



Single-Cell Gel Electrophoresis (Comet) Assay: Foundations, Refinements and Applications in Genetic Toxicology

Zorawar Singh*

Department of Zoology, Khalsa College Amritsar, Punjab, India

ABSTRACT

The single-cell gel electrophoresis (SCGE) assay, universally designated as the comet assay, has established itself as a foundational methodology across contemporary molecular toxicology, environmental biomonitoring, and regulatory genetic toxicology. By micro-electrophoretically resolving DNA damage within individual eukaryotic nuclei, the assay delivers exceptional analytical sensitivity, broad compatibility across proliferating and quiescent tissues, and direct visual assessment of cell-to-cell genomic heterogeneity. The alkaline adaptation ($\text{pH} > 13$) provides simultaneous detection of primary DNA single-strand breaks (SSBs), double-strand breaks (DSBs), alkali-labile sites (ALS), and transient enzymatic repair scission intermediates. Furthermore, incorporating lesion-specific repair endonucleases (such as Fpg and hOGG1) enables high-precision quantification of oxidative and alkylative purine/pyrimidine base damage. This comprehensive article details the fundamental biophysical mechanisms governing nucleoid unwinding and electrophoretic fragment migration, provides exhaustive step-by-step experimental optimization criteria, evaluates quantitative scoring metrics (% tail DNA, tail moment, tail length), addresses critical analytical confounders including cytotoxicity-induced hedgehogs, surveys high-throughput miniaturization platforms (12-gel arrays and microfabricated CometChips), and delineates regulatory validation under OECD Test Guideline 489.

KEYWORDS: Comet, Assay, Toxicology, Refinement, Electrophoresis, DNA, Single cell

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*Corresponding author:
Zorawar Singh
singhzorawars@gmail.com

1. INTRODUCTION

The preservation of genomic integrity is critical for cellular viability, normal tissue homeostasis, and the suppression of neoplastic transformation. Biological systems are constantly exposed to genotoxic insults originating from endogenous metabolic processes, such as reactive oxygen species (ROS) produced by mitochondrial oxidative phosphorylation, as well as exogenous environmental, occupational, and pharmaceutical xenobiotics. These agents induce an array of lesions including apurinic/aprimidinic (AP) sites, single- and double-strand scissions, modified bases, and inter- or intra-strand crosslinks. Unrepaired or aberrantly processed lesions frequently lead to transcriptional disruption, chromosome missegregation, somatic mutations, and apoptosis.

Historically, measuring DNA damage required bulk biochemical techniques, such as alkaline sucrose density gradient sedimentation, alkaline or neutral filter elution, and cesium chloride isopycnic centrifugation. Although mechanistically informative, these approaches possess intrinsic limitations: they require large cell inputs, often mandate pre-labeling with radioactive isotopes (^3H - or ^{14}C -thymidine), and yield macroscopic population averages that mask critical cell-to-cell heterogeneity. Concurrently, classical cytogenetic end points, including the in vitro mammalian chromosomal aberration test and the micronucleus assay, mandate active cellular proliferation to express cytogenetic anomalies during mitosis, restricting their

direct utility in non-dividing, differentiated, or quiescent primary organs.

The evolution toward single-cell resolution commenced in 1984, when Östling and Johanson embedded mammalian cells in an agarose matrix on glass slides, performed cellular lysis with non-ionic detergents under neutral conditions, and subjected the resulting structures to neutral electrophoresis. This early neutral comet assay detected double-strand breaks and higher-order chromatin relaxation. In 1988, Singh and colleagues instituted a transformative breakthrough by performing unwinding and electrophoresis under highly alkaline conditions ($\text{pH} > 13$). The alkaline environment denatured double-stranded DNA, uncoiled superhelical structures, and cleaved alkali-labile phosphodiester bonds at AP sites into frank single-strand breaks. Under the applied electric field, relaxed loops and broken fragments migrated toward the anode, generating fluorescent structures resembling celestial comets.

Over subsequent decades, concerted international standardization initiatives, spearheaded by the European Comet Assay Validation Group (ECVAG) and the International Workshops on Genotoxicity Testing (IWGT), standardized critical experimental parameters. These collaborative efforts culminated in the formal adoption of OECD Test Guideline 489 (In Vivo

Mammalian Alkaline Comet Assay), solidifying the assay as a recognized regulatory standard for assessing target-tissue genotoxicity in industrial chemical, pharmaceutical, and agrochemical safety evaluations.

2. THEORETICAL PRINCIPLES

The core physical entity evaluated in the comet assay is the eukaryotic 'nucleoid.' When intact single cells embedded within an agarose hydrogel are subjected to hypertonic lysis (typically containing 2.5 M NaCl, 100 mM Na₂EDTA, 10 mM Tris, and 1% Triton X-100 at pH 10.0), several distinct biochemical events take place in rapid succession:

Solubilization of Membranous Envelopes: The non-ionic surfactant rapidly dissolves both the outer plasma membrane and the inner/outer nuclear membranes, releasing free cytosolic proteins, lipids, and cytoplasmic organelles.

Extraction of Histones and Chromatin Deproteinization: Hypertonic sodium chloride dissociates core histones (H₂A, H₂B, H₃, H₄) and linker histone H₁ from the DNA phosphodiester backbone. Concurrently, soluble nuclear non-histone proteins are extracted.

Retention of the Supercoiled Matrix Core: The residual structure consists of high-molecular-weight genomic DNA anchored at periodic intervals to an insoluble proteinaceous nuclear scaffold (nuclear matrix/lamina remnants).

In intact, undamaged cells, the DNA organizes into negatively supercoiled loops attached to this skeletal framework. The geometric tortuosity and high molecular mass of these supercoiled chromatin domains completely impede their electrophoretic displacement through the surrounding agarose polymer network under moderate field strengths.

3. BIOPHYSICAL MECHANISMS OF ELECTROPHORETIC MIGRATION

The introduction of a single-strand or double-strand break by physical or chemical mutagens relieves the torsional tension within that discrete supercoiled loop domain. Upon entry into an alkaline denaturation bath (pH > 13, composed of 300 mM NaOH and 1 mM Na₂EDTA), complementary double strands dissociate, hydrogen bonding collapses, and alkali-labile lesions undergo rapid beta-elimination cleavage. Consequently, the relaxed, extended single-stranded DNA loops and liberated fragments are freed from structural entrapment.

When an electric field is applied horizontally, the negatively charged polyanionic phosphodiester backbone experiences an electrostatic driving force toward the anode (+). The intact, unbroken genomic core, retaining significant mass and scaffold attachments, remains essentially stationary at the origin, forming the dense, spherical 'comet head.' Conversely, broken loops and lower-molecular-weight fragments migrate through the microscopic agarose pores at rates inversely proportional to their frictional coefficients and structural complexity, creating the extended, luminous 'comet tail.' At low damage frequencies, tail formation represents relaxed loops extending toward the anode while still tethered to the core; at high damage levels, true fragmentation occurs, producing freely mobile fragments.

4. SPECTRUM OF LESIONS RESOLVED UNDER ALKALINE CONDITIONS

The standard alkaline protocol (pH > 13) detects a comprehensive array of primary structural DNA alterations:

Primary DNA Single-Strand Breaks (SSBs): Direct scissions of the phosphodiester chain induced by free-radical attack or direct chemical cleavage.

Primary DNA Double-Strand Breaks (DSBs): Coincident or proximal breaks occurring across opposing strands within a few base pairs.

1. Cell Isolation	Monodispersed suspension (< 10 ⁶ cells/mL); viability > 70-80%; chilled PBS/EDTA	Avoid harsh mechanical shearing or prolonged trypsinization; prevent artifactual DNA scission.
2. Agarose Embedding	0.5% - 0.8% LMP agarose at 37°C; pre-coated glass slides or hydrophilic films	Maintain temperature strictly at 37°C; excessive heat induces thermal DNA damage; premature cooling causes clumping.
3. Lysis	2.5 M NaCl, 100 mM EDTA, 10 mM Tris, 1% Triton X-100, pH 10.0; 1-24 h at 4°C in dark	Freshly add Triton X-100; maintain 4°C to suppress residual endogenous nucleases; shield from UV light.
4. Enzyme Digestion (Optional)	Fpg, hOGG1, or Endo III; 30-45 min incubation at 37°C in reaction buffer	Run enzyme-buffer control alongside active enzyme to distinguish true base oxidation from buffer incision.
5. Alkaline Unwinding	300 mM NaOH, 1 mM EDTA, pH > 13.0; 20-40 min at 4°C	Constant unwinding duration across all comparative batches; monitor buffer pH and temperature rigorously.
6. Electrophoresis	0.7 - 1.2 V/cm (~300 mA constant current); 20-30 min at 4°C	Circulate buffer to eliminate pH/thermal gradients; maintain constant liquid depth (e.g. 0.4 cm above slides).
7. Neutralization & Fixation	0.4 M Tris-HCl (pH 7.5); wash x3; 100% cold ethanol dehydration	Remove all residual alkali to prevent ongoing gel deterioration; air-dry completely before storage.
8. Staining & Imaging	SYBR Gold, Propidium Iodide, or DAPI; automated fluorescence scoring	SYBR Gold provides superior dynamic range and quantum yield; avoid over-exposure and rapid photobleaching.

Alkali-Labile Sites (ALS): Apurinic and apyrimidinic (AP) sites generated spontaneously, via enzymatic DNA glycosylase action, or by unstable phosphotriester adducts that cleave at pH > 13.

Incomplete Excision Repair Intermediates: Transient single-stranded incisions and gaps formed during active Base Excision Repair (BER) or Nucleotide Excision Repair (NER) prior to final DNA polymerase gap-filling and ligation.

DNA-Protein and DNA-DNA Crosslinks: Covalent crosslinking complexes that physically retard electrophoretic mobility, manifesting as an apparent reduction in comet tail migration relative to untreated controls.

Standard Methodological Workflow and Critical Optimization
Achieving reproducible, reliable, and regulatory-compliant comet assay data requires rigorous adherence to standardized experimental parameters. Minor variations in agarose concentration, unwinding duration, temperature, or electrophoretic field strength can dramatically affect DNA migration kinetics.

5. THE ENZYME-MODIFIED COMET ASSAY

Standard alkaline electrophoresis measures non-specific strand breakage and alkali-labile sites indiscriminately. To resolve discrete oxidative, alkylative, or photolytic base modifications, lesion-specific repair endonucleases are integrated into the workflow directly post-lysis. The permeabilized nucleoid core provides an accessible substrate for exogenous bacterial or mammalian repair glycosylases:

Formamidopyrimidine DNA Glycosylase (Fpg): Recognizes and excises oxidized purines, specifically 8-oxo-7,8-dihydroguanine (8-oxoG), 2,6-diamino-4-hydroxy-5-formamidopyrimidine (FaPy-guanine), and FaPy-adenine, converting them into single-strand breaks via AP-lyase activity.

Human 8-Oxoguanine DNA Glycosylase 1 (hOGG1): Exhibits refined specificity for 8-oxoG paired with cytosine, showing less non-specific nicking at non-canonical lesions compared to bacterial Fpg.

Endonuclease III (Endo III / Nth): Targets and excises oxidized pyrimidines, including thymine glycol, 5,6-dihydrothymine, and uracil glycol.

T4 Endonuclease V: Cleaves cyclobutane pyrimidine dimers (CPDs) induced by ultraviolet radiation.

Net lesion-specific damage is calculated by subtracting the migration value of a parallel buffer-incubated control slide from the enzyme-incubated slide migration value: Net Enzyme-Sensitive Sites = (% Tail DNA with Enzyme) - (% Tail DNA Buffer Control).

Metric	Linear Dynamic Range	Key Advantages	Primary Limitations
% Tail DNA	Wide (0% to ~85%)	Directly proportional to break frequency; OECD compliant; universal comparability	Requires calibrated segmentation of head-tail boundaries
Tail Length	Narrow (Early saturation)	Easily estimated manually; sensitive to early strand-break induction	Reaches an early physical plateau; highly dependent on gel density
Olive Tail Moment	Moderate to Wide	Reflects both total migrated mass and distance distribution	Expressed in arbitrary units; inter-system harmonization is difficult
Visual Score (0-400)	Qualitative / Categorical	Rapid; no specialized software required; ideal for field assays	Operator-dependent; subjective categorization thresholding

A central challenge in genetic toxicology is differentiating true primary genotoxicity from secondary genomic fragmentation

6. QUANTITATIVE METRICS, IMAGE ANALYSIS, AND SCORING METHODOLOGY

Fluorescence epifluorescence microscopy coupled with digital charge-coupled device (CCD) or scientific CMOS (sCMOS) cameras enables the acquisition of comet images for computational intensity profiling. Several primary metrics are used across published research and regulatory filings.

Mathematical Formulations of Comet Metrics

1. Percentage Tail DNA (% Tail DNA):
Calculated as the total integrated optical density of the comet tail divided by the sum of head and tail intensities, multiplied by 100:
$$\% \text{ Tail DNA} = [\text{Tail Intensity} / (\text{Head Intensity} + \text{Tail Intensity})] * 100$$

This parameter is universally recommended by regulatory agencies (OECD TG 489) because it directly reflects the relative fraction of liberated genomic DNA, demonstrates a linear response across increasing damage levels, and maintains high inter-laboratory comparability.

2. Tail Length (TL):
The linear distance measured from the estimated center or trailing edge of the head to the leading edge of the tail. While sensitive to initial low-level damage, Tail Length quickly reaches a plateau governed by agarose pore diameter and unwinding physics, making it unsuitable for evaluating wide dose-response spectra.

3. Olive Tail Moment (OTM):
Combines the percentage of migrated DNA with the spatial distance between the centroids of the head and tail distributions:

$$OTM = [\% \text{ Tail DNA} / 100] * (X_{\text{tail_center}} - X_{\text{head_center}})$$

While statistically robust in modeling complex damage distributions, OTM yields arbitrary units, impeding direct historical and cross-laboratory comparisons.

caused by overt cellular cytotoxicity. Cells undergoing early-to-late apoptosis or necrotic lysis activate endogenous calcium/magnesium-dependent endonucleases (such as Caspase-

Activated DNase, CAD). These nucleases indiscriminately cleave genomic DNA into internucleosomal segments (180–200 bp ladders) and high-molecular-weight fragments (50 kb).

In the comet assay, this non-specific enzymatic shredding causes substantial DNA migration, potentially yielding false-positive genotoxicity assessments. To prevent misinterpretation, regulatory guidelines mandate that the comet assay be performed only at test concentrations or doses that maintain cell viability above 70% to 80%. Parallel cytotoxicity assays, such as Trypan Blue exclusion, neutral red uptake, or relative population doubling, must be performed concurrently.

7. THE 'HEDGEHOG' (GHOST CELL) MORPHOLOGY

Under conditions of extreme exposure or severe cytotoxicity, microgels frequently display 'hedgehogs' (also designated ghost cells or clouds). These structures are characterized by an extremely small or nearly undetectable head surrounded by a large, diffuse halo of widely dispersed DNA fragments.

While hedgehogs often correspond to non-viable, apoptotic, or necrotic cells, empirical studies demonstrate that they can also arise from massive, localized, but potentially repairable single-strand breaks induced by non-lethal doses of specific agents (such as hydrogen peroxide or low-dose gamma irradiation). If cells can repair these lesions during post-exposure incubation, the morphology may represent reversible DNA damage rather than inevitable cell death. Consequently, current consensus guidelines recommend scoring hedgehogs separately and noting their frequency alongside standard comet metrics.

8. APPLICATIONS

In Vivo Regulatory Safety Assessment (OECD TG 489)

OECD Test Guideline 489 establishes the internationally harmonized framework for conducting the in vivo mammalian alkaline comet assay. The assay serves as a secondary follow-up to evaluate positive findings from in vitro bacterial (Ames) or mammalian cell assays. A major advantage of the in vivo comet assay is its tissue universality: unlike the erythrocyte micronucleus test (OECD TG 474), which is restricted to dividing hematopoietic cells, the comet assay can assess any tissue from which an intact single-cell suspension can be isolated.

Routine in vivo protocols assess the primary site of metabolism (liver), primary contact sites (stomach, duodenum, colon via oral gavage; respiratory epithelium via inhalation), and target organs identified in subacute repeat-dose studies. Under OECD TG 489, testing mandates a minimum of five analyzable rodents per sex per dose group, three treated dose tiers administered 24 hours apart, tissue collection 2–6 hours following the final dose, concurrent positive and vehicle controls, and automated scoring of at least 150 cells per animal per tissue distributed across multiple slides.

Nanotoxicology and Engineered Nanomaterials

The rapid growth of nanotechnology has driven extensive use of the comet assay to evaluate engineered nanomaterials (ENMs), including metal oxides (TiO₂, ZnO, Fe₃O₄), carbon allotropes (graphene, carbon nanotubes), and polymeric delivery systems. However, ENMs present unique analytical challenges:

Optical Interference: High-refractive-index nanoparticles can aggregate on or within the agarose gel, scattering light and creating automated focus and fluorescence measurement artifacts.

Cell-Free Radical Generation (Fenton Catalysis): Transition-metal nanoparticles co-isolated with nucleoids can catalyze Fenton reactions in the presence of trace hydrogen peroxide or ambient light, producing hydroxyl radicals that induce ex vivo DNA strand breaks during alkaline unwinding.

Cyto-centrifugation & Shearing: Internalized dense nanoparticles can mechanically slice or shear nuclear DNA during isolation and centrifugation, mimicking genuine intracellular genotoxicity.

9. HUMAN ENVIRONMENTAL AND OCCUPATIONAL BIOMONITORING

Because peripheral blood mononuclear cells (PBMCs) are accessible via minimally invasive collection, the comet assay is widely used in molecular epidemiology and occupational health surveillance. Cohort studies have investigated populations exposed to pesticides, heavy metals, ionizing radiation, volatile organic compounds (VOCs), and airborne particulate matter (PM_{2.5}). Applying enzyme modifications (e.g., Fpg and hOGG1) allows researchers to differentiate background strand breaks from oxidative base damage, providing an informative biomarker for environmental exposure, dietary interventions, and lifestyle factors.

The traditional 2-gel glass slide format suffers from low analytical throughput, high reagent consumption, and inter-gel variability. Several miniaturization platforms have been developed to address these limitations:

- **Multi-Gel Slide Arrays:** By depositing 12 to 96 miniaturized agarose droplets onto hydrophobically bordered glass or polyester substrates, multiple experimental conditions, concentrations, or enzyme treatments can be electrophoresed concurrently within a single chamber, minimizing slide-to-slide technical variance.

- **The Microfabricated CometChip:** Developed by Engelward and colleagues, the CometChip utilizes photolithographic micro-molding to generate an array of microscopic cylindrical wells (30–40 μm diameter) in an agarose sheet fitted to a 96-well plate format. Single cells fall into individual microwells by gravity, creating a uniform, single-plane array of non-overlapping cells. This system eliminates manual slide preparation, prevents cell crowding, standardizes the focal plane, and enables automated, high-speed image acquisition.

10. ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND DEEP LEARNING SCORING

Automated comet scoring has evolved from conventional threshold-based segmentation to advanced deep-learning convolutional neural networks (CNNs), such as U-Net and Mask R-CNN architectures. These networks are trained on large, diverse image sets to segment overlapping comets accurately, filter out debris and staining artifacts, correct for non-uniform background fluorescence, and classify hedgehogs automatically. This computational standardization reduces operator bias and enhances data comparability across multi-center collaborative trials.

11. CRITICAL COMPARISON WITH COMPLEMENTARY GENOTOXICITY ASSAYS

Selecting an appropriate assay requires aligning the test's mechanistic sensitivity with the biological question of interest. The table below contrasts the alkaline comet assay with three standard genotoxicity platforms.

Assay Platform	Primary Biological End Point	Cell Proliferation Requirement	Key Strengths & Target Niches
Alkaline Comet Assay (OECD TG 489)	DNA strand breaks (SSBs, DSBs), alkali-labile sites, excision repair gaps	NO (Scores non-dividing and differentiated cells directly)	Universal tissue applicability in vivo; rapid turnaround; enzyme-modified base damage profiling
Mammalian Micronucleus (OECD TG 487 / 474)	Structural chromosome breaks (clastogenicity) & whole chromosome loss (aneugenicity)	YES (Mitotic division required to express micronuclei)	Directly evaluates irreversible cytogenetic structural and numerical chromosome changes
Bacterial Reverse Mutation (Ames Test, OECD TG 471)	Gene mutations (base-pair substitutions and frameshifts in <i>Salmonella</i> / <i>E. coli</i>)	YES (Bacterial replication and colony outgrowth required)	Gold-standard regulatory screening assay; wide historical mutagenicity database
gamma-H2AX Foci Assay (Immunofluorescence)	Phosphorylated histone Ser139 marking double-strand break repair foci	NO (Assesses molecular damage response pathways)	High sensitivity for double-strand break induction and repair kinetics; amenable to flow cytometry

12. CONCLUSION

The single-cell gel electrophoresis (comet) assay remains a foundational methodology in genetic toxicology. Its technical accessibility, sensitivity, single-cell resolution, and adaptability to virtually any nucleated eukaryotic cell type make it uniquely valuable across research and regulatory domains. Methodological refinements, such as lesion-specific endonucleases for oxidative DNA profiling, microfabricated CometChip arrays, and deep learning-based image analysis, continue to improve its throughput, reproducibility, and analytical precision. Supported by OECD Test Guideline 489, the in vivo comet assay continues to serve as an established follow-up test in regulatory safety batteries, enabling target-tissue hazard characterization across industrial, agrochemical, and pharmaceutical sectors.

Author Contributions

The author conceived the concept, wrote and approved the manuscript.

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