CAFFEINE ENHANCEMENT OF DIGESTION OF DNA BY NUCLEASE S₁

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Summary

The activity of Aspergillus orzae nuclease S₁ on DNA has been investigated under varying pH and metal ion conditions. Nuclease S₁ was found to preferentially digest denatured DNA. With native DNA as substrate the enzyme could only digest the DNA when caffeine was added to the reaction mixture. The enzyme was more active in sodium acetate buffer (pH 4.5), than in either standard saline citrate (pH 7.0) or sodium phosphate buffer (pH 6.8).

Caffeine was also found to affect the thermal stability of DNA, resulting in a melting profile characterized by two transitions. The first transition (poorly defined) was below the normal melting temperature of the DNA, while the next transition was at the normal melting temperature of the DNA. The susceptibility of caffeine-treated DNA to nuclease digestion seems to be a result of the local unwinding that caffeine causes in the regions of DNA that melt in the first transition. This selective destabilization presumably sensitizes the unwound regions to nuclease hydrolysis.

The hydrolysates of the DNA digested by nuclease S₁ were subjected first to ion exchange chromatography followed by paper chromatography. The results from this partial characterization of the digestion products showed that they contain mononucleotides as well as oligonucleotides of varying lengths. The base composition of the mononucleotide digests suggests that caffeine has greater preference for interacting with A–T base-pairs in DNA.

Introduction

The treatment of X- and UV-irradiated Escherichia coli cells with caffeine has been reported to have a synergistic effect on nuclease hydrolysis of DNA, while mere treatment of E. coli cells by caffeine alone did not lead to the breakdown of their DNA [5]. In vitro, caffeine inhibits exonucleases of E. coli [11].
On the other hand when these cells were simultaneously treated with caffeine and phleomycin, there was an extensive breakdown of their DNA [4]. Recently caffeine has been shown to cause varying degrees of damage to the chromosomes of eucaryotic cells [3,6].

We have used nuclease S₁ from *Aspergillus orzae*, as a probe in examining the in vitro effect of caffeine on eucaryotic DNA. Nuclease S₁ is specific for single-stranded nucleic acids [1]. We report here the destabilization of bihelical DNA by caffeine in a manner that enhances its degradation by nuclease S₁, even under reaction conditions that we had found to inhibit the activity of this enzyme. The digestion products, although almost completely acid-soluble, consist of both mononucleotides and oligonucleotides of different lengths. The treatment of native DNA with caffeine and nuclease S₁ resulted in the releasing of some mononucleotides which were rich in A + T.

Materials and methods

**Materials**

Caffeine (1,3,7-trimethylxanthine) was obtained from Fisher Scientific. (methyl[³H]) Thymidine was obtained from International Chemical and Nuclear Corporation, Irvine, Cal. *Aspergillus orzae* crude α-amylase and bovine serum albumin were obtained from Sigma. DEAE-Sephadex (A-50) and DEAE-Sephadex (A-25) were obtained from Pharmacia. dAMP, dCMP, dGMP and dTMP were obtained from Calbiochem. L1210 mouse leukemia cells were obtained from Associated Biomedic Systems, Buffalo, New York. Bleomycin was obtained from National Wholesale Drugs Co., Detroit, Michigan.

**Labeled DNA**

Mouse L1210 cells were used as the source of labeled DNA. The cells routinely maintained in RPMI 1640 medium containing 5% horse serum were labeled with (methyl[³H])thymidine (1 μCi per ml of culture medium) for 24 h at 37°C. DNA was prepared by the method of Marmur [8] from both L1210 cells and mouse liver.

**Nuclease S₁ assays**

Nuclease S₁ was prepared from *A. orzae* crude α-amylase by a slight modification of the method of Sutton [14]. The enzyme was eluted from a DEAE-Sephadex (A-50) column by using a step gradient of 0.1, 0.15, 0.25, 0.3 and 0.5 M NaCl buffered in 0.02 M potassium phosphate, pH 6.9. Nuclease S₁ activity was measured in a 0.25 ml reaction mixture consisting of 0.1 M KCl, 0.1 mM ZnSO₄, and 0.025 M sodium acetate (KZS), pH 4.5. The bulk of high activity nuclease S₁ was eluted with the 0.25 M NaCl, 0.02 M potassium phosphate, pH 6.9 solution. In some reactions ZnSO₄ was replaced by other transition metal ions. The other reaction conditions used are described in the appropriate legends. Generally, the reaction mixtures also contained 5 μg of native or heat denatured L1210 cell [³H]DNA and 5 μg of nuclease S₁, sometimes supplemented with varying concentrations of caffeine. Incubations were for 30 min at 37°C, unless stated otherwise. The reaction was stopped by chilling the reaction mixtures in an ice bath, adding 25 μg of bovine serum albumin
to each tube, and precipitating the undigested material with 10% cold trichloroacetic acid. The acid-insoluble materials were collected on GF/C filters and the counts in them measured in a Beckman liquid scintillation spectrometer.

Some nuclease S1 assays were carried out with unlabeled DNA. In such cases, 50 μg of unlabeled DNA was used as substrate and incubation terminated by adding 25 μg of carrier calf thymus DNA to facilitate the precipitation of longer DNA fragments with 0.5 N perchloric acid. After chilling for 15 min the acid-insoluble precipitates were removed by centrifuging at 17,000 g for 10 min, and the amount of digested material in the supernatant measured at A260. The enzyme had a specific activity of 220 units/mg. A unit of nuclease S1 activity is the amount of enzyme which causes the release of 1.0 A260 unit of acid-soluble material during 30 min of incubation at 37°C.

Chromatography of nuclease S1 digestion products. The digestion of DNA was carried out in 1.5 ml of KZS containing 200 μg of denatured DNA and 20 μg of nuclease S1. In some cases 50 μg caffeine was also added. After incubating for 20 h at 37°C, the samples were desalted by passing them through Bio-Gel P-2 (50-100 mesh), made 0.1 M in Tris-HCl, pH 8.3, and loaded on to a DEAE-Sephadex (A-25) column (1.5 × 30 cm), pre-equilibrated with 0.1 M Tris-HCl, pH 8.3 [15]. A column volume of loading buffer was used to remove most of the nuclease S1 material from the column. The enzyme seems to poorly bind to the column matrix at pH 8.3. The nucleic acid hydrolysates were eluted with a linear gradient of 0.05—0.5 M NaCl made in loading buffer. Column effluents were monitored at 253, 259, 267 and 272 nm which are the wavelengths of maximum absorption of dGMP, dAMP, dTMP, and dCMP, respectively. Fractions in each peak were pooled, desalted, frozen in liquid N2, and lyophilized.

The samples were each dissolved in 0.1 ml H2O and 0.01 ml aliquots applied to Whatman No. 1 paper for descending chromatography using an isopropanol—conc. HCl—water (170 : 41 : 39) solvent system. Commercial deoxyribonucleoside monophosphates and caffeine were used as standards. Chromatography was allowed to take place for 16 h at 25°C. After drying, the sample spots were visualized by means of a UV light (257.3 nm), and marked in order to determine Rf values.

Bleomycin digestion of [3H]DNA. The conditions of treatment of the DNA with bleomycin were according to the procedure of Kuo et al. [7]. The final dialysis of the DNA was against a solution of 0.1 M KCl, 0.1 mM ZnSO4, and 0.025 M sodium acetate, pH 4.5. This was followed by treatment of the 20 μg of [3H]DNA with 10 μg of nuclease S1 in a 0.5 ml volume reaction mixture. After incubation for 30 min at 37°C, the acid-insoluble material was collected on GF/C filters and counted.

**Melting profiles**

For the melting temperature measurements, 0.5 A260 unit of calf thymus DNA, as well as that of caffeine—DNA complexes (1 : 1 mass ratio) in 0.015 M NaCl, 0.0015 M sodium citrate (0.1 × SSC) solution was used. The melting was measured in a Gilford 222 recording spectrophotometer equipped with a temperature programmer.
Results

Fig. 1 shows the effect of the helix-coil configuration of DNA on the activity of nuclease S1. The enzyme shows minimal activity with a native DNA substrate, but does almost completely digest denatured DNA. In the presence of caffeine, however, more than 35% of native DNA is digested by the enzyme. The kinetics of the caffeine-mediated digestion of native DNA somewhat resemble those of the digestion of denatured DNA in the absence of caffeine. The digestion in both cases is slow and approaches the plateau level after 40 min. As nuclease S1 is specific for single-stranded nucleic acids [1,14] caffeine probably enhances its digestion of native DNA by promoting regional unwinding of the double-helix. The loci of native DNA that undergo this special destabilization thus become subject to nuclease S1 digestion. Caffeine by itself did not render a detectable amount of native DNA acid soluble. Sleigh and Grigg [12] have reported a similar observation in their studies on the activity of Neurospora crassa conidial endonuclease in the presence of phleomycin and caffeine.

Nuclease S1 exhibits the highest level of activity in KZS. In this medium, 96% of denatured DNA was digested by the enzyme in 30 min in the presence of caffeine (Fig. 2). In either 2 × SSC, pH 7.0, or 0.12 M sodium phosphate buffer, pH 6.8, nuclease S1 digested only about 10% of denatured DNA in the absence of caffeine. It seems that the pH of the two media as well as partial renaturation of the DNA during incubation reduced the activity of the enzyme.
Fig. 2 also shows that the addition of caffeine to the reaction mixture increased
the digestion of the DNA by nuclease S₁ to about 45% in 2 × SSC, and 31% in
0.12 M sodium phosphate buffer, pH 6.8. This suggests that caffeine interferes
with the renaturing of the DNA and thereby promotes the action of nuclease
S₁.

As Zn²⁺ belongs to the transition metal ion group, we examined the effect of
replacing the Zn²⁺ in KZS with other transition metal ions. We also examined
the effect of supplementing some of these reaction mixtures with caffeine.
Table I presents a summary of the results so obtained. In the sodium acetate
buffer, pH 4.5, the reactions with Zn²⁺ showed the greatest nuclease S₁ activity
both in the presence and absence of caffeine when compared to the reactions
with the other metal ions. In the same buffer, the activity of the enzyme in the
presence of the other transition metal ions was remarkably enhanced by the
presence of caffeine. In 0.01 M Tris—HCl, pH 7.4, the enhancement of nuclease
S₁ activity by caffeine was still lower than the almost complete digestion of the
DNA observed in KZS. The results in these two buffer systems indicate that the
enzyme exhibits greater activity at pH 4.5.

When DNA that had been treated with bleomycin (DNA : bleomycin ratio of
1 : 15) was subjected to nuclease S₁ digestion, 99% of the DNA was rendered
acid-soluble. This suggests that bleomycin destabilizes the DNA in a manner
analogous to the action of caffeine. Kuo et al. [7] have reported that 20% of
the DNA treated with bleomycin remains undegraded and is single-stranded.
Our results clearly confirm their observations, as the almost complete digestion
of the bleomycin treated DNA by nuclease S₁ indicates that the fragments not
degraded by bleomycin are single-stranded polydeoxyribonucleotides. Only 1%
of the bleomycin treated DNA resists digestion by nuclease S₁, probably be-
cause it had become renatured.

The absorption spectra of caffeine and of the caffeine—DNA complex in
KZS are presented in Fig. 3. The profiles show that when caffeine is complexed
with DNA, its absorption maximum at 205 nm is conserved, while that at 275
nm is shifted to 270 nm, presumably due to the influence of the DNA whose

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Metal ion</th>
<th>Percentage of DNA digested</th>
<th>Sodium acetate, pH 4.5</th>
<th>0.01 M Tris—HCl, pH 7.4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>−Caffeine</td>
<td>+Caffeine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZnSO₄</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NiCl₂</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cu(NO₃)₂</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CdSO₄</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co(NO₃)₂</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FeCl₃</td>
<td>18.4</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each 0.25 ml reaction mixture contained 0.1 M KCl, the appropriate metal ion and buffer, 10 μg of de-
natured [³H] DNA and 5 μg nuclease S₁. Some reaction mixtures were supplemented with 5 μg caffeine.
Incubation was at 37°C for 30 min.
absorption maximum is at 260 nm. The absorption minimum of the complex becomes shifted from 245 to 250 nm. The absence of significant increase in absorbance at 270 nm upon the addition of 20 µg of DNA to the caffeine solution whose absorbance (A270) is already 0.5, suggests that some of the unwound DNA becomes involved in some type of a complex with caffeine leading to a reduction in the hyperchromic effect that would have been expected from the unwinding of the DNA.

Fig. 4 shows that the melting profile of the DNA–caffeine complex occurs over a broad two-phase transition (T_m 64°C, 72°C). The T_m of DNA alone is 72°C [10,13]. The poorly defined transition at 64°C is reproducible. The nature of the profile is consistent with the notion that caffeine selectively destabilizes some regions (T_m 64°C) of the DNA while some regions retain the typical T_m (72°C) of calf thymus DNA. Presumably, it is the material melting at 64°C that becomes nuclease S1 sensitive after caffeine treatment. This notion is supported by the fact that the nucleotides released by nuclease S1 after caffeine treatment are high in A and T composition.

When the hydrolysates from heat denatured DNA digested with nuclease S1, were subjected to chromatography on DEAE-Sephadex A-25, the material was separated into four peaks (Fig. 5). The absorbance of each fraction was measured at 253, 259, 267 and 272 nm to get a rough estimate of the relative amounts of dGMP, dAMP, dTMP and dCMP, respectively in each fraction. Absorbance measurements of the fractions in the first three peaks indicated that each fraction consisted of the four deoxyribonucleotides. The data do not show whether these were mononucleotides or polynucleotides. Fig. 5A shows that peak IV material contains dCMP (A272) and a minimal amount of dTMP (A267). Peak IV material also contains dGMP (A253) and dAMP (A259) (Fig.
Fig. 5. Chromatographic separation of nuclease S₁ hydrolysates of DNA. The hydrolysates of 200 μg of denatured DNA digested by 20 μg of nuclease S₁ were fractionated on a DEAE-Sephadex A-25 column as described in the text. The absorbances of the fractions from the same column were measured at four wavelengths as follows: (A) ○, 272 nm for dCMP; •••, 267 nm for dTMP; (B) ○, 259 nm for dAMP; •••, 253 nm for dGMP.

5B). As the base ratio of the nucleotides in peak IV does not give evidence of base equivalence in the DNA, it can be inferred that this material consists of mononucleotides derived from one DNA strand, assuming that some of the nucleotides represented in this fraction are not constituents of homopolymers. There is a greater release of dGMP and dCMP from denatured DNA by nuclease S₁; this suggests a specificity in the mode of action of this enzyme on single-stranded polydeoxyribonucleotides.

When attempts were made to resolve the material recovered in the four peaks from the DEAE-Sephadex column by paper chromatography, the separation was generally poor. The material from peak I did not migrate from the origin indicating that the material was composed of polynucleotides. The material from peak II consisted of low mobility oligonucleotides and a faster moving spot of material of R₁ value corresponding to that of dAMP. Peak III consisted largely of dTMP, small amounts of dCMP and poorly resolved trailing material. Peak IV consisted of dCMP, small amounts of dGMP and dAMP and trace amounts of dTMP, thus confirming the λₘₐₓ measurements of the eluates from the DEAE-Sephadex column (Fig. 5).

DEAE Sephadex chromatography of the nuclease S₁ digests of the caffeine treated DNA (not shown in Fig. 5) also resolved these hydrolysates into four peaks. Attempts were also made to resolve the nucleotide composition of the material in each of peaks I—IV. Caffeine, dAMP, dCMP, dGMP and dTMP were included on each chromatogram as markers. The caffeine standard migrated
TABLE II
MOBILITIES OF NUCLEASE S1 DIGESTS OF CAFFEINE–DNA COMPLEXES.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nucleotide recovered</th>
<th>( R_f ) value</th>
<th>( R_f ) value of nucleotide standard</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>dAMP</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>0.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dGMP</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dCMP</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dTMP</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>0.362</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caffeine</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The digestion and paper chromatography conditions are given in Materials and Methods. The \( R_f \) values were determined from approximate mean distances migrated. Where trailing was extensive, no efforts were made to determine \( R_f \) values.

just behind dTMP standard as the \( R_f \) values in Table II show. The material in peaks I–III seemed to be made up of oligonucleotides of varying sizes as evidenced by the trailing nature of the mobility profile; peak I was larger than each of peaks II and III. Peak IV material consisted of mononucleotides whose A–T/G–C ratio was about 5; these estimates are based on quantitative measurements of the mononucleotides recovered from the paper chromatograms. The results suggest that caffeine sensitizes DNA to nuclease S1 by destabilizing the A–T rich segments of the double helix.

Discussion

The finding that caffeine causes chromosome breakage [6] places it in the group of chemical mutagens. In this study we were interested in determining some of the mechanisms of the action of caffeine on DNA. The digestion of caffeine-treated DNA by nuclease S1 indicated that caffeine causes regional unwinding of the DNA. The base-stacking interaction of caffeine with DNA [9] and the increased affinity of caffeine for single-stranded DNA [17] seem to be responsible for promoting local unwinding.

The destabilization of DNA by caffeine was further demonstrated by the mode of the melting of DNA after exposure to caffeine. Such DNA showed a two-transition melting profile covering a broader range of temperature when compared to the melting of untreated DNA (Fig. 4). This broadening of the melting transition mediated by caffeine is comparable to that observed by Falaschi and Kornberg [2] in their work with DNA-phleomycin complexes. The first transition at 64°C is about 8°C below the normal \( T_m \) of calf thymus DNA (72°C). This value is comparable to the results obtained by Ts'o et al. [16].

The hydrolysates recovered when caffeine treated native DNA was treated with nuclease S1 consisted of oligonucleotides as well as mononucleotides. The mononucleotides were approximately five times richer in A + T than in G + C. We conclude that caffeine base-stacks largely with A–T rich regions of DNA, and that this interaction results in a local unwinding of the DNA, thus sensitizing double helix DNA to nuclease S1.

In an effort to determine the nucleotide composition of the regions of DNA unwound by caffeine, we have tried to analyze the hydrolysates from the DNA
digested by nuclease S1, both without caffeine treatment and after caffeine treatment. The $\lambda_{max}$ absorbance measurements of material in each peak was not really sensitive enough to tell us the base composition of the material. Such data alone made it difficult for us to make valid conclusions concerning the base composition of the regions of DNA that preferentially interact with caffeine. Consequently, the nuclease S1 digests of caffeine-treated DNA were next subjected to paper chromatography.

These results from paper chromatography indicate that nuclease S1 digests consist of a heterogeneous mixture of DNA fragments of different sizes. These fragments are apparently eluted from DEAE-Sephadex A-25 on the basis of size as well as binding affinity. The largest fragments were eluted in the first peak while subsequent peaks contained molecules of decreasing sizes; the last peak (IV) seemed to contain only mononucleotides. These results make us conclude that nuclease S1 attacks single-stranded DNA in such a way that it releases polynucleotides of different sizes as well as mononucleotides. In the case of nuclease digests from caffeine-treated DNA, the mononucleotides were greatly enriched in A-T composition.

Acknowledgements

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References