Analysis of ethylene biosynthesis gene expression profile during titanium dioxide (TiO₂) treatment to develop a new banana postharvest technology

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ABSTRACT Banana is an important crop that demands proper methods in postharvest handling. As a climacteric fruit, the banana fruit ripening process is affected by ethylene. Several methods have been developed to extend the shelf life of a banana, such as using ethylene scrubbers. In this study, titanium dioxide (TiO₂), a photocatalyst, was used as an alternative method to delay the fruit ripening process. The effect of TiO₂ on the ripening-related gene MaACS1 was investigated. Banana fruits were placed in a TiO₂-coated glass chamber and observed for ten days. Fruit ripening in the treated chamber was delayed for eight days compared to the control. Total RNA was extracted from control and TiO₂-treated fruit pulp and synthesized into cDNA. Reverse transcription PCR was performed to investigate the gene expression, which showed that MaACS1 expression was relatively lower than treated control. The finding of these studies suggested that the TiO₂ chamber has the potential to extend the shelf life of banana by delaying its ripening process and decreasing the expression of MaACS1. To the best of our knowledge, no previous study has investigated the effect of TiO₂ on the expression of genes related to banana fruit ripening.

KEYWORDS banana; ripening; TiO₂; postharvest; gene expression

1. Introduction

Banana is one of the most consumed fruits and categorized as an important commodity in various countries. The highly nutritious contents in banana such as vitamins A, B1, B2, and C make the fruit popular around the world (Cano et al. 1997). Indonesia is one of the top 10 countries in banana production (FAO 2019). However, Indonesia also faces problems in the postharvest handling of banana production. The majority of postharvest handling of banana is performed traditionally, which consequently leads to low-quality banana production. Some of the banana agroindustries around the world have attempted using a modified atmosphere and a controlled atmosphere technology to extend the shelf life of the fruit. However, such techniques may not be effectively applicable, especially for small Indonesian farmers in rural areas. Therefore, there is a need for other alternatives such as low energy technologies to extend the shelf life of banana by delaying its ripening process.

Ripening is a natural process that occurs in fruits and is highly influenced by a gaseous phytohormone, ethylene (C₂H₄) (Guo and Ecker 2004). Ethylene is synthesized from S-adenosyl methionine (AdoMet), which is then converted into 1-aminocyclopropane-1 carboxylic acid (ACC) with the help of the enzyme ACC synthase (Yang and Hoffman 1984). ACC is the intermediate precursor to generate ethylene. ACC is then converted into ethylene with the help of an ACC oxysde enzyme. Studies have demonstrated that MaACS1, a member of the ACC synthase (ACS) gene family, is responsible for the ripening process of the fruit (Liu et al. 1999; Karmawan et al. 2009; Dwivany et al. 2016).

Titanium dioxide (TiO₂) has been used as a photocatalyst to degrade ethylene that is emitted by fruits at low temperatures (Hussain et al. 2010). Another recent study conducted using TiO₂ nanofiber has demonstrated a delay in banana softening and color change (Zhu et al. 2019). It has been reported that ethylene degradation by TiO₂ produces carbon-dioxide and water and triggers a low ratio of O₂ to CO₂ in the atmosphere (Charoenhap et al. 2012). These conditions result in the reduction of ethylene biosynthe-
sis since oxygen is needed to convert ACC to ethylene by ACC oxidase (Kanellis et al. 2009). As mentioned above, ACC synthase is also an important enzyme which its activity also triggered by ethylene auto-catalytic reaction. Thus, lower ethylene production will influence this reaction (Inaba et al. 2007). In the present study, we investigated the effect of TiO$_2$ applied as a thin coating on the process of fruit ripening and the expression of the banana ripening-related ACC synthase gene, MaACS1. The results of this study demonstrated that TiO$_2$ has the potential to extend the shelf life of banana fruit.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Fruit Storage Chamber Preparation

Fruit storage chambers made from glass (1.5 L) were used in the experiment. The chambers were coated with a thin layer of TiO$_2$ that was prepared by mixing crystal TiO$_2$ (J25) nanoparticles in ethanol as a solvent. The anatase crystal had a pH range of 3.5–4.5. The TiO$_2$ nanoparticles were coated on the chambers using an airbrush sprayer and then heated using a shot gun. All preparations were performed at the Chemistry Department, Institut Teknologi Bandung. Charcoal pouches were placed in all chambers to absorb water produced from respiration.

Best quality Cavendish bananas were assorted, placed inside the chambers, and stored until ripening for approximately ten days. The observation time points were chosen from day 0 to day 8 (D-day, D-1, D-3, D-6, and D-8). Control group bananas were placed in a closed chamber without light exposure, whereas treated group bananas were placed in a closed chamber with UV radiation (300–890 nm) for 24 h. Both treatments were performed at room temperature (26°C–27°C). The observation was performed at Bioscience and Biotechnology Research Center, Institut Teknologi Bandung.

2.2. Physical and Physiological Analysis

Physical and physiological characteristics of the bananas were evaluated based on peel color changes, starch content measurements using the iodine test, pulp-to-peel ratio measurements, and sugar content values measured using total soluble solids (TSSs) (Dadzie and Orchard 1997). Peel discoloration and starch content measurements based on the iodine test during ripening were documented using a Canon IXUS 230 HS digital camera. Meanwhile, TSS measurements were performed using a hand refractometer (Atago™).

2.3. Gene Expression Profile Analysis

Molecular analysis was conducted to investigate the pattern of MaACS1 gene expression in control and treated groups using gene-specific primers (Karmawan et al. 2009; Handayani and Dwivany 2014), wherein MaGA-PDH was used as a reference gene to compare the expression profile. Total RNA was extracted as described by Cordeiro et al. (2008) with some modifications. The total RNA was then synthesized into complementary DNA (cDNA) using iScript™ cDNA Synthesis (Biorad catalog number: 170-8890). Gene expression profile was analyzed by reverse transcription PCR (RT-PCR) using the GreenTaq Master Mix kit (Promega, catalog number: M7122). All the PCR results were confirmed by electrophoresis on 1% (w/v) agarose. Semiquantitative analysis of gene expression was performed using ImageJ quantification (http://www.imagej.net) as well as by T-test analysis.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Physical and Physiological Analysis

Before conducting molecular analysis, the physical and physiological characteristics of all bananas from the control and treatment groups were evaluated (Dadzie and Orchard 1997). Based on the ripening stage, the fruit can be divided into two categories, climacteric, and nonclimacteric (Friend and Rhodes 1981). Banana is a climacteric fruit and has the unique feature of ethylene production during its ripening stage. During the entire ripening process, the cells undergo several physical and physiological as well as molecular changes. Banana peel color changes can be easily monitored by physical analysis before conducting physiological and molecular analyses.

The assessments in this study included observation of color changes in the banana peel, starch content analysis, pulp-to-peel ratio measurement, and TSS analysis. Color changes in the peel in both the control and treatment groups were observed during the ripening stage (Figure 1). Data were collected at the observation points D-day, D-1, D-3, D-6, and D-8. Results showed that treatment using the TiO$_2$ chamber could delay the ripening process as indicated by the color changes from mature green to yellow and brown. Banana peels in the control group were generally brown in color since day 6, whereas the treated banana peels were green to yellow in color.

Regarding starch content analysis, Dadzie and Orchard (1997) had stated that this method is simple, rapid, and inexpensive to detect starch conversion into sugar during the ripening process visually. In this study, the treated bananas showed differences compared with the control group bananas, and after six days of observation, the pulp still had the black coloration (Figure 1). This indicated that the treated group had abundant starch content compared with the control group. This result was also confirmed by the TSS values (Figure 2). Bananas from both the control and treatment groups exhibited an increment in the °Brix during ripening. The faster ripening process in the control group was also confirmed by its °Brix value that was higher from D-day to D-6 than that in the treated group. However, on D-8, the sugar content in the control group was found to be lower than that in the treatment group. Regarding the color changes in the banana peel from green to yellow and brown after being overripened, studies have reported that these changes are caused by...
the degradation of chlorophyll by the chlorophyllase enzyme (Matile et al. 1996; Duan et al. 2007). Furthermore, the yellow coloration on the peel is due to the increasing amount of carotenoid pigments in the fruit (Subagio et al. 1996). The brown spot or senescent spotting that appeared on the ripe banana could be due to cell necrosis as a result of chlorophyll degradation (Mosera et al. 2009). The color and size of the spot could increase rapidly during the ripen-
During the process of ripening, starch conversion results in a sweeter fruit. In this study, the starch content was assessed qualitatively by the iodine test, in which iodine reacts with starch and results in black color around the fruit flesh. On the other hand, the sugar content analysis done by measuring the TSS in the pulp of the fruit indicated that TSS values increased as the ripening process progressed (Dadzie and Orchard 1997).

These results also corresponded to the pulp-to-peel ratio measurement. Based on the data obtained, both the control and treatment groups exhibited an increase in the pulp-to-peel ratio during the ripening process (Figure 3). However, the pulp-to-peel ratio has been considered to be constant and better in assessing the ripening index (Dadzie and Orchard 1997). A change in the pulp-to-peel ratio is one of the physical indicators of ripening — sugar concentration increases in the pulp, which causes differences in the osmotic pressure in the tissue. Meanwhile, the peel loses its water content due to transpiration. Hence, the pulp-to-peel ratio shows an increasing trend during the ripening process. This measurement can also be performed using the peel-to-pulp ratio, but this would show a concomitantly decreasing trend with the ripening process.

In this study, bananas in the treated group exhibited a lower ratio than the control group bananas, indicating a correlation with a slower ripening process in the treated group.

3.2. Gene Expression Profile Analysis

The MaACS1 gene expression profile analysis was conducted as described by Handayani and Dwivany (2014) using MaGAPDH as the reference gene (Figure 4). Results showed that the expression level of MaACS1 in the control group was statistically significantly higher than that in the treated group (p<0.05). Lower MaACS1 gene expression may result in lower ethylene synthesis, as the gene has been reported to be a member of the ACC synthase gene family that converts AdoMet into ACC with the help of the enzyme ACC synthase. As mentioned earlier, ACC is the intermediate precursor of ethylene and influenced by ethylene auto-catalytic reaction. The change of O₂ to CO₂ ratio in the atmosphere by TiO₂ treatment may result in a reduction of auto-catalytic reaction and ethylene biosynthesis. The MaACS1 has been reported as a marker for two different treatments to prolong banana fruit ripening, such as low temperature and fungicide storage as well as chitosan coating treatment (Dwivany et al. 2016; Lustriane et al. 2018).

On the basis of previous studies, the expression level of the MaACS1 gene increases significantly during early ripening and then decreases (Inaba et al. 2007; Karmawan et al. 2009). In this study, the expression of MaACS1 was increased until day six and then decreased on day 8.

4. Conclusions

This study has provided further information about the effects of using the TiO₂ chamber on the physical, physiological, and gene expression changes during banana ripening. Earlier studies have also used TiO₂ application to delay papaya and tomato ripening (Maneerat and Hayata 2006; Lourenço et al. 2017). However, to the best of our knowledge, this study is the first investigation on banana ripening using the TiO₂ chamber treatment, wherein the results provided new insights into important gene expression changes occurring during ripening and further suggested that these changes can be used as an important biomarker for evaluating banana ripening. The findings of this study can provide a novel strategy to increase the postharvest quality of banana by prolonging its shelf life. Finally, these results can also provide a better understanding of the process of banana ripening and aid the development of postharvest technology.

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Authors’ contributions

FMD, RRE, and VS designed the study. ASP and AAP carried out the laboratory work, and FMD and AAP analyzed the data and wrote the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interest.
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