PPPNDPPP PNPNDPPP ANDPPPNAN DPAPPNANDP 150
 APPNANDPAP PNANDPAPPN ANDPPPNPN DPAPPNANDP PPPNDPAP 200
 PQGNNNPQPQ PRPQPQPQPQ PQQPQPQPQ PRPQPQPQPG GNNNNKNNNN 250
 DDSYIPSAEK ILEYLNKIQN SLSTEWSPCS VTCGNGIQVR IKPGSANKPK 300
 DELDYENDIE KKICKMEKCS SVFNVVNSSI GLIMVLSFLF LN 342

SEQ ID NO:85

>VLP-206

MDIDPYKEFGSSYQLLNFLPLDFFPDNALVDTATALYEEELTGREHCSPHHTAIRQALV
 CWDELTKLIAMSSNITSGILDRADGQPAGDRADGQPAGDRAAGQPAGDRAAGQPAGDLE
 QVRTIIIVNHVNDTWGLKVRQSLWFHLSCLTFGQHTVQEFVLSFGVWIRTPAPYRPPNAP I
 LSTLPEHTVIRRRGGARASRSPRRRTPSPRRRSQSPRRRSQSPSANC

SEQ ID NO:86

>VLP-245

MDIDPYKEFGSSYQLLNFLPLDFFPDNALVDTATALYEEELTGREHCSPHHTAIRQALV
 CWDELTKLIAMSSNITSGILEEDNEKLRKPKHELEQVRTIIIVNHVNDTWGLKVRQSLWF
 HLSCLTFGQHTVQEFVLSFGVWIRTPAPYRPPNAP ILSTLPEHTVIRRRGGARASRSPRR
 RTPSPRRRSQSPRRRSQSPSANC

SEQ ID NO:87

>VLP-270

MDIDPYKEFGSSYQLLNFLPLDFFPDNALVDTATALYEEELTGREHCSPHHTAIRQALV
 CWDELTKLIAMSSNITSGILEENAIKKTKNQEELEQVRTIIIVNHVNDTWGLKVRQSLWF
 HLSCLTFGQHTVQEFVLSFGVWIRTPAPYRPPNAP ILSTLPEHTVIRRRGGARASRSPRR
 RTPSPRRRSQSPRRRSQSPSANC

CLAIMS

We claim:

1. An antigenic composition comprising a hybrid woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigen, wherein
 - the hybrid core antigen is a fusion protein comprising a malaria antigen and a woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigen,
 - the woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigen comprises the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO:12 or 14
 - the malaria antigen comprises a B cell domain of from 4 to 60 amino acids in length and a T cell domain of from 8 to 120 amino acids in length,
 - the B cell domain is inserted at a first position and the T cell domain is inserted at a second position, and the first position is not adjacent to the second position within the core antigen, and
 - the fusion protein is capable of assembling as a hybrid virus-like particle (VLP).
2. The antigenic composition of claim 1, wherein the first position is an internal position of the core antigen selected from the group consisting of 61, 71, 72, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85 and 92 as numbered according to SEQ ID NO:1.
3. The antigenic composition of claim 1 or claims 2, wherein the second position is a terminal position of the core antigen selected from the group consisting of N-terminal, 149 (truncated C-terminal), 187 and 188 as numbered according to SEQ ID NO:1.
4. The antigenic composition of claim 1, wherein the first position is 78 and the second position is 188.
5. The antigen composition of claim 4, wherein the core antigen is a modified woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigen comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO:13, but does not comprise SEQ ID NO:1 or SEQ ID NO:11.
6. The antigenic composition of claim 5, wherein the modified woodchuck hepadnavirus comprises one of the amino acid sequences selected from the group consisting of SEQ ID NO:2, SEQ ID NO:3, SEQ ID NO:4, SEQ ID NO:5, SEQ ID NO:6 and SEQ ID NO:7.

7. The antigenic composition of claim 54, wherein the modified woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigen comprises one, two, three, four or five modifications of the group consisting of:

$\Delta 2$ = WHcAg/L21A, D26A, L27A, N28A, A29V, V31A substitutions;

$\Delta 3$ = WHcAg/N136P, A137P substitutions;

$\Delta 4$ = WHcAg/C61S substitution;

$\Delta 5$ = WHcAg/replacement of residues 62-85, 65-88 or 64-87 with a heterologous antigen;

$\Delta 6$ = WHcAg/R150A, R151A, R152A, R156A, R159A, R162A, R163A, R164A, R169A, R170A, R171A, R177A, R178A, R179A, R180A substitutions; and

$\Delta 7$ = WHcAg/N75A, I76A, T77A, S78A, E79A, Q80A, V81A, R82A, T83A substitutions;

wherein the modifications are numbered according to SEQ ID NO:1.

8. The antigenic composition of claim 4, wherein the malaria antigen comprises a fragment of a circumsporozoite antigen of one or more parasite species selected from the group consisting of *P. falciparum*, *P. vivax*, *P. ovale* and *P. malariae*.

9. The antigenic composition of claim 4, wherein one or both of the B cell domain and the T cell domain is a fusion protein comprising fragments of two, three, four or five different polypeptides.

10. The antigenic composition of claim 4, wherein the B cell domain comprises the amino acid sequence of one or more of the group consisting of SEQ ID NOS:24-40 and 57-71.

11. The antigenic composition of claim 4, wherein the T cell domain comprises the amino acid sequence selected from the group consisting of SEQ ID NOS:41-50.

10. The antigenic composition of claim 4, wherein the B cell domain comprises the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO:24 or is at least 95% identical thereto.

11. The antigenic composition of claim 4, wherein the T cell domain comprises the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO:49 or is at least 95% identical thereto.

12. The antigenic composition of claim 4, wherein the T cell domain is inserted at the carboxy-terminal end of the core antigen as a linker/insert combination according to the formula [D]_y[I]_z-X_m in which both y and z are in integers independently selected from the group consisting of 0, 1, and 2, and wherein X_m is the T cell domain. 13. The antigenic

composition of claim 4, wherein the hybrid woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigen comprises the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO:20 or is at least 95% identical thereto.

14. The antigenic composition of claim 13, wherein the hybrid VLP competes with a native, or recombinant soluble form of the circumsporozoite protein for binding to a circumsporozoite protein-specific antibody.

15. The antigenic composition of claim 13, wherein the hybrid VLP elicits a high titer, antibody response against the circumsporozoite protein or against a sporozoite of a malaria parasite that expresses the circumsporozoite protein.

16. The antigenic composition of claim 13, wherein the hybrid VLP elicits a measurable neutralizing antibody response against a sporozoite of a malaria parasite that expresses the circumsporozoite protein.

17. The antigenic composition of claim 13, wherein the hybrid VLP elicits a protective immune response against blood stage malaria parasite infection.

18. The antigenic composition of claim 13, wherein the hybrid VLP elicits a protective immune response against liver stage malaria parasite infection.

19. An antigenic composition comprising a hybrid woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigen, wherein

the hybrid core antigen is a fusion protein comprising a malaria antigen and a woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigen,

the woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigen comprises the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO:12 or 14,

the malaria antigen comprises a B cell domain of from 4 to 60 amino acids and length,

the B cell domain is inserted at a position of the core antigen selected from the group consisting of 1, 61, 71, 72, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85, 92, 149, 187, and 188, as numbered according to SEQ ID NO:1, and

the fusion protein is capable of assembling as a hybrid virus-like particle (VLP).

20. The antigenic composition of claim 19, wherein the position is an internal position of the core antigen selected from the group consisting of 61, 71, 72, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85 and 92 as numbered according to SEQ ID NO:1.

21. The antigen composition of claim 19 or claim 20, wherein the core antigen is a modified woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigen comprising the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO:13, but does not comprise SEQ ID NO:1 or SEQ ID NO:11.

22. The antigenic composition of claim 21, wherein the modified woodchuck hepadnavirus comprises one of the amino acid sequences selected from the group consisting of SEQ ID NO:2, SEQ ID NO:3, SEQ ID NO:4, SEQ ID NO:5, SEQ ID NO:6 and SEQ ID NO:7.

23. The antigenic composition of claim 21, wherein the modified woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigen comprises one, two, three, four or five modifications of the group consisting of:

$\Delta 2$ = WHcAg/L21A, D26A, L27A, N28A, A29V, V31A substitutions;

$\Delta 3$ = WHcAg/N136P, A137P substitutions;

$\Delta 4$ = WHcAg/C61S substitution;

$\Delta 5$ = WHcAg/replacement of residues 62-85, 65-88 or 64-87 with a heterologous antigen;

$\Delta 6$ = WHcAg/R150A, R151A, R152A, R156A, R159A, R162A, R163A, R164A, R169A, R170A, R171A, R177A, R178A, R179A, R180A substitutions; and

$\Delta 7$ = WHcAg/N75A, I76A, T77A, S78A, E79A, Q80A, V81A, R82A, T83A substitutions; wherein the modifications are numbered according to SEQ ID NO:1.

24. The antigenic composition of claim 20, wherein the malaria antigen comprises a fragment of a reticulocyte-binding protein homolog 5 (RH5) of one or more parasite species selected from the group consisting of *P. falciparum*, *P. vivax*, *P. ovale* and *P. malariae*.

25. The antigenic composition of claim 24, wherein the B cell domain comprises the amino acid sequence of one or more of the group consisting of SEQ ID NOs:37, 38, 39, 40, 66, 67 and 68.

26. The antigenic composition of claim 24, wherein the B cell domain comprises the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO:37 or is at least 95% identical thereto.

27. The antigenic composition of claim 24, wherein the hybrid woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigen comprises the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO:87 or is at least 95% identical thereto.

28. The antigenic composition of claim 20, wherein the malaria antigen comprises a fragment of a circumsporozoite antigen of one or more parasite species selected from the group consisting of *P. falciparum*, *P. vivax*, *P. ovale* and *P. malariae*.

29. The antigenic composition of claim 28, wherein the B cell domain comprises the amino acid sequence of one of the group consisting of SEQ ID NOs:33-36, 57-65 and 71.

30. The antigenic composition of claim 28, wherein the B cell domain comprises the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO:33 or is at least 95% identical thereto.

31. The antigenic composition of claim 28, wherein the hybrid woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigen comprises the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO:86 or is at least 95% identical thereto.

32. The antigenic composition of claim 20, wherein the malaria antigen comprises a fragment of a circumsporozoite antigen of *P. vivax*.

33. The antigenic composition of claim 32, wherein the B cell domain comprises the amino acid sequence of one or both of SEQ ID NO:69 and SEQ ID NO:70.

34. The antigenic composition of claim 32, wherein the B cell domain comprises the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO:69 or is at least 95% identical thereto.

35. The antigenic composition of claim 32, wherein the hybrid woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigen comprises the amino acid sequence of SEQ ID NO:85 or is at least 95% identical thereto.

36. The antigenic composition of any one of the preceding claims, wherein the composition comprises a combination of two, three, four, or five different hybrid VLPs.

37. The antigenic composition of claim 36, wherein the combination of different hybrid VLPs comprises a first VLP and a second VLP, wherein the first VLP is of the antigen composition of claim 1, the second VLP is of the antigenic composition of claim 24.

38. The antigen composition of claim 36, wherein the combination of different hybrid VLPs comprises a first VLP and a second VLP, wherein the first VLP is of the antigen composition of claim 1, and the second VLP is of the antigenic composition of claim 32.

37. The antigenic composition of claim 36, wherein the combination of different hybrid VLPs comprises a first VLP, a second VLP, and a third VLP, wherein the first VLP is of the antigen composition of claim 1, the second VLP is of the antigenic composition of claim 24, and the third VLP is of the antigenic composition of claim 32.

38. The antigenic composition of claim 36, wherein the combination of different hybrid VLPs comprises a first VLP, a second VLP, and a third VLP, wherein the first VLP is of the antigen composition of claim 13, the second VLP is of the antigenic composition of claim 27, and the third VLP is of the antigenic composition of claim 35.

39. The antigenic composition of claim 36, wherein the combination of different hybrid VLPs comprises a first VLP and a second VLP, and a third VLP, wherein the first VLP comprises a fragment of a *P. falciparum* circumsporozoite antigen, the second VLP comprises a fragment of a *P. vivax* circumsporozoite antigen, and the third VLP comprises a fragment of a *P. falciparum* reticulocyte-binding protein homolog 5.

40. A vaccine comprising the antigenic composition of any one of the preceding claims, and an adjuvant.

41. A method for eliciting a malaria antigen-reactive antibody response, comprising administering to a mammal an effective amount of the vaccine of claim 40.

42. A method for reducing malaria parasite infection or preventing malaria in a mammal in need thereof, comprising administering to the mammal an effective amount of the vaccine of claim 40 according to a vaccine regimen comprising an initial immunization and one or more subsequent immunizations.

43. A polynucleotide encoding the hybrid woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigen of any one of claims 1 to 35.

44. An expression construct comprising the polynucleotide of claim 43 in operable combination with a promoter.

45. An expression vector comprising the expression construct of claim 44, for expression of the hybrid woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigen in bacterial cells or yeast cells.

46. A host cell comprising the expression vector of claim 45.

47. A method for screening anti-malaria antigen antibodies comprising:

- a) measuring binding of an antibody or fragment thereof to the hybrid woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigen of any one of claims 1 to 35;
- b) measuring binding of the antibody or fragment thereof to a woodchuck hepadnavirus core antigen devoid of the malaria antigen; and
- c) determining that the antibody or fragment thereof is specific for the malaria antigen when the antibody or fragment thereof binds to the hybrid core antigen but not the core antigen devoid of the malaria antigen.

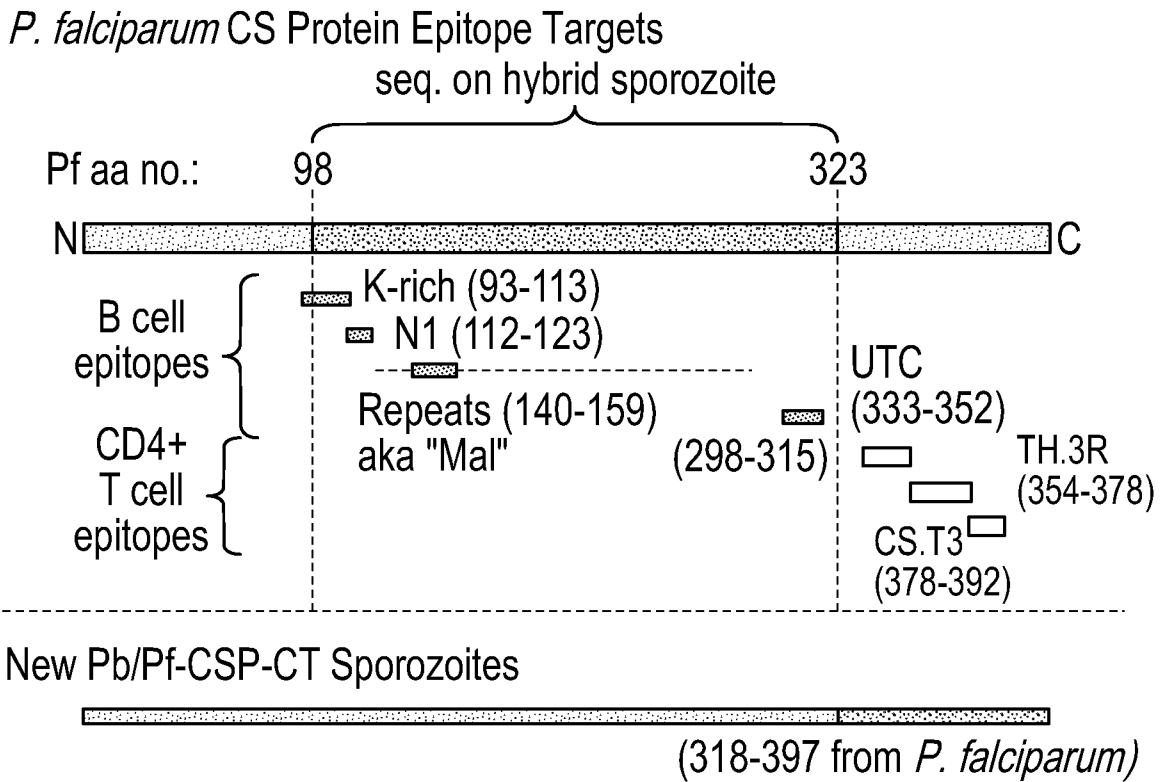


FIG. 1A

VLPs Constructed

- | | | |
|--------------------|---------------------|-----------|
| WHc-Mal-78 | WHc-Mal-78-UTC | WHc-Pv-78 |
| WHc-Krich-78 | WHc-Mal-78-TH | |
| WHc-N1(112-123)-78 | WHc-Mal-78-3T | |
| WHc-(298-315)-78 | WHc-Ct-3T | |
| WHc-Mal5-78 | WHc(C61S)-Mal-78-3T | |

FIG. 1B

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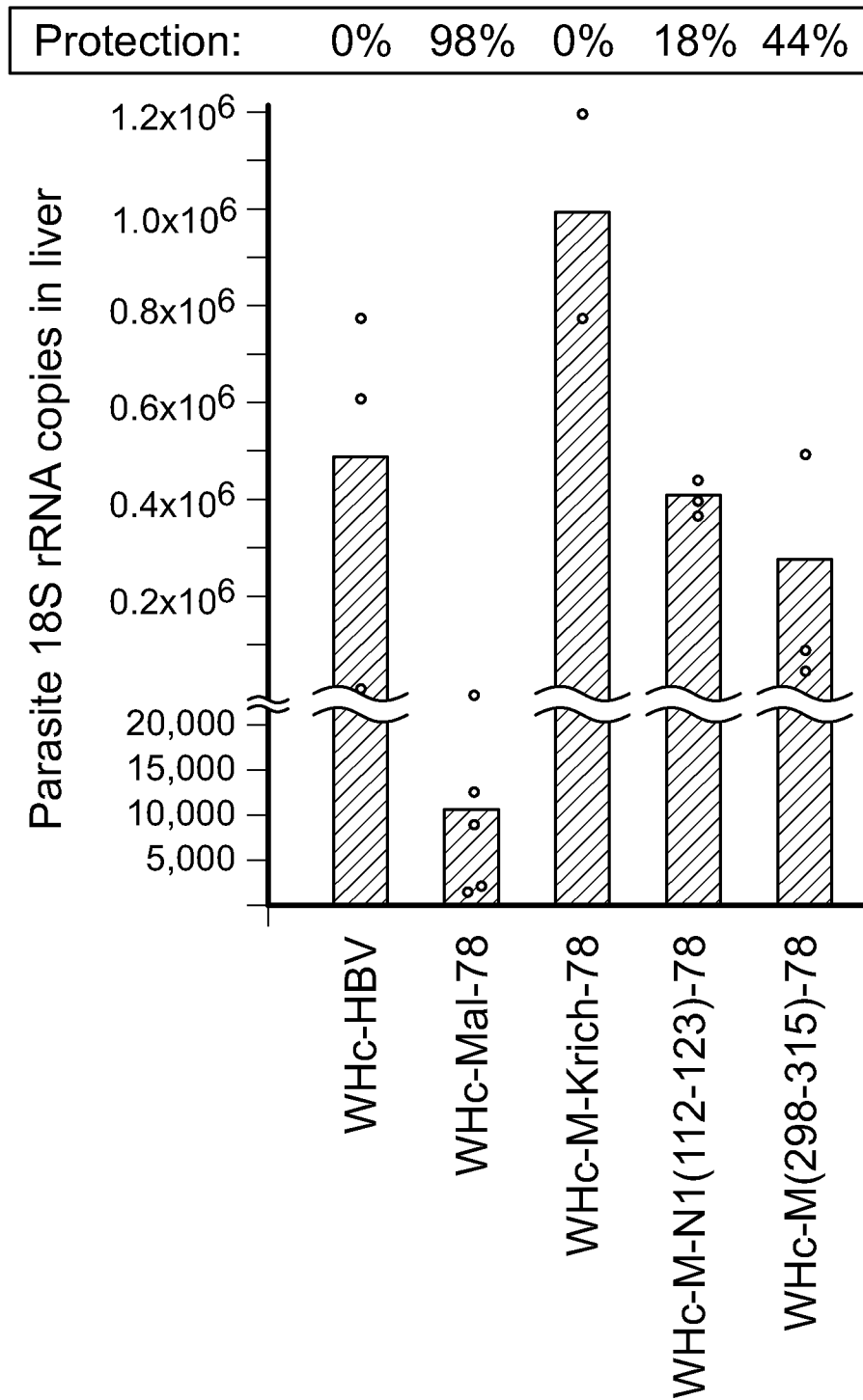


FIG. 2

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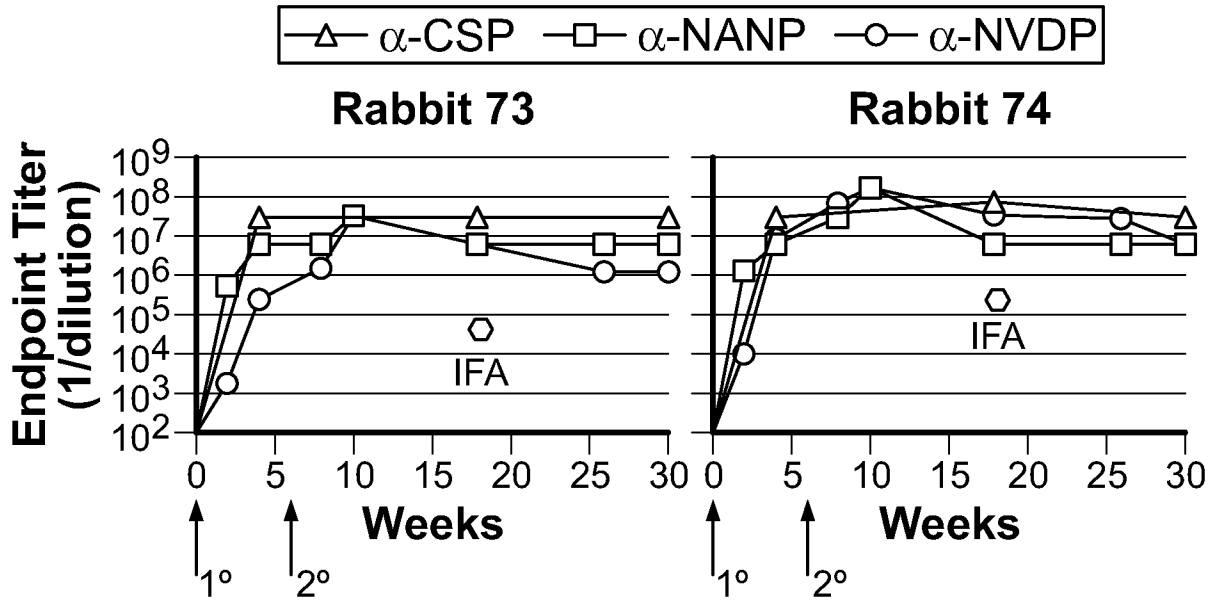


FIG. 3A

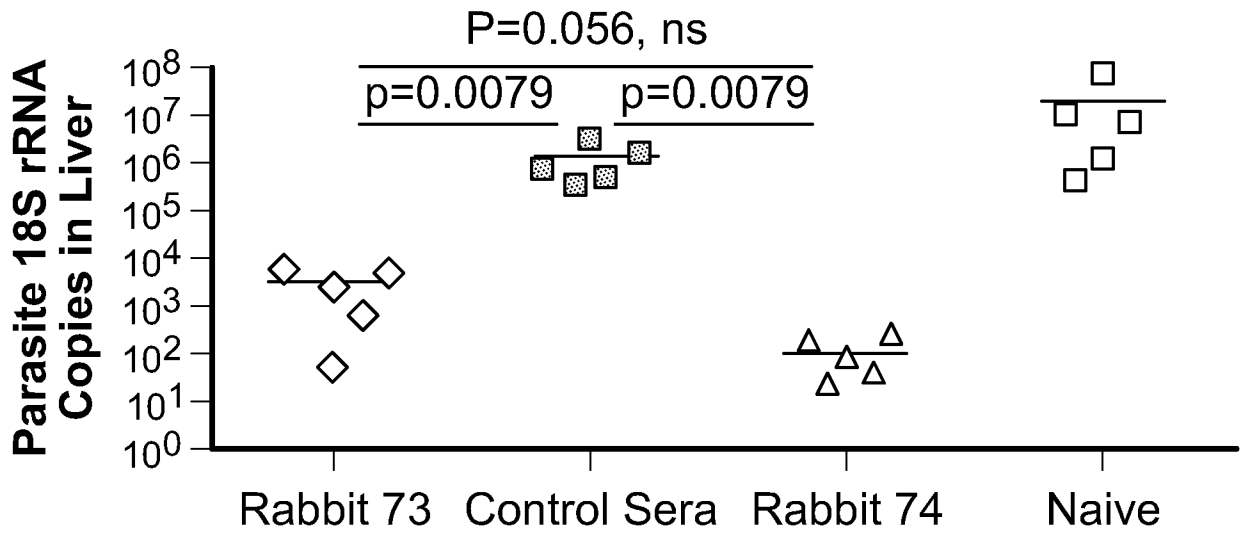


FIG. 3B

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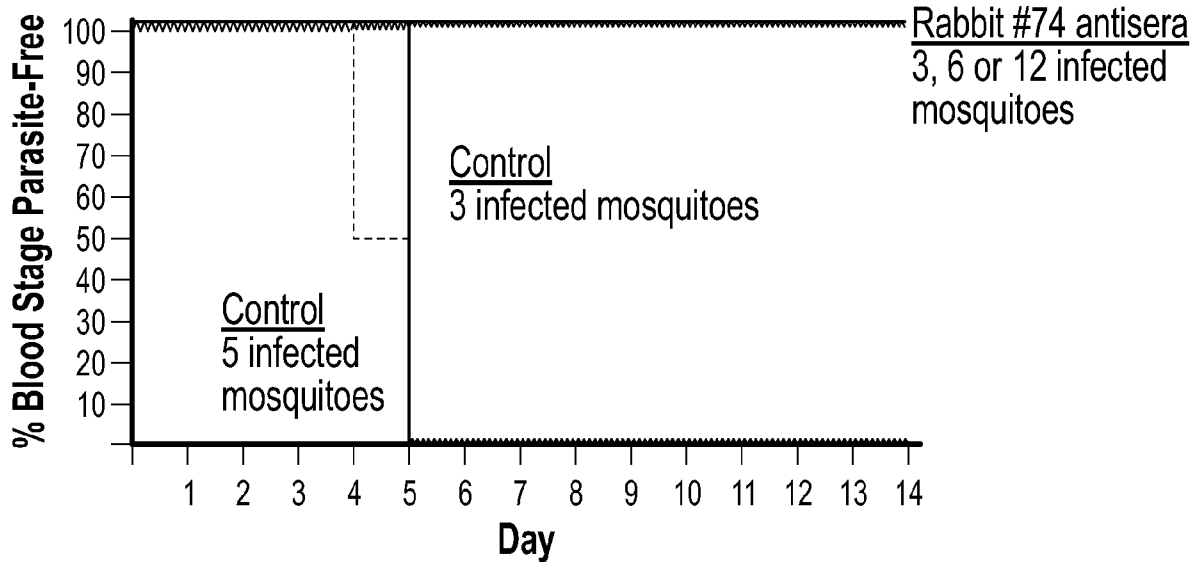


FIG. 3C

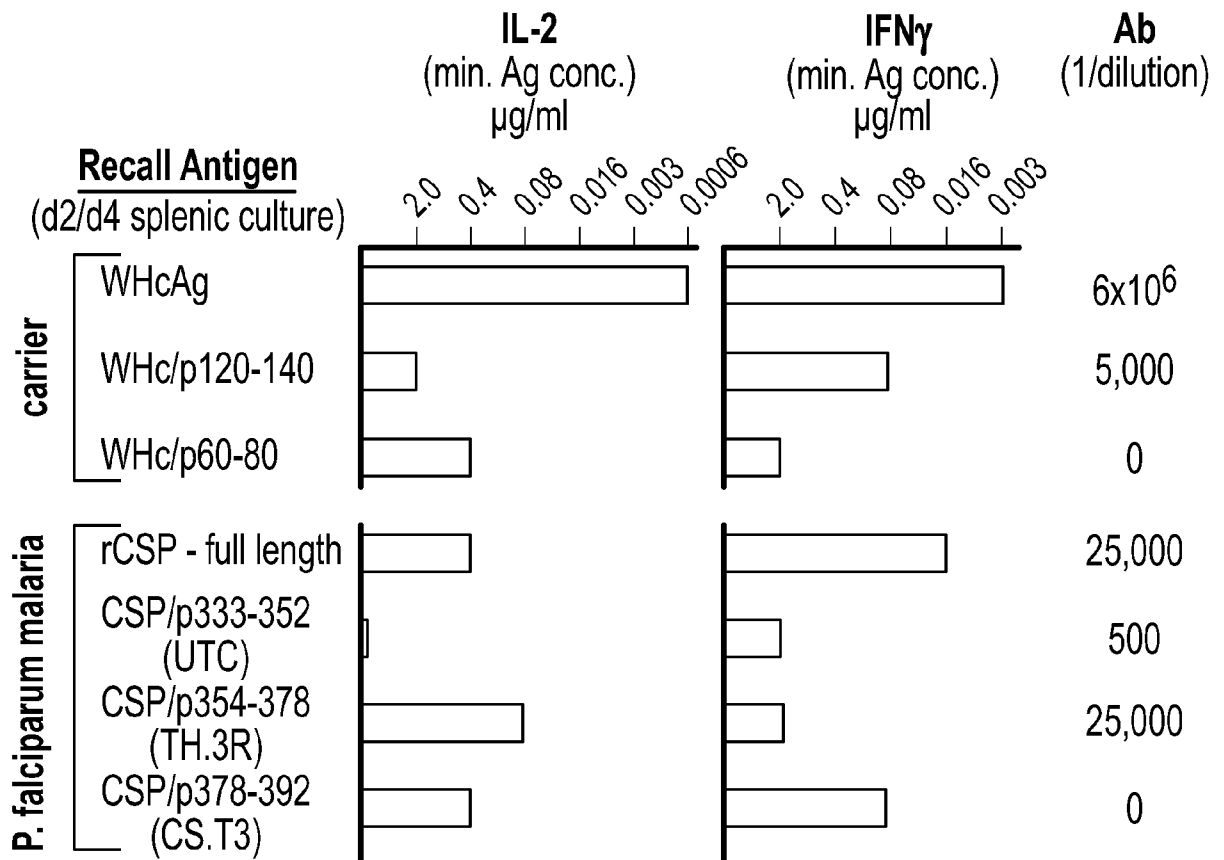


FIG. 4

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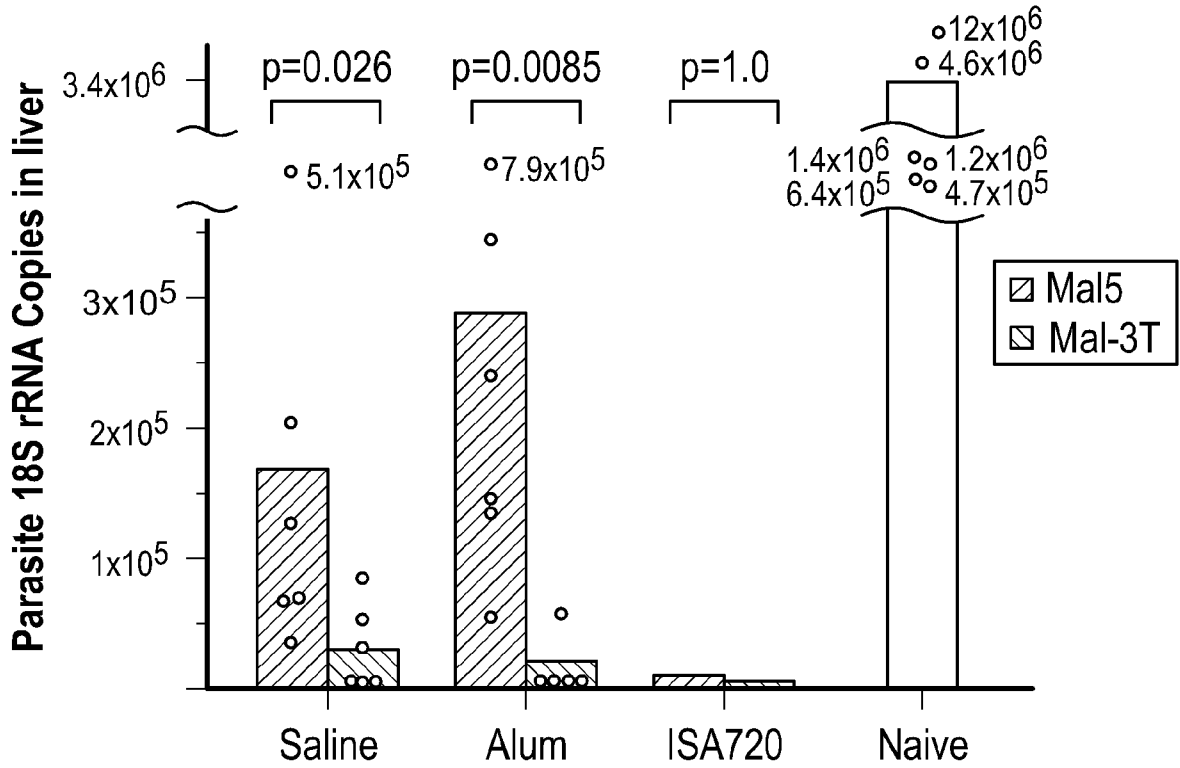


FIG. 5A

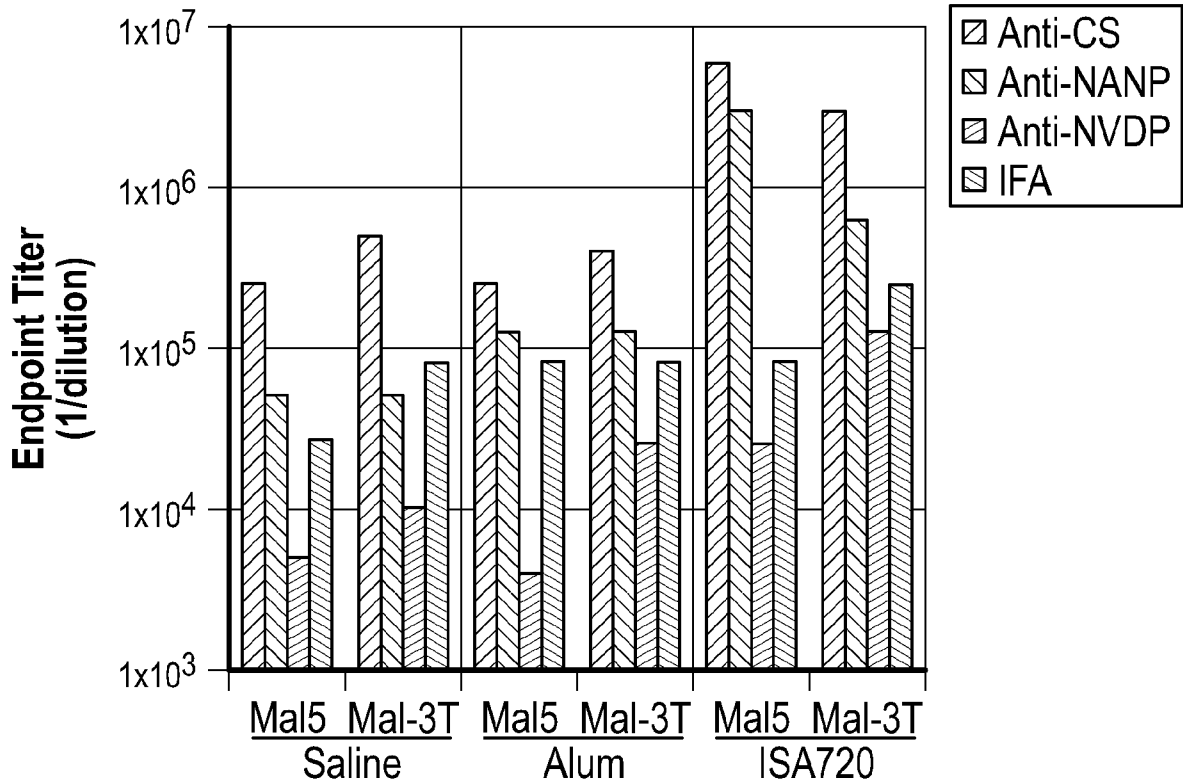


FIG. 5B

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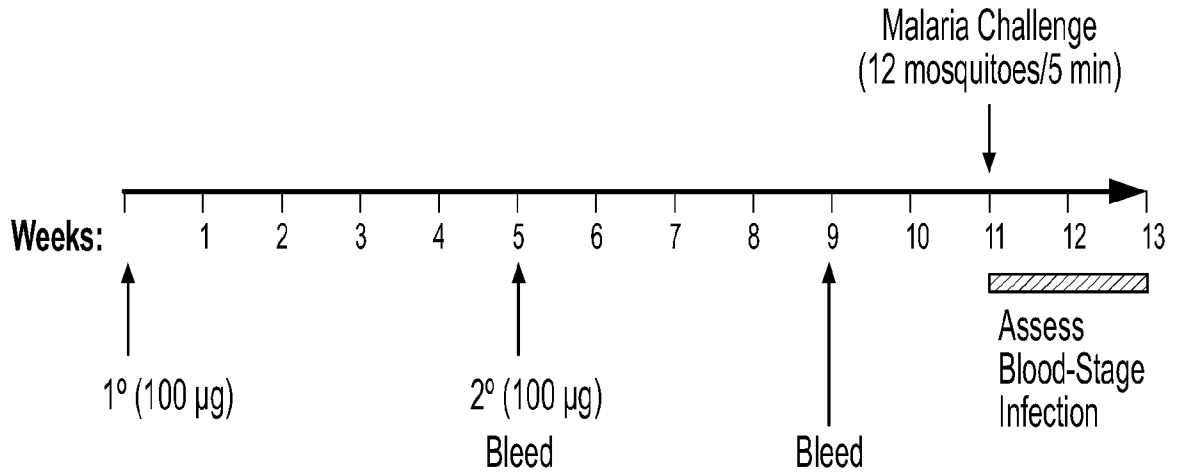


FIG. 6A

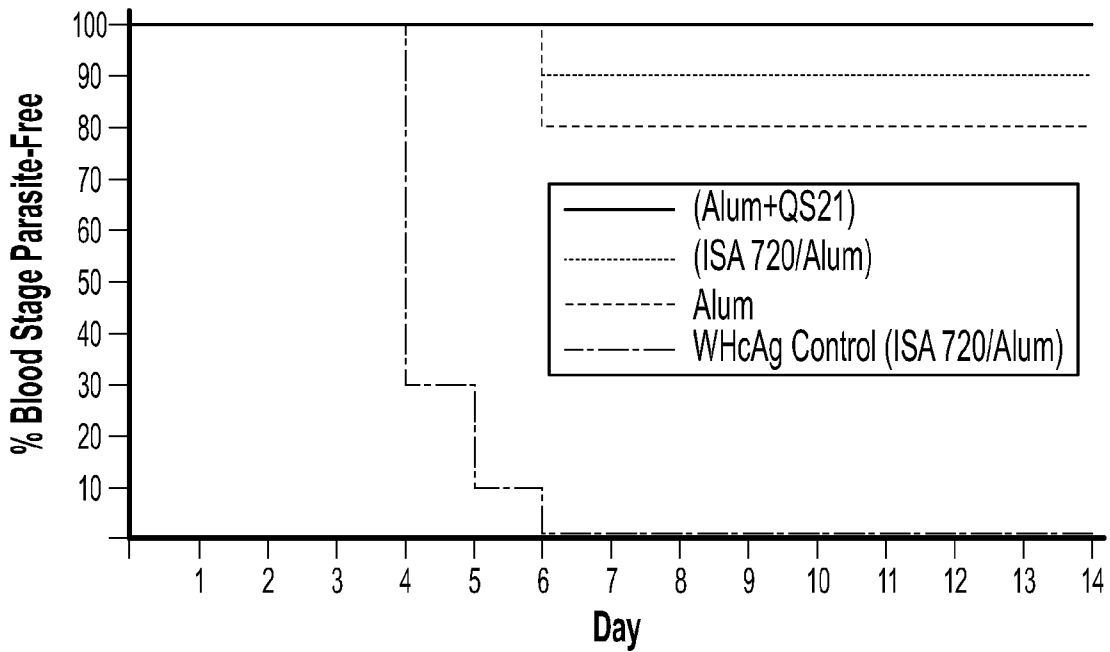


FIG. 6B

Immunogen	Formulation (prime/boost)	Mice Challenged	Mice Infected	Protection	Mean Days Pre-patent
WHc(C61S)-Mal-78-3T	Alum/Alum	10	2	80%	6
	Alum+QS-21/Alum+QS21	9	0	100%	-
	ISA 720/Alum	10	1	90%	6
WHcAg	ISA 720/Alum	10	10	0%	4.4

FIG. 6C

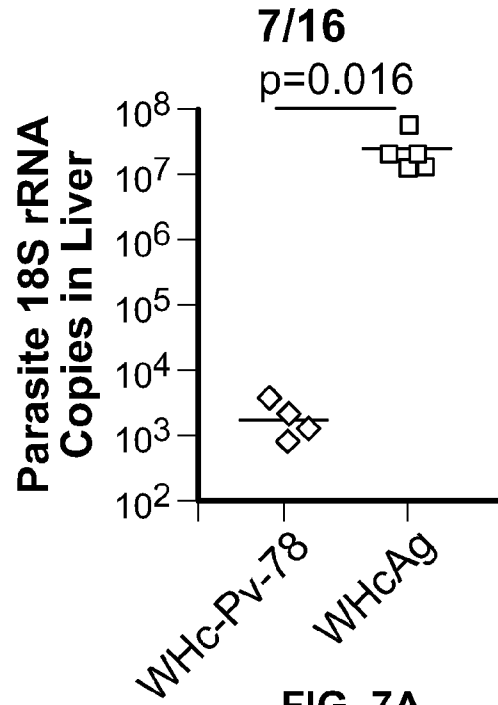


FIG. 7A

Cohort	Infected/ challenged (mice)	Pre-patent period (days)	Protection
WHc-Pv-78	0/4	-	100%
WHcAg	4/5	4.5	20%

FIG. 7B

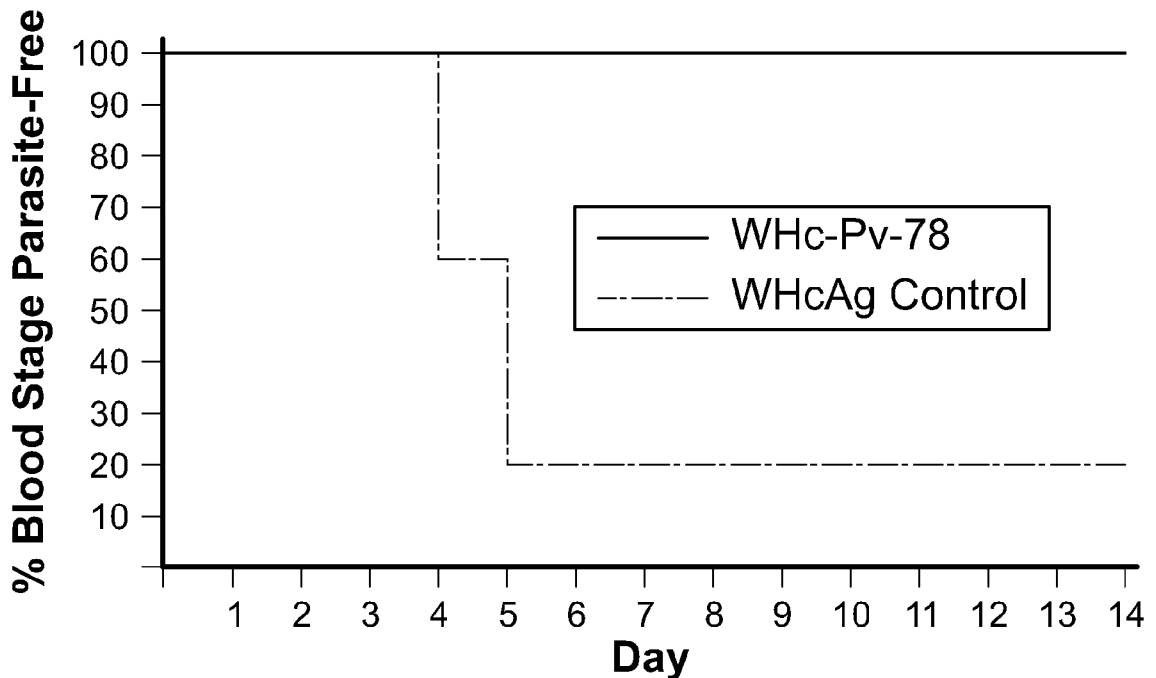


FIG. 7C

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	<u>Anti-CSP Titers</u> (1/dilution)			
	<u>CSP</u>	<u>NANP</u>	<u>NVDP</u>	<u>CSP(93-113)</u>
α -CSP	3×10^6	50K	1K	20K
α -CSP (Δ NANP, NVDP)	625K	1K	0	20K

In vivo Protection

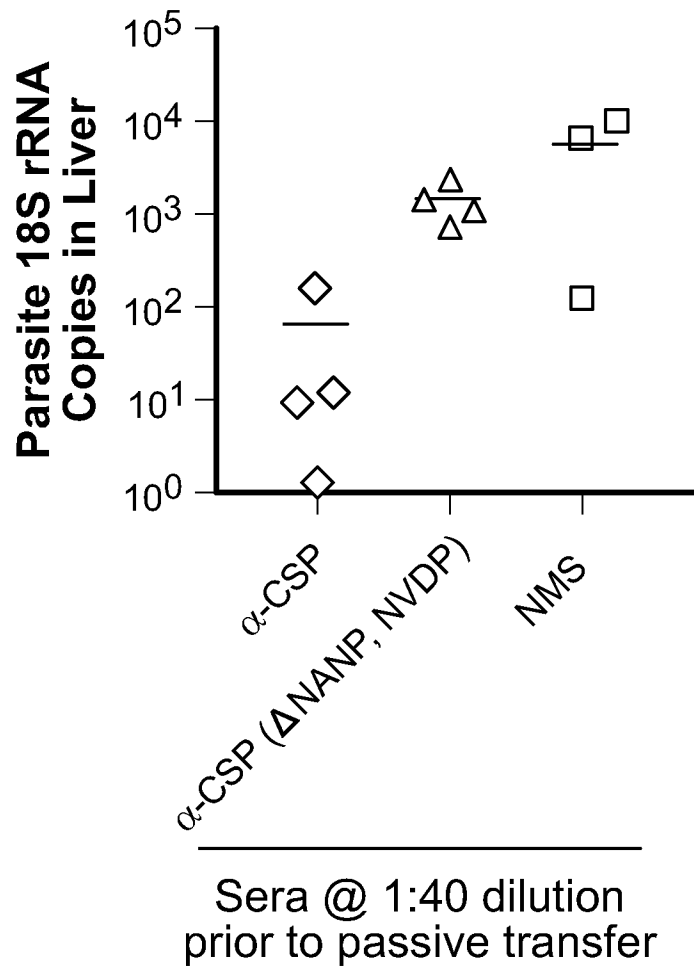


FIG. 8

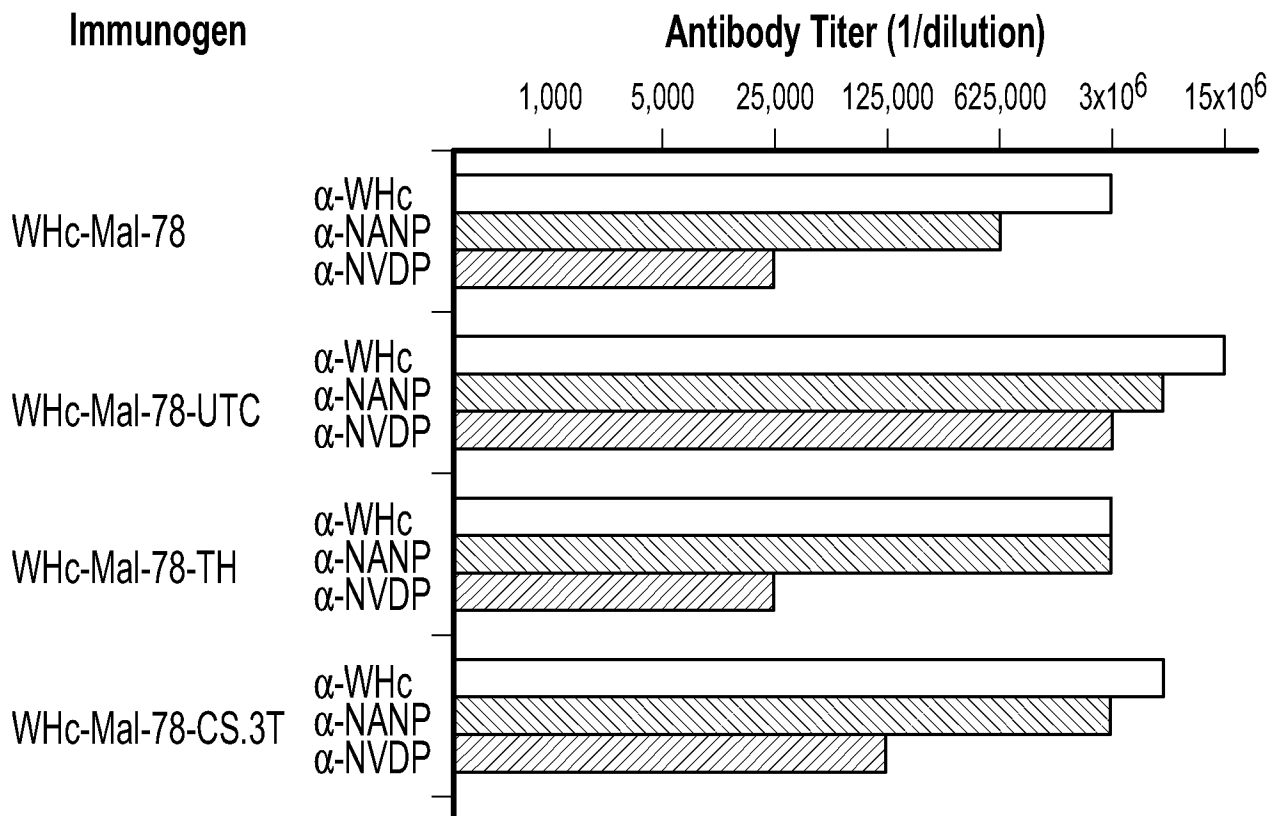


FIG. 9

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Sequence of the hybrid CS protein

1 MKKCTILVVA SLLLVSLLP GYGQNKSIQA QRNLNELCYN EGNDNKLYHV 50
 51 LNSKNGKIYN RNTVNRLAD APEGKKNEKK NEKIERNNKL KQPPPPNPN 100
 101 DPPPNDPNDP PPPNDPPPP PNPNDPPPN ANDPPPNAN DPAPPNANDP 150
 151 APPNANDPAP PNANDPAPPN ANDPPPNPN DPAPPNANDP PPPNPNDPAP 200
 201 PQGNNNPQPQ PRPQPQPQ PQQPQPQPQ PRPQPQPQPG GNNNNKNNNN 250
 251 DDSYIPSAEK ILEYLNKIQN SLSTEWSPCS VTCGNGIQVR IKPGSANKPK 300
 301 DELDYENDIE KKICKMEKCS SVFNVVNSSI GLIMVLSFLF LN* 342

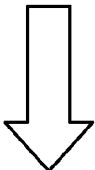




SEQ ID NO:21

FIG. 10A

	____UTC____	____TH.3R____	____CS.T3____	<i>P. berghei</i>
	EFVKQIRDSITEEWSQCNVT	C GSGIRVRKRKGSNKKAE DL TLEDI	DTE--ICKMDKCSSIFN	SEQ ID NO:22
	
	EYLNKIQNSLSTEWSPCSVT	S GNGIQVRIKPGSANKPKDELDYEN	DIEKKICKMEKCSSV--	SEQ ID NO:23
				<i>P. falciparum</i>
Identical aa's:	9/20 (45%)	9/24 (38%)	10/15 (67%)	
Similar aa's:	13/20 (65%)	11/24 (46%)	12/15 (80%)	

FIG. 10B

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Task	Selection Process	End-Point	
1. Select B cell epitopes	(NANP) ₄ , (NVDP), CS-non-repeats	α-Peptide binds CS protein and sporozoites	
1a. Epitope optimization	NANP-NVDP-(NANP) ₃	++Antigenicity/immunogenicity	
Select T cell epitopes	UTC; TH.3R; CS(CST3)	Th cell function in humans	
Select molecular adjuvants	ssRNA	++immunogenicity	
2. Produce construct	Combinatorial technology 17 insertion sites/21 C-termini		
3. Transform <i>E.coli</i> with constructs (0.5 L culture volume)	Screen lysates (ELISAs)		2-3 units
	Protein expression		3-4 units
	Particle assembly Epitope antigenicity	3-4 units	
4. CS-WHcAg purification (5 L culture volume)	Assembly (1% agarose, CL-4B) Yield	 Particulate ≥ 80 mg/L 	
5. Biochemical/structural characterization	Particle size Electron microscopy CD spectra Thermal stability	30-50 nm Formation of particle structures WHcAg like (high alpha helix) > 70°C 	
6. Immunogenicity in mice	<i>In vivo</i> Ab Production <i>In vitro/in vivo</i> Th cell activity (1 prime/1 boost)	α-Insert titer of 10 ⁶ -10 ⁷ IgG isotypes, Ab persistence + IL-2, + IFN _γ 	
7. In vitro immunofluorescence assay (IFA) on sporozoites		IFA titer of 10 ⁴ -10 ⁵	
8. In vivo protection liver/blood	a. Direct immunization/ challenge b. Passive transfer of antisera	CD4+/antibody % protection only antibody % protection	

Selection criteria for improvements to the preliminary FLw-Mal-74-TH vaccine candidate
and new vaccine particles.

FIG. 11

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Comparison of WHc-CS Malaria VLP Vaccine Features to Previous-Generation Malaria VLP Vaccines RST,S and ICC-1132

		RST,S	WHc-CS	Apovia (ICC-1132)
Malaria	B epitopes	CS repeats: (NANP) ₁₆ only	CS repeats (NANP and NVDP)	CS repeats (NANP and NVDP)
	T epitopes	CS, C-terminus 302-395	CS 318-337 (UTC) CS 339-363 (TH-3R) CS 363-377 (CS.T3)	CS 318-337
Carrier		HBsAg (human pathogen)	WHcAg (full length) (nonhuman pathogen)	HBcAg (truncated) (human pathogen)
		T cell dependent	T cell dependent or independent	T cell dependent or independent
		100-1000-fold less immunogenic in mice	100-1000-fold more immunogenic in mice	100-1000-fold more immunogenic in mice
		Soluble HBsAg less immunogenic in humans	N.D.	Soluble HBcAg more immunogenic in humans
		MHC nonresponder genotypes (mice and human)	No MHC nonresponders identified	No MHC nonresponders identified
		Preexisting anti-HBs from HBV infection	Not relevant	Preexisting anti-HBc from HBV infection
		Immune tolerance in HBV chronics	No Immune tolerance in HBV chronics	Immune tolerance in HBV chronics
		N.D.	Δcarrier B cell sites	N.D.
		N.D.	Replace spikes	N.D.
	N.D.	Modify C-terminus	N.D.	

FIG. 12

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	Requires coexpression of HBsAg for HBsAg-CS assembly?	Self-assembly of WHc-CS	Self-assembly of HBc-CS
	Cannot express in bacteria N.D. ?	Bacterial expression Sterile immunity to blood stage in Tg sporozoite model	Bacterial expression N.D.
Endogenous molecular adjuvants	None	ssRNA-TLR7/8 ligands	None
Stability to fixation	Lyophilization	Lyophilization	N.D.
Cold chain	Not required	Not required	N.D.
Formulation/adjuvants	Absolute requirement for immunostimulatory adjuvant (ASO1B, MPL/QS-21/oil/liposome)	Saline, alum, Montanide ISA-720	Montanide ISA-720, alum
Phase II clinical results	1-3 dose, 0 protection 3 dose + ASO2A, 30%-50%	N.D. N.D.	1 dose, 0 protection N.D.

Note: Bold represents characteristics unique to WHc(C61S)-Mal-78-3T.

FIG. 12 (Cont.)

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WHcAg	MDIDPYKEFGSSYQLLNFLPLDFFPDLNALVDTATALYEEELTGREHCSPHHTAIRQALV
WHcAgΔ2	MDIDPYKEFGSSYQLLNFLPADFFPAAAVLADTATALYEEELTGREHCSPHHTAIRQALV
WHcAgΔ3	MDIDPYKEFGSSYQLLNFLPLDFFPDLNALVDTATALYEEELTGREHCSPHHTAIRQALV
WHcAgΔ4	MDIDPYKEFGSSYQLLNFLPLDFFPDLNALVDTATALYEEELTGREHCSPHHTAIRQALV
WHcAgΔ5	MDIDPYKEFGSSYQLLNFLPLDFFPDLNALVDTATALYEEELTGREHCSPHHTAIRQALV
WHcAgΔ6	MDIDPYKEFGSSYQLLNFLPLDFFPDLNALVDTATALYEEELTGREHCSPHHTAIRQALV
WHcAgΔ7	MDIDPYKEFGSSYQLLNFLPLDFFPDLNALVDTATALYEEELTGREHCSPHHTAIRQALV

***** * * *

WHcAg	CWDELTKLIAWMSSNITSEQVRTIIIVNHVNDTWGLKVRQSLWFHLSCLTFGQHTVQEFLV
WHcAgΔ2	CWDELTKLIAWMSSNITSEQVRTIIIVNHVNDTWGLKVRQSLWFHLSCLTFGQHTVQEFLV
WHcAgΔ3	CWDELTKLIAWMSSNITSEQVRTIIIVNHVNDTWGLKVRQSLWFHLSCLTFGQHTVQEFLV
WHcAgΔ4	SWDELTKLIAWMSSNITSEQVRTIIIVNHVNDTWGLKVRQSLWFHLSCLTFGQHTVQEFLV
WHcAgΔ5	CXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXHVNDTWGLKVRQSLWFHLSCLTFGQHTVQEFLV
WHcAgΔ6	CWDELTKLIAWMSSNITSEQVRTIIIVNHVNDTWGLKVRQSLWFHLSCLTFGQHTVQEFLV
WHcAgΔ7	CWDELTKLIAWSSAAAAAAAAAIIIVNHVNDTWGLKVRQSLWFHLSCLTFGQHTVQEFLV

WHcAg	SFGVWIRTPAPYRPPNAPILSTLPEHTVIRRRGGARASRSPRRRTPSPRRRRSQSPRRRR
WHcAgΔ2	SFGVWIRTPAPYRPPNAPILSTLPEHTVIRRRGGARASRSPRRRTPSPRRRRSQSPRRRR
WHcAgΔ3	SFGVWIRTPAPYRPPPPILSTLPEHTVIRRRGGARASRSPRRRTPSPRRRRSQSPRRRR
WHcAgΔ4	SFGVWIRTPAPYRPPNAPILSTLPEHTVIRRRGGARASRSPRRRTPSPRRRRSQSPRRRR
WHcAgΔ5	SFGVWIRTPAPYRPPNAPILSTLPEHTVIRRRGGARASRSPRRRTPSPRRRRSQSPRRRR
WHcAgΔ6	SFGVWIRTPAPYRPPNAPILSTLPEHTVIAAAGGAAASASPAAATPSPAAARSQSPAAAA
WHcAgΔ7	SFGVWIRTPAPYRPPNAPILSTLPEHTVIRRRGGARASRSPRRRTPSPRRRRSQSPRRRR

***** * * * * *

WHcAg	SQSPSANC (SEQ ID NO:1)
WHcAgΔ2	SQSPSANC (SEQ ID NO:2)
WHcAgΔ3	SQSPSANC (SEQ ID NO:3)
WHcAgΔ4	SQSPSANC (SEQ ID NO:4)
WHcAgΔ5	SQSPSANC (SEQ ID NO:5)
WHcAgΔ6	SQSPSANC (SEQ ID NO:6)
WHcAgΔ7	SQSPSANC (SEQ ID NO:7)

FIG. 13

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2 neutralizing B cell CS repeat epitopes: NANP(NVDP)NANP₃

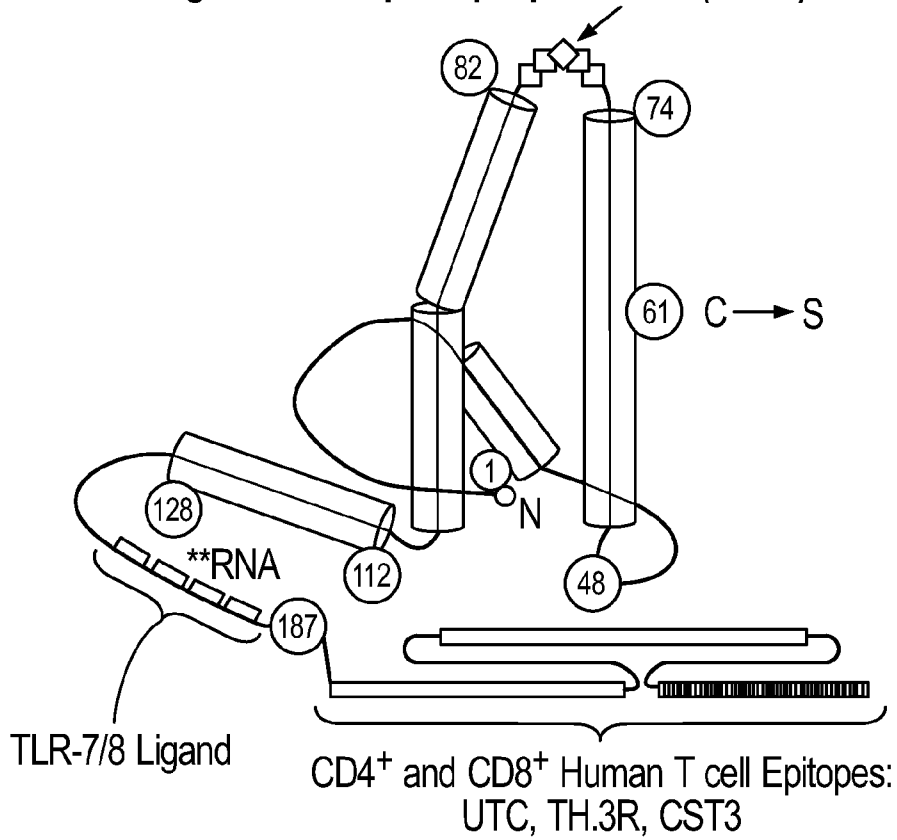


FIG. 14A

WHcAg	MDIDPYKEFGSSYQLLNFLPLDFFPDNLALVDTATALYEEELTGREHCSPHHTAIRQALV	60
VLP-162	MDIDPYKEFGSSYQLLNFLPLDFFPDNLALVDTATALYEEELTGREHCSPHHTAIRQALV	60

WHcAg	CWDELTKLIAWMSSNITS-----EQVRTIIVNHVNDTWGLK	96
VLP-162	SWDELTKLIAWMSSNITSGILNANPNVDPNANPNANPNANPLEQVRTIIVNHVNDTWGLK	120
	*****	*****
WHcAg	VRQSLWFHLSCLTFGQHTVQEFVLSFGVWIRTPAPYRPPNAPILSTLPEHTVIRRRGGAR	156
VLP-162	VRQSLWFHLSCLTFGQHTVQEFVLSFGVWIRTPAPYRPPNAPILSTLPEHTVIRRRGGAR	180

WHcAg	ASRSPRRRTPSPRRRRSQSPRRRSQSPSANC-----	188
VLP-162	ASRSPRRGTPSPRRRRRSQSPRRRSQSPSANC DIEYLNKIQNSLSTEWSPCSVTSNGNIQ	240
	*****	*****
WHcAg	-----	188 (SEQ ID NO:1)
VLP-162	VRIKPGSANKPKDEL DYENDIEKKICKMEKCSSV	274 (SEQ ID NO:20)

FIG. 14B

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WHcAg MDIDPYKEFGSSYQLLNFLPLDFFPDLNALVDTATALYEEELTGREHCSPHHTAIRQALV 60
 VLP-206 MDIDPYKEFGSSYQLLNFLPLDFFPDLNALVDTATALYEEELTGREHCSPHHTAIRQALV 60

WHcAg CWDELTKLIAWSSNITS-----E 79
 VLP-206 CWDELTKLIAWSSNITSGILDRADGQPAGDRADGQPAGDRAAGQPAGDRAAGQPAGDLE 120
 ***** *

WHcAg QVRTIIVNHVNDTWGLKVRQSLWFHLSCLTFGQHTVQEFLVSFGWIRTPAPYRPPNAPI 139
 VLP-206 QVRTIIVNHVNDTWGLKVRQSLWFHLSCLTFGQHTVQEFLVSFGWIRTPAPYRPPNAPI 180

WHcAg LSTLPEHTVIRRRGGARASRSPRRRTPSPRRRRSQSPRRRRSQSPSANC 188 (SEQ ID NO:1)
 VLP-206 LSTLPEHTVIRRRGGARASRSPRRRTPSPRRRRSQSPRRRRSQSPSANC 229 (SEQ ID NO:85)

FIG. 15A

WHcAg MDIDPYKEFGSSYQLLNFLPLDFFPDLNALVDTATALYEEELTGREHCSPHHTAIRQALV 60
 VLP-245 MDIDPYKEFGSSYQLLNFLPLDFFPDLNALVDTATALYEEELTGREHCSPHHTAIRQALV 60

WHcAg CWDELTKLIAWSSNITS-----EQVRTIIVNHVNDTWGLKVRQSLWF 103
 VLP-245 CWDELTKLIAWSSNITSGILEEDNEKLRKPKHELEQVRTIIVNHVNDTWGLKVRQSLWF 120

WHcAg HLSCLTFGQHTVQEFLVSFGWIRTPAPYRPPNAPILSTLPEHTVIRRRGGARASRSPRR 163
 VLP-245 HLSCLTFGQHTVQEFLVSFGWIRTPAPYRPPNAPILSTLPEHTVIRRRGGARASRSPRR 180

WHcAg RTPSPRRRRSQSPRRRRSQSPSANC 188 (SEQ ID NO:1)
 VLP-245 RTPSPRRRRSQSPRRRRSQSPSANC 205 (SEQ ID NO:86)

FIG. 15B

PATENT COOPERATION TREATY

PCT

DECLARATION OF NON-ESTABLISHMENT OF INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

(PCT Article 17(2)(a), Rules 13ter.1(c) and (d) and 39)

Applicant's or agent's file reference 720222000340	IMPORTANT DECLARATION	Date of mailing (day/month/year) 21 JUL 2017
International application No. PCT/US17/30475	International filing date (day/month/year) 01 May 2017	(Earliest) Priority Date (day/month/year) 30 April 2016
International Patent Classification (IPC) or both national classification and IPC IPC: C12Q 1/68; CPC: C12Q 2600/158		
Applicant VLP BIOTECH, INC.		

This International Searching Authority hereby declares, according to Article 17(2)(a), that no international search report will be established on the international application for the reasons indicated below.

1. The subject matter of the international application relates to:
 - a. scientific theories
 - b. mathematical theories
 - c. plant varieties
 - d. animal varieties
 - e. essentially biological processes for the production of plants and animals, other than microbiological processes and the products of such processes
 - f. schemes, rules or methods of doing business
 - g. schemes, rules or methods of performing purely mental acts
 - h. schemes, rules or methods of playing games
 - i. methods for treatment of the human body by surgery or therapy
 - j. methods for treatment of the animal body by surgery or therapy
 - k. diagnostic methods practised on the human or animal body
 - l. mere presentations of information
 - m. computer programs for which this International Searching Authority is not equipped to search prior art
2. The failure of the following parts of the international application to comply with prescribed requirements prevents a meaningful search from being carried out:

the description the claims the drawings
3. A meaningful search could not be carried out without the sequence listing; the applicant did not, within the prescribed time limit:
 - furnish a sequence listing in the form of an Annex C/ST.25 text file, and such listing was not available to the International Searching Authority in a form and manner acceptable to it; or the sequence listing furnished did not comply with the standard provided for in Annex C of the Administrative Instructions.
 - furnish a sequence listing on paper or in the form of an image file complying with the standard provided for in Annex C of the Administrative Instructions, and such listing was not available to the International Searching Authority in a form and manner acceptable to it; or the sequence listing furnished did not comply with the standard provided for in Annex C of the Administrative Instructions.
 - pay the required late furnishing fee for the furnishing of a sequence listing in response to an invitation under Rule 13ter.1(a) or (b).
4. Further comments:
Applicant failed to submit a valid electronic seq. listing in response to the ISA/225.

Name and mailing address of the ISA/ Mail Stop PCT, Attn: ISA/US, Commissioner for Patents P.O. Box 1450, Alexandria, Virginia 22313-1450 Facsimile No. 571-273-8300	Authorized officer Blaine Copenheaver PCT Helpdesk: 571-272-4300 PCT OSP: 571-272-7774
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