

Demonstration of an Unstable Variant of Pyruvate Dehydrogenase Protein (E₁) in Cultured Fibroblasts from a Patient with Congenital Lactic Acidemia

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ABSTRACT. The deficiency of pyruvate dehydrogenase enzyme complex causes congenital lactic acidemia and devastating neurologic abnormalities in newborns and children. In the majority of cases, the basic defect appears to be in the pyruvate dehydrogenase (E₁) component, which consists of two subunits, α and β . Whereas some patients are deficient of a single subunit, in other patients both subunits of E₁ are missing. To find out why two proteins were deficient, we investigated the cultured fibroblasts of a female patient who had missing E₁- α and E₁- β protein bands on Western blot. Radiolabeling-immunoprecipitation studies with ³⁵S-methionine revealed that patient fibroblasts synthesized normal sized precursor E₁- α and E₁- β proteins, which were presumably transported into mitochondria and processed into normal sized mature proteins. However, pulse-chase analysis showed that α - and β -proteins were degraded rapidly compared to normal. Our findings proved that α - and β -subunits were synthesized and processed normally but failed to form a stable structure for incorporation into the pyruvate dehydrogenase complex. (*Pediatr Res* 30: 11-14, 1991)

Abbreviations

PDHC, pyruvate dehydrogenase complex
E₁, pyruvate dehydrogenase component of PDHC

PDHC, an intramitochondrial multienzyme complex, consists of three catalytic components, two regulatory components, and a component known as Protein-X, whose function is unknown (1). The catalytic components are pyruvate dehydrogenase (EC 1.2.4.1), dihydrolipoyl transacetylase (EC 2.3.1.12), and dihydrolipoamide dehydrogenase (EC 1.6.4.3), commonly referred to as E₁, E₂, and E₃ respectively. The E₁ component is a tetramer of two different subunits, α and β (2). The constituent polypeptides of PDHC, like the majority of mitochondrial proteins, are nuclear coded and translated on cytoplasmic ribosomes as higher molecular weight cytosolic precursors which, after transport into mitochondria, are processed into mature proteins (3).

Defects of PDHC cause congenital lactic acidemia and devastating neurologic abnormalities. Mutation at the active sites of

E₁, E₂, E₃, and their cofactor binding sites, and defects of activation of PDHC could lead to PDHC deficiency (4, 5). Deficiencies of nuclear-coded polypeptides may be due to reduced synthesis, increased rate of degradation, or defective transport of protein precursors from cell cytosol to mitochondria. One aspect still awaiting definition is different subunit defects possible in E₁ deficiency (6). There is heterogeneity in the expression of E₁ deficiency at the protein level. Examination of deficient cell lines at the level of mRNA by Northern blotting techniques indicated that, although in some patients the defect was in the synthesis of E₁ protein, in other patients the defect could be due to some other mechanisms (7). In some patients, both E₁- α and E₁- β were deficient (7-9). To find the mechanism of combined deficiency, we investigated the synthesis, mitochondrial import, processing, and rate of degradation of both proteins in cultured fibroblasts of a patient with PDHC deficiency.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Brief case report. The patient was a girl born at the 38th wk of an uncomplicated pregnancy. The birth weight was 2590 g. Neither of the parents had any problem. The patient presented with poor feeding, muscle weakness, developmental retardation, and lactic acidosis. Serum lactic and pyruvic acid levels were 4.57 mmol/L (41.2 mg/dL) and 0.44 mmol/L (3.89 mg/dL), respectively. Urine organic acids and plasma amino acids were uninformative. At 8 mo of age, she developed infantile spasm. Computed tomography scan showed total brain atrophy. EEG showed diffuse spikes and waves. At 4 y 9 mo of age, enzyme studies on a biopsy specimen of muscle and cultured fibroblasts showed PDHC deficiency (10). The original and dichloroacetic acid-activated activities were 20 and 9% of normal, respectively. Total activity of PDHC, measured after *in vitro* activation with an excess amount of a broad specificity phosphatase, was 16% of normal. The patient was maintained on a respirator from 6 y of age until her death at the age of 8 y.

Materials. L-³⁵S-methionine (>800 Ci/mmol) and ¹⁴C-labeled protein standard were purchased from Amersham Corp. (Arlington Heights, IL). Formalin-fixed *Staphylococcus aureus* cells were from Bethesda Research Laboratories (Bethesda, MD). Rhodamine 6G, x-ray film, X-Omat R, and film cassettes were from Eastman Kodak Co. (Rochester, NY). The immunoblot system was purchased from Bio-Rad Laboratories (Richmond, CA). Cycloheximide, phenylmethanesulphonyl fluoride, *p*-aminobenzamidine, and leupeptin were purchased from Sigma Chemical Co. (St. Louis, MO). Cell culture materials were from Nissui, Tokyo, Japan.

Preparation of antibodies against PDHC and E₁- α and E₁- β proteins. The PDHC was purified from ox heart by the method of Stanley and Perham (11). On SDS-PAGE, PDHC gave the

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following bands: $E_1\text{-}\beta$, $E_1\text{-}\alpha$, E_2 , E_3 , and X. The different components were separated by SDS-PAGE and capillary endomosis using the electro-elutor ELFE as described in the manual (Genofit, Switzerland). Rabbit antibodies were prepared against PDHC $E_1\text{-}\alpha$ and $E_1\text{-}\beta$ proteins using standard procedures.

Immunoblot analysis. The confluent monolayers of cultured skin fibroblasts were washed with ice-cold PBS and suspended in a solution of 20 mM potassium phosphate, pH 7.0, 0.25 M sucrose, 1 mM EDTA, and 5 mg/L of leupeptin. The cells were treated with digitonin (1 mg/mL), and the mitochondrial fraction was collected by centrifugation. The pellet was resuspended in a solution of 20 mM potassium phosphate, pH 7.0, 1% Triton X-100, 3 mM EDTA, 0.5 mg/L of leupeptin, and 0.2 mM phenylmethylsulphonyl fluoride and freeze-thawed three times at -80°C . The soluble fraction was stored in aliquots of 50 μg of protein at -80°C until use. SDS-PAGE was done with 10% separating gel and 4% stacking gel as described by Laemmli (12). After separation by SDS-PAGE, proteins were transblotted to nitrocellulose membranes as described in the instruction manual. The blots were blocked in Tris-buffered saline containing 3% nonfat dry milk and incubated for 1 h in anti-PDHC antibody diluted 1:500 with Tris-buffered saline. Components were detected by a Bio-Rad antirabbit immune-blot horseradish peroxidase kit.

Pulse-labeling of fibroblasts with ^{35}S -methionine and pulse-chase. Confluent monolayers of fibroblasts in a 25-cm² flask were labeled with ^{35}S -methionine (50 μCi) in 2.5 mL of labeling medium containing 60% Puck's saline G, 15% dialyzed FCS, and 10% glucose (12). Optimum labeling for $E_1\text{-}\beta$ and $E_1\text{-}\alpha$ occurred when the culture flasks were incubated 1 h and 4 h, respectively. After incubation, the labeling medium was removed and cells were washed twice with PBS and then harvested by adding 5 mL of NETS/methionine buffer (150 mM NaCl, 10 mM EDTA, pH 7.4, 0.5% Triton X-100, 0.25% SDS, and 2% unlabeled methionine) to each flask. When studying the precursor proteins, labeling was done in the presence of 1 μM of rhodamine 6G. In the chase experiments, after pulse-labeling, the medium was replaced with growth medium containing no label, and the cells were harvested at 24, 48, 72 and 96 h, respectively. Optimal conditions for immunoprecipitation of PDHC or individual subunits were determined in pilot studies. ^{35}S -methionine incorporation into total proteins was measured by a liquid scintillation counter (Aloka 612, Tokyo, Japan) and the amount containing 10^7 dpm was used for immunoprecipitation. The individual subunits were immunoprecipitated with anti- $E_1\text{-}\alpha$ and anti- $E_1\text{-}\beta$ antibody and *S. aureus* cells. The precipitates were analyzed by SDS-PAGE and fluorography. Protease inhibitors were present in all subsequent steps during the immunoprecipitation procedure.

RESULTS

Immunochemical analysis. Figure 1 shows the immunoblot of SDS-PAGE of purified bovine PDHC (lane 1) and mitochondrial extract from normal (lanes 2 and 4) and PDHC-deficient (lane 3) fibroblasts. Mitochondrial extract of normal fibroblasts gave four bands corresponding to components E_2 , X, $E_1\text{-}\alpha$ and $E_1\text{-}\beta$. Patient fibroblasts gave normal E_2 and X bands, but $E_1\text{-}\alpha$ and $E_1\text{-}\beta$ bands were missing. The E_3 band could not be detected by Western blot analysis in either patient or in normal fibroblasts because of its low immunogenicity. Western blot analysis using monospecific antibodies against $E_1\text{-}\alpha$ and $E_1\text{-}\beta$ confirmed absence of $E_1\text{-}\alpha$ and $E_1\text{-}\beta$ bands in patient fibroblasts (result not shown).

Electrophoretic analysis of $E_1\text{-}\alpha$ and $E_1\text{-}\beta$ proteins labeled with ^{35}S -methionine. We studied the synthesis and mitochondrial import of the precursors of α - and β -subunits of E_1 protein in normal and patient fibroblasts by labeling with ^{35}S -methionine in presence of rhodamine 6G. Rhodamine 6G, an inhibitor of the mitochondrial energy metabolism, is known to inhibit the uptake of precursor of nuclear-encoded mitochondrial enzymes,

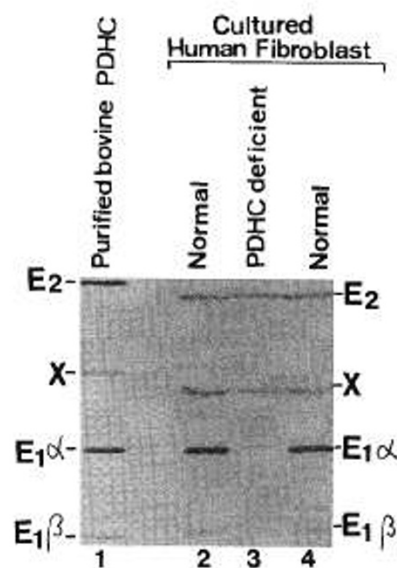


Fig. 1. Immunoblot of PDHC in extracts of normal and PDHC-deficient cultured skin fibroblast mitochondria. Extracts of cultured skin fibroblast mitochondria (50 μg protein/sample) were separated by SDS-PAGE and electroblotted to a filter membrane. PDHC components were detected with anti-PDHC antibodies and a Bio-Rad antirabbit immunoblot horseradish peroxidase kit. Lane 1, purified ox heart PDHC (300 ng protein). Lanes 2 and 4, mitochondrial extract from normal fibroblasts. Lane 3, mitochondrial extract from PDHC-deficient fibroblasts.

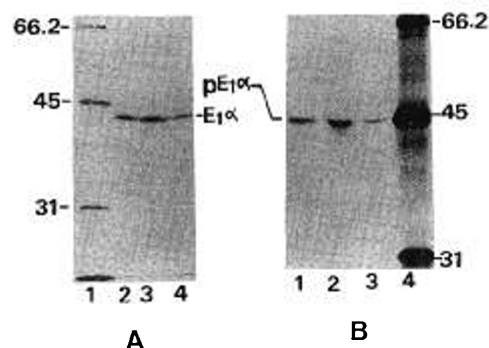


Fig. 2. Detection of precursor ($pE_1\alpha$) and mature ($E_1\alpha$) $E_1\text{-}\alpha$ protein in normal and PDHC-deficient fibroblast. The confluent monolayers of fibroblasts were labeled with ^{35}S -methionine for 4 h in the presence (B) and in the absence (A) of rhodamine 6G, an inhibitor of mitochondrial import. After harvesting with NETS/methionine buffer, monospecific anti- $E_1\text{-}\alpha$ antibody and *Staphylococcus* cells were added to the fibroblast extracts and the immunoprecipitates (total radioactivity into incorporated protein, 10^7 dpm) were analyzed by 10% SDS-PAGE and fluorography. A, lanes 2 and 4, mature $E_1\text{-}\alpha$ protein from normal fibroblasts. A, lane 3, mature $E_1\text{-}\alpha$ protein from patient fibroblasts. B, lanes 1 and 3, precursor $E_1\text{-}\alpha$ protein from normal fibroblasts. B, lane 2, precursor $E_1\text{-}\alpha$ protein from patient fibroblasts. Lane 1 in A and lane 4 in B were standard molecular weight markers.

leading to the suppression of their posttranslational processing (13–15). In normal fibroblasts, when $E_1\text{-}\alpha$ protein was labeled in absence of rhodamine 6G, a sharp band with a molecular weight of 42 kD was observed (Fig. 2A, lanes 2 and 4). In patient fibroblasts, the band had the same molecular weight but was consistently more intense (Fig. 2A, lane 3). When cell labeling was performed in the presence of rhodamine 6G, the 42-kD band was not present and a new 44.5-kD band for precursor protein was detected in both normal and patient fibroblasts (Fig. 2B, lanes 1, 2, and 3). In Figures 2A and B, the bands in the patient's lanes were more intense than those of the corresponding control. This might reflect increased synthesis or altered immu-

noreactivity of a variant $E_1\text{-}\alpha$ protein. Both 42- and 44.5-kD bands were not detectable when an excessive amount of pure $E_1\text{-}\alpha$ was added to each immunoprecipitation mixture before the addition of antibody (result not shown). This confirms that 42- and 44.5-kD bands were indeed the mature and precursor $E_1\text{-}\alpha$, respectively.

Using anti- $E_1\text{-}\beta$ antibody, a 36-kD band was detected in both normal and patient fibroblasts (Fig. 3, lanes 1 and 3) when labeling was done in the absence of rhodamine 6G. When labeling was done in the presence of rhodamine 6G, the 36-kD band was not present, and a new 39-kD band for precursor protein was detected in both normal and patient fibroblasts (Fig. 3, lanes 2 and 4). Both 36- and 39-kD bands disappeared when excess $E_1\text{-}\beta$ protein was added to each immunoprecipitation mixture before the addition of antibody (result not shown).

Pulse-labeling chase experiment. To investigate the rate of degradation, we pulse-labeled $E_1\text{-}\alpha$ protein for 4 h with ^{35}S -methionine and then chased the labeled $E_1\text{-}\alpha$ for various periods. The density of the fluorographic band for $E_1\text{-}\alpha$ remained the same at 24 h of chase in the normal fibroblast line (Fig. 4, lane 2) but decreased markedly in the patient fibroblasts (Fig. 4, lane 5). The $E_1\text{-}\alpha$ protein band in patient fibroblasts almost disappeared after 48 h, although the band in the normal fibroblasts did not change much. In the normal fibroblasts, the fluorographic band was clearly detectable even after 10 d (result not shown).

Similarly, we did a pulse-chase experiment for $E_1\text{-}\beta$ protein (Fig. 5). The density of the fluorographic band for $E_1\text{-}\beta$ protein remained comparable at 24 h (result not shown) and decreased progressively at 48 and 96 h, but was clearly detectable at 96 h in the normal fibroblast line (Fig. 5A, lanes 1–3). In the normal fibroblast line, the fluorographic band was detectable even after 10 d (result not shown). The patient fibroblast line, after 1 h of pulse-labeling, synthesized $E_1\text{-}\beta$ protein in an amount comparable to the normal fibroblast line (Fig. 5B, lane 1). However, the fluorographic band was barely detectable after 48 h of chase (Fig. 5B, lane 2) and could not be detected after 96 h of chase (Fig. 5B, lane 3), even when the film was exposed for a long time.

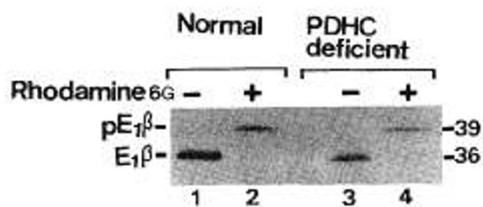


Fig. 3. Detection of mature ($E_1\beta$) and precursor ($pE_1\beta$) $E_1\text{-}\beta$ protein. After labeling for 1 h with ^{35}S -methionine, $E_1\text{-}\beta$ was immunoprecipitated and analyzed by SDS-PAGE and fluorography. Lane 1, normal mature protein. Lane 2, normal precursor protein. Lane 3, patient mature protein. Lane 4, patient precursor protein.

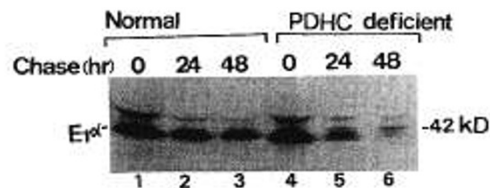


Fig. 4. Pulse-labeling chase experiment for $E_1\text{-}\alpha$ protein in normal and PDHC-deficient fibroblasts. Confluent monolayers of fibroblasts, in 25-cm² flasks were labeled with ^{35}S -methionine. After 4 h of labeling, the labeling medium was replaced with normal growth medium and the preparation chased for 24 and 48 h. After chase, labeled $E_1\text{-}\alpha$ protein was immunoprecipitated and analyzed by 10% SDS-PAGE and fluorography. Lanes 1–3, normal fibroblasts. Lanes 4–6, patient fibroblasts. Lane 1 and 4, immediately after 4 h of pulse. Lanes 2 and 5, after 24 h of chase. Lanes 3 and 6, after 48 h of chase.

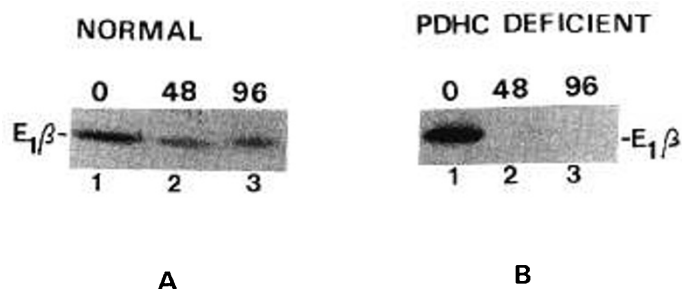


Fig. 5. Pulse-chase experiment for $E_1\text{-}\beta$ protein in normal and PDHC-deficient fibroblasts. After labeling for 1 h with ^{35}S -methionine, the labeling medium was replaced with normal growth medium and the preparation chased for 48 and 96 h. A, lanes 1–3, normal. B, lanes 1–3, patient. A and B, lane 1, immediately after 1 h of pulse. Lane 2, after 48 h of chase. Lane 3, after 96 h of chase.

DISCUSSION

We investigated cultured fibroblasts from a patient with PDHC deficiency. Immunoblot and radiolabeling-pulse-chase experiments showed increased degradation of $E_1\text{-}\alpha$ and $E_1\text{-}\beta$ subunits.

Deficiency of PDHC is the most common of the disorders leading to congenital lactic acidemia (6). More than 100 cases of this deficiency have been described in the literature (16). In the majority of cases, the basic defect appears to be in the E_1 protein, and different patterns of E_1 deficiency have been detected (6–9). In one group, there are immunologically detectable $E_1\text{-}\alpha$ and $E_1\text{-}\beta$ with normal mRNA levels. A second group has diminished amounts of both immunoreactive proteins, but normal levels of mRNA for both subunits. In another group, immunologically detectable $E_1\text{-}\alpha$ and $E_1\text{-}\beta$ proteins are diminished, but with reduced levels of mRNA for $E_1\text{-}\alpha$ only. In a fourth group there are few cases of isolated $E_1\text{-}\alpha$ deficiency. It is striking that only $E_1\text{-}\alpha$ or combined deficiency have been reported. The phosphorylation sites for regulation of the whole complex are on the $E_1\text{-}\alpha$ subunit; it may be that a defect involving the $E_1\text{-}\beta$ chain would not have the same severe consequences as a lack of or a disturbance of phosphorylation of α -subunit.

It is interesting that both $E_1\text{-}\alpha$ and $E_1\text{-}\beta$ proteins were deficient in our patient and in some reported cases (7, 8). $E_1\text{-}\alpha$ and $E_1\text{-}\beta$ proteins are encoded by different genes (17). This excludes the possibility that a common mRNA and protein exist from which $E_1\text{-}\alpha$ and $E_1\text{-}\beta$ are derived. The chances that there were simultaneous mutations in two different genes encoding both the subunits in a group of unrelated patients are very small. However, there are instances in biology where a single gene defect causes multiple missing proteins (18). A single gene defect that results in deficiencies of both subunits of the E_1 protein could have several explanations: 1) mutation in a regulatory gene that controls the synthesis of α - and β -subunits; 2) a common defect in mitochondrial import and processing of both proteins; and 3) failure to form a stable $\alpha_2\beta_2$ -tetramer for incorporation into PDHC resulting in the degradation of unassociated subunit proteins. A similar case is found in cAMP-dependent protein kinase, where the degradation of the regulatory subunit I is increased 10 times in absence of the catalytic subunit (19).

In this study, immunoblot analysis of PDHC revealed that immuno-cross-reactive $E_1\text{-}\alpha$ and $E_1\text{-}\beta$ were absent, indicating that the steady state amount of α - and β -subunits within fibroblasts were very low. However, radiolabeling studies revealed that the same fibroblast line could produce ^{35}S -methionine-labeled $E_1\text{-}\alpha$ and $E_1\text{-}\beta$ in amounts comparable to those of normal fibroblast lines. This indicated that patient fibroblasts produced $E_1\text{-}\alpha$ and $E_1\text{-}\beta$ proteins that were extremely labile compared to normal proteins. Pulse-chase experiments also confirmed that α - and β -proteins were degraded more rapidly in patient fibroblasts than in normal fibroblasts. The half-life of the precursor protein in cytosol may be shorter than that of the mature form in the mitochondria. However, in patient fibroblasts, $E_1\text{-}\alpha$ and $E_1\text{-}\beta$

proteins were synthesized as 44.5- and 39-kD precursors, which were presumably imported into the mitochondria and processed to 42- and 36-kD mature forms, respectively, in a normal fashion. This excludes the possibility that patient fibroblasts produced truncated precursors that could not properly be imported into mitochondria. Thus, it seems that patient fibroblasts expressed and processed α - and β -subunits normally but failed to form a stable structure for incorporation into the complex; as a result, both the subunits were rapidly degraded. Incidentally, members of the heat shock protein family, a class of well-documented and highly conserved polypeptides, act as chaperons in the folding and assembly of imported subunits (20). Disturbance of a heat shock protein may be important in selected cases of PDHC deficiency. Recently, we have located a 4-bp insertion in the cDNA for $E_1\text{-}\alpha$ that resulted in an early stop codon and a shorter E_1 protein (Ito M, Saijo T, Naito E, Takeda E, Huq AHMM, Kuroda Y, unpublished data). The mutant $E_1\text{-}\alpha$ protein might affect the proper folding of $E_1\text{-}\alpha$ protein and formation of a stable $\alpha_2\beta_2$ -tetramer to be incorporated into highly structured PDHC. Mammalian PDHC is composed of a structural core of E_2 protein around which E_1 and E_3 are arranged (1). In our case and also in the earlier reports (7-9), defects in the E_1 component didn't cause any abnormality of E_2 or X in immunoblot analysis. However, in a case of apparent X component deficiency, $E_1\text{-}\alpha$ and $E_1\text{-}\beta$ were reduced below normal (21). Further studies of the nature of the possible interactions of different subunits, their states of aggregation, and their assembly are necessary to address the question how a single mutation would affect the assembly and function of PDHC.

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