The Atypical Response Regulator Protein ChxR Has Structural Characteristics and Dimer Interface Interactions That Are Unique within the OmpR/PhoB Subfamily*

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Typically as a result of phosphorylation, OmpR/PhoB response regulators form homodimers through a receiver domain as an integral step in transcriptional activation. Phosphorylation stabilizes the ionic and hydrophobic interactions between monomers. Recent studies have shown that some response regulators retain functional activity in the absence of phosphorylation and are termed atypical response regulators. The two currently available receiver domain structures of atypical response regulators are very similar to their phospho-accepting homologs, and their propensity to form homodimers is generally retained. An atypical response regulator, ChxR, from Chlamydia trachomatis, was previously reported to form homodimers; however, the residues critical to this interaction have not been elucidated. We hypothesize that the intra- and intermolecular interactions involved in forming a transcriptionally competent ChxR are distinct from the canonical phosphorylation (activation) paradigm in the OmpR/PhoB response regulator subfamily. To test this hypothesis, structural and functional studies were performed on the receiver domain of ChxR. Two crystal structures of the receiver domain were solved with the recently developed method using triiodo compound 13C. These structures revealed many characteristics unique to OmpR/PhoB subfamily members: typical or atypical. Included was the absence of two α-helices present in all other OmpR/PhoB response regulators. Functional studies on various dimer interface residues demonstrated that ChxR forms relatively stable homodimers through hydrophobic interactions, and disruption of these can be accomplished with the introduction of a charged residue within the dimer interface. A gel shift study with monomeric ChxR supports that dimerization through the receiver domain is critical for interaction with DNA.

Two-component signal transduction systems are important mechanisms that mediate many physiological functions within an organism. The output response of these systems is generally an alteration of gene expression (1, 2). The prototypical two-component system consists of a membrane-bound sensor histidine kinase that transfers a phosphoryl group to a cognate response regulator (3). Phosphorylation of the response regulator stabilizes the active form of the protein, which promotes oligomerization through a receiver domain. Oligomerization facilitates an effector domain to interact with DNA and the transcriptional machinery.

Although the genes regulated by these transcription factors vary, a highly conserved protein architecture and residue composition (i.e. structure and sequence) appears to be critical for a canonical mechanism of activation. The topology of the receiver domain (β1-α1-β2-α2-β3-α3-β4-α4-β5-α5) is highly conserved among response regulators (3, 4). In addition to the conserved domain architecture, the current understanding of the mechanism of activation within these proteins is derived from comparisons of multiple structures of these proteins in both the inactive (unphosphorylated) and active (phosphorylated) state (5–9). The cognate sensor kinase transfers a phosphoryl group to a conserved phospho-accepting Asp in the receiver domain of the response regulator. An essential Mg2+ ion and a Lys residue assist in the transfer and retention of the phosphoryl group within the binding site (8, 9). The activation signal is then transduced to the dimer interface (α4-β5-α5) through the reorientation of two conformational switch residues (Thr/Ser and Tyr/Phe) toward the phosphoryl group. The reorientation of these two residues and subtle conformational changes throughout the protein dramatically enhances homodimer formation by properly aligning residues within the dimer interface that are involved in ionic and hydrophobic interactions between monomers. Homodimer formation through the receiver domain enhances the ability of the effector domain to bind to DNA and regulate transcription (10).

An increasing number of response regulators have been identified that appear to not rely on a sensor kinase or a phosphorylation event for activation. These atypical response regulators do not retain many of the residues critical to the canonical phosphorylation (activation) process (4). For example, HP1043, from Helicobacter pylori, lacks the canonical phospho-accepting Asp but is still capable of forming homodimers and interacting with DNA in the absence of phosphorylation (11–13). Two experimentally determined structures of atypical

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receiver domains have shown that the conserved structural topology of the typical response regulators is largely retained (11, 14). Functional studies of these proteins, albeit limited, have determined that the propensity to form homodimers is also generally retained (11, 14–16). The structural elements that maintain their phosphorylation-independent activity, however, are poorly understood due to the paucity of functional and structural studies of these proteins.

The medically important bacteria *Chlamydia* encodes a transcriptional regulator termed ChxR. Transcriptional regulation has been determined to be a key factor in the development and pathogenesis of *Chlamydia* (17, 18). Largely due to a lack of a system for directed gene disruption in *Chlamydia*, the ability to determine a specific biological role for ChxR has been impeded; however, prior studies support that the function of ChxR is exerted during the middle and late stages of the developmental cycle, which includes generation of the infectious form of *Chlamydia* (*i.e.* elementary body) (16, 19). Given the relative paucity of alternative transcription factors encoded by *Chlamydia*, the number of putative ChxR binding sites throughout the genome (16), and the restricted growth conditions (obligate intracellular), it is expected that ChxR plays an important role in biology of *Chlamydia* (20).

ChxR was identified from primary sequence homology to be a member of the OmpR/PhoB subfamily of response regulators (21). Computational analysis indicated that ChxR lacks the phospho-accepting Asp, and a cognate sensor kinase was not identified within the chlamydial genome, suggesting that the function of ChxR is not directly controlled by phosphorylation (19). Functional studies have reported that ChxR exists as a stable homodimer and could activate transcription in the absence of phosphorylation (16, 19). Although these results support the conclusion that ChxR is an atypical OmpR/PhoB transcriptional regulator, the critical structural features and molecular interactions that permit the protein to be maintained in an active state and thereby mimic phosphorylated response regulators have yet to be identified. We hypothesize that the intra- and intermolecular interactions involved in activation and dimerization of ChxR are distinct from the canonical phosphorylation (activation) paradigm in the OmpR/PhoB response regulator subfamily. To test this hypothesis, structural and functional studies were performed with the receiver domain of ChxR.

**EXPERIMENTAL PROCEDURES**

**Cloning, Expression, and Purification of ChxRRec**

—DNA encoding the receiver domain of ChxR (ChxRRec) residues 2–113 was PCR-amplified using *Chlamydia trachomatis* LGV (L2/434/Bu) genomic DNA and primers for ChxRRec (5′-GGAATTCCATATGGCCCTAAACATGTTG-3′ and 5′-CCGCTCGAGATGTAGCGAATGCTGAGAAAG-3′) (Integrated DNA Technologies, Coralville, IA). The PCR product was digested with NdeI/XhoI and inserted into the N-terminal polyhistidine tag encoding pET28b vector (Novagen, San Diego, CA). ChxRRec was expressed and purified as described for full-length ChxR (ChxRfull) (16). Briefly, the protein was initially purified using Co2+ affinity chromatography (Clontech, Mountain View, CA) equilibrated with 50 mM Tris-HCl, pH 8.0, 400 mM NaCl. ChxRRec was further purified by size exclusion chromatography using a Sephacryl S-200 16/60 column (GE Healthcare) equilibrated with 50 mM Tris-HCl, pH 8.0, 400 mM NaCl.

**Crystallization of ChxRRec**—Purified ChxRRec concentrated to 10 mg/ml in 20 mM NaH2PO4/K2HPO4, pH 7.0, 400 mM NaCl was screened for crystallization in Compact Jr. (Emerald Biosystems, Bainbridge Island, WA) sitting drop vapor diffusion plates by mixing 1 μl of protein and 1 μl of crystallization solution equilibrated against 100 μl of the latter. Prismatic ChxRRec crystals were obtained from two crystallization conditions. ChxRRec crystals, belonging to a *C*-centered monoclinic lattice (space group C2), grew in ~2 days at 4 °C from the Wizard 3 screen (Emerald Biosystems) condition #10 (20% (w/v) PEG 3350, 0.2 M sodium thiocyanate). A tetragonal crystal form (space group *I*41) grew in ~2 days at 4 °C from the Precipitant Synergy screen (Emerald Biosystems) condition #7 and pHat screen (Emerald Biosystems) condition #42 (4 M NaCl, 5% iso-propyl alcohol, and 100 mM NaH2PO4/K2HPO4, pH 7.0). Single crystals were transferred to a cryoprotectant solution containing 80% crystallization solution and 20% ethylene glycol before flash-freezing in liquid nitrogen for data collection. For SIRAS phasing, a crystal belonging to the C2 form was soaked for 5 min in 50 mM 5-amino-2,4,6-triiodoisophthalic acid (I3C, Hampton Research, Aliso Viejo, CA) dissolved in crystallization solution before the transfer to the cryoprotectant solution.

**Data Collection and Processing**—Diffraction data for structure solution using the SIRAS phasing method were collected at 93 K at the University of Kansas Protein Structure Laboratory using a Rigaku RU-H3R rotating anode generator (Cu-Kα) equipped with an R-axis IV++ image plate detector and osmic blue focusing mirrors. The exposure time for each 1° oscillation image was 8 min at a detector distance of 150 mm. Intensities were integrated and scaled using the HKL2000 package (23). Structure solution was carried out using the SIRAS phasing method with the SHELX C/D/E software package (24) via the CCP4 interface (25). Iodine positions corresponding to three I3C sites were identified using SHELXC and SHELXD that yielded correlation coefficient all/weak of 38.80/27.17. Calculation of initial phase angles and density modification were conducted with SHELXE and yielded a pseudo-free correlation coefficient of 69.28% and an estimated mean figure of merit of 0.653 for the inverted substructure. **BUCCANNER** (26) was used to generate a Cα trace of the model for future molecular replacement against the high resolution native data.

High resolution native ChxRRec (C2 space group) data were collected at 100 K at the IMCA-CAT beamline 17BM at the Advanced Photon Source using an ADSC Quantum 210r CCD detector at a wavelength of 1.0 Å. The exposure time for each 1° oscillation image was 5 s. Intensities were integrated and scaled using *D*TREK (27). High resolution native ChxRRec (A4 space group) data were collected at 100 K at Stanford Synchrotron Radiation Laboratory beamline 9-2 using an MAR325 detector at a distance of 170 mm, a wavelength of 1.54 Å, an exposure...
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time of 5 s and a 1° oscillation per image. Intensities were inte-
gated and scaled using MOSFLM and SCALA (28), respecti-
ively. A C₅₀ model obtained from SIRAS phasing with I3C was
used as the search model for molecular replacement with
PHASER (29) against the high resolution synchrotron data. Ini-
tial automated model building was carried out using ARP/
wARP (30). Anisotropic atomic displacement parameters were
modeled by TLS refinement 7 groups as generated by the
TLSMD server (31). Final model building and structure refine-
ment were performed with COOT (32) and PHENIX (33),
respectively. Data collection and processing statistics are listed
in Table 1. Figures were created using CCP4 Molecular Graph-
ics Program (34).

For the 1.6 Å resolution model, monomer A comprises resi-
dues 2–111, and monomer B comprises residues 4–37, 43–60,
and 68–110. The model contained two ethylene glycol mole-
cules and 106 water molecules. For the 2.1 Å resolution model,
monomer A comprises residues 4–54 and 66–110, and mono-
mer B comprises residues 4–60 and 67–109. The model con-
tained two sodium ions and 39 water molecules. For the 2.1 Å
resolution structure, monomer A comprises residues 3–111,
and monomer B comprises residues 4–37, 43–60, and 68–109.
The model contained 75 water molecules and three I3C mole-
cules. One I3C molecule is located at the interface between
monomer A in the asymmetric unit and monomer B of a sym-
metric-related molecule. I2 is 2.8 Å away from the amide O
of Leu-23, and O8 of one carboxyl group of the I3C molecule
forms a hydrogen bond with the symmetry-related Lys-101 NZ
(2.7 Å) and Arg98 NH1 (3.0 Å). The second I3C molecule is
located at the solvent-exposed surface of monomer B. Hydro-
gen bonds are observed between four water molecules and N1,
O8, O9, and O12 of the I3C molecule. Additionally, O9 forms a
hydrogen bond with His-13 ND (2.8 Å). The third I3C molecule
forms a hydrogen bond with the symmetry-related Lys-101 NZ
and Arg98 NH1 (3.0 Å). The second I3C molecule is
located at the interface between monomer A in the asymmetric unit and monomer B of a symmetric-related molecule. I2 is 2.8 Å away from the amide O of Leu-23, and O8 of one carboxyl group of the I3C molecule forms a hydrogen bond with the symmetry-related Lys-101 NZ (2.7 Å) and Arg98 NH1 (3.0 Å). The second I3C molecule is located at the solvent-exposed surface of monomer B. Hydrogen bonds are observed between four water molecules and N1, O8, O9, and O12 of the I3C molecule. Additionally, O9 forms a hydrogen bond with His-13 ND (2.8 Å). The third I3C molecule is located at the solvent-exposed surface of monomer B. O8 of one carbonyl group forms a hydrogen bond with the amide N of Gln-35 (2.9 Å) and a water molecule (3.0 Å). Additionally, O9 forms a hydrogen bond with Gln-35 NE2 (3.1 Å).

Far-UV CD Spectroscopy—CD analysis was performed with a
Chirascan-plus circular dichroism spectrometer equipped with
a Peltier temperature controller and a four-position cuvette
holder (Applied Photophysics Ltd, Leatherhead, UK). Far UV
spectra of YycFRec and ChxRRec and ChxRRec were
collected in the range of 190–260 nm using a 0.1-cm path
length cuvette sealed with a Teflon stopper. A sampling time-
per-point of 2 s and a bandwidth of 1 nm were used. The sec-
ondary structure components were estimated by the CDNN CD
spectrum deconvolution software (35). CDNN is a neural net-
works method-based program that can be used to analyze data
to determine the content of α-helix, parallel and anti-parallel
β-structure, turns, and random coil. The results from the
CDNN analysis were sorted automatically in five regions (190–
260, 195–260, 200–260, 205–260, and 210–260 nm) for each
secondary structure component. For each secondary compo-
nent, results of five regions were averaged, and S.D. were
calculated.

Site-directed Mutagenesis—Mutations were introduced into the
ChxRFL and ChxRRec plasmids using the QuikChange II XL
site-directed mutagenesis kit and following the manufacturer’s
protocol (Agilent Technologies, La Jolla, CA). All clones were
verified by DNA sequencing analysis (ACGT, Inc., Wheeling,
IL). The proteins were overexpressed in pET28b and purified as
described previously for ChxRFL (16) or above for ChxRRec.

Analytical Size Exclusion Chromatography—After purifica-
tion, ChxRRec was concentrated to 100 μM using an Amicon
Ultra centrifugal filter (Millipore, Billerica, MA). ChxRRec was
then diluted to 10 μM and 1 μM in 50 mM Tris-HCl, pH 8.0, 400
mm NaCl. The proteins were applied to a Superdex 75 10/300
GL analytical size exclusion column (GE Healthcare) equili-
brated with 50 mM Tris-HCl, pH 8.0, 400 mm NaCl. For analyti-
cal size exclusion chromatography of ChxRRec, ChxRRec was
then diluted to 10 μM and applied to a Superdex 75 10/300 GL
analytical size exclusion column (GE Healthcare) equili-
brated with 50 mM Tris-HCl, pH 7.5, 100 mm NaCl, and 250 mm KCl. A protein standard solution containing bovine serum albumin (66 kDa), chicken ovalbumin (44 kDa), horse myoglobin (17 kDa), and vitamin B12 (1.35 kDa) (Bio-Rad) was used to generate a stand-
dard curve.

Analytical Ultracentrifugation—Changes in CD and ChxRRec
were subjected to analytical ultracentrifugation at a concentra-
tion of 23 and 27 μM, respectively. Each protein was loaded into two-channel, 12-mm
tooth length cells and analyzed using a Beckman Coulter
XL-I analytical ultracentrifuge (Palo Alto, CA). A four-hole
An60 Ti rotor was used for housing the cells; each sample cell
was run at 10 °C for 450 continuous scans. The speed of rotor
was 120,000 × g for the sedimentation velocity analysis and was
conducted using SEDFIT (Version 12.1b) (36). Continuous c(s)
distribution analysis was used by employing nonlinear regres-
sion during the data fit. In addition, viscosities and densities of
the buffers were measured using the SVM 3000 viscometer
(Anton Parr USA Inc., Ashland, VA) for accurate parameters
used in the analytical ultracentrifugation fitting process. Each
experiment was performed in duplicate.

Electrophoretic Mobility Shift Assay—An EMSA to test DNA
binding by ChxR was performed as previously described (16)
with IR800-labeled DNA corresponding to the high affinity
(DR2) binding site within the chxR promoter. The assays were
performed at a protein concentration of 44 nM, which is the
approximate dissociation constant for this binding site (i.e. 50% of
this DNA sequence is shifted at this protein concentration) and
would thus permit maximal variation in the amount of
DNA bound with the substitutions (16). The binding reactions
contained 1 nM DNA and either 44 nM wild-type or variant
ChxRFL. The DNA was visualized and quantified using an
Odyssey Infrared Imaging System (LI-COR Biosciences, Lin-
coln, NE). The effector domain of ChxR used in this assay
was purified as described previously (37).

Phosphorylation Assays—Purified ChxRFL in 50 mM Tris-
HCl, pH 7.5, 50 mM KCl, and 50 mM MgCl₂ was incubated with
1, 10, or 100 μM acetyl phosphate (Sigma). After incubation for
1 h at 37 °C, the reaction was subjected to native PAGE, and
protein bands were visualized through Coomassie staining. For
DNA binding analysis, ChxRFL was incubated with 100 μM
acetyl phosphate for 1 h before the analysis. An EMSA was
contribute to the function of ChxR in Chlamydia. Moreover, primary sequence comparison with a highly conserved and structurally characterized phosphorylation-dependent homolog (YycF) of the OmpR/PhoB subfamily members indicated that the primary sequence of ChxRRec is similar to other homologs (Fig. 1). The secondary structure elements of ChxRRec were determined using CD analysis (Fig. 2). ChxRRec is a compact homodimer, whereas YycFRec is a more flexible homodimer. Thus, the secondary structure content of ChxRRec is reduced relative to YycFRec. A comparative proteolytic and crystallization study was performed with ChxR and YycF to elucidate the residues and structural elements that could affect the length and secondary structure elements in ChxRRec. Therefore, CD was used to determine the relative secondary structure content of ChxRRec (Fig. 2). The CD analysis indicated that a majority (37.6 ± 0.013%) of ChxRRec is random coil and that 26.4 ± 0.005, 23.0 ± 0.029, and 18.2 ± 0.002% of the protein is α-helical, β-sheet, and β-turn, respectively. In contrast, CD analysis of YycFRec indicated that the protein is 32.1 ± 0.005% random coil, 32.5 ± 0.014% α-helical, 16.9 ± 0.008% β-sheet, and 16.6 ± 0.003% β-turn. Comparing the relative estimated percentages of the secondary structures in the two proteins indicates that the α-helical content of ChxRRec is reduced relative to YycFRec.

ChxRRec Is a Stable Homodimer—The physiological concentrations of some members of the OmpR/PhoB subfamily have been reported to be ~1–15 μM (40, 41). Although the physiological concentration of ChxR in Chlamydia is unknown, our prior studies with full-length ChxR indicated that it is a stable homodimer at 1 μM (16). Because dimerization occurs through the receiver domain, we determined the oligomeric state of the ChxR receiver domain at a relatively high concentration (100 μM) within the reported physiological concentrations of OmpR/PhoB subfamily members (Fig. 3). The calculated molecular mass of a monomer of ChxRRec is 13.8 kDa. ChxRRec eluted from the analytical size exclusion column as a single population with an approximate molecular mass of 21 kDa, independent of concentration, corresponding to a compact homodimer. These results indicate that ChxRRec is a stable homodimer at the physiological concentrations of other members of the OmpR/PhoB subfamily.

ChxRRec Structure—Structural studies were performed with ChxRRec to elucidate the residues and structural elements that contribute to the constitutive activity of the protein. Crystalli-
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For 188 of a total of 194 residues was 0.95 Å, indicating a high degree of structural similarity between the two models. The biggest regions of dissimilarity between the two models are in the random coils between β2–β3 and β3–β4; however, the Ca r.m.s. deviations for the residues in these regions is <2 Å. The asymmetric unit of both crystal lattices consisted of two ChxRRec monomers, which formed a homodimer with a similar interface (α2–β5–α3). The dimer interface surface area of each monomer was ~1095 Å².

Structural Comparison of ChxRRec with Other OmpR/PhoB Subfamily Members—The structure of ChxRRec is distinct from other subfamily members. A superimposition of ChxRRec and YycFRec indicated that the r.m.s. deviations between the Ca of 94 residues in each monomer was 2.05 Å (Fig. 5A). Despite the overall structural conservation, the α2 and α3 of YycFRec correspond to random coils in ChxRRec (Fig. 5B). The absence of these helices in the ChxRRec structure may suggest that these two regions are random coils in endogenous ChxR.

In addition to the distinct molecular topology of ChxRRec, the structure also revealed that the architecture and residue composition of canonical site of phosphorylation is unique. As mentioned previously (Fig. 1), none of the residues that coordinate the divalent cation and phosphoryl group in phospho-accepting homologs was retained in ChxR. In ChxRRec, Glu-49 and Arg-93 replace the phospho-accepting Asp and coordinating Lys, respectively (Fig. 5B). Interestingly, Arg-93 forms a salt bridge with Glu-49; therefore, these residues mimic the positions of the Asp and Lys in phosphorylated OmpR/PhoB homologs. This interaction could be important in maintaining ChxR in a constitutively active state.

The rotomeric state of the two conformational switch residues reflects the activation state of OmpR/PhoB response regulators (3). Because recombinant ChxRRec was shown to exist as a stable homodimer (Fig. 3), we hypothesized that the orientation of the residues (Leu-72 and Tyr-90) in the same position as the canonical conformational switch residues would be in a similar conformation to that of an activated homolog (i.e. toward the site of phosphorylation) (Fig. 5C). In fact, the ChxR receiver domain structure revealed the exact opposite. These two residues had similar orientations to those in inactive subfamily members (Fig. 5D). This suggests that these two residues possibly contribute to the oligomeric state of ChxR in a different fashion than they do in other subfamily members.

ChxRRec Dimer Interface—Based on a sequence alignment of residues comprising the dimer interface of ChxR, HP1043, and PhoB (Fig. 6A), two of the three hydrophobic residues in PhoB (Val-91, Leu-94, and Ala-112) are retained in ChxR (Val-81 and Leu-84). Additionally, four of the residues involved in hydrophobic interaction in an HP1043 dimer are retained in ChxR (Val-81, Leu-84, Iso-99, and Leu-106). An analysis of the accessible surface area supports that these four residues comprise a relatively large percentage (~27%) of the interface surface area. In addition, the accessible surface area analysis indicated that Phe-75 and Trp-89 (Fig. 6B), which comprise 7 and 12% of the accessible surface area, respectively, contribute to the hydrophobic core of the interface.

In contrast to the relative conservation of hydrophobic residues between ChxR and other subfamily members, the loca-
ever, a salt bridge between these two residues is likely not essential for dimerization given the length between the residues and that solvent ions would compete to interact with these residues. Although the distance between the two residues is slightly outside the limit of a salt bridge (4 Å) (43), the position of these two residues could be closer in solution. However, a salt bridge between these two residues is likely not essential for dimerization.

A comparison of the surface area and the residue composition of the dimer interface from many members of the OmpR/PhoB subfamily support that the dimer interface of ChxR is unique within the subfamily. As Table 2 indicates, the intermolecular surface area of activated or inactivated phosphorylation-dependent OmpR/PhoB response regulators generally ranges from 1090 to 807 Å². Furthermore, the residues that comprise their intermolecular interface are 27–39% nonpolar, 8–32% polar, and 36–56% charged. Despite the activity of HP1043 in the absence of phosphorylation, the dimer interface surface area and the residue composition are similar to typical OmpR/PhoB response regulators. The intermolecular interface of ChxR is 1095 Å² and the percentage of nonpolar, polar, and charged residues is 52, 26, and 22%, respectively. The relatively large percentage of hydrophobic residues within the interface of ChxR and its larger surface area than most OmpR/PhoB response regulators is not conserved in ChxR. Additionally, the noncovalent interactions between monomers of ChxR compared with typical and even other atypical OmpR/PhoB response regulators. Substitutions were generated for dimerization given the length between the residues and that solvent ions would compete to interact with these residues.

Rational for Residue Substitutions and Functional Analysis—As evident from the structure of ChxRrec, the architecture and residue composition of the canonical site of phosphorylation in OmpR/PhoB response regulators is not conserved in ChxR. Additionally, the noncovalent interactions between monomers are distinct in ChxR compared with typical and even other atypical OmpR/PhoB response regulators.

FIGURE 4. Ribbon diagram of ChxRrec. ChxRrec crystallized in two distinct crystal forms. High resolution data sets from each crystal form were refined to 2.15 Å (I41 space group) and 1.6 Å (C2 space group). The asymmetric unit of both crystals contained two protein molecules. The molecular topology of each monomer is β1-α1-β2-β3-β4-α2-β5-α3. The two molecules from the C2 data set (left) and the I41 data set (right) are shown in yellow and blue, respectively.

### Table 1: Data collection and refinement statistics

|              | Apo (C2) | SIRAS (I3C) | Apo (I41) |
|--------------|----------|-------------|-----------|
| **Data collection** |          |             |           |
| Unit cell parameters (Å, °) | a = 149.9 b = 41.3 | a = 149.8 b = 41.1 | a = 53.7 b = 53.7 |
| Space group | C2       | C2          | I41       |
| Resolution (Å) | 23.66-1.6 (I66-1.6) | 30.0-2.1 (2.18-2.1) | 30.0-2.15 (2.27-2.15) |
| Wavelength (Å) | 1.0      | 1.54        | 1.54      |
| Observed reflections | 128,193 | 52,247      | 54,653    |
| Unique reflections | 35,320  | 15,613      | 14,580    |
| Completeness (%) | 99.8 (100) | 98.8 (96.2) | 99.9 (100) |
| Redundancy | 3.63 (3.63) | 3.3 (3.2) | 3.7 (3.7) |
| Rmerge (%) | 3.9 (29.6) | 12.2 (46.7) | 8.1 (45.6) |
| **Refinement** |          |             |           |
| Resolution (Å) | 23.66-1.60 | 28.14-2.09 | 29.67-2.15 |
| Rfactor/Rfree (%) | 18.83/21.02 | 19.60/25.51 | 20.50/24.69 |
| No. of atoms (protein/water) | 1,802/108 | 1,700/77 | 1,631/41 |
| **Model quality** |          |             |           |
| r.m.s deviations |          |             |           |
| Bond lengths (Å) | 0.015    | 0.018       | 0.008     |
| Bond angles (°) | 1.513    | 1.698       | 1.079     |
| Average B factor (Å²) | 29.5     | 37.6       | 40.1     |
| Protein | 30.9     | 35.6       | 39.4     |
| Water | 43.4     | 0.30       | 0.25     |
| DCC |          |             |           |
| Coordinate error based on maximum likelihood (Å) | 0.21   |           |           |
| Ramachandran plot |          |             |           |
| Favored (%) | 99.5     | 99.5       | 99.5     |
| Allowed (%) | 0.5      | 0.0        | 0.5      |
| Disallowed (%) | 0.0      | 0.5        | 0.0      |
| PDB ID | 3Q7R     | 3Q7S       | 3Q7T      |

a Values in parenthesis are for the highest resolution shell.

b Rmerge = ΣhkI(hkl) - (ΣhkI(hkl))/ΣhkI(hkl), where I(hkl) is the intensity measured for the ith reflection, and (ΣhkI(hkl)) is the average intensity of all reflections with indices hkl.

c Rfactor/Rfree = Σhk|FcalI(hkl) - |FcalcI(hkl)|/Σhk|FcalI(hkl)|; Rfactor is calculated in an identical manner using 5% of randomly selected reflections that were not included in the refinement.

### Table 2: Interface residues of ChxR

| Residue | intermolecular | intraresidue | surface area (Å²) |
|---------|---------------|--------------|------------------|
| Glu-78  | 12.0          | 1.0          | 1095             |
| Arg-98  | 12.0          | 1.0          | 1095             |
| Lys-101 | 12.0          | 1.0          | 1095             |
| Asp-85  | 12.0          | 1.0          | 1095             |

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erated within the residues comprising these two regions to begin elucidating their contribution to the constitutive active state of ChxR. The ability of each full-length protein to form homodimers was tested at a relatively low concentration (10 μM) by analytical size exclusion chromatography.

Glu-49 is the site in ChxR where the phospho-accepting Asp is typically located. Glu-49 in ChxRFL was previously substituted to an Asp (E49D) to test if the native Glu was solely responsible for the proteins constitutive activity (16). ChxRFL E49D retained homodimer formation and the ability to interact with DNA in vitro, suggesting that additional factors contribute to the protein constitutive activity. Upon solving the structure of ChxRRec, however, it was evident that Glu-49 forms an intramolecular salt bridge with Arg-93 (Fig. 5B). This structural repositioning, along with other subtle structural changes (i.e. Cα r.m.s. deviations of ~1 Å (6)) is thought to enhance the interactions between receiver domains thus promoting dimerization. Within the corresponding loop (β4-α4) in ChxR, Asp-73 forms a salt bridge with Arg-93 (Fig. 5B). The interaction between Asp-73 and Arg-93 may stabilize this loop in ChxR, which could be important in positioning α4 for dimerization. But when Asp-73 was substituted to an Ala (D73A), the full-length protein eluted from the column as a homodimer (data not shown), suggesting that the Asp-73–Arg-93 interaction is not critical for dimerization. As mentioned above, Glu-49 is also in the position to interact with Arg-93; therefore, a double substitution was also generated (E49A/D73A). This double substitution was expected to completely disrupt the interactions in ChxR in the region of the canonical site of phosphorylation in typical OmpR/PhoB subfamily members.

Structural studies with inactive and activated OmpR/PhoB subfamily members have identified the conformation changes that occur in response to phosphorylation. The two conformational switch residues reorient toward the site of phosphorylation, which moves the β4-α4 loop and the N terminus of α4 toward the site of phosphorylation (9). This structural repositioning, along with other subtle structural changes (i.e. Cα r.m.s. deviations of ~1 Å (6)) is thought to enhance the interactions between receiver domains thus promoting dimerization.
the E49A or D73A single substitutions, the double substitution had no detectable effect on dimer stability as the protein was again determined to be a homodimer (data not shown).

Recently, Hong et al. (11) proposed that ionic interactions between receiver domains of the atypical OmpR/PhoB homolog HP1043 could be the initial intermolecular interaction and that hydrophobic interactions then stabilize dimerization. We hypothesized that disrupting these interactions in ChxR through Ala substitutions at Glu-78 (E78A), Lys-101 (K101A), or in combination (E78A/K101A) would have little effect on the oligomeric state of the protein as the intermolecular interface is primarily comprised of hydrophobic residues. Our functional analysis supports this hypothesis, as each full-length protein was determined to exist as a homodimer in solution (data not shown).

In addition to disrupting the ionic interactions between ChxR monomers, we introduced a substitution within the hydrophobic center of the interface to determine the importance of this interaction in dimer stability. A candidate for this substitution was Trp-89, a residue that is oriented toward the opposing monomer within the dimer interface, which contributes the most surface area to the interface, and Trp-89 in monomer B forms a hydrogen bond (2.72 Å) with Gln-110 in monomer A. Additionally, Trp-89 is located within the hydrophobic core of the dimer interface, packed closely with hydrophobic residues Leu-69 (3.8 Å; distance away from Trp-89), Leu-8 – 4 (3.8 Å), and Phe-107 (4.7 Å) in the same monomer and Leu-69 (4.0 Å), Trp-89 (3.0 Å), Leu-91 (3.5 Å), Phe-107 (3.9 Å), Ala-103 (4.6 Å), and Leu-106 (4.6 Å) in the opposing monomer. We hypothesized that substituting Trp-89 to a Glu (W89E) would destabilize the dimer by disrupting the hydrophobic interaction between the two monomers. Trp-89 was also substituted to an Ala (W89A) to determine whether the orientation and/or relatively bulky size of Trp-89 is an important factor in the hydrophobic interactions at the dimer interface.

ChxRFL

**Comparison of the hydrophobic and charged residues at the dimer interface of OmpR/PhoB subfamily members.** A, shown is sequence alignment of the residues comprising the dimer interface of ChxR, HP1043 (atypical), and PhoB (typical). The secondary structures of ChxRRec and PhoB are indicated above and below the alignment, respectively. Blue and orange highlights represent residues involved in hydrophobic and ionic interactions, respectively. B, hydrophobic interaction between ChxRRec monomers occurs through Phe-75, Val-81, Leu-84, Trp-89, Ile-99, and Leu-106 in each monomer, whereas ionic interactions occur through Glu-78 and Arg-98 and potentially through Asp-85 and Lys-101 between each monomer. C, shown is the electrostatic potential surface of the dimer interface of ChxR, HP1043, and PhoB.

### TABLE 2

| Protein         | PDB ID  | Interface surface area | Interface residues |
|-----------------|---------|------------------------|--------------------|
|                 | Å²      |                        | Non-polar | Polar | Charged |
| ChxR (atypical) | 3Q7R    | 1095                   | 52        | 26    | 22      |
| YycF (inactive) | 3F8P    | 1087                   | 36        | 11    | 53      |
| PhoP (ReFa-activated) | 2PL1 | 1027                   | 32        | 32    | 36      |
| TorR (inactive) | 1ZGZ    | 981                    | 28        | 24    | 48      |
| DerD (Inactive) | 3NNN    | 978                    | 39        | 13    | 48      |
| PhoB (ReFa-activated) | 1ZES | 977                    | 36        | 8     | 56      |
| PhoF (inactive) | 2PKX    | 936                    | 35        | 25    | 39      |
| ArcA (ReFa-activated) | 1XHF | 887                    | 27        | 23    | 50      |
| ArcA (inactive) | 1XHE    | 876                    | 30        | 22    | 48      |
| HP1043 (atypical) | 2PLN  | 837                    | 38        | 17    | 45      |
| DrrB (inactive) | 3NNN    | 802                    | 38        | 19    | 43      |

* The dimer interface surface area and residue composition were calculated using PROTORP (51).
and the previously reported high affinity binding site (DR2) in the chxR promoter (Fig. 8) (16). Although the other substitutions (W89A, E49A, D73A, E49A/D73A, E78A, K101A, and E78A/K101A) did not affect dimer stability, as determined through analytical size exclusion chromatography, their ability to interact with DNA was also quantified to determine whether they influence overall protein conformation and/or an interaction between the receiver and effector domain. The effector domain of ChxR was included in the assay as a control for DNA interaction in the absence of the receiver domain.

As evident in Fig. 8, disrupting the hydrophobic interaction within the dimer interface had a significant impact on ChxR-DNA interaction. The amount of DNA electrophoretically shifted with the W89E substitution was found to not be statistically significant from that of wild-type ChxR. In contrast, the W89E substitution had the lowest affinity (3%) for DNA relative to wild-type ChxRFL. The dramatic reduction in DNA affinity with the W89E substitution suggests that dimerization through the receiver domain is critical for stable ChxR-DNA interaction, albeit within the given in vitro experimental conditions.

**DISCUSSION**

The structure of ChxRRec supports the hypothesis that the intra- and intermolecular interactions in ChxR are distinct from its phosphorylation-dependent homologs. The ChxRRec structure revealed that the canonical site of phosphorylation is composed of three residues (Glu-49, Asp-73, and Arg-93; Fig. 5B). When Glu-49 was substituted to an Ala, the protein was still able to form a homodimer, and the amount of DNA electrophoretically shifted with this substitution was not statistically significant from that of wild-type ChxR. Similar to the Glu-49 substitution, the Asp-73 and Glu-49/Asp-73 substitutions resulted in proteins that formed homodimers and interacted with DNA in a manner similar to wild-type ChxR. These results were expected as the two conformational switch residues in ChxR are oriented away from the canonical site of phosphorylation (Fig. 8). Similar to the Glu-49 substitution, the Asp-73 and Glu-49/Asp-73 substitutions resulted in proteins that formed homodimers and interacted with DNA in a manner similar to wild-type ChxR. These results were expected as the two conformational switch residues in ChxR are oriented away from the canonical site of phosphorylation (Fig. 5D), and therefore, modifications to this region would likely not be transduced to the dimer interface. These results also indicate that the residues in ChxR in the same positions as the residues critical to the coordination of the phosphoryl group in other OmpR/PhoB subfamily members do not significantly influence overall protein stability, homodimerization, or interaction with DNA.

**ChxR Dimer Stability**—Receiver domains from phosphorylation-dependent OmpR/PhoB subfamily members primarily exist in a monomeric state in the absence of phosphorylation (6,
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Analytical size exclusion chromatography indicated that ChxR<sub>Rec</sub> is a dimer, even at a concentration (1 μM; Fig. 3) similar to the physiological concentration of other OmpR/PhoB subfamily members (41). This observation implies that ChxR receiver domains have a higher propensity to form dimers than typical OmpR/PhoB subfamily members. The structure of the receiver domain supports this observation as six residues contribute to the hydrophobic interaction between monomers. This is twice the number of hydrophobic residues found in the dimer interface of homologs (5). Furthermore, a comparison of the ChxR dimer interface and other OmpR/PhoB response regulators indicated that the primarily hydrophobic dimer interface of ChxR is very distinct from other subfamily members (Table 2). Additionally, the only substitution that rendered ChxR monomeric was to a residue (W89E) within the hydrophobic region of the dimer interface (Fig. 7). In combination, these results strongly support the conclusion that ChxR is a stable homodimer in solution and that this interaction is accomplished largely through hydrophobic interactions. 

**Significance of ChxR Dimerization**—Dimerization through the receiver domain of ChxR is essential for stable interaction with DNA. ChxR was previously reported to interact with tandem repeat sequences, but mutations to either recognition site greatly reduced ChxR-DNA interaction (16). These results suggested that optimal ChxR-DNA interaction requires that ChxR bind to DNA as a homodimer. EMSAs with a dimer-deficient ChxR support this observation as the amount of DNA shifted with the W89E substitution was reduced ~95% compared with wild-type ChxR (Fig. 8). In support of this observation, the effector domain of ChxR alone binds to DNA with ~10-fold less affinity than full-length ChxR. Currently, it is unknown whether the ChxR receiver domain is responsible for positioning the effector domain for optimal interaction with DNA through a direct interaction, but these data strongly support that dimerization increases DNA affinity by binding cooperatively to adjacent binding sites.

**DNA Binding Characteristics of Atypical Response Regulators**—Interestingly, the significant reduction in DNA binding by monomeric ChxR is in stark contrast to other atypical OmpR/PhoB response regulators, which may be a result of the DNA sequences recognized by these proteins. NbIR was reported to exist as a monomer in vivo and likely binds to DNA as a monomer (45). A dimer-deficient HP1043 protein was reported to bind to DNA with an apparent similar affinity as dimeric HP1043 (11). This suggests that dimerization of these atypical response regulators is not essential for DNA interaction. These differing DNA binding characteristics between ChxR, HP1043, and NbIR are likely a result of their affinity and specificity for DNA. Although the DNA sequence recognized by NbIR is currently unknown, HP1043 was determined to bind to relatively conserved DNA sequence (46). In contrast, the frequency of specific nucleotides in the DNA sequence recognized by ChxR is relatively low (16). This suggests that HP1043 forms dimers primarily to increase DNA specificity, whereas ChxR forms dimers to increase both DNA affinity and specificity.

**Regulatory Mechanisms of Atypical Response Regulators**—Recent studies have begun to identify potential mechanisms that regulate atypical response regulators, which include ligand and protein-protein interaction-based mechanisms. NarB, a nitrogen reductase from *Synechococcus elongatus* PCC 7942, has been shown to interact with NbIR and possibly inhibit its transcriptional regulatory activity (47). Additionally, a recent study reported that the DNA binding activity of an atypical response regulator, JadR1 from *Streptomyces venezuelae*, is severely reduced in the presence of a compound (jadomycin B), which led the authors to speculate that small ligands might regulate the activity of other atypical response regulators (48).

Our structural and functional observations presented here as well as previous reports (16, 19) strongly support that ChxR exists in a constitutively active state that is not influenced directly by phosphorylation. This conclusion is further supported by the absence of enhanced DNA binding when ChxR is treated with acetyl phosphate in conditions previously reported to phosphorylate OmpR/PhoB subfamily members (data not shown) (49). Similarly, the mobility of ChxR within native PAGE was not affected after incubation with increasing concentrations of acetyl phosphate (data not shown). In the absence of direct phosphorylation, it is highly expected that ChxR is regulated by an alternative mechanism similar to those observed in atypical response regulators. Whether a ligand or protein partner is employed is unknown; however, the two large random coils in the receiver domain of ChxR may serve as a site of regulation. Many studies have reported that random coils in proteins can undergo conformational transitions into more rigid structures in the presence of binding partners (50). The most commonly observed random coil-to-structured transition occurs in short (~8–12 residues), hydrophilic regions that form a helix upon binding. Similarly, the two random coils in the ChxR receiver domain are short (8 and 11 residues, respectively) and contain few hydrophobic residues (1 and 2, respectively). If ChxR is post-transcriptionally regulated, these similarities suggest that the two random coils in the receiver domain may participate in the regulation.

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