Pushing the limit: Examining factors that affect anoxia tolerance in a single genotype of adult D. melanogaster

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Drosophila melanogaster is a promiscuous species that inhabits a large range of harsh environments including flooded habitats and varying temperature changes. To survive these environments, fruit flies have adapted mechanisms of tolerance that allow them to thrive. During exposure to anoxic stress, fruit flies and other poikilotherms enter into a reversible, protective coma. This coma can be manipulated based on controlled environmental conditions inside the laboratory. Here we utilize a common laboratory raised strain of D. melanogaster to characterize adaptation abilities to better understand coma recovery and survival limitations. Our goal is to mimic the fly’s natural environments (wet anoxia) and relate findings to a typical gas induced environment (dry anoxia) that is commonly used in a laboratory. Despite the abundance of research regarding acute and chronic anoxic exposure and cold stress, the literature is lacking evidence linking anoxic stress with variable environmental conditions such as animal age and stress duration. We present novel ways to assess coma recovery and survival using readily available laboratory tools. Our findings suggest that younger age, exposure to colder temperatures and wet environments increase resistance to anoxic stress.
Additionally, literature is missing data connecting the detrimental effects of increased reactive oxygen species (ROS) production and protein oxidation during aging with stress tolerance\(^{15,16,17}\). When insects are re-exposed to normoxic environments following bouts of anoxia, oxygen is reintroduced to cells and ROS begin to oxidize biomolecules important for survival. Over time, these damaged molecules lead to cell and eventually animal death. Similarly, as an insect ages ROS begin to slowly build up, leading to an increased amount of cell damage when compared to younger insects\(^{17,18}\). It is important to develop a thorough understanding of how the effects of age, temperature, and type of anoxic environment can influence anoxia tolerance in terms of both recovery and survival while focusing particular attention on comparing laboratory induced gaseous anoxia to wet anoxia in D. melanogaster’s natural habitat.

Taking this into account, we present a novel method to assess the limitations of recovery and survival of D. melanogaster with the consideration of four important factors: 1) anoxic environment (submersion vs. gaseous), 2) anoxic exposure duration (0 to 72 h), 3) ambient temperature (23°C vs. 3°C), and 4) age (young vs. old). By developing a novel assay to simulate flooded habitats and temperature fluxes we will cohesively define the limits of anoxic stress, temperature, environment, and age in D. melanogaster and provide a necessary missing link in ecology literature.

**Results**

**Age and anoxia tolerance.** We assessed the role aging plays in regard to stress tolerance in a wet environment at room temperature (23°C) and cold temperature (3°C) and revealed that older animals take longer to recover, especially at 23°C, and have a lower probability of survival. There was a significant difference between the recovery times of old and young flies submerged at 23°C for 12 h (N > 9; three-way ANOVA, \(F_{(2,58)} = 41.527\); \(P < 0.001\)); Holm-Sidak, \(P < 0.001\); Fig. 1A). At 3°C, older flies took longer to recover at every time point after 12 h of submersion, (Holm-Sidak, \(P < 0.015\)) indicating age as an important physiological factor for anoxic stress tolerance. All regression lines corresponding to both figures 1 and 2 had \(r^2\) values greater than 0.79, suggesting data fit the model closely.

Survival data disclosed an interesting trend at room temperature, old and young flies only survived up to 12 h, while at the cold temperature, young flies survived up to 72 h of stress and old flies survived 48 h of stress (three-way ANOVA, \(N > 9\), \(F_{(2,53)} = 0.673\), \(P > 0.003\); Fig. 1B). During submersion insults at cold temperatures for 1–24 h, there was no significant difference between survival rates among age groups. While room temperature conditions displayed overall significant differences through analysis with three-way ANOVA (\(N > 9\), \(F_{(2,53)} = 0.673\), \(P < 0.011\)).

**Linking environment, age, stress duration, and temperature.** The previous submersion experiments were intended to imitate flooded habitats in nature, but it is important to compare these to typical gas induced anoxia environments created in a laboratory to account for potential additional stressors. Examining the recovery time of flies subjected to 23°C gaseous and submersion protocols indicate a significant difference only after 1 h of exposure, and not after 6 h and 12 h of exposure (\(N > 7\); three-way ANOVA, \(F_{(2,674)} = 2.111\), \(P < 0.001\); Holm-Sidak, \(P < 0.007\); Fig. 2A). At cold temperature, all the stress periods revealed a significant difference in the recovery times between the wet and dry assays except for the 12 h duration, with the gaseous anoxia showing consistently longer recovery times (Holm-Sidak, \(P < 0.039\)). These results coincide with the trends observed throughout the experiment; cold temperature and submersion anoxia increase stress tolerance in adult D. melanogaster. The survival data collected reveals interesting trends. While flies were tested at room temperature past 72 h, animals did not recover after 12 h. At room temperature, all time points were significantly different between the submersion and anoxic chamber experiments but at cold temperatures, there is no significant difference until 24 h of exposure (three-way ANOVA, \(F_{(2,65)} = 2.118\), \(P < 0.003\); Fig. 2B).

**Discussion**

In its natural environment, Drosophila are occasionally exposed to variable ecological conditions that test the limits of their survival\(^3\). Past work investigating anoxia in laboratories has focused on acute and chronic effects of anoxic exposure but evidence linking this environment to typical anoxia in nature, while tying in age and temperature influences is lacking. This investigation characterizes anoxia tolerance both in a wet, submerged environment and a dry, gaseous environment and relate these to other parameters that are prevalent for stress tolerance, specifically: age, temperature, and stress duration.

Although flies demonstrate an impressive ability to survive acute bouts of anoxia, there are limitations to survival when anoxic exposure is extended. A possible explanation of these findings relates to...
the production and depletion of cellular energy during an anoxic coma. During anoxic events, the metabolic rate decreases significantly, allowing the fly to preserve cellular ATP while also significantly decreasing total ATP production\textsuperscript{5,9,19,25}. When the fly begins to recover upon reoxygenation, there is less ATP available to restore metabolic deficits, due to ATP depletion during anoxia, and subsequent survival is compromised\textsuperscript{19,23,24}. Additionally, ATP depletion leads to failure of the Na\textsuperscript{+}/K\textsuperscript{+} ATPase, leading to dysregulation of ionic homeostasis, protein unfolding and subsequently protein aggregation\textsuperscript{23,24}. Our findings reveal that flies exposed to longer periods of stress take more time to recover from the insult. Previous work assessing anoxic exposure and recovery time reflects similar trends in that there is a strong inverse correlation between increasing stress duration and decreasing survival probability, possibly due to deficits in ATP production and the inability for the animal to compensate for ATP consumption\textsuperscript{23,24}. It is also a possibility that as the flies are metabolizing O\textsubscript{2} and producing CO\textsubscript{2}, hypercapnia is aiding to the anoxia coma\textsuperscript{23,24}. However, we believe this has minimal affects as Drosophila spiracles quickly release CO\textsubscript{2} in hypercapnic environments.

It appears that lowering the temperature inherently protects D. melanogaster from anoxic coma. Flies that are subjected to cold anoxic stress take less time to recover from a coma and have a greater survival rate when compared to the flies subjected to room temperature anoxia for both submersion and gaseous environments. This can be explained through Rodriguez and Robertson’s (2012) results suggesting that during repetitive anoxia, decreased temperature has a protective effect on regulating neuronal K\textsuperscript{+} homeostasis\textsuperscript{25}. Lowering the temperature during repetitive, acute anoxic events leads to a lesser increase in extracellular K\textsuperscript{+}, when compared to hyperthermia. Cells are therefore able to return to normal ion homeostatic levels quicker with less cellular damage and an overall increase in their survival probability\textsuperscript{25}. Work in the fall field cricket (Gryllus pennsylvanicus) concerning chill-coma recovery (CCR) also suggests ion homeostasis in gut epithelial cells plays a role in coma onset and recovery\textsuperscript{25}. It is important to note that previous investigations into the effect of anoxia treatment duration (7.5–60 minutes) and temperature (20°C–30°C) on recovery concluded that temperature did not influence recovery time\textsuperscript{25}. However, there were critical differences in the methodology, most importantly, the current investigation extends treatment time to 72 h, and decreases temperature to 3°C.

Additionally, our data suggests that regardless of temperature, flies exposed to submersion anoxia recovered quicker and had a higher probability of survival. There are several possible explanations for this affect, 1) water the lessened potential for desiccation stress and 2) the possibility of oxygen in the water. Extensive research concerning desiccation, or dryness, in Drosophila as an additional stressor in the ambient environment suggests that Drosophila, along with many other temperate weather insects, are highly susceptible to desiccation stress\textsuperscript{13,26}. Exposure to environmental desiccation potentially generates an additional stressor to which submerged flies are not subjected. Previous investigations have determined that as Drosophila are exposed to gaseous anoxic conditions, ATP depletion causes mechanical failure of the spiracle muscles\textsuperscript{27,28}. This leads to water loss through the spiracle and additional desiccation stress\textsuperscript{26}. The paradigm of desiccation stress during recovery time is also reflected when assessing survival probability between dry anoxia and submerged flies. Lastly, in order to mimic a natural ecosystem, oxygen was not removed from water in the submersion container. Therefore, there remains the possibility that oxygen in the water contributed to the more successful recovery times and survival proportions.

According to the oxidative stress theory of aging, as animals progress in age, ROS increase and oxidative stress becomes a factor governing lifespan. During increased stress including anoxia, there is an additional accumulation of ROS\textsuperscript{12,29}. Oxygen deprivation is accompanied by ROS formation which damages lipids, proteins, and DNA, further promoting cell damage\textsuperscript{30}. Previous research suggests that the sum of ROS due to the natural process of aging, in addition to ROS produced under anoxic stress, leads to increased cellular damage, resulting in a longer recovery time and a decreased chance of survival\textsuperscript{13,31}. Our investigation of the effect of age on anoxia tolerance suggests that older age increases recovery time and decreases survival probability after anoxic stress at every duration greater than 6 h in both cold and room temperatures. This indicates that age plays a major role in stress tolerance.

In summary, we determined that anoxia tolerance is reduced with increased stress exposure duration, increased temperature, and increased age and tolerance is more favorable in wet conditions. At the same time, survival limitations were found to be correlated with these variables. Now that the environmental conditions have been characterized in terms of anoxic stress, they can serve as parameters for future investigation of anoxia tolerance mechanisms.
results filled in specific gaps regarding anoxic tolerance studies in *D. melanogaster* and should now be investigated utilizing the extensive library of genetic tools available for *Drosophila* research to better understand the mechanisms behind anoxia tolerance.

**Methods**

**Fly maintenance.** *D. melanogaster* w^{1118} stocks were reared at 25°C with 40% humidity on a 12:12 h light dark cycle. Flies were raised on 50 mL of standard medium (recipe from Bloomington Stock Center at Indiana University) in plastic culture bottles with approximately 100 adult flies per bottle. All flies used in the experiments were one to nine day old males (designated as young flies) or 35–39 day old males (designated as old flies).

**Submersion assay (wet anoxia).** To simulate the wet environment a container was filled with water and a novel submersion chamber was fabricated. The submersion container was constructed by first cutting the bottom out of a plastic cylinder (approximately 8 cm tall × 6 cm diameter) and replacing the bottom with stiff metallic mesh (1 mm × 1 mm spacing). The top of the submersion container consisted of the same stiff metallic mesh glued to a plastic lid with the center removed. The plastic lid securely fit the dimensions of the cylinder while the center was cut out leaving about a 5 mm overhang in order to have a surface to glue on the metallic mesh. The mesh at the top and bottom of the cylinder allowed for free exchange of water while containing the flies. After construction of the submersion chamber, young male and old male flies were carefully transferred to separate submersion containers. The containers were placed into the water chamber and tapped against the bottom of the water chamber to eliminate air bubbles trapped in the metallic mesh (Supporting Information SI, Video S1). As the chambers were submerged, oxygen bubbles briefly encompassed the cuticle but dissipated within 1–2 minutes. Time zero began when the bubble dissipated and fly movement ceased.

To simulate temperature fluxes, the flies were submerged in containers that were either at room temperature (23°C) or cold temperature (3°C). The room temperature experiments were carried out on an undisturbed laboratory bench for the designated amount of time. The water chambers for the cold temperature experiments were monitored with a thermometer and regulated using ice and a refrigerator to maintain 3°C. It was important to ensure flies submerged at 3°C entered into an anoxic coma rather than a cold induced-coma (where oxygen may still remain within the animal); therefore these flies were subjected to argon gas for ten minutes prior to being placed in the submersion container. Submersion chamber immersion in 23°C, removal, re-immersion in 3°C, and removal again seemed to be detrimental to the integrity of the fly wings. Therefore, we elected to use gas to induce the coma and place flies directly into the 3°C submersion container. This process did not alter the time 23°C vs 3°C submerged flies entered into the coma because time zero began at coma onset. After a specific time interval, the flies were carefully removed using a soft paint brush and placed on a piece of metallic mesh. A Kim wipe (VWR International, Radnor, PA, USA) was placed on the underside of the mesh to wick away the water from the fly without physically touching the fly. Flies were then placed in a plastic vial and sealed with a Parafilm-M film to prevent the flies from getting stuck in the food. A digital video recorder was used to record the flies for 24 h post-stress. Time to recovery was defined as the ability to stand up. The recovery time of each fly was recorded; however, ‘N’ was the average recovery time of all recovered flies in an individual vial. After 24 h, the number of flies that did not recover was recorded for survival data. (Supporting Information SI, Video S2).

**Gaseous assay (dry anoxia).** The previous submersion experiments were developed to mimic a natural flooded habitat, but it is important to compare these to a controlled dry anoxic environment (the primary method used in research)\(^{12,13}\). Male flies one to nine days post eclosion were placed in plastic vials with food. To induce an anoxic coma, the flies were transferred to the submersion containers and placed inside an anoxia chamber containing 90% N\(_2\), 5% H\(_2\), and 5% CO\(_2\) (Air Gas, Miami, FL, USA) along with the materials needed for the next several steps. Inside the anoxia chamber, exposure to the gas mixture caused quick coma onset. This was recorded as time zero. The flies were then placed into a petri dish with a four-sided frame to prevent the flies from getting stuck in the food. A digital video recorder was used to record the flies for 24 h post-stress. Time to recovery was defined as the ability to stand up. The recovery time of each fly was recorded; however, ‘N’ was the average recovery time of all recovered flies in an individual vial. After 24 h, the number of flies that did not recover was recorded for survival data. (Supporting Information SI, Video S2).

**Data Acquisition.** Immediately after the flies were transferred into the plastic vials with food, the vials were positioned in front of a digital video camera. The video camera recorded for 24 h. This video was analyzed by recording the exact time when each fly stood upright and began to walk, the average of all flies recorded as a single N. Survival data was obtained by counting the number of living flies 24 h post stress. The percent of live flies was recorded.

**Statistical analysis.** Data was analyzed using three-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) followed by a Holm-Sidak method (Holm-Sidak) pairwise multiple comparisons test using SigmaPlot 11.0 (San Jose, California). Holm-Sidak multiple comparisons test described effects between each variable (ie: only age) while three-way ANOVA describes interactions between all effects. Data were normally distributed. The computer tested our data and it met the assumptions of independence of observations, homogeneous variances, and population normality therefore F value was appropriate to report. In the reported statistics, the F value subscripts represent degrees of freedom and total sample size, respectively. All figures have one or more asterisks which represent mean ± SEM and regression lines to assess each parameter as an overall function of treatment duration. Figure legends contain all appropriate p values where values closer to 1.0 represent data best fit by the model. Figures also contain slope (m) and appropriate p values. ‘N’ is defined as one experiment including at least five animals. For example, N > 7 means an average of at least seven flies was recorded. Significant differences are represented with asterisks denoting a significant difference to the two time points below the asterisk with all P ≤ 0.05.
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**Acknowledgments**

We thank Drs. R. Meldrum Robertson and Diane Baronas-Lowell for helpful reviews and edits concerning the manuscript. We also thank Dr. Sarah Milton for the use of the anoxia chamber. This study was supported by a Florida Atlantic University seed grant and Eco Neurologics Inc.

**Author contributions**

R.B.M. and K.D.S. designed experiments. R.B.M., P.H. and M.F. collected data. R.B.M., M.G.R., P.H., M.F. and K.D.S. analyzed data. R.B.M., M.G.R. and K.D.S. wrote the paper.

**Additional information**

Supplementary information accompanies this paper at http://www.nature.com/scientificreports

**Competing financial interests:** The authors declare no competing financial interests.

**How to cite this article:** Benasayag-Meszaros, R., Risley, M.G., Hernandez, P., Fendrich, M. & Dawson-Scully, K. Pushing the limit: Examining factors that affect anoxia tolerance in a single genotype of adult *D. melanogaster*. Sci. Rep. **5**, 9204; DOI:10.1038/srep09204 (2015).

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