In Vitro and In Vivo Inhibitory Effects of Gaseous Chlorine Dioxide against Fusarium oxysporum f. sp. batatas Isolated from Stored Sweetpotato: Study II

Ye Ji Lee¹†, Jin-Ju Jeong¹²†, Hyunjung Jin¹, Wook Kim¹, Young Chull Jeun³, Gyeong-Dan Yu⁴, and Ki Deok Kim ¹*  

¹Department of Biosystems and Biotechnology, Korea University, Seoul 02841, Korea  
²Institute of Life Science and Natural Resources, Korea University, Seoul 02841, Korea  
³Faculty of Bioscience and Industry, College of Applied Life Sciences, Jeju National University, Jeju 63243, Korea  
⁴Bioenergy Crop Research Institute, National Institute of Crop Science, Rural Development Administration, Muan 58521, Korea

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Chlorine dioxide (ClO₂) has been widely used as an effective disinfectant to control fungal contamination during postharvest crop storage. In this study, Fusarium oxysporum f. sp. batatas SP-f6 from the black rot symptom of sweetpotato was isolated and identified using phylogenetic analysis of elongation factor 1-α gene; we further examined the in vitro and in vivo inhibitory activities of ClO₂ gas against the fungus. In the in vitro medium tests, fungal population was significantly inhibited upon increasing the concentration and exposure time. In in vivo tests, spore suspensions were drop-inoculated onto sweetpotato slices, followed by treatment using various ClO₂ concentrations and treatment times to assess fungus-induced disease development in the slices. Lesion diameters decreased at the tested ClO₂ concentrations over time. When sweetpotato roots were dip-inoculated in spore suspensions prior to treatment with 20 and 40 ppm of ClO₂ for 0-60 min, fungal populations significantly decreased at the tested concentrations for 30-60 min. Taken together, these results showed that ClO₂ gas can effectively inhibit fungal growth and disease development caused by F. oxysporum f. sp. batatas on sweetpotato. Therefore, ClO₂ gas may be used as a sanitizer to control this fungus during postharvest storage of sweetpotato.

Keywords: chlorine dioxide, elongation factor 1-α gene, Fusarium oxysporum f. sp. batatas, Fusarium wilt, sweetpotato

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Chlorine has been widely applied to control postharvest diseases in various fruits and vegetables such as blueberries, cucumber, oranges, potatoes, strawberries, and tomatoes (Bhagat et al., 2011; Mahovic et al., 2007; Popa et al., 2007; Tweddell et al., 2003; Yuk et al., 2006). Chlorine has a strong oxidation activity on cellular constituents and combines directly with membrane proteins and enzymes (Tweddell et al., 2003). Chlorine, with these action traits, can destroy various microbes existing on fruits and vegetables. Owing to this ability, chlorine dioxide (ClO₂) could be used as an alternative sanitizer as its oxidation capacity is 2.5 times higher than that of chlorine (Beuchat et al., 2004). ClO₂ works effectively and rapidly against microbes at low concentrations while its toxicity to human and animals is considered low (Vaid et al., 2010; Wang et al., 2016). Thus, ClO₂ as a sanitizer has been approved for agricultural and medical uses by the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) (2006). Recently, the application of gaseous ClO₂ (e.g., ClO₂ concentration, time, and temperature) against pathogenic microbes on posthar-
vest stage and storage of various fruits and vegetables was well documented by Sun et al. (2019).

Sweetpotato (Ipomoea batatas Lam.) is one of the most important food crops worldwide (Sanusi et al., 2016). While the consumption of sweetpotato has increased, post-harvest diseases (especially fungal contamination) during crop storage are significant limitations (estimated quantity and quality loss, 15-65%) (Ray and Ravi, 2005). Sweetpotato is generally stored in storage houses, in which fungal contamination may spread throughout the storage facility, resulting in significant contamination of the stored crop (Wu and Rioux, 2010). Hence, it is important to apply effective control measures to prevent fungal infection during sweetpotato storage. Fungicides such as thiabendazole, dichloran, benomyl, and iprodione may be used to control root rots of sweetpotato in fields or to obtain disease-free ‘seed’ roots for plant production (Clark et al., 2013). However, application of agricultural chemicals is generally avoided during sweetpotato storage because the crop roots are directly used as a food source. Thus, ClO₂ gas, as described above, may be used as an alternative measure to control fungal contamination during crop storage.

Numerous Fusarium spp. have been reported to infect sweetpotato roots (Farr and Rossman, 2018); however, Fusarium wilt caused by Fusarium oxysporum f. sp. batatas is one of the major diseases of sweetpotato (Clark et al., 2013). Fusarium wilt is usually widespread and shows higher infection levels in commercial fields (Thompson et al., 2011). In Korea, this disease was first reported by Park (1967) and has caused significant economic losses in sweetpotato production areas such as Haenam. In general, Fusarium wilt symptoms include yellowing of older leaves followed by wilting, abscission of older leaves, and stunting of vine growth (Clark et al., 2013). The infection of sweetpotato plants by the pathogen can occur from soil-borne inoculum such as chlamydospores. Thus, soil as a source of inoculum may also contribute to the infection of sweetpotato roots at harvest and root rot may follow during storage. In this sense, it is important to find measures to limit infection of the pathogen to sweetpotato roots (Clark et al., 2013).

Previously, we often observed black rot symptoms on stored sweetpotato roots and frequently isolated Fusarium spp. from the infected roots. We suspected the causal agent for this symptom to be the pathogen causing Fusarium wilt on sweetpotato plants in fields. Therefore, the objectives of this study were (1) to identify the causal agent of the black rot symptom of stored sweetpotato roots and (2) to evaluate in vitro and in vivo inhibitory activities of gaseous ClO₂ against the causal agent isolated from sweetpotato at various ClO₂ concentrations and treatment times.

**Materials and Methods**

**Fungus and sweetpotato.** Diseased sweetpotato roots (cv. ‘Juwhangmi’) supplied from the Bioenergy Crop Research Center, National Institute of Crop Science, Rural Development Administration (Muan, Korea) in August 2015 were used in this study (Fig. 1A and B). For fungal isolation, small pieces of tissues from the margins of the diseased root were cut and sterilized with 1% NaOCl for 2 min. The tissue pieces were then washed with sterile distilled water three times and blotted on a sterile filter paper (Whatman No. 1). The pieces were placed on acidified potato dextrose agar (PDA) supplemented with lactic acid (600 μl/l) at 25°C. Two to three days after placement on the medium, hyphal tips of mycelia grown from tissue pieces (one per lesion) were transferred to acidified PDA. Obtained isolates were further stored on PDA slants at 4°C until use. A representative isolate SP-f6 from isolated cultures was selected and subjected to further identification. Isolate SP-f6 was grown on Spezieller Nährstoffärmer agar (SNA) for macroconidium and microconidium formation (Leslie and Summerell, 2006). Healthy sweetpotato roots (cv. ‘Juwhangmi’) from the same center mentioned above were used in this study and these were stored in a moist chamber with 60% relative humidity at 15°C until use.

**Fig. 1.** (A) Outer and (B) inner black rot symptoms on sweetpotato (cv. ‘Juwhangmi’). (C) Obverse and (D) reverse cultural morphologies of isolate SP-f6, isolated from a diseased sweetpotato, on potato dextrose agar at 25°C for 5 days in the dark. (E) Macroconidia and microconidia (inset) of isolate SP-f6 on Spezieller Nährstoffärmer agar.
Molecular identification of isolate SP-f6. For molecular identification of isolate SP-f6 obtained from the diseased root tissue, the genomic DNA was extracted from fungal mycelia grown on PDA at 25°C for 7 days using an i-genomic BYF DNA Extraction Kit (iNtRON Biotechnology, Seongnam, Korea) according to the manufacturer’s instructions. The internal transcribed spacer (ITS) regions of isolate SP-f6 were amplified using the universal primers ITS1 (5’-TCCGTAAGGTGAACCTGCGG-3’) and ITS4 (5’-TCCTCCGCTTATTGATATGC-3’) (Glass and Donaldson, 1995); the elongation factor 1-α gene of the isolate was amplified with primers EF-1 (5’-ATGGGTAAGGAAGACACAGAC-3’) and EF-2 (5’-GGAAGTAC-CAGTGATCATGTT-3’) (Kim et al., 2005). Polymerase chain reaction and DNA sequence analysis were conducted as described by Kim et al. (2009) and Sang et al. (2013). The sequenced data were analyzed using the Basic Local Alignment Search Tool (BLAST) at the NCBI website (https://blast.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/Blast.cgi). A phylogenetic tree was constructed using the neighbor-joining (Saitou and Nei, 1987) and maximum-likelihood (Fitch, 1971) algorithms using Molecular Evolutionary Genetics Analysis (MEGA) version 6.0. The topology of the tree was assessed by analyzing bootstrap with 1000 replications (Felsenstein, 1985). The experiments were performed twice for confirmation.

Pathogenicity test of isolate SP-f6. For pathogenicity tests of isolate SP-f6, healthy sweetpotato roots (cv. ‘Ju-whangmi’) were washed with tap water and rinsed with distilled water. The roots were surface-sterilized with 70% ethanol for 5 min. Then, these roots were rinsed with distilled water twice and dried for 10 min at 15°C. The roots were hole-inoculated with isolate SP-f6 grown on PDA at 25°C for 7 days. Holes in roots were made using a sterile 4-mm cork-borer. Mycelial plugs (5 mm in diameter) from the edges of the growing cultures of isolate SP-f6 or PDA plugs (uninoculated control) were inoculated into holes made in the outer layers of the sweetpotato roots [six holes: three (sub-replicates) for SP-f6 and three for PDA plug per root (replicate)]. The inoculated roots were then wrapped up in polyethylene film (Cleanwrap Co., Seoul, Korea) and placed in moist plastic containers [23 (length) × 13 (width) × 16 (height) cm] with three layers of wet paper towels (100% RH) and incubated at 28°C. After 10 days of incubation, lesion diameters (mm) were measured. At the same time, fungus was re-isolated from the symptomatic tissues to fulfill Koch’s postulates. The edges of lesions were cut, sterilized with 1% NaOCl for 1.5-5 min, washed three times with sterile distilled water, and blotted on a sterile filter paper (Whatman No. 1). These pieces were placed on acidified PDA at 25°C for 3 days. The mycelia grown from the pieces was transferred to PDA and the identity of the isolate reconfirmed by the elongation factor 1-α gene sequence analysis, as described above.

In vitro effect of gaseous chlorine dioxide against isolate SP-f6 on medium. To examine the in vitro inhibitory effect of gaseous ClO2 against isolate SP-f6 on the medium, spore suspensions (200 µl) of the isolate were spread on acidified PDA. Spores from cultures of isolate SP-f6 grown on PDA at 25°C for 7 days were harvested with 0.03% Tween 20 and adjusted to 5 × 10^5 spores/ml using a hemocytometer. Next, these spore-inoculated plates were treated with various concentrations (1, 5, 10, and 20 ppm) of ClO2 gas for 0, 1, 10, 30, and 60 min. The gas treatment for various treatment times was conducted using a ClO2 generator (PurgoFarm Co. Ltd., Hwaseong, Korea) with an electrochemical method (Gates, 1998), as described in our previous study (Lee et al., 2019). The gas-treated plates were further incubated at 25°C. After 2 days of incubation, numbers of colony-forming units (CFUs) on the plates were counted.

In vivo effect of gaseous chlorine dioxide against isolate SP-f6 on root slices. To examine the in vivo inhibitory effect of gaseous ClO2 against isolate SP-f6 on root slices, healthy sweetpotato roots prepared as described in the pathogenicity test were cut into 1-cm-thick slices, and placed in Petri plates (90 mm in diameter). The centers of the slices were drop-inoculated with the spore suspension (10 µl of 5 × 10^6 spores/ml) prepared as described above. The inoculated slices were treated with various concentrations (5, 10, and 20 ppm) of ClO2 gas for 0, 10, 30, and 60 min, as described above. Next, the gas-treated slices were put in the plastic containers containing wet paper towels as described above and incubated at 28°C for 14 days. Then, lesion diameters on the gas-treated, inoculated slices were measured as follows: longest lesion length (mm) + shortest lesion length (mm) were divided by two.

In vivo effect of gaseous chlorine dioxide against isolate SP-f6 on sweetpotato roots. To examine the in vivo inhibitory effect of gaseous ClO2 against isolate SP-f6 on sweetpotato, roots were dipped in spore suspension (5 × 10^6 spores/ml) prepared as described above, for 10 min. The 0.03% Tween 20 was used as an uninoculated control. The inoculated roots were treated with different concentrations (20 and 40 ppm) of ClO2 gas for 0, 30, and 60 min as described above. Then, the surface layers (approximately 1.5
mm in thickness) of the gas-treated roots were peeled using a vegetable peeler. Samples (2 g) were finely ground using an analytical mill (IKA A11 basic, IKA Works) in sterile distilled water (20 ml). After serial dilutions of the ground sample solution, the samples were spread on acidified PDA and further incubated at 25°C. After 2 days of incubation, colonies that appeared on the medium were counted; these were expressed as CFUs per g dry weight.

Statistical analysis. Experiments were conducted using factorial designs to recognize the effects of ClO2 gas concentration and treatment time with various levels on lesion diameters and fungal populations. All experiments except molecular identification of the isolate were conducted twice with three replicates per treatment. Fungal population data from repeated experiments of the in vitro ClO2 inhibitory tests on the medium were pooled after confirmation of homogeneity of variances, using Levene’s test (Levene, 1960). In addition, fungal population data in this study were analyzed after logarithmic transformation. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted using general linear model procedures; the means were separated using least significant difference (LSD) test at \( P < 0.05 \). Statistical analysis of all data was conducted using Statistical Analysis Systems (SAS) software (SAS Institute, Cary, NC, USA).

Results

Fungal isolation and identification of isolate SP-f6. The potential causal fungus was consistently isolated from the margins of symptomatic lesions of diseased sweetpotato roots. Isolate SP-f6 randomly selected from isolates obtained from diseased sweetpotato roots (cv. Juwhangmi) showed white floccose mycelium and pink to purple reverse color (Fig. 1C and D); consequently, it was considered as the genus *Fusarium*. In addition, macroconidia and microconidia of isolate SP-f6 were observed on SNA medium (Fig. 1E).

For the phylogenetic analysis of isolate SP-f6, partial sequences (469 and 608 bases) of the ITS region and elongation factor 1-α genes, respectively, were analyzed. In the neighbor-joining analysis using the ITS region sequence, isolate SP-f6 was clustered with *Fusarium oxysporum* CBS 132475 \( \approx 100% \) similarity, *Fusarium oxysporum* f. sp. batatas CBS 258.50 \( \approx 98.08% \) similarity, and *Fusarium oxysporum* f. sp. batatas CBS 172.30 \( \approx 98.08% \) similarity (Supplementary Fig. 1). On the other hand, based on the neighbor-joining analysis of elongation factor 1-α gene, isolate SP-f6 was clustered with *F. oxysporum* f. sp. *batatas* NRR 36391 \( \approx 98.84% \) similarity, *F. oxysporum* f. sp. batatas NRR 36391 \( \approx 98.84% \) similarity, *Fusarium oxysporum* f. sp. batatas NRR 22535 \( \approx 100% \) similarity, *Fusarium oxysporum* f. sp. batatas NRR 36391 \( \approx 98.84% \) similarity, *Fusarium oxysporum* f. sp. batatas NRR 36391 \( \approx 98.84% \) similarity, and *Fusarium oxysporum* f. sp. batatas CBS 132475 \( \approx 99.04% \) similarity (Fig. 2). Thus, isolate SP-f6 was clearly identified as *Fusarium oxysporum* f. sp. *batatas* based on the analysis of elongation factor 1-α gene sequence. The ITS (MK212928) and the elongation factor 1-α gene (MK358411) sequences of *Fusarium oxysporum* f. sp. *batatas* SP-f6 have been deposited in GenBank.

Pathogenicity of *Fusarium oxysporum* f. sp. *batatas* SP-f6 on sweetpotato. In the pathogenicity test, *Fusarium oxysporum* f. sp. *batatas* SP-f6 caused dark grayish round lesions with white mycelia on sweetpotato (cv. Juwhangmi) roots 10 days after inoculation (Fig. 3A). Lesion diameters on outer layers of roots inoculated with isolate SP-f6 were 8.72 ±

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 Supplementary Fig. 1. Neighbor-joining tree that shows the relationships between isolate SP-f6 (MK358411) and related members of the genus *Fusarium*, based on phylogenetic analysis of elongation factor 1-α gene sequence. Filled circles on the branches indicate that the nodes were also recovered in the tree constructed by the maximum-likelihood algorithm. *Microdochium nivale* 200118 (KT736151) was used as an outgroup (not shown). Scale bar, 1 nt substitution per 10 nt of the sequence.
Gaseous Chlorine Dioxide against *Fusarium oxysporum* f. sp. *batatas*

In vitro effect of gaseous chlorine dioxide against *F. oxysporum* f. sp. *batatas* SP-f6 on medium. When the *in vitro* inhibitory effect of gaseous ClO$_2$ against *F. oxysporum* f. sp. *batatas* SP-f6 was tested on PDA, gaseous ClO$_2$ at various concentrations and exposure times affected the growth of isolate SP-f6 (Fig. 4). Fungal population was significantly inhibited at 1 ppm of ClO$_2$ for 30 min and was almost completely suppressed at 1 ppm for 60 min and 5 ppm for 5 min. Furthermore, ClO$_2$ gas treatment at 5 ppm for 30-60 min and 10 and 20 ppm for 10-60 min completely inhibited the fungal population on medium (Fig. 4).

In vivo effect of gaseous chlorine dioxide against *F. oxysporum* f. sp. *batatas* SP-f6 on root slices. Lesion diameters caused by *F. oxysporum* f. sp. *batatas* SP-f6 in the inoculated sweetpotato slices decreased with an increase in ClO$_2$ concentrations and exposure times in experiment 2, but not in experiment 1 (Fig. 5A, Supplementary Table 1). ClO$_2$ concentration ($P = 0.0013$) and exposure duration ($P < 0.0001$) significantly affected lesion diameters on the inoculated slices in experiment 2, but not in experiment 1 (Supplementary Table 1). Significant concentration and time interactions ($P = 0.9415$ for experiment 1 and $P = 0.1258$ for experiment 2) for lesion diameters were not observed in either experiment (Supplementary Table 1). The
degree of darkness of lesions declined over time, regardless of gas concentration. In addition, root slice tissues were lignified after gas treatment, especially at 20 ppm for 30-60 min (Supplementary Fig. 2). However, disease symptoms were not observed in uninoculated sweetpotato slices (Supplementary Fig. 2).

**In vivo effect of gaseous chlorine dioxide against *F. oxysporum* f. sp. *batatas* SP-f6 on sweetpotato roots.** When the *in vivo* inhibitory effect of gaseous ClO₂ against *F. oxysporum* f. sp. *batatas* SP-f6 was tested on sweetpotato roots, growth of isolate SP-f6 was significantly inhibited by ClO₂ gas treatment at 40 ppm for 30-60 min in experiment 1 and at 20 and 40 ppm for 60 min in experiment 2 (Fig. 5B). ClO₂ gas treatment at 40 ppm inhibited more population of isolate SP-f6 than the gas treatment at 20 ppm for 30 and 60 min in experiment 1 (Fig. 5B). The concentration of ClO₂ showed significant (*P* = 0.0001) inhibition on fungal population in an experiment; treated time exhibited significant (*P* = 0.0001 for experiment 1 and *P* = 0.0003 for experiment 2) reduction of fungal populations in both experiments (Supplementary Table 1). Significant (*P* = 0.0002) concentration and time interactions for fungal populations were observed in experiment 1 (Supplementary Table 1).

**Discussion**

In this study, we isolated fungal isolate SP-f6 from the black rot lesion on a diseased sweetpotato root and identified it as *F. oxysporum* f. sp. *batatas* using phylogenetic analysis of the elongation factor 1-α gene. Furthermore,
we tested whether ClO₂ gas had inhibitory activity against the development and growth of *F. oxysporum* f. sp. *batatas* on sweetpotato. We found that ClO₂ gas suppressed fungal population and infection on sweetpotato roots. In addition, we observed that treatment time had a greater inhibitory effect than the ClO₂ gas concentration on disease development and fungal population on sweetpotato.

ClO₂ gas as a disinfectant has been widely used to control food-borne or postharvest microbial contamination on storage crops (Bhagat et al., 2011; Du et al., 2002; Yuk et al., 2006); thus, we examined the efficiency of ClO₂ gas in controlling *F. oxysporum* f. sp. *batatas*—mediated infection in stored sweetpotato. In *in vitro* medium tests, the growth of *F. oxysporum* f. sp. *batatas* SP-f6 was significantly inhibited when treated with 1 ppm ClO₂ gas for 30-60 min. Furthermore, growth of the fungus was completely inhibited following treatment with increased ClO₂ concentration of 5 ppm for 30-60 min and 10 and 20 ppm for 10-60 min. In our previous study, *Diaporthe batatas* was shown to have similar growth inhibition pattern against various ClO₂ concentrations and exposure times (Lee et al., 2019). There are several other studies that demonstrate *in vitro* inhibitory activity of ClO₂ on various fungal contaminations on crops. Chen and Zhu (2011) reported that treatment of chestnut with 7 mg/l of ClO₂ for 15 min led to a 4.6-log reduction of *Fusarium tricinctum* spores, whereas a 5.0-log reduction in *Dothiorella gregaria* spores was detected under the same treatment conditions. Wu et al. (2011) observed that spore germination rate of litchi anthracose pathogens (*Colletotrichum* spp.) was significantly inhibited following treatment with 5 mg/l of ClO₂ solution. In addition, Sun et al. (2017) found that aqueous ClO₂ significantly inactivated spores of *Fusarium graminearum*, the causal agent of Fusarium head blight of wheat.

In *in vivo* inoculation tests on sweetpotato slices, lesion diameters were significantly restricted when the slices were treated with ClO₂ gas for 30 min at 20 ppm treatment. Treatment for 60 min led to decrease in lesion diameters at all concentrations of the gas tested. However, lesion darkness, which indicates fungal growth and development, on slices turned lighter over time, and the tissues were lignified after gas treatment especially following the 60 min-treatment, regardless of the ClO₂ concentration used. Tissue lignification resulting from gas treatment may not be a cause for concern as ClO₂ gas is usually applied on sweetpotato roots. In *in vivo* root dip-inoculation tests followed by ClO₂ gas treatment, fungal populations were reduced as observed in the slice tests. The inhibitory effect of ClO₂ gas in this study followed a pattern similar to that observed in our previous study (Lee et al., 2019). These previous and present results imply that the ClO₂ gas may have wide antifungal or antimicrobial activities beneficial for stored crops. In this regard, Bhagat et al. (2011) showed that ClO₂ gas treatment inhibited Salmonella growth on oranges. They spot-inoculated a mixed culture of four *Salmonella* strains on the surface of orange and then treated the fruits with 0.1, 0.3, and 0.5 mg/l ClO₂ gas for 2-14 min at 22°C and 90-95% relative humidity. Consequently, a 5-log reduction of *Salmonella* per sample was observed with 0.1 and 0.3 mg/l ClO₂ gas treatments at 14 min, and 0.5 mg/l ClO₂ gas at 10 min. Moreover, Sy et al. (2005) also found similar reductions in populations of foodborne pathogens such as *Escherichia coli*, *Salmonella*, *Listeria monocytogenes*, yeasts, and molds when the inoculated fresh and fresh-cut produces were exposed to 4.1 mg/l ClO₂ gas.

Taken together, the results in this study showed that ClO₂ gas can effectively inhibit fungal population and infection by *F. oxysporum* f. sp. *batatas* on sweetpotato. The ClO₂ gas treatment with 40 ppm for 30-60 min may produce a desirable outcome by controlling the fungal growth and symptom development on the crop. Therefore, ClO₂ gas may be used as a sanitizer to control *F. oxysporum* f. sp. *batatas* during postharvest storage of sweetpotato.

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**Electronic Supplementary Material**

Supplementary materials are available at The Plant Pathology Journal website (http://www.ppjonline.org/).

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