



Gene behind evolution of intelligent life identified

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TORONTO: Scientists have identified a common ancestral gene that enabled the evolution of advanced life more than a billion years ago, and without which life on our planet would probably still be bacterial slime.

The gene, found in all complex organisms, including plants and animals, encodes for a large

group of enzymes known as protein kinases that enabled cells to be larger and to rapidly transfer information from one part to another.

"If the duplications and subsequent mutations of this gene during evolution did not happen, then life would be completely different today," said Steven Pelech, a professor at the University of British Columbia in Canada. "The most advanced life on our planet would probably still be bacterial slime," Pelech said.

Plants, animals, mushrooms and more all exist because they are made up of eukaryotic cells that are larger and far more complex than bacteria. Inside of these eukaryotic cells are hundreds of organelles that perform diverse functions to keep them living, just as different organs do for the human body.

The new research identified the gene that gave rise to protein kinases.

On a cellular scale, these highly interactive signalling proteins play a role similar to the neurons in the brain by transferring information throughout the cell by a process known as protein phosphorylation.

This ability to transmit signals from one part of the cell to another not only enabled cells to become more complex internally, but also allowed cells to come together to form systems, paving the way for the evolution of intelligent life.

Research into these enzymes has become very important to medicine. More than 400 human diseases like cancer and diabetes are linked to problems with cell signalling. Disease occurs when a cell gets misinformed or confused.

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