Comparison of retinyl ester hydrolase activities in bovine liver and retinal pigment epithelium

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Abstract Various properties of retinyl ester hydrolysis in the liver and the retinal pigment epithelium (RPE) have been studied, yet the relationship between the retinyl ester hydrolase (REH) activities in these tissues of the same species is not known. In the present study, REH activities in bovine liver and RPE microsomes were compared to explore potential biochemical relationships of retinyl ester metabolism in these tissues. Rates of [3H]11-cis retinyl palmitate hydrolysis by liver and RPE were comparable (i.e., $V_{max}$ was $300$ pmol/min per mg; $K_{m}$ was $30$ μM), while hydrolysis of [3H]all-trans retinyl palmitate by RPE was significantly higher ($V_{max}$ was $1,667$ pmol/min per mg). When equimolar amounts (10 μM) of either [14C]triolein or unlabeled 11-cis retinyl palmitate were added to [3H]all-trans REH assays, all-trans REH activities in liver and RPE demonstrated similar time-dependent inhibition profiles. In contrast, hydrolysis of [3H]11-cis retinyl palmitate by RPE was relatively unaffected by addition of either [14C]triolein or unlabeled all-trans retinyl palmitate. Additionally, modification of the microsomal proteins with N-ethylmaleimide produced profound, dose-dependent alterations in $K_{m}$ values for all-trans retinyl ester hydrolysis, whereas $K_{m}$ for 11-cis REH in the RPE was not significantly altered. These results have elucidated common biochemical features of all-trans retinyl ester hydrolysis in liver and RPE. In contrast, hydrolysis of 11-cis retinyl ester in RPE is characterized by a distinctive substrate preference and unique biochemical properties.

Thus, in the RPE, vitamin A is stored as all-trans and 11-cis retinyl esters (7-9). Because liver and RPE are the principal storage sites for retinyl esters, similar mechanisms may regulate retinyl ester metabolism in these tissues. However, it is not clear how all-trans REH activity in liver is related to all-trans and 11-cis REH activities in RPE. In fact, analysis of all-trans and 11-cis retinyl ester hydrolysis in the liver and the RPE of the same species has not been reported.

Previous reports from Blaner et al. (10), and from our laboratory (11) have identified distinct biochemical properties of all-trans and 11-cis REH activities. However, it is not clear whether the observed differences are due to specific enzymic mechanisms or to undefined physical interactions that allow the isomeric retinyl ester substrates to be presented in a different manner to broad specificity hydrolases (1).

In this investigation, we have analyzed REH activities in bovine liver and RPE in order to probe potential relationships of retinyl ester metabolism in these tissues. Our examination has revealed many biochemical similarities of all-trans retinyl palmitate hydrolysis. Characteristics of 11-cis retinyl palmitate hydrolysis by RPE were distinct from these common features and indicated the presence of a separate catalytic mechanism for 11-cis retinyl ester hydrolysis in the RPE.

Supplementary key words vitamin A • retinoids • microsomes • hydrolase

Mobilization of retinoids from tissue storage sites is facilitated by retinyl ester hydrolase (REH) enzymes (reviewed in ref. 1). The physiological significance of all-trans REH activity in rat liver membranes has been particularly well documented (2-4). The retinal pigment epithelium (RPE) of the eye also possesses abundant stores of all-trans retinyl esters. In addition, unique enzymic properties inherent to RPE cells confer the capacity to generate 11-cis isomers of vitamin A (5, 6).
MATERIALS AND METHODS

All-trans-retinyl palmitate, bovine serum albumin (BSA; fraction IV), dithiothreitol (DTT), disodium ethylenediaminetetraacetic acid (2Na-EDTA), all-trans-retinol, all-trans-retinyl palmitate, N-ethylmaleimide (NEM), and dimethyl sulfoxide (DMSO) were purchased from Sigma Chemical Co. (St. Louis, MO). [9,10-3H]palmitic acid (specific activity 37 Ci/mmol) was obtained from DuPont-NEN (Rochester, NY). [14C]tri olein (carboxyl-14C; specific activity 120 mCi/mmol) was purchased from New England Nuclear (Boston, MA). Puri

Preparation of [3H]all-trans- and [3H]all-trans-retinyl palmitate substrates

[3H]all-trans- and [3H]all-trans-retinyl palmitate substrates ([3H]AtRP and [3H]llcRP, respectively) were prepared by reacting the respective vitamin A alcohols with [9,10-3H]palmitic acid anhydride (11). Specific activity of the retinyl ester substrates was adjusted to 65,000–75,000 dpm/nmol by addition of unlabeled, all-trans or 11-cis retinyl palmitate. Substrate was routinely added to reaction mixtures in 10 µl of ethanol.

Preparation of bovine RPE and liver microsomes

Preparation of bovine RPE microsomes has been previously described (11). All procedures were performed at 4°C. Briefly, RPE/choroid was removed from freshly enucleated bovine eyes and placed in buffer A (0.25 mM sucrose, 10 mM Tris-acetate, 1 mM DTT, 2 mM 2Na-EDTA, pH 7.0) prior to transport by overnight courier to our laboratory. After a thawing period on ice, additional buffer A was added to the samples (final volume = 4 ml/RPE) and RPE/choroid tissue was agitated using a vortex mixer. Choroid tissue was removed with a dissecting needle and the resulting RPE cell suspension was homogenized (Polytron Homogenizer, Brinkman Instruments; setting 7 for 20 s). Bovine liver homogenates were prepared from 0.5–1.0 gm portions of fresh liver as follows. Liver samples were rinsed in ice-cold buffer A, blotted dry, weighed, and minced with scissors. Four volumes of buffer A was added, and the tissue was homogenized with a Polytron Homogenizer (setting 7 for 30 s). Microsomal protein was prepared from RPE and liver homogenates by differential centrifugation as previously described (11). Aliquots of the microsomal proteins were stored at -85°C. Protein determinations were made by the dye-binding method using BSA as a standard (12).

REH enzyme assay

The radiometric REH assay first described by Prystowsky, Smith, and Goodman (13) was used in the present study. In a routine REH assay, 2 nmol of [3H]AtRP or [3H]llcRP was delivered in 10 µl of ethanol to pre-incubated (1–2 min @ 37°C) reaction mixtures containing 50 mM Tris-acetate, pH 8.0, and 5–10 µg of microsomal protein (final reaction volume = 200 µl). After a timed incubation at 37°C, aqueous and lipid phases of the reaction mixtures were partitioned as described by Belfrage and Vaughn (14). One milliliter of the aqueous ([3H]palmitic acid) phase was removed, placed in 10 ml Econo-1 scintillation cocktail and analyzed for 3H using a liquid scintillation counter. Non-enzymic hydrolysis of the substrates was assessed in each analysis using heat-denatured microsomal protein. REH activity is represented as the molar amount of [3H]palmitic acid liberated versus incubation time. Apparent kinetic constants (Km-app and Vmax-app) were determined from double-reciprocal (Lineweaver-Burk) plots of substrate saturation data. Each experiment was performed with triplicate samples and the results were confirmed in at least two separate trials. Statistical analyses were performed using the Student's t-test (Sigmaplot 5.0; Jandel Scientific, Corte Madera, CA).

Substrate specificity and competition

The effect of [14C]triolein on REH activities was assessed using the aforementioned REH activity assay. In these studies, [14C]triolein (10 µM; specific activity = 50,000 dpm/nmol) was included in reaction mixtures containing either 10 µM [3H]AtRP or 10 µM [3H]llcRP. The examined [3H]retinyl ester substrate and [14C]triolein were delivered simultaneously in a total volume of 10 µl ethanol. Time course profiles (0–7.5 min) for the REH activities in the absence and presence of [14C]triolein were obtained and the REH activity (pmol [3H]palmitic acid/min) in experimental and control samples was plotted. Liberation of [14C]oleic acid from [14C]triolein ester hydrolysis was also monitored but is not shown in order to facilitate clarity of Fig. 1. Competition studies in which the hydrolysis of [3H]AtRP and [3H]llcRP was challenged with unlabeled 11-cis and all-trans retinyl palmitate, respectively were performed as described above for [14C]triolein assays. In preliminary studies, the REH reaction was determined to be linear over a 0–10 min time interval. Because the ob-
served rate changes are directly proportional to the initial velocity of the reaction during this period, time course profiles of the REH activities in experimental and control samples are reported.

Microsomal protein modification

Experiments were designed to assess the effects of a thiol hydrolase inhibitor, N-ethylmaleimide (NEM), on all-trans and 11-cis REH activities in the microsomal proteins. Stock solutions of NEM were prepared in DMSO at 20x the desired concentration (0.5–20 mM) immediately prior to use in REH assays. Varied concentrations of NEM were delivered to reaction mixtures containing 50 mM Tris-acetate, pH 8.0, and protein (5 μg). Control samples containing only DMSO (10 μl) were analyzed concurrently. Non-enzymic hydrolysis of the substrates was assessed in each analysis using heat-denatured microsomal protein. Samples were preincubated for 1–2 min at 37°C prior to addition of substrate (1–20 nmol of either [3H]AtRP or [3H]11cRP in 10 μl ethanol; final reaction vol = 200 μl). Incubation was resumed for 20 min at 37°C. Samples were then processed and REH activity was quantified as described above. Apparent kinetic constants (K_{max} and K_{m}) were determined following Lineweaver-Burk transformation and Dixon plot of the substrate saturation data (15). In this study, samples were analyzed in triplicate in three separate trials.

RESULTS

Analysis of substrate concentration and hydrogen ion dependencies for all-trans REH activity in bovine liver and RPE microsomes revealed comparable V_{max} and K_{m} values (= 300 pmol/min per mg and = 30 μM, respectively), and similar hydrogen ion dependencies (maximal at pH 7–9). Although hydrolysis of [3H]11cRP by these tissues was also optimal at neutral to alkaline pH, V_{max} and K_{m} for 11-cis REH activity in liver (V_{max} = 526 pmol/min per mg and 45 μM, respectively) were lower than those determined for 11-cis REH in RPE (V_{max} = 1,667 pmol/min per mg and K_{m} = 58 μM). Because liver lacks an endogenous pool of 11-cis retinyl esters, the observed 11-cis REH activity is clearly non-physiologic and may be due to "nonspecific" mechanisms. Studies designed to address this possibility are delineated below.

Substrate specificity: effect of triolein on REH activity

Hydrolysis of [3H]AtRP and [3H]11cRP by liver and RPE microsomes was studied in the presence of [14C]triolein. Time course profiles for all-trans and 11-cis REH activities are given in Fig. 1. In the liver, inclusion of [14C]triolaen resulted in significant inhibition of all-trans and 11-cis REH activities (56% inhibition, 1A; and 48% inhibition, 1B, respectively at t = 7.5 min). Although
similar inhibition was observed with all-trans REH activity in RPE (46% inhibition at t = 7.5 min, 1C). 11-cis retinyl ester hydrolysis in RPE was virtually unaffected by the addition of triolein (1D). Notably, a concomitant hydrolysis of [14C]triolein was also observed but is not plotted in Fig. 1 for purposes of clarity. In fact, when triolein concentration was increased 2-fold relative to the retinyl ester substrate concentration, all-trans REH activities, and 11-cis REH activity in liver, were reduced proportionately (data not shown); this effect was not observed for 11-cis REH activity in the RPE.

Substrate competition: effect of cis/trans isomer competition on REH activity

The hydrolysis of [3H]AtRP was also challenged with unlabeled 11-cis retinyl palmitate, while the hydrolysis of [3H]11cRP was challenged with unlabeled all-trans retinyl palmitate. REH activities were monitored as described in Methods and are shown in Fig. 2. In the liver, [3H]all-trans (2A) and [3H]11-cis (2B) REH activities were similarly reduced in the presence of their respective unlabeled, retinyl ester isomer (≈50% inhibition). In RPE, however, only hydrolysis of [3H]AtRP was diminished as result of similar substrate competition (45% inhibition, 2C). Hydrolysis of [3H]11cRP by RPE microsomes was unaffected by the addition of unlabeled all-trans retinyl palmitate (2D).

Chemical modification of REH proteins

In order to further resolve biochemical properties of 11-cis and all-trans REH activities in liver and RPE microsomes, a known inhibitor of thiol hydrolases, N-ethylmaleimide (NEM), was used to modify specific amino acid residues in the microsomal proteins. Specifically, NEM alkylates the -SH group of cysteine residues. Rate studies were performed with fixed protein (5 μg), increasing substrate (0–100 μM), and at several NEM concentrations (0–1 mM). Data from liver studies, shown in Fig. 3A, revealed a profound alteration of all-trans REH apparent enzyme-substrate affinity with increasing NEM concentration (K_{i,app} = 120 μM, 3A, solid symbols). Determination of the apparent inhibitor constant for hydrolysis of 11-cis retinyl palmitate by NEM-treated liver microsomes revealed a similar K_{i,app} of 200 μM (3A, open symbols). All-trans REH activity in RPE, shown in Fig. 3B, was also profoundly influenced by NEM as K_{i,app} was altered with increasing NEM concentration (K_{i,app} = 100 μM, 3B, solid symbols). In marked contrast, hydrolysis of 11-cis retinyl palmitate by RPE microsomes (3B, open symbols) was not significantly affected by NEM; K_m was relatively unchanged and the apparent inhibitor constant was several times higher than that observed for the other REH activities (K_{i,app} = 480 μM). It is important to note that variabilities in the data shown in Fig. 3 were too small to warrant the use of error bars.

Fig. 2. Analysis of retinyl ester substrate competition. Substrate competition studies in which the hydrolysis of [3H]AtRP (solid symbols) and [3H]11cRP (open symbols) by bovine liver (panels A and B) and RPE (panels C and D) microsomes was challenged with 10 μM of the respective unlabeled retinyl ester isomer (triangles) were performed as described for [14C]triolein assays. A time course profile of the REH activity in experimental and control samples was plotted (mean ± SD, n = 8). At each time point indicated in panels A, B, and C, the group means of the experimental samples were determined to be significantly different than those of the control samples (α = 0.05).
DISCUSSION

The focus of the present investigation was to study the relationship of retinyl ester hydrolysis in tissues that represent principal storage sites for all-trans and 11-cis retinyl esters. Specifically, we have attempted to identify similarities between all-trans and 11-cis REH activities in bovine liver and RPE microsomes. To this end, we have conducted studies that address REH substrate specificity and biochemical nature of the REH active site(s).

Prior to this report, very little information was available regarding the relationship of the physiologically relevant all-trans REH activity in liver to REH activities in RPE. Because RPE possesses abundant stores of retinyl esters, the presence of similar REH activities seems likely. Moreover, biochemical characterization of membrane-associated REH activities in ocular and hepatic tissues of a single species has not been reported. Previous comparisons of this nature have typically utilized rat liver for study of hepatic REH activity while bovine RPE has been used for analysis of REH activity in the eye (16).

Results from the present study highlight many similarities between all-trans REH activities in bovine liver and RPE. Thus, all-trans REH activities associated with liver and RPE microsomal proteins demonstrate comparable $V_{\text{max}}$ and $K_m$ values, and are similarly reduced in the presence of physiological esters, such as triolein, or by competition with 11-cis retinyl palmitate. Additionally, each all-trans REH activity appears to rely to some extent on the presence of cysteine residues in the microsomal proteins. The fact that all-trans REH enzyme-substrate affinities are similarly altered as a function of increasing NEM concentration suggests that the modification did take place, or had a bearing on, similar catalytic sites within these tissues.

Although, it is difficult to justify a physiological role for all-trans REH activity in the visual cycle (17), mechanisms for release of retinol for metabolic functions such as retinoic acid synthesis and/or retinol/retinyl ester homeostasis must be present in all tissues. Based upon the present biochemical comparisons of all-trans REH in RPE and all-trans REH in liver, the possibility exists that these two all-trans REHs may be isozymes. Additional investigations will be required to consolidate this hypothesis.

We have also identified a hydrolytic activity against 11-cis retinyl palmitate in liver microsomes. Results from substrate competition studies indicate that a 1:1 molar competition with either triolein or all-trans retinyl palmitate reduces 11-cis REH activity in liver by ~50%. It is noteworthy that the inhibition became more pronounced with increasing concentrations of competing substrate (data not shown). In contrast, 11-cis REH activity in RPE was not significantly affected by the inclusion of these competing substrates, although they were hydrolyzed to a great extent during the course of the reaction. These data suggest that the 11-cis ester may be “nonspecifically” hydrolyzed by broad-specificity hydrolases present in liver microsomes (e.g., triolein ester hydrolase).

Results from our studies also tend to abrogate the notion that differences in 11-cis and all-trans REH activities in RPE are due solely to ‘undefined physical interactions.’ The distinctive apparent inhibitor constants for NEM-induced inhibition of 11-cis REH activity in RPE (NEM $K_{\text{i,app}}$ = 480 $\mu$M) versus the NEM $K_{\text{i,app}}$ for the other REH activities (100–200 $\mu$M) are particularly interesting.

![Figure 3](image_url)
as this result suggests a fundamental difference in the amino acid composition at the active site of the enzyme(s) that catalyze(s) hydrolysis of 11-cis and all-trans retinyl esters. It is conceivable that the presence of 11-cis retinyl esters in the RPE has necessitated the evolution of unique enzymic activities that are responsible for their metabolism.

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