Minibeam radiation therapy: a micro- and nano-dosimetry Monte Carlo study

M. Dos Santos^{*,1} and R. Delorme^{*,2,3}, R. Salmon^{2,3}, Y. Prezado^{2,3}.

¹IRSN, Department of Radiobiology and regenerative medicine (SERAMED), Laboratory of Radiobiology of Accidental exposures (LRAcc) Fontenay-aux-Roses.

²Imagerie et Modélisation en Neurobiologie et Cancérologie (IMNC), CNRS, Univ Paris-Sud, Université Paris-Saclay, F-91400 Orsay, France

³Université de Paris, IMNC, F-91400 Orsay, France

*Co-first authors

Corresponding authors: morgane.dossantos@irsn.fr

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Abstract

Purpose: Minibeam radiation therapy (MBRT) is an innovative strategy based on a distinct dose delivery method that is administered using a series of narrow (submillimetric) parallel beams. To shed light on the biological effects of MBRT irradiation, we explored the micro- and nanodosimetric characteristics of three promising MBRT modalities (photon, electron, and proton) using Monte Carlo (MC) calculations.

Methods: Irradiation with proton (100 MeV), electron (300 MeV), and photon (effective energy of 69 keV) minibeam were simulated using Geant4 MC code and the Geant4-DNA extension, which allows the simulation of energy transfer points with nanometric accuracy. As the target of the simulations, cells containing spherical nuclei with or without a detailed description of the DNA geometry were placed at different depths in peak and valley regions in a water phantom. The energy deposition and number of events in the cell nuclei were recorded in the microdosimetry study, and the number of DNA breaks and their complexity were determined in the nanodosimetric study, where a multi-scale simulation approach was used for the latter. For DNA damage assessment, an adapted DBSCAN clustering algorithm was used. To compare the photon MBRT (xMBRT), electron MBRT (eMBRT), and proton MBRT (pMBRT) approaches, we considered the treatment of a brain tumor located at a depth of 75 mm.

Results: Both mean energy deposition at micrometric scale and DNA damage in the “valley” cell nuclei were very low as compared with these parameters in the peak region at all depths for xMBRT and at depths of 0 mm to 30 mm and 0 mm to 50 mm for eMBRT and pMBRT, respectively. Only the charged minibeam were favorable for tumor control by producing similar effects in peak and valley cells after 70 mm. At the micrometer scale, the energy deposited per event pointed to a potential advantage of proton beams for tumor control, as more aggressive events could be expected at the end of their tracks. At the nanometer scale, all three MBRT modalities produced direct clustered DNA breaks, although the majority of damage (> 93%) was composed of isolated single strand breaks. The pMBRT led to a significant increase in the proportion of clustered single strand breaks and double-strand breaks at the end of its range as compared to the entrance (7% at 75 mm vs. 3% at 10 mm) in contrast to eMBRT and xMBRT. In the latter cases, the proportions of complex breaks remained constant, irrespective of the depth and region (peak or valley).

Conclusions: Enhanced normal tissue sparing can be expected with these three MBRT techniques. Among the three modalities, pMBRT offers an additional gain for radioresistant tumors, as it resulted

in a higher number of complex DNA damage clusters in the tumor region. These results can aid understanding of the biological mechanisms of MBRT.

Keywords: Minibeam Radiation Therapy, DNA damage, Monte Carlo simulations, GEANT4

1. Introduction

The therapeutic index of radiation therapy (RT) treatments can be notably improved by changing the dose delivery methods, such as the temporal¹ or spatial fractionation of the dose.²⁻⁸ Minibeam radiation therapy (MBRT) is a promising example of how the spatial modulation of the dose can lead to a net reduction in neurotoxicity^{2-5,7} while providing equivalent or superior tumor control to standard RT for high-grade gliomas.^{6,8}

Although photon MBRT (xMBRT) was originally developed in synchrotrons,² it was recently implemented on a cost-effective preclinical installation, the Small Animal Radiation Research Platform (SARRP, XSTRAHL Ltd., UK), available at the Experimental Radiotherapy Platform of the Institut Curie (Orsay, France).⁹ Recently, the promising potential of a combination of MBRT with charged particle beams has started to be explored.¹⁰⁻¹³ Proton MBRT (pMBRT) was developed on a clinical beam line of the Proton Therapy Center of the Institut Curie (ICPO, Orsay, France).^{7,14} Previous research demonstrated significant widening of the therapeutic index^{7,8} when pMBRT was applied in preclinical studies.^{14,15} This approach combines the advantages of spatial fractionation of the dose (i.e., sparing of healthy tissue before the tumor) with the ballistic advantage of the Bragg peak and known superior relative biological effectiveness of proton beams.¹⁶ Very high-energy electron (VHEE, i.e., 70-300 MeV) therapy offers a potential alternative cost-effective solution to conventional radiotherapy beams.¹⁷ Among their major advantages over photons, one can retain the possibility to scan small pencil beams, producing a finer resolution of intensity modulated treatment and favorable dosimetric characteristics (i.e., low lateral penumbrae and reduced sensitivity to tissue heterogeneities) leading to superior dose distributions in most clinical cases.¹⁸ The biological effectiveness of electron MBRT (eMBRT) has not been evaluated, mainly due to a lack of available facilities. However, a theoretical proof of the concept of VHEE grid-therapy has been reported.¹³ As VHEE with such high kinetic energy have a higher probability to induce nuclear reactions, it is conceivable that their biological effect may be greater than that of photons or clinical electrons.

The biological bases underlying these new RT approaches are not fully understood. Ionizing radiation affects a diverse array of molecules and involves multiple (e.g., physical, chemical, and biological) mechanisms at different space and time scales. The narrow beam sizes employed in MBRT exploit dose-volume effects: the smaller the field size, the higher the tolerance of healthy tissue.^{19,20} According to previous studies, hyperplasia and migration of endothelial and glial cells from valleys (low doses) to peaks (high doses) led to recovery of damaged tissue.^{21,22} In addition, the preferential effect on malignant tissue compared to normal tissue was attributed to MBRT-induced damage of the immature tumor vasculature associated with tumor hypoxia and the lack of this effect on normal tissue.²³

The goal of this study was to expand understanding of the possible physical or biological mechanisms involved in the response to MBRT irradiation. With this aim in mind, we explored the micro- and nanodosimetric characteristics of three promising MBRT modalities (X-rays, VHEEs, and protons). The impact of secondary and primary particles in peak or valley regions may differ markedly at micro- and nanodosimetric scales. We performed the calculations using the Geant4 Monte Carlo (MC) code, and especially the Geant4-DNA extension, allowing to simulate energy deposition by ionizing radiation in very small biological structures, such as DNA, which is one of the most sensitive biological targets of ionizing radiation. We undertook a theoretical microdosimetry study at the cell nucleus level (i.e.,

energy deposited, interaction probability, and peak-to-valley dose ratio [PVDR]) and an evaluation of the number and complexity of DNA damage events induced at the nanometric scale.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. The Monte Carlo (MC) code

The general-purpose Geant4 MC code^{24,25} (version 10.3 patch-01) and its extension, Geant4-DNA,^{26–29} were used. Geant4-DNA allows the transportation of electrons in liquid water down to thermalization.^{26–29} It can be used to simulate discrete interactions of electrons, protons, and neutral hydrogen, as well as interactions of alpha particles and their charged states and some ions (Fe, C, O, and N), in liquid water in micro- and nano-dosimetry studies. Simulations performed with this package allow the calculation of all elementary interactions down to the electron-volt scale, with nanometric accuracy. The calculations are performed on an event-by-event basis, taking into account all the energy transfer points. In the present study, due to a lack of theoretical and experimental cross-section data for biological molecules in condensed states, liquid water with five excitation levels and five ionization shells was used as the target material.³⁰ For the sake of computation time, a combination of discrete and condensed history processes was used in the MC calculations. The Geant4-DNA processes were activated only in cells in order to let the short-range secondary particles be produced and tracked precisely in the cytoplasm and cell nucleus, our sensitive target. Outside the cells, we used standard low-energy electromagnetic and nuclear processes of Geant4 and applied a general tracking cut of 1 nm.^{24,25} We used the Livermore database for electromagnetic processes, which is well adapted for low-energy interactions of electrons and photons down to 250 eV but also suitable for energies up to 1 GeV. Hadronic processes were those recommended in the *Hadrontherapy* advanced example of Geant4. Inside the cells, the Geant4-DNA processes applied were those of the default physics constructor “G4EmDNAPhysics” of the version 10.3 patch-01 of Geant4 code.^{26–28} As detailed in the work of Bernal *et al.*²⁸, Geant4-DNA transports electrons, protons and Helium ions in the range of 7.4 eV to 1 MeV, 100 eV to 100 MeV and 1 keV to 400 MeV, respectively. Heavier ions are transported only in the 0.5 MeV/u to 10⁶ MeV/u range. The photons are tracked following the Livermore database even in the targets. We did not apply any additional energy user limits on the Geant4-DNA processes. A model of a cell with or without a detailed description of DNA was introduced as the target of the calculations and was placed at different depths in peak and valley regions.

2.2. Simulation details of irradiation configurations, geometries and data recorded

xMBRT, pMBRT and eMBRT were simulated using the irradiation configurations currently used for our theoretical or experimental studies.^{5,14,31}

In the present study, for xMBRT, three minibeam of 600 $\mu\text{m} \times 5 \text{ mm}$ with a center-to-center distance of 1,200 μm were simulated. The effective energy of the photon beam was 69 keV, based on the photon energy spectrum of the SAARP facility. For the sake of simplification of this theoretical study, time savings, and increase of statistics to reach the targets, we did not simulate the collimator. Instead, we used rectangular sources to represent the minibeam at the position of the collimator exit, with no divergence considered. This configuration approximated synchrotron xMBRT,⁴ for which a spatially fractionated dose over the entire depth is expected.

Concerning pMBRT, minibeam of 400 $\mu\text{m} \times 5 \text{ mm}$ with a center-to-center distance of 3,200 μm were simulated. An energy of 100 MeV was used for primary protons (Bragg peak position around 75 mm in water), and a realistic beam divergence of 3 mrad was taken into account.^{14,32} The collimator was not

simulated. Instead, three minibeam at the position of the collimator exit were used. This configuration corresponded to what would have been obtained with a magnetic collimation of the beam. Based on previous theoretical studies,^{13,33} for eMBRT approach, the beam energy chosen for the primary electrons was 300 MeV. Three minibeam of $600\text{ }\mu\text{m} \times 5\text{ mm}$ with a center-to-center distance of $1,800\text{ }\mu\text{m}$ were simulated. According to previous feasibility studies, beam divergence compatible with a beam size of $600\text{ }\mu\text{m}$ and with technically feasible beam optics on high-energy electron accelerators must be less than 0.2 mrad .^{31,33} Thus, beam divergence was not considered in the present study.

In electron and proton irradiation, beam size and beam spacing parameters were selected to obtain a highly spatially fractionated dose in the healthy tissue region ($10\text{--}50\text{ mm}$) and a quasi-homogeneous dose in the tumor region (approximately $70\text{--}75\text{ mm}$) in order to favor tumor control. These irradiation configurations corresponded to that used in previous studies and represented the case of the deepest brain tumor.^{13,14,32}

Spherical cells with a diameter of $20\text{ }\mu\text{m}$, each containing a centered spherical nucleus of $10\text{ }\mu\text{m}$ in diameter, were placed in a $5 \times 5 \times 10\text{ cm}^3$ water phantom at different depths ($1\text{--}75\text{ mm}$) in the central minibeam path (peak) and in the next valley region, as illustrated in Figure 1. The cells were centered in the minibeam/valley both in lateral and vertical (2.5 mm from the edge of the minibeam) directions.

Figure 1. Scheme of the simulation configuration in the microdosimetry study. Three minibeam of 5 mm (vertical direction) are simulated, with a horizontal width of $400\text{ }\mu\text{m}$ for protons and $600\text{ }\mu\text{m}$ for electrons and photons. The minibeam are separated by $1,200\text{ }\mu\text{m}$ for photons, $1,800\text{ }\mu\text{m}$ for electrons and $3,200\text{ }\mu\text{m}$ for protons, and are transported in a 10 cm long water phantom. Spherical cells are positioned at depths of $10, 30, 50, 70$ and 75 mm in the central beam path (peak) and between two beams (valley).

To save computation time, only three minibeam have been simulated in all three irradiation modalities. In the case of electrons, the contribution in the central peak cells of the scattered dose due to an additional minibeam will amount 1% of D_{max} at 5 cm depth and about 3% at the tumor position. Although the mean energy of the particles coming from the more extreme minibeam will be slightly higher, their number being much reduced, this will have a minimum impact in the mean energy. Similar findings will be observed in the three modalities. Being this a comparative evaluation between MBRT modalities, the inclusion of a higher number of minibeam will add unnecessary calculation time and not significantly change the conclusions of this work. In the microdosimetry study, the cell nuclei were filled only with water and the energy deposited as well as the number of events were scored. An

"event" must be understood here in the sense of a "Geant4 event", i.e. containing the history of a primary particle tracked in the geometry as well as its possible secondary particles. Uncertainties on the deposited energies per nucleus were calculated following the formula of Chetty *et al.*³⁴ for multicore MC-based calculations.

In the nanodosimetry study, a detailed description of the sensitive target, the nucleosome (the first DNA compaction level), was included to enable an evaluation of the RT-induced damage to cell nuclei. The geometry of the nucleosome was extracted from an extended example of geant4 (*G4.10.1/example/extended/medical/dna/WholeNuclearDNA*). In brief, the nucleosome was composed of a cylinder representing histone proteins wrapped by roughly two turns of DNA double helix (~2 nm of diameter) containing 200 amino bases and a sugar phosphate corresponding region,³⁵ as shown in Figure 2. The construction of the sugar phosphate region is based on an association of small spheres, forming a continuous volume for each strand. The nucleosomes were randomly oriented in the nucleus with respect to the beam orientation. The two DNA strands were flagged differently to calculate the type of breaks. The cell nucleus contained 29,925,000 nucleosomes, corresponding roughly to 6 Giga base pairs (Gbp). Due to the huge memory required to simulate the entire DNA of one cell in Geant4, with 24 Gigabytes of memory needed for each job, we used one-third of the total DNA (roughly 2 Gbp) in our simulations. Because of the low probability of interaction with the DNA when we simulated the whole three-minibeam source in the water phantom, we separated these simulations into two parts. This is a commonly used method for multi-scale studies requiring track-structure precision in small targets with realistic RT sources.³⁶ We previously verified that a one-step simulation, i.e. transporting particles from a reduced source surface in the whole water volume to the DNA, yields equivalent number of simple strand break (SSB) than the two-step method. The one-step simulation requires 1000 times the number of primary particles to get the same statistical uncertainty than with the two-step method, even with a simplified source. The method adopted in this work was the following: 1) in a first step, we used the same geometry as that employed in the microdosimetry study (Figure 1) to recover the energy spectrum of the particles (primary and secondary) in square targets of $20 \times 20 \mu\text{m}^2$ placed 10 μm before each cell at all depths (10–75 mm) and in both regions (peak and valley). 2) In a second step, we used these recorded energy spectra as the source for the second simulation. Each source of $20 \times 20 \mu\text{m}^2$ was sent in a single cell in which the detailed description of the DNA was included (Figure 2). The source was placed 10 μm before the cell membrane and centered in a water box of $0.5 \times 0.5 \times 0.5 \text{ mm}^3$. The angular dispersion of the recorded spectra was neglected, and all the particles were launched along the z-axis toward the cell. The particle transport was performed using Livermore and standard hadronic physics of Geant4 outside the cells, while Geant4-DNA physics was used inside the cells. The final number of DNA breaks was calculated after normalizing by the initial number of particles sent in the three-minibeam source (first step geometry) and by DNA Gbp. The calculation of DNA damage was considered as a counting following a Poisson distribution. Uncertainty was therefore estimated from the square root of the obtained number of breaks.

Figure 2. DNA geometry of the cell nucleus,³⁵ with a zoomed-up view of one nucleosome and the irradiation scheme used in the second step of the nanodosimetry simulations.

In the present study, a spherical nucleus of $10 \text{ }\mu\text{m}$ in diameter corresponded to that of a neuronal cell, which defined the level of compaction of the modelled DNA. Using different sizes or shapes of nuclei would lead to different chromatin condensation and potentially different results in terms of DNA damage.

2.3. Analysis of DNA damage

The number of DNA breaks was assessed using a method developed at the Institute of Radioprotection and Nuclear Safety (IRSN) that combines the use of full DNA geometry and an adapted DBSCAN (Density-Based Spatial Clustering of Applications with Noise) algorithm. DBSCAN is a powerful method to reveal interaction points belonging to a same cluster and links between these points.^{35,37}

Thanks to the detailed DNA geometry introduced in the simulations, all the energy transfer points located in the region of interest (i.e., DNA) were selected. As mentioned in the previous section, each nucleosome contains two sugar phosphate continuous volumes not allowing the distinction between nucleotides. To differentiate whether the energy transfer points belonged to the same strand (SSB) or to opposite strands (double-strand break [DSB]), each volume has been marked. The impossibility of counting directly the number of base pairs or nucleotide for DNA damage determination imposes the use of a clustering algorithm to assess DNA clustered damage. The energy transfer points located on the target region were analyzed and we used the adapted DBSCAN algorithm to obtain the energy deposition cluster that contributed to direct DNA damage. Although it is true that some other codes like PARTRAC³⁸ allows for a molecular precision, being the main purpose of this paper to relatively compare three new modalities of MBRT under the same conditions, Geant4-DNA is an adequate tool

that allows us to consider particle transport in a whole nucleus DNA. In this study, we simulated only the physical stage of the interactions (i.e., the direct effect of ionizing radiation). Thus, the quantification of DNA damage revealed by the clustering algorithm represented only potential clusters of SSBs or DSBs. To identify these clusters, three parameters were defined:

- The minimum number of energy transfer points composing a cluster was two.
- The maximal distance between two energy transfer points composing a cluster was 3.2 nm, as it is the distance between 10 base pairs, ensuring that the resulting clusters represented potential DSBs.^{39–41}
- The minimal energy contained in a cluster was 10 eV or the minimal energy of each energy transfer point was 5 eV.

From these considerations, three types of damage were distinguished:

- An isolated SSB (SSBis): energy transfer point located more than 3.2 nm from another point.
- A complex SSB (SSBcplx): two or more energy transfer points located on the same strand and separated by less than 3.2 nm.
- A DSB: two or more energy transfer points located on two strands and separated by less than 3.2 nm.

Although DSBs play a key role in inducing cell death, we scored all DNA damage candidates. We have chosen to present separately isolated SSBs to clustered SSBs (corresponding roughly to the "SSB+" damage category in the DNA break classification proposed by Nikjoo et al.³⁹) as more energy is deposited locally on a clustered damage, which is potentially more difficult to repair. As in our geometry two energy transfer points, in a same strand, could be located in a same nucleotide and counted as a SSBcplx, a slight overestimation of the number of SSBcplx could be expected.

3. Results

3.1. Microdosimetry study

Three parameters were studied: the total energy deposited in cell nuclei, the energy deposited in cell nuclei by event (i.e., a particle, primary or secondary, that interacted at least once with the cell nucleus), and the interaction probability in cell nuclei. For all configurations, the PVDR was calculated. Global statistical uncertainties of < 1% in peak cell nuclei and of < 2% in most valley cell nuclei were achieved. Only the point at 30 mm in valley for pMBRT presented a higher uncertainty of 8%.

3.1.1. Energy deposited in cell nuclei

Figure 3 shows the evolution of the total energy deposited in cell nuclei as a function of the depth in peak and valley regions for xMBRT, pMBRT and eMBRT. To compare the three modalities, the results were normalized to obtain the same absorbed dose (1 Gy) in the central peak cell nucleus at the tumor depth of 75 mm.

Figure 3. Total energy deposited in cell nuclei located in peak and valley regions for xMBRT (red), pMBRT (blue), and eMBRT (green) normalized at a depth of 75 mm in the central peak. The triangle symbols and solid lines depict the peak region, and the diamond symbols and dotted lines denote the valley region.

Table 1 shows the calculated PVDR for xMBRT, pMBRT and eMBRT. The PVDR is an important dosimetric parameter in spatially fractionated radiotherapy, as previous research showed that it was related to the dose tolerance of normal tissues.²² In the present study case, high PVDR values obtained at shallow depths suggested that normal tissue sparing could be expected.

Table 1. Peak-to-valley dose ratio (PVDR) values as a function of depth in water for xMBRT, pMBRT, and eMBRT modalities.

Depth (mm)	PVDR		
	xMBRT	pMBRT	eMBRT
10	30.0 ± 0.2		19.8 ± 0.3
30	27.7 ± 0.2	246 ± 22	10.5 ± 0.1
50	23.3 ± 0.2	4.4 ± 0.1	2.20 ± 0.02
70	22.8 ± 0.2	1.13 ± 0.02	1.10 ± 0.01
75	27.5 ± 0.3	1.11 ± 0.02	1.06 ± 0.01

The results obtained for MBRT revealed an exponential decrease in the energy deposited with depth and this decrease was similar in peak and valley regions. As divergence of the minibeam source was not considered in this study, the observed behavior was similar to that of synchrotron minibeam

profiles, where the PVDR remained relatively constant with depth due to the very low energy of the secondary particles.⁴

Regarding eMBRT, the energy deposition in the peak region followed the same trends as observed with xMBRT. The decrease was mainly due to the very small beam sizes used and their rapid lateral spreading with depth. In the case of minibeam, 300 MeV electrons exhibit substantial lateral scattering at a deep depth. Thus, a small beam size induces electronic disequilibrium in the central minibeam axis. The latter has a significant impact on energy deposition in depth, despite the very high energy used, as shown in previous studies.¹³ In the present study, the small beam size in eMBRT compensated for the high energy of the electrons, and this compensation was sufficient to cause a depth profile decrease as steep as for the 69 keV photon beam. The energy deposition in the valley was the highest among the three modalities compared at all depths.

The results obtained for pMBRT showed that the lowest amount of energy was deposited in cell nuclei both in the peak and valley regions, which should favor tissue sparing. The energy deposited in valley cells was one order of magnitude smaller than in the case of xMBRT or eMBRT before a depth of 50 mm. As for eMBRT, the very small beam size used impacted deeply the minibeam depth-profile, as shown in previous studies.^{13,14} However, lateral spreading was widely compensated by the Bragg peak (an increase in the track density) at the tumor location. There was a significant increase of deposited energy in nuclei in the peak region, with an associated PVDR close to 1 at depths of 70–75 mm. Using this pMBRT configuration, high tolerance to radiation can be expected in healthy tissue, with a favorable effect on tumor control.

3.1.2. *Energy deposited in cell nuclei per event*

Figure 4 reports the evolution of energy deposited in cell nuclei per event as a function of depth for the three modalities. Here, an event corresponds to the Geant4-event term, i.e. a primary particle and the possible secondary particles that it has produced. The event is only counted once when the primary or its secondary particles have interacted one time or more in the nucleus with an associated energy deposited in the volume. The final observable is the mean energy deposited in the cell nucleus per event having produced at least one interaction in the nucleus. This observable reflected the track-structure behavior of each irradiation modality at the micrometric scale.

Figure 4. Energy deposited per event in cell nuclei for xMBRT (red), pMBRT (blue) and eMBRT (green). The triangle symbols and solid lines depict the peak region, and the diamond symbols and dotted lines denote the valley region.

For both xMBRT and eMBRT, no dependence with the depth or differences between peak and valley regions were observed. This finding can be explained by the energy spectrum, which does not change significantly in accordance with depth or region for these beam types. The values for photons were four times higher than those of VHEEs. In contrast, for pMBRT, the profile of energy deposited per event increased as a function of depth, reaching a maximum value at the Bragg peak position (five times higher than at the entrance point) both in peak and valley regions. Such an increase, accompanied by a significant increase in the average energy deposited in the nucleus (Figure 3), suggested that an event occurring in the tumor region is potentially more aggressive at the micrometric level than one at the entrance (healthy tissue region).

3.1.3. Interaction probability

Figure 5 shows the interaction probability (i.e., the number of events interacting with the cell nucleus per primary particle) as a function of the depth for the three modalities. Both peak and valley regions were assessed.

Figure 5. The interaction probability in cell nuclei for xMBRT (red), pMBRT (blue) and eMBRT (green). The triangle symbols and solid lines depict the peak region, and the diamond symbols and dotted lines denote the valley region.

The expected exponential decrease in the interaction probability for photons was around 20 times higher in peak than in valley regions. Moreover, VHEEs and protons were much likely than photons were to interact with a targeted nucleus (around three orders of magnitude). This was due to their higher ionization density along their track. The differences in peak cells between eMBRT and pMBRT were also partly due to the geometric difference of beam size: 400 μm for protons versus 600 μm for electrons. The trend of the interaction probability as a function of depth followed that observed for energy deposition in both peak and valley regions (Figure 3). However, the number of events was not related to the increase of energy deposition observed in the Bragg peak in the peak region (Figure 3). This finding was mainly due to a decrease in the mean free path of the secondary particles, which delivered all their energy inside the cell nucleus. This phenomenon, highlighted by the energy deposited per event (Figure 4), was clearly due to the intrinsic properties of ion beams versus those of photon and electron beams.

3.2. Nanodosimetry study

We simulated the number and complexity of SSBs (isolated and clustered) and DSBs induced by direct interactions in cell nuclei for xMBRT, eMBRT and pMBRT. For pMBRT, in common with the findings of the microdosimetric study (Section 3.1), very little energy was deposited in the valley cell nuclei in the first 30 mm. Thus, DNA damage was calculated only from a depth of 50 mm in the valley region. The calculated uncertainties on the number of SSBs were < 0.5% for all modalities and $\leq 1\%$ on SSBcplx

and DSBs for both pMBRT and eMBRT. Using xMBRT, the uncertainties were 3% and 5% for SSBcplx and DSBs, respectively.

Figure 6 shows a comparison of the DNA damage among the three modalities normalized by the target dose (1 Gy peak dose at the tumor location, depth of 75 mm).

Figure 6. DNA damage (isolated SSBs, clustered SSBs and DSBs)/Gbp normalized for 1 Gy at 75 mm for xMBRT (red), pMBRT (blue), and eMBRT (green) in the peak (left) and valley (right) regions as a function of the depth. The triangle symbols and solid lines denote DSBs, the square symbols and dashed lines denote SSBcplx, and the diamond symbols and dotted lines denote SSBis.

Irrespective of the irradiation modality, most of the DNA damage consisted of isolated SSBs (93–98%). Complex SSBs and DSBs accounted for only 1.5–5% and 0.5–2% of DNA damage, respectively. This finding can be explained by the very small volume of DNA molecules (0.20%) to that of the total volume of the cell nucleus. Hence, the probability of having energy transfer points close enough to form DSBs was weaker than the probability of having isolated energy transfer points.

As a complement to Figure 6, Table 2 reports the total number of direct DNA breaks as a function of depth for pMBRT, eMBRT and xMBRT in peak and valley regions.

Table 2. Total amount of direct DNA damage/Gbp normalized for 1 Gy at 75 mm, in the peak (left) and valley (right) regions for pMBRT, eMBRT and xMBRT modalities.

Total DNA breaks per Gbp, normalized for 1 Gy at 75 mm		
Depth (mm)	pMBRT-peak	pMBRT-valley
10	35.37 ± 0.04	1.713 ± 0.001 10.690 ± 0.006 25.355 ± 0.009
30	22.31 ± 0.02	
50	13.35 ± 0.01	
70	14.18 ± 0.01	
75	27.80 ± 0.01	
Depth (mm)	eMBRT-peak	eMBRT-valley
10	91.77 ± 0.08	1.569 ± 0.001
30	82.55 ± 0.07	5.674 ± 0.004
50	50.76 ± 0.04	21.71 ± 0.02
70	36.59 ± 0.03	32.40 ± 0.03
75	35.66 ± 0.03	32.99 ± 0.03
Depth (mm)	xMBRT-peak	xMBRT-valley
10	132.6 ± 0.7	3.32 ± 0.02
30	87.7 ± 0.4	2.56 ± 0.01
50	58.2 ± 0.3	1.75 ± 0.01
70	39.4 ± 0.2	1.17 ± 0.01
75	36.0 ± 0.2	1.04 ± 0.01

These results indicated that, compared to eMBRT or xMBRT, in the peak, the quantity of DNA damage events was lower in the case of pMBRT between 10 and 70 mm, which might favor sparing of healthy tissue. Moreover, due to an increase in track density in the tumor location at a depth of 75 mm, pMBRT resulted in the highest number of complex DNA damage events, such as DSBs, which are the most critical type of DNA lesion (Figure 6). This finding suggests that pMBRT could be expected to result in more lethal lesions at the tumor position than eMBRT or xMBRT. The number of complex DNA breaks obtained in the valley region was negligible or very low before 50 mm. However, this number increased with depth, reaching an equivalent level to that of the peak obtained at 75 mm, highlighting the homogenous irradiation effect of pMBRT at the tumor site. These observations were correlated with the theoretical results obtained in the microdosimetric study, in which higher energy was deposited per event at 75 mm (Figure 4).

In the peak region of xMBRT and eMBRT, a similar steady decline in the total number of DNA damage events was observed with depth, in accordance with the observations of the interaction probability and total energy deposited in cell nuclei reported above (Section 3.1). The number of clustered SSBs and DSBs obtained using xMBRT was slightly greater than that obtained using eMBRT.

In the valley region, the total number of DNA damage events caused by eMBRT increased with depth until reaching a value similar to that of the peak obtained at 75 mm. In contrast, the total number of xMBRT-induced DNA damage events continued to decrease with depth, with a steadily lower amount compared to the peak by a factor of around 35. The difference factor in complex DNA breaks (SSBcplx and DSBs) between the peak and the valley was around 60 after eMBRT at a depth of 10 mm, and became equivalent to that caused by xMBRT at 30 mm. In accordance with the microdosimetric study, this result suggested that low damage can be expected on entrance tissues with eMBRT. At a depth of

50 mm, the number of complex DNA breaks in the valley region was higher using eMBRT by an order of magnitude as compared with those obtained using xMBRT and pMBRT. In the tumor region (70–75 mm), this number increased using eMBRT due to lateral spreading of the electron beam with depth, confirming the homogeneous damaging effect of charged beams on peaks and valleys at the nanoscale. The maximum number of DSBs occurred at a depth of 75 mm using both pMBRT and eMBRT, showing that important cell death can be expected in the tumor region, even in the valley's axis.

Although the proportions of complex DNA breaks (i.e., SSBcplx and DSBs) remained constant at all depths for xMBRT (approximately 2.5% and 1%, respectively) and eMBRT (approximately 1.6 and 0.6%, respectively), the proportion of SSBcplx and DSBs increased and reached maximum values of 5% and 2% at 75 mm for pMBRT, respectively. The latter finding was the result of an increase in radiation linear energy transfer (LET) of protons with depth.

In terms of complexity (i.e., the number of energy transfer points composing clusters), there was an exponential decrease in the number of DNA breaks with the cluster size, irrespective of the irradiation modality. In the case of pMBRT and eMBRT, about 90% of SSBcplx and 73% of DSBs were composed of two or three energy transfer points, both in the peak and valley regions. For these two modalities, DSB clusters containing as many as 15 energy transfer points were detected, although at a very small frequency. For xMBRT, the clusters were slightly less complex, with 92% of SSBcplx and 76% of DSBs composed of two or three energy transfer points, and DSB clusters that did not exceed 10 energy transfer points. In terms of the proportion of complexity level, no significant differences were found among peak and valley regions or depth for all modalities. However, the maximal number of damage events for a given complexity was found for pMBRT at the tumor depth (75 mm).

4. Discussion

This study compared micro- and nanodosimetric characteristics of three innovative types of spatially fractionated RT: photon, electron and proton minibeam radiation therapy. xMBRT and pMBRT approaches have been the subject of several dosimetric^{14,32} and biological studies,^{5–8,42} and these have demonstrated very promising results as a treatment for radioresistant tumors. However, the underlying mechanisms remain unclear. In addition, eMBRT using very high-energy electrons has never been studied experimentally, although theoretical studies pointed to potentially interesting properties in terms of normal tissue sparing.^{13,33} This is the first multiscale MC study mimicking realistic conditions of minibeam treatments, and the results allow to deepen understanding of the physical mechanisms involved in xMBRT approaches down to the DNA level. The latter was made possible by the precision of Geant4-DNA^{26–29} code, detailed geometry of human neuronal DNA, and use of the adapted clustering DBSCAN algorithm.^{35,37}

Concerning a depth of 10–50 mm representative of healthy tissue, the energy deposition in cell nuclei located in the valley region was very low, resulting in high PVDR values (Section 3.1). In addition, the number of complex direct DNA damage events in the valley region was at least one order of magnitude lower than in the peak region (Section 3.2). These results suggested a potential gain in normal tissue sparing for all the modalities studied. Among the three modalities, pMBRT was associated with the lowest amounts of energy deposition and DNA breaks, both in peak and valley cell nuclei, when the results were normalized to a target dose of 1 Gy at 75 mm depth.

Regarding the tumor location (70–75 mm), both eMBRT and pMBRT appeared to favor tumor control by delivering a quasi-homogeneous energy distribution at the depth of the tumor. Using xMBRT, the proportion of energy deposition and direct DNA breaks between peak and valley regions remained relatively constant from entrance to tumor depth.

The results of the nanodosimetry study showed that all modalities caused a significant number of direct complex DNA breaks, such as DSBs and clustered SSBs, in the tumor region. We focused attention on complex DNA breaks because they are the most critical lesion to cause cell death, especially DSBs.^{43,44} Photons have the lowest probability of interacting with targets as small as DNA. Hence, at least 10,000 additional primary particles are needed to reach similar DNA break values to those of charged beams. In the present study, the proportion of complex SSBs and DSBs at the tumor site (75 mm) using pMBRT was much higher than that obtained using eMBRT or xMBRT in both peak and valley regions (up to 7% of clustered DNA damage versus 3% for electrons and photons). In addition, clusters composed of up to 15 energy transfer points and separated by less than 3.2 nm were obtained using eMBRT and pMBRT, whereas clusters composed of up to 10 energy transfer points were found for xMBRT.

Finally, pMBRT may be superior to xMBRT and eMBRT in terms of radioresistant tumor control, as it was associated with a higher number of complex DNA breaks and higher energy deposition, and energy per event, at the cell nucleus level when scored at the tumor depth. In addition, pMBRT showed the lowest energy deposition and the lowest number of DNA lesions in healthy tissue.

xMBRT may be a promising treatment modality in cases where the advantages of spatial fractionation are required at all depths. In such cases, to decrease PVDR values and obtain a quasi-homogenous dose distribution in the tumor, an orthogonal array of interlaced minibeam irradiation must be used.⁶ In relation to eMBRT, this modality may be useful for skin and superficial tissue protection. It also offers the advantage of a homogeneous dose to favor tumor control at a potentially lower cost than proton beams. When submillimetric beams are used to treat deep tumors, the use of several beam incidences can additionally increase the dose deposition. However, the gain expected for normal tissues located close to the tumor would be very limited as compared with that obtained using pMBRT.

Thus, depending on the tumor location, normal tissue sparing, and nearby organs at risk, each configuration could be used (pMBRT, eMBRT or xMBRT), potentially enhancing conventional treatment for cancers not benefiting currently from a satisfactory curative solution. These results pave the way for additional studies on the effectiveness of MBRT modalities for the treatment of radioresistant tumors or pediatric cancers, as the treatment doses could be increased while limiting damage to healthy tissues surrounding a tumor.

As a proof of concept, we considered a tumor located in the center of the brain, i.e., a deeply embedded brain tumor with a poor prognosis due to the potential high doses deposited in the surrounding normal tissue. Our results do not need to be restricted to brain location and could be extrapolated for any tumor located at such depth. However, we remind the reader that a modification of the size or the shape of the cell nucleus may lead to a different DNA condensation and potentially to different DNA damage results. For other tumor depths, as PVDR values and the proportion of DNA breaks in healthy tissue and tumor may vary, different beam sizes and center-to-center distances may be selected to optimize the treatment, depending on the tumor site. In the present study, to reduce the computation time while ensuring the nanometric precision needed, the simulations were

performed using only three minibeam instead of a full array of minibeam as would be the case in a realistic treatment to cover macroscopic targets. Although non-negligible for VHEE beams, the missing contribution due to long-range secondary particles does not alter the conclusions of the present study in terms of relative effectiveness of the different MBRT modalities.

In the last decades, several cell nuclei models containing DNA geometry have been implemented in MC simulations to quantify DNA damage and to aid understanding of their biological effects. Different MC codes (e.g., KURBUC or PARTRAC), geometry models, DNA break quantification methods and, for the most advanced codes, DNA repair processes have been used in calculations aiming of quantifying DNA damage.^{28,38,45,46} In the present study, we simulated only the physical stage of the interactions (i.e., the direct effect of ionizing radiation), as a result of which we did not calculate absolute numbers of DNA breaks. Thus, our results cannot be directly compared to DNA break yields published in previous MC studies.^{38,46} Moreover, most of these studies focused on charged particles (i.e., protons, alpha particles and heavier ions) with specific LET and for which the sources were delivered directly to the cell nucleus. In our calculations, we endeavored to closely simulate the real irradiation conditions in minibeam therapies. The main objective of this study was to compare for the first time three promising MBRT modalities at radiobiological scales. An additional original contribution was to evaluate the situation of VHEE beams in comparison to photon and proton beams at such scales. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first micro- and nanodosimetry study on MBRT. In addition, no *in vitro* or *in vivo* experiments have compared these three modalities. For these reasons, it is not possible to compare our results with previous numerical studies or experiments. Moreover, although it holds true that Geant4-DNA does not transport heavy ions produced with energies lower than 0.5 MeV/u in the case of VHEE, our calculations demonstrated that their production rate is four order of magnitude smaller than that of secondary electrons and photons. Thus, this limitation should not alter the conclusions of this work.

To go further, it would be interesting to simulate indirect effects of ionizing radiation, as a large amount of DNA damage is caused by radiolytic products resulting from water radiolysis after irradiation.^{47,48} Such researches would improve the realism of our damage estimations to allow comparisons to other MC simulation results or biological data. Geant4-DNA can already be used to study the production and transportation of chemical species, although only in liquid water.⁴⁹ It will be interesting to perform simulations of the physico-chemical and chemical stages of radiation in detailed DNA geometries when the processes will be available for the public in Geant4.^{49,50} Finally, systematic *in vitro* and *in vivo* experimental measurements would be required to validate the therapeutic benefit of these promising MBRT modalities.

5. Conclusion

This work compared the micro- and nanodosimetric characteristics of xMBRT, eMBRT, and pMBRT, three innovative RT approaches based on spatial fractionation and the use of submillimetric irradiation beams. The MC results presented herein provide additional micro- and nanometric arguments in favor of developing these new MBRT modalities for cancer treatment. Among the modalities assessed in the present study, pMBRT showed the highest potential in terms of normal tissue preservation. It was also the most aggressive treatment in the tumor region (located at 75 mm in this study). Future studies will focus on performing systematic radiobiology experiments to explore the impact of these promising MBRT modalities on DNA damage *in vitro* and to validate their therapeutic benefit *in vivo*.

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Conflicts of interest

All the authors declare that they have no conflict of interest in relation to the research in the submitted manuscript.

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