Natural Products as Topoisomerase II Poisons: Effects of Thymoquinone on DNA Cleavage Mediated by Human Topoisomerase IIα

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ABSTRACT: The seeds of *Nigella sativa* (often referred to as black seed) have long been utilized as a medicinal herb in Middle Eastern, Northern African, and Indian cultures. Historically, black seed has been used to treat a variety of illnesses associated with inflammation. More recent studies have found that it induces apoptosis and displays anticancer activity in animal and cellular models. The major bioactive compound of black seed is thymoquinone, which shares structural features with 1,4-benzoquinone and other covalent topoisomerase II poisons. Because a number of anticancer drugs target type II topoisomerase, we determined the effects of thymoquinone and a series of related quinones on human topoisomerase IIα. Thymoquinone enhanced enzyme-mediated DNA cleavage ~5-fold, which is similar to the increase seen with the anticancer drug etoposide. In order to enhance cleavage, compounds had to have at least two positions available for acylation. Furthermore, activity was decreased by the inclusion of electron-donating groups or bulky substituents. As predicted for a covalent topoisomerase II poison, the activity of thymoquinone (and related compounds) was abrogated by the addition of a reducing agent. Also, thymoquinone inhibited topoisomerase IIα activity when incubated with the enzyme prior to the addition of DNA. Cleavage complexes formed in the presence of the compound were stable for at least 8 h. Lastly, black seed extract and black seed oil both increased levels of enzyme-mediated DNA cleavage, suggesting that thymoquinone is active even in more complex herbal formulations. These findings indicate that thymoquinone can be added to the growing list of dietary and medicinal natural products with activity against human type II topoisomerases.

INTRODUCTION

*Nigella sativa* is an annual flowering plant that is indigenous to Mediterranean countries, India, and Pakistan. The seeds of *N. sativa* (often referred to as black seed or black cumin) are used as a spice in Eastern cooking. Furthermore, black seed has been utilized as a medicinal herb in Middle Eastern, Northern African, and Indian cultures for over 3000 years. Seeds from *N. sativa* were found in Tutankhamun’s tomb, indicating that their use in Egypt dates back at least to ca. 1325 B.C. Historically, the herb has been used to treat a number of illnesses associated with inflammation, including asthma, bronchitis, fever, arthritis, and rheumatism. More recently, it has been shown to have anticancer activity in animal and cellular models.

The major and most well-studied bioactive compound in *N. sativa* is thymoquinone. This compound is found in the essential oil, which comprises approximately 0.4% of the seed. A high proportion of the essential oil (estimates range from 28–57%) is thymoquinone.

Since thymoquinone was first isolated in the 1960s, a number of studies have investigated its antioxidant and cellular effects. In addition, it causes cell cycle arrest and inhibits the growth of cancer cells with minimal effects on non-malignant lines.

Thymoquinone is similar in structure to 1,4-benzoquinone (Figure 1), a benzene metabolite that increases levels of DNA cleavage mediated by human type II topoisomerases. These enzymes help modulate levels of torsional stress in the genetic material and remove knots and tangles from the genome. They function by creating a transient double-strand break in one double helix and passing a separate intact DNA segment through the opening. To maintain genomic integrity while the DNA is cleaved, type II topoisomerases covalently attach to the newly generated 5′ termini of the cleaved helix. This covalent enzyme-cleaved DNA complex is known as the cleavage complex. Compounds that increase the steady-state concentration of cleavage complexes are termed “topoisomerase II poisons” because they convert these enzymes to cellular toxins that generate permanent chromosomal breaks. A number of well-characterized chemotherapeutic drugs as well as several natural products with anticancer or chemopreventive properties are topoisomerase II poisons.
Because thymoquinone has anticancer properties and has structural similarities to known topoisomerase II poisons, the effects of the compound on the activity of human topoisomerase IIα were determined. Results indicate that purified thymoquinone, black seed extract, and black seed oil all increase levels of enzyme-mediated DNA cleavage. Thus, like several other dietary phytochemicals, thymoquinone is a topoisomerase II poison.

**EXPERIMENTAL PROCEDURES**

**Enzymes and Materials.** Recombinant human wild-type topoisomerase IIα and mutant topoisomerase IIα C392A/C405A were expressed in Saccharomyces cerevisiae and purified as described previously. Negatively supercoiled pBR322 DNA was prepared from Escherichia coli using a plasmid mega kit (Qiagen) as described by the manufacturer. Thymoquinone, 2-methyl-1,4-benzoquinone, 2,6-di-methyl-1,4-benzoquinone, 2,5-di-t-butyl-1,4-benzoquinone, 2,3,5-trimethyl-1,4-benzoquinone, and etoposide were purchased from Sigma-Aldrich. 2,5-Dimethyl-1,4-benzoquinone was purchased from Santa Cruz Biotechnology. Compounds were prepared as 20 or 40 mM stock solutions in 100% DMSO and stored at 4 °C. In all cases, the activity of compounds in DMSO stock solutions was stable for over 6 months. Ground black seed and black seed oil were obtained from Amazing Herbs. The ground black seed was dissolved at 187 mg/mL in 50% DMSO. Insoluble components were removed by centrifugation, and the supernatant was stored at 4 °C. Black seed oil was stored at room temperature and added directly to reaction mixtures. Light mineral oil was obtained from Fisher, stored at room temperature, and added directly to reaction mixtures.

**DNA Cleavage.** DNA cleavage reactions were performed as described previously. Reaction mixtures contained 150 nM human topoisomerase IIα and 10 nM negatively supercoiled pBR322 DNA in 20 μL of cleavage buffer [10 mM Tris-HCl (pH 7.9), 5 mM MgCl2, 100 mM KCl, 0.1 mM EDTA, and 2.5% (v/v) glycerol]. Reactions were incubated for 6 min at 37 °C unless noted otherwise. Enzyme–DNA cleavage complexes were trapped by adding 2 μL of 5% SDS followed by 2 μL of 250 mM EDTA, pH 8.0. Proteinase K was added (2 μL of a 0.8 mg/mL solution), and reaction mixtures were incubated for 30 min at 45 °C to digest topoisomerase IIα. Samples were mixed that accompany DNA strand passage, the cofactor is required to initiate DNA cleavage or religation (the above reactions did not contain ATP). However, because of the large conformational changes that accompany DNA strand passage, the cofactor is required to promote overall catalytic activity. Therefore, the effects of thymoquinone on topoisomerase IIα activity were assessed in the presence of ATP (Figure 2, left, inset). Although the relative enhancement of DNA cleavage was somewhat lower in the presence of ATP, thymoquinone still poisoned the type II enzyme.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**Thymoquinone Is a Covalent Topoisomerase II Poison.** Thymoquinone increased levels of DNA cleavage mediated by human topoisomerase IIα ~5-fold in a dose-dependent manner (Figure 2, left). At all concentrations examined, cleavage induced by the compound was similar to or greater than that of etoposide, a commonly used anticancer drug. Maximal DNA scission was observed at ~50 μM thymoquinone, and the cleavage-religation equilibrium was reached at ~6 min (Figure 2, right).

Type II topoisomerases do not require ATP for DNA cleavage or religation (the above reactions did not contain ATP). However, because of the large conformational changes that accompany DNA strand passage, the cofactor is required to promote overall catalytic activity. Therefore, the effects of thymoquinone on topoisomerase IIα activity were assessed in the presence of ATP (Figure 2, left, inset). Although the relative enhancement of DNA cleavage was somewhat lower in the presence of ATP, thymoquinone still poisoned the type II enzyme.

Topoisomerase II poisons can be categorized as interfacial or covalent. Interfacial poisons, including several anticancer drugs and dietary compounds, interact noncovalently with both the enzyme and the DNA near the cleavage site. After cleavage occurs, these compounds intercalate into the DNA at the scissile bond and prevent religation.

Covalent topoisomerase II poisons contain protein-reactive groups such as quinones, isothiocyanates, and maleimides. Unlike interfacial poisons, covalent poisons form adducts with the type II enzyme. A number of
modified cysteine residues have been identified, all of which are distal to the DNA cleavage–religation active site. It is believed that covalent poisons enhance topoisomerase II–mediated DNA cleavage, at least in part, by closing the N-terminal gate of the protein.

Because the oxidation state of covalent poisons is critical for the addition chemistry, reducing agents, such as DTT, prevent their activity against topoisomerase II. Although covalent poisons increase DNA cleavage when added to the enzyme–DNA complex, they inhibit topoisomerase II activity when incubated with the enzyme prior to the addition of DNA. This inhibition is a hallmark of covalent poisons.

Thymoquinone is structurally related to 1,4-benzoquinone, the archetypical covalent topoisomerase II poison (Figure 1). This similarity suggests that thymoquinone also is a covalent poison. Therefore, several experiments were carried out to determine whether this hypothesis was correct.

First, a number of compounds related to thymoquinone (Figure 1) were tested for the ability to enhance DNA scission mediated by human topoisomerase IIα (Figure 3). If thymoquinone is a covalent poison, altering ring substituents should lead to predictable changes in cleavage activity. 2-Methyl-1,4-benzoquinone, which lacks the electron-donating isopropyl group of thymoquinone, should be more reactive than thymoquinone and therefore should be a more potent topoisomerase II poison. As seen in Figure 3, this was the case: 2-methyl-1,4-benzoquinone induced cleavage at much lower concentrations. Replacing the isopropyl moiety of thymoquinone with a methyl group, which is less electron donating, should also result in a compound that is more reactive than the parent compound (but less so than 2-methyl-1,4-benzoquinone). 2,5-Dimethyl-1,4-benzoquinone and 2,6-dimethyl-1,4-benzoquinone both displayed this predicted intermediate activity.

In contrast to the above, substitution of the methyl and isopropyl groups with tertiary butyl groups, which are more electron donating, should decrease the reactivity of the parent compound. 2,5-Di-t-butyl-1,4-benzoquinone, which contained these substitutions, displayed no ability to enhance enzyme-mediated DNA cleavage. Lastly, the ability of covalent poisons to induce DNA scission generally requires at least two available acylation sites on the compound. Consistent with this requirement, 2,3,5-trimethyl-1,4-benzoquinone, which has only one available acylation site, displayed no activity against topoisomerase IIα.

Previous studies have shown that (within the guidelines discussed above) covalent poisons can accommodate a greater range of structural alterations than interfacial poisons. This finding suggests that covalent poisons act more as chemical modification reagents than “ligands” that require specific binding pockets on topoisomerase IIα. The above notwithstanding, increased reactivity among the compounds examined also correlated with decreased substituent bulk (methyl > dimethyl > methyl + isopropyl > di-t-butyl). Thus, it is possible that changes in activity in this series are due to steric, rather than electronic, effects. If this were the case, the observed activity patterns would not be conclusive evidence that thymoquinone is a covalent poison.

Therefore, a second experiment was carried out in which the effects of DTT on thymoquinone and its derivatives were examined. DTT (100 μM) abrogated the ability of thymoquinone to increase DNA cleavage when added to reaction mixtures (Figure 2, left, and Figure 4). Similarly, the inclusion of DTT in reaction mixtures abolished the activity of 2-methyl-1,4-benzoquinone, 2,5-dimethyl-1,4-benzoquinone, and 2,6-dimethyl-1,4-benzoquinone (Figure 4).

Once covalent poisons have generated protein cross-links within topoisomerase II, their redox state no longer affects their activity. Consequently, the addition of reducing agents to assay mixtures after DNA cleavage–religation equilibria have been established with a covalent poison should not reverse the
cleavage enhancement. As seen Figure 4, 100 μM DTT had no significant effect on the activity of thymoquinone, 2-methyl-1,4-benzoquinone, 2,5-dimethyl-1,4-benzoquinone, or 2,6-dimethyl-1,4-benzoquinone once adducts were formed.

In a third experiment, 50 μM thymoquinone was incubated with human topoisomerase IIα prior to the addition of DNA (Figure 5, left). As expected for a covalent poison, thymoquinone inactivated the enzyme ($t_{1/2} \approx 5$ min).

Lastly, in a fourth experiment, topoisomerase IIα was incubated with thymoquinone, and the resulting peptides generated by tryptic digestion were analyzed by MALDI mass spectrometry (data not shown). Mass changes in several peptides were observed following treatment with thymoquine.

none. Although this finding indicates that thymoquinone covalently modifies topoisomerase IIα, sites of addition could not be assigned. This is most likely because thymoquinone has two sites for potential acylation and generates protein cross-links. A similar issue was previously reported for the analysis of topoisomerase IIα peptides following incubation with 1,4-benzoquinone. In this latter case, sites of addition were identified using plumbagin (a para-quinone that has only a single site for acylation) and were confirmed by mutagenesis studies. This study established that quinones can adduct human topoisomerase IIα at Cys392 and Cys405 and that topoisomerase IIαC392A/C405A is partially ($\sim40$–$50$%) resistant to covalent poisons, such as 1,4-benzoquinone, PCB quinones, and curcumin oxidation products, but not to interfacial poisons.

Therefore, the ability of thymoquinone to increase the level of DNA cleavage mediated by topoisomerase IIαC392A/C405A was compared to that of the wild-type enzyme. As seen in Figure 5 (right), levels of cleavage were $\sim40$% lower with the mutant enzyme.

Taken together, the above results provide strong evidence that thymoquinone and related compounds are covalent topoisomerase II poisons.

Effects of Thymoquinone on DNA Religation Mediated by Topoisomerase IIα. Interfacial topoisomerase II poisons typically increase levels of DNA cleavage complexes by inhibiting the religation of cut strands. In contrast, covalent poisons have varying abilities to inhibit the topoisomerase II DNA religation reaction. Thymoquinone displayed a modest effect on the rate of topoisomerase II religation (decreased by $\sim35$–$50$%), whereas etoposide (an interfacial poison) inhibited the reaction by at least 10-fold (Figure 6). Thymoquinone derivatives 2-methyl-1,4-benzoquinone, 2,5-dimethyl-1,4-benzoquinone, and 2,6-dimethyl-1,4-benzoquinone displayed no appreciable ability to inhibit religation (Figure 6, inset).
Effects of Thymoquinone on the Stability of Topoisomerase IIα–DNA Cleavage Complexes. Upon dilution, DNA cleavage complexes formed with human topoisomerase IIα rapidly re-establish equilibria ($t_{1/2} < 1$ min) in which levels of DNA cleavage are significantly decreased (Figure 7). Because covalent poisons trap the DNA within the annulus formed by the cross-linked N-terminal domains, the re-equilibration seen in the absence of the poison should not take place. As predicted, no significant decrease in thymoquinone-induced cleavage complexes was seen 8 h after dilution (Figure 7).

**Black Seed Is a Topoisomerase II Poison.** In culinary and medicinal applications, thymoquinone generally is consumed as either ground black seed or black seed oil.1–4 Therefore, we determined the effects of both on the DNA cleavage activity of human topoisomerase IIα (Figure 8). Black seed extract increased enzyme-mediated DNA cleavage ∼4-fold in a dose-dependent fashion. Levels of cleavage enhancement were consistent with the estimated thymoquinone concentration in the extract. The addition of 100 μM DTT abolished the activity of black seed extract (data not shown). Furthermore, as seen with thymoquinone, cleavage complexes formed in the presence of black seed extract remained stable for more than 8 h following dilution in persistence assays (Figure 7).

The inclusion of 2 μL of black seed oil in reaction mixtures also increased levels of DNA cleavage (∼4-fold) mediated by human topoisomerase IIα (Figure 8, inset). In contrast, no cleavage enhancement was observed when light mineral oil was included instead. Taken together, results with the black seed extract and oil imply that thymoquinone is a topoisomerase II poison even in its more complex natural formulation.

**SUMMARY**

Thymoquinone is the primary active compound in black seed, a Mediterranean plant with a rich history of use as a medicinal herb.1,2,14 A number of topoisomerase II poisons derived from natural sources display chemotherapeutic or chemopreventive activity.19,20,22,23,26–35 Given the structural similarity between thymoquinone and established topoisomerase II poisons, we examined the activity of the compound against human topoisomerase IIα. Results indicate that thymoquinone is a covalent topoisomerase II poison even in its herbal formulation. Thus, thymoquinone can be added to the growing list of dietary and medicinal natural products with activity against human type II topoisomerases.

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**Funding**

This research was supported by grant GM033944 from the National Institutes of Health. R.E.A. was supported by Graduate Research Fellowship DGE-0909667 from the National Science Foundation.

**Notes**

The authors declare no competing financial interest.

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

Human topoisomerase IIα was prepared by Jo Ann Byl. We are grateful to Adam C. Ketron for preliminary work on this project and to Katie J. Aldred, MaryJean Pendleton, and Kendra R. Vann for their critical reading of the manuscript.

**ABBREVIATIONS**

DTT, dithiothreitol

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