Fabrication of a mercaptoaetic acid pillar[5]arene assembled nanochannel: a biomimetic gate for mercury poisoning†

Fan Zhang,†a Junkai Ma,a Yue Sun,a Imene Boussouar,a Demei Tian,a Haibing Li†ab and Lei Jiangb

Mercury ion binding blocks potassium ion channels, which leads to toxicity in vivo. It is challenging to design a simple and efficient artificial system to mimic the sophisticated biological process of mercury poisoning. Herein, based on biomimetic strategies, a tunable mercury(II) ion-gate modulated by mercaptoaetic acid-piller[5]arene (MAP5) is reported. By virtue of the unique design of the host–guest competition, potassium ion transport can actualize the reversible switching between "on" and "off" in the absence and presence of mercury ions. Moreover, the MAP5-immobilized nanochannel is highly effective at distinguishing Hg2⁺ from other metal ions and can be used to detect Hg2⁺ and act as an excellent and robust gate valve for developing integrated circuits and nanoelectronic logic devices. This study paves a new way for better understanding the physiological phenomenon of mercury toxicity and shows great promise for biomedical research.

Introduction

The mercury(II) ion is a highly toxic pollutant that can cause serious damage to nervous tissues and organs, such as lung damage, deterioration of the brain and kidneys, and so forth.1–6 Recently, a number of studies have demonstrated that mercury ion binding blocks potassium ion channels, which leads to toxicity in vivo.7–9 The biological process is complicated, which is quite significant when investigating the pathology and toxicology. Therefore, it is hugely challenging to fabricate a simple and efficient artificial device to mimic the biological process of mercury(II) ion-gated potassium ion channels.

The gating of biological ion channels is the basis of cellular signal-transduction processes.10–13 It always plays a crucial role in regulating the functionalities of biological channels, such as in opening and closing the ion channel, governing specific ion diffusion, and controlling ion conduction in response to specific stimuli.12–15 However, most of the biological channels in nature, embedded in lipid bilayers, are not stable and sophisticated.16,17 To better understand the complicated process of biological ion transport, artificial biomimetic nanochannels have been widely developed because of their excellent mechanical robustness and chemical stability.18–22 These solid-state synthetic nanochannels possess great flexibility in terms of their geometry and size, and have multi-functional surface properties.23–26 Especially the conical nanochannel in polyethylene terephthalate (PET), which has strong implications for the simulation of the different ionic transport processes as well as the enhancement of the functionality of biological ion channels.27–30 Recently, interest in nanochannels has been stimulated by discoveries of the importance of biological channels in many of the physiological processes of living organisms as well as in building functional gates. Hence, preparing nanochannels as smart switchable gates to mimic mercury ions poisoning has drawn enormous research attention.

To the best of our knowledge, among the various methods for constructing switchable gates, host–guest binding and release can be used as a simple and robust method to fabricate "on-off" switches. Pillar[5]arenes, as a new type of macrocyclic host, have gained increasing attention in recent years.31–33 They have been used extensively as supramolecular switches for host–guest interactions, such as with pseudorotaxanes, rotaxanes, catenanes, supramolecular dimers, and so forth.34–36 With these in mind, we developed a new strategy to introduce molecular switches into nanochannel systems to fabricate a tunable mercury ion-gated nanochannel. Herein, inspired by the phenomenon of mercury ions binding with thiol containing protein blocks in the potassium ion channels, we designed and synthesized a water-soluble mercaptoaetic acid-pillar[5]arene (MAP5) using the "thiol–ene" click reaction. By virtue of host-
guest interactions, MAP5 can assemble into the inner wall of the nanochannel which is modified with suitable guest molecules. Because mercury ions bind to thiol-containing molecules, mercury ions can remove MAP5 from the host–guest complex and change the surface charge and wettability of the nanochannel. Such a tunable mercury(II) ion gate with good molecular responsive properties can open and close in response to external stimuli and control potassium ion transport in the channels (Scheme 1).

Results and discussion

Synthesis of mercaptaoacetic acid-pillar[5]arene

To obtain a Hg2+ responsive supramolecular switch that can be assembled in water, we designed and synthesized water-soluble mercaptaoacetic acid-pillar[5]arene (MAP5) using a rapid photocatalytic click reaction. The strategy for MAP5 synthesis is shown in Fig. 1. Paraformaldehyde (0.9 g, 30 mmol) was added to a solution of monomer 1 (1.9 g, 10 mmol) in dichloromethane (30 mL) under a nitrogen atmosphere. Iron(III) chloride (FeCl3, 0.325 g, 2 mmol) was then added to the solution and the mixture was stirred at room temperature for 30 min. After the solvent was removed, the obtained solid was purified using column chromatography on silica gel with petroleum ether/ethyl acetate (40 : 1 v/v) as the eluent to obtain white powder 2 (0.2 g, 10% yield). Subsequently, MAP5 was synthesized using the classical “thiol–ene” click reaction. Mercaptaoacetic acid (0.736 g, 8 mmol) and the photoinitiator 2,2-dimethoxy-2-phenylacetophenone (DMPA, 50 mg) were added to compound 2 (0.2 g, 0.2 mmol) in dichloromethane (20 mL) and exposed to 365 nm UV light under stirring at room temperature for 15 min. After solvent evaporation, the crude product was purified using column chromatography to give a white powder. Then the product was mixed with 40% NH3·H2O (10.0 mL) and stirred at reflux for 5 h. The mixture was concentrated under reduced pressure to obtain the precipitated product. The product was collected by filtration, washed with ethanol, and dried under vacuum to obtain MAP5 as a white solid (0.214 g, 83.3% yield), which was characterized using 1H NMR and 13C NMR spectroscopy, and MALDI-TOF (see Fig. S6–S8†).

The 1H NMR analysis of the supramolecular switch

Based on molecular recognition, we devised a new strategy to introduce pillar[5]arene to the nanochannel using host–guest interactions. We chose 1,6-hexanediamine (HDA) as a model guest molecule immobilized on the surface. Initially, 1H NMR spectroscopy was performed to investigate the host–guest interaction of MAP5 and HDA. As shown in Fig. 2, when 1.0 equiv. of HDA was added to a solution of MAP5, chemical shifts of some protons in HDA and MAP5 appeared (Fig. S9†). The protons Ha, Hb and Hc of the HDA alkyl chain exhibited substantial upfield shifts of $\Delta \delta_a = 0.062$ ppm, $\Delta \delta_b = 0.164$ ppm, and $\Delta \delta_c = 0.23$ ppm, respectively, because of the inclusion-induced shielding effects when interacting with MAP5.
Simultaneously, the proton of benzene in MAP5 was also downshifted by $\Delta \delta = 0.206$ ppm. These shifts can be attributed to the alkyl chain being inserted into the cavity of MAP5 to form a host–guest complex. Details of the interaction of HDA and MAP5 were measured through $^1$H NMR titration. The mole ratio plots based on the proton NMR data showed that the complexes of MAP5 and HDA had a 1 : 1 stoichiometry in water at room temperature (as shown in Fig. S10 and S11†). Moreover, computational calculations at the b3lyp/6-31G (d) levels verified the formation of a host–guest complex driven by hydrophobic interactions (Fig. S12†). When mercury(II) ions were introduced into the MAP5–HDA system, the chemical shift changes of HDA recovered because of the stronger affinity between Hg$^{2+}$ and MAP5. On the other hand, the protons in MAP5 also exhibited slight chemical shift changes due to the interactions with Hg$^{2+}$. These results revealed that Hg$^{2+}$ successfully competes with HDA to form the MAP5–Hg$^{2+}$ complex.

**Construction of the supramolecular switch on the PET planar film**

Encouraged by the above competition between Hg$^{2+}$ and HDA in aqueous solution, we further investigated the tunable switch from the functionalized poly(ethylene terephthalate) (PET) membrane surface properties. In this experiment, to confirm that HDA and MAP5 modified the surface of the PET film successfully, the functionalized film was characterized using contact angle (CA) measurements and X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) analysis. Fig. S14† shows that the CA of the etched membrane with its exposed −COO$^-$ groups is 61.9° ± 2.3°. After modification with HDA, the functionalized surface has a CA of 76.4° ± 0.2°. Then, when MAP5 attached to the HDA functionalized membrane by self-assembly, the membrane became more hydrophilic due to the multiple −COO$^-$ groups of MAP5 and had a CA of 54.7° ± 0.6°. Furthermore, XPS was used to evaluate the chemical composition of the PET membrane. Before modification (black line), the spectrum showed only a C 1s peak at 284.83 eV and an O 1s peak at 531.89 eV. Then the N 1s peak at 399.62 eV appears in the modified membrane owing to the nitrogen atom in HDA. The S 2p peak appears at 163.43 eV after MAP5 self-assembles on the surface of the PET membrane. Normally, the density of −COO$^-$ groups on the surface was estimated to be approximately 1 group per nm$^2$. Therefore, according to the XPS derived relative content of N and S, we calculated the density of MAP5 modified on the surface to be approximately 0.01 MAP5 molecules per nm$^2$ (see Fig. S15 and Tables S2–S4†).

As wettability plays a crucial role in the switchable system of HDA–MAP5–Hg$^{2+}$, we further investigated the wettability of the molecular switch using a HDA-modified PET planar film (Fig. 3a). The results show that before MAP5 assembled on the surface of the film, it appears to be hydrophilic with a CA of 76.4° ± 0.2°. The film surface containing MAP5, through the host–guest interaction with HDA, shows a significantly hydrophilic surface with a CA of 56.3° ± 1.6°. Upon addition of Hg$^{2+}$, the CA returned to that of the HDA-modified film, which indicates that Hg$^{2+}$ can remove MAP5 from the complex of HDA–MAP5 because of the high affinity between Hg$^{2+}$ and MAP5. Moreover, the CA of the HDA film alternately immersed in MAP5 aqueous solution and Hg$^{2+}$ aqueous solution could reversibly switch between 76.4° ± 0.2° and 56.3° ± 1.6°. Hence, according to these results, a cycling experiment of the HDA-modified PET surface in MAP5 and Hg$^{2+}$ aqueous solutions was carried out. The CA switched six times, indicating the good reversible change of the wettability of the surface as a molecular switch. In addition, application of the HDA-modified PET surface as a molecular switch was also confirmed using XPS characterization. As shown in Fig. 3b, the S 2p peak at 163.43 eV is not present for the HDA-modified film, but when the HDA immobilized surface assembles with MAP5, the peak is clearly observed. After immersing the film in 1 mM Hg$^{2+}$ solution and washing with deionized water, the S 2p peak disappears, which is caused by MAP5 being removed from the HDA film due to its stronger affinity for Hg$^{2+}$. These results clearly demonstrate the excellent reversible properties of the HDA–MAP5 complex toward Hg$^{2+}$.

**Fabrication of the MAP5 assembled nanochannel**

Based on the above properties in solution and on the PET surface, we attempted to fabricate a tunable mercury ion-gated nanochannel with the idea of the above supramolecular switch. Firstly, a single conical nanochannel was prepared using an asymmetric track-etch technique on a 12 µm thick PET membrane (Hostaphan RN12 Hoechst) with a single heavy-ion-irradiated track in the center. Before the etching process, each side of the PET membrane was exposed to UV light (365 nm) for 1 hour. Diameter measurements of the nanochannels were performed with a commonly used electrochemical method. The large opening (base) was about 560 nm in diameter and the tip diameter was calculated to be around 20 nm (see Fig. 4c and S17†). During the chemical etching process, carboxyl groups (−COO$^-$) were exposed on the nanochannel surface, and then 1,6-diaminohexane (HDA) covalently linked to the −COO$^-$...
showed a nonlinear membrane. As shown in Fig. 4b, the original nanochannel electrolyte at a neutral pH value (pH 6.86) on both sides of the O

The tunable switch of this ion-gated nanochannel was evaluated by testing the current change with the addition of Hg\(^{2+}\) and HDA, there is an obvious decrease in the ionic current at the initial state of cation (K\(^+\)) selectivity due to the rich negative charges coming from MAP5. The reversibility of the ion current measured with the addition of \(\text{MAP5}^{–}\) and \(\text{Hg}^{2+}\). Under these conditions, the gate shows the “on” state for potassium ion selective transport, and the current through the MAP5 assembled nanochannel is about −4.8 nA at a voltage of −2 V. After immersing the film in a solution of 1 mM \(\text{Hg}^{2+}\), the current at −2 V remarkably decreases to −0.5 nA because MAP5 is removed from the MAP5–HDA complexes. The pseudorotaxane complex transforms to the positively charged HDA-modified state, and the gate shows the “off” state for potassium ion transport inhibition. The HDA-modified nanochannel then recovers the function for binding MAP5. The reversibility of the ion current measured with the addition of MAP5 and \(\text{Hg}^{2+}\) could be repeated for six cycles. After several cycles, there was only a slight decrease in the ion current, indicating that the nanochannel is stable. Hence, the measurements confirm that this tunable system can be switched between the “on” and “off” states in response to MAP5 and \(\text{Hg}^{2+}\), and it can regulate potassium ion transport in the presence of \(\text{Hg}^{2+}\).

To further demonstrate the reversibility of the nanochannel, laser scanning confocal microscopy was conducted. We used the fluorescent \(\text{MAP5}^{–}\) derivative \(\text{MAP5}^{–}–\text{RhB}\), which was synthesized by linking the carboxyl group (–COO\(^–\)) of \(\text{MAP5}\) to rhodamine B amine (RhB–NH\(_2\)). A host–guest complex was then formed on the HDA-modified porous PET membrane by the interaction between HDA and \(\text{MAP5}^{–}–\text{RhB}\). As shown in Fig. 5c, when \(\text{MAP5}^{–}–\text{RhB}\) successfully assembles on the HDA immobilized nanochannel, a fluorescence signal appears (the “on” state). The fluorescence thickness is ca. 13.0 ± 0.5 μm, which agrees with the actual thickness of the PET membrane. When \(\text{Hg}^{2+}\) is added to the system, the fluorescence is significantly
quenched (the “off” state) as the MAP5-RhB is removed from the nanochannel. Clearly, all the above data show that the MAP5 assembled nanochannel exhibits an excellent Hg^{2+} recognition capability and can act as an excellent model to mimic sophisticated physiological processes.

The ion selectivity of the MAP5 assembled nanochannel

Additionally, the MAP5 assembled nanochannel could also have good Hg^{2+} selective gated properties. Fig. 6 shows I-V curves of the MAP5 assembled nanochannel exposed to electrolytes containing 10 μM Ba^{2+}, Cu^{2+}, Cd^{2+}, Zn^{2+}, Co^{2+}, Ni^{2+}, Ca^{2+}, Mg^{2+}, and Hg^{2+}. The presence of Hg^{2+} results in a drastic decrease in the ion flux across the MAP5-assembled nanochannel, whereas the current is nearly constant in the presence of the other tested ions. This can be ascribed to the thiol of MAP5 having a stronger affinity for Hg^{2+} than the other ions. Thus, other metal ions cannot change the surface properties of the nanochannel. The current-change ratio (I/I₀ – I/I₀) at –2 V was determined to quantify the changes in the ion current passing through the modified nanochannels in the presence of different metal ions. Compared with the current ratios from the naked channel and HDA channel, we found that only the MAP5 assembled channel can act as a good selectivity binding site for Hg^{2+}. Moreover, the Hg^{2+}-responsive properties were also confirmed using UV-vis spectroscopy (Fig. S13†), from which we found that only Hg^{2+} can enhance the characteristic peak. Therefore, these results indicate that Hg^{2+} can efficiently control the “off” and “on” states in the MAP5-modified nanochannel.

![Image](image1.png)

**Fig. 6** I-V curves of the nanochannel in the presence of 10 μM Ba^{2+}, Cu^{2+}, Cd^{2+}, Zn^{2+}, Co^{2+}, Ni^{2+}, Ca^{2+}, Mg^{2+}, and Hg^{2+}. (a) The naked channel. (b) The HDA immobilized nanochannel. (c) MAP5 assembled nanochannel. (d) Histogram of ionic current change ratios (I/I₀ – I/I₀) at –2 V after adding the above ions into the nanochannels. The results show that little change was observed for the naked nanochannel and HDA immobilized nanochannel.

To further illustrate the gating ratio of the mercury ion regulated nanochannel, the current-concentration ([I-C]) properties of the MAP5-assembled nanochannel for Hg^{2+} were determined. As shown in Fig. S18, the transmembrane ion current at –2 V dramatically decreases with increasing Hg^{2+} concentration. With a Hg^{2+} concentration range from 1 nM to 1 μM (Fig. S18a†), the current gradually decreases, which indicates that the gate is closed. Therefore, the gating ratio can be defined as the current changing ratio. From the results, with 1 nM Hg^{2+} in the system, the potassium current is close to 6.5%. Moreover, when the concentration of Hg^{2+} is more than 1 μM, the current sharply decreases and there is gradual inversion of the I-V curve. This illustrates that Hg^{2+} can bind with MAP5 and form a stable MAP5–Hg^{2+} complex, gradually removing MAP5 from the HDA-modified nanochannel, which can act as a good gate for regulating and controlling potassium ion transport.

**Conclusions**

In summary, a biomimetic tunable mercury(ii)-gated nanochannel was successfully developed by immobilizing MAP5 on a HDA-functionalized nanochannel. The system shows a responsive switching ability and stability by virtue of the unique host–guest interaction. This bioinspired ion gate systematically regulates potassium ion transport in the presence of mercury ions. When the channel shows the “on” state, potassium ion transport proceeds freely, representative of a normal biological organism; when it shows the “off” state, the potassium ion channel is blocked, indicating mercury poisoning. This work provides an interesting insight to comprehensively understand the important physiological process of mercury(ii) ions binding with and blocking potassium ion channels, which results in toxicity. Moreover, the device easily distinguishes Hg^{2+} from other metal ions with a detection limit of 1 nM, which has potential applications in biosensors, toxicological testing for Hg^{2+}, and as an excellent and robust gate valve for developing integrated circuits and programmable nanoelectronic logic devices.

**Experimental section**

**Nanochannel preparation**

The single conical nanochannel was produced in a PET membrane (Hostaphan RN12 Hoechst, 12 μm thick, with single ion tracks in the center) using an asymmetric track-etched technique. Briefly, the PET membrane was embedded between the two chambers of a conductivity cell at about 35 °C. One chamber was filled with etching solution (9 M NaOH), while the other side was filled with stopping solution (1 M HCOOH + 1 M KC1) (Fig. S16f). For observation of the etching process, the voltage (1 V) used to monitor the etching process was applied in such a way that the transmembrane ion current could be observed as soon as the nanochannel opened. The etching process was stopped at a desired current value corresponding to a certain tip diameter. Then the membrane was soaked in MilliQ water (18.2 MΩ) to remove residual salts.
Modification
As a result of the chemical etching, carboxyl groups are generated on the nanochannel surface. These can be activated with EDC/NHSS, forming an amine-reactive ester intermediate. Then these reactive esters were further condensed with 1,6-hexanediol (HD) through the formation of covalent bonds. In this paper, NHSS ester was formed by soaking PET film in an aqueous solution of 15 mg of EDC and 3 mg of NHSS for 1 hour. After that the film was washed with distilled water and treated with 1 mM HDA solution overnight. Finally, the modified film was washed three times with distilled water. Then, mercapto-acetic acid-pillar[5]arene (MAP5) was attached to the HDA-channel through self-assembly.

Ion current measurements
Ion currents were measured using a Keithley 6487 picoammeter (Keithley Instruments, Cleveland, OH). Ag/AgCl electrodes were used to apply a transmembrane potential across the membrane. The film was mounted between the two halves of a conductance cell. Both halves of the cell were filled with 0.1 M KCl, pH 6.86. In order to record the I–V curves, a scanning triangle voltage signal from −2 V to +2 V with a 40 s period was selected. Each test was repeated 5 times to obtain the average current value at different voltages.

XPS
X-ray photoelectron spectra (XPS) data were obtained with an ESCALab220i-XL electron spectrometer from VG Scientific using 300 W Al Kz radiation. All peaks were referenced to C 1s (CHx) at 284.8 eV in the deconvoluted high resolution C 1s spectra.

Contact angle measurements
Contact angles were measured using an OCA 20 contact angle system (Dataphysics, Germany) at 25 °C. Before the contact angle test, the sample was blown dry with N2. In each measurement, a droplet of about 2 μL of water was dispensed onto the surface of the PET membrane. The average contact angle value was obtained at five different positions of the same membrane.

Confocal fluorescence images
Confocal images were acquired using a Zeiss confocal laser scanning unit mounted on an LSM710 fixed-stage upright microscope.

Gaussian calculation
Computational calculations were carried out at the density functional theory b3lyp/6-31G (d) levels using Gaussian 03.

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