

Gold compound auranofin inhibits I κ B kinase (IKK) by modifying Cys-179 of IKK β subunit

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Accepted 7 December 2002

Abbreviations: 15dPGJ₂, 15-deoxy- Δ^{12-14} -prostaglandin J₂; GST, glutathione S-transferase; HA, hemagglutinin; IKK, I κ B kinase; NIK, NF- κ B-inducing kinase

Abstract

Antirheumatic gold compounds have been shown to inhibit NF- κ B activation by blocking I κ B kinase (IKK) activity. To examine the possible inhibitory mechanism of gold compounds, we expressed wild type and mutant forms of IKK α and β subunits in COS-7 cells and determined the effect of gold on the activity of these enzymes both *in vivo* and *in vitro*. Substitution of Cys-179 of IKK β with alanine (C179A) rendered the enzyme to become resistant to inhibition by a gold compound auranofin, however, similar protective effect was not observed with an equivalent level of IKK α (C178A) mutant expressed in the cells. Auranofin inhibited constitutively active IKK α and β and variants; IKK α (S176E, S180E) or IKK β (S177E, S181E), suggesting that gold directly cause inhibition of activated enzyme. The different inhibitory effect of auranofin on IKK α (C178A) and IKK β (C179A) mutants indicates that gold could inhibit the two subunits of IKK in a different mode, and the inhibition of NF- κ B and IKK activation induced by inflammatory signals in gold-treated cells appears through its interaction with Cys-179 of IKK β .

Keywords: antirheumatic agent gold; auranofin; cysteine; mutagenesis; NF- κ B; protein-serine-threonine kinases

Introduction

The transcription factor NF- κ B plays a critical role in the regulation of genes involved in chronic inflammatory diseases (Barnes and Karin, 1997). In unstimulated cells, NF- κ B is sequestered in the cytoplasm through interaction with inhibitory proteins called I κ B (I κ B α , β and ϵ). NF- κ B is activated in response to many signals including proinflammatory cytokines such as IL-1 and TNF, bacterial LPS, virus, ultraviolet light, and oxidants (Baeuerle and Henkel, 1994; Barnes and Karin, 1997). These signals cause phosphorylation and subsequent degradation of I κ B proteins, and the released NF- κ B enters the nucleus to induce expression of specific target genes. In the signal pathway for NF- κ B activation, phosphorylation of I κ B is likely to be the central point of regulation. Previous studies identified an I κ B kinase (IKK) complex of 700 kDa, which is induced by inflammatory signals and able to phosphorylate two conserved N-terminal serine residues of I κ B α and I κ B β (DiDonato *et al.*, 1997; Mercurio *et al.*, 1997). IKK complex is composed of two catalytic subunits, IKK α (or IKK1) and IKK β (IKK2), and a regulatory subunit, IKK γ /NEMO/IKKAP1 (reviewed in May and Ghosh, 1998; Zandi and Karin, 1999). IKK α and IKK β are Ser/Thr kinases of similar structure which can form homodimers and heterodimers *in vitro*, and purified recombinant form of each can directly phosphorylate I κ B α and β at proper sites (Lee *et al.*, 1998; Li *et al.*, 1998; Zandi *et al.*, 1998). The activity of IKK α and IKK β was shown to depend on their phosphorylation at specific serine residues (Ser-176/180 of IKK α and Ser-177/181 of IKK β) located in the T (activation) loop of the kinase domain, and substitution of these sites with glutamate, which mimic the effect of phosphoserine, generated constitutively activated form of IKK α and IKK β (Mercurio *et al.*, 1997; Ling *et al.*, 1998). Although the similar structures of IKK α and IKK β suggest their common functional role in NF- κ B activation, studies with animals deficient in each IKK subunit revealed that IKK α plays a role during embryonic development of the skin and skeletal system, while IKK β is essential for the activation of IKK in response to TNF and other pro-inflammatory stimuli (Gerondakis *et al.*, 1999; reviewed in Zandi and Karin, 1999).

Gold compounds, comprised of elemental Au(I) and a sulfur-containing ligand, have been used for the treatment of rheumatoid arthritis, inducing improvement of clinical conditions in a majority of patients

(Research Subcommittee of the Empire Rheumatism Council, 1960; Champion *et al.*, 1990). Administration of a gold compound aurothiomalate to rheumatoid arthritis patients was shown to reduce expression of inflammatory cytokines, IL-1, IL-6 and TNF, in the synovial membrane (Yanni *et al.*, 1994). In LPS-stimulated monocytes and macrophages, a lipid-soluble gold compound auranofin inhibited production of IL-1 and TNF by reducing their mRNA levels, suggesting a transcriptional regulation of IL-1 and TNF expression by auranofin (Bondeson and Sundler, 1995). Our previous study showed that auranofin and other thiol-reactive metal ions inhibit NF- κ B activation by blocking IKK activation in LPS-stimulated macrophages (Jeon *et al.*, 2000). These metal compounds and other thiol-modifying agents such as *N*-ethylmaleimide and *p*-hydroxymercuribenzoate directly suppressed IKK activity *in vitro*, indicating that these agents inhibit IKK by modifying a critical cysteine thiol group of the enzyme molecule. Recently, other thiol-reactive agents, including cyclopentenone PG [PGA₁ and 15-deoxy- Δ^{12-14} -PGJ₂ (15dPGJ₂)] and arsenite anion (AsO₃³⁻) were also reported to inhibit NF- κ B and IKK activation in cells stimulated with TNF, IL-1, or phorbol esters (Kapahi *et al.*, 2000; Rossi *et al.*, 2000). The inhibitory effect of 15dPGJ₂ and arsenite was not observed in cells expressing mutant IKK β in which Cys-179 in the activation loop is replaced with alanine, indicating that they inhibit IKK by modifying Cys-179 of IKK β . These results suggest that gold and other thiol-reactive agents can affect IKK activity reacting with Cys-179 of IKK β or Cys-178 of IKK α .

Here, we examined the effect of gold and other thiol-reactive agents on the activity of various IKK α and IKK β mutants expressed in COS-7 cells. IKK β mutant in which Cys-179 was substituted to alanine was resistant to inhibition by auranofin, while an equivalent IKK α mutant, IKK α (C178A), was still susceptible to gold. We also show that various thiol-reactive agents inhibit constitutive-active forms of IKK α and IKK β as effectively as wild type enzymes. Our results reveal that gold blocks IKK activity by reacting with different sites of IKK α and IKK β .

Materials and Methods

Materials and cell culture

Antibodies to IKK α (M-280), IKK β (H-4), and hemagglutinin (HA) tag (Y-11) were obtained from Santa Cruz Biotechnology (Santa Cruz, CA). Anti-Flag (M2) antibody was from Stratagene (La Jolla, CA). Auranofin was provided by Yukyung Medical (Seoul, South Korea). 15dPGJ₂ was from Biomol (Plymouth Meeting, PA) and dissolved in ethanol. Other chemicals were obtained from Sigma (St. Louis, MO). Recombinant

glutathione S-transferase (GST)-I κ B α containing N-terminal 54 residues of I κ B α was prepared by expression in *Escherichia coli* as described previously (Jeon *et al.*, 2000). COS-7 monkey kidney cells were obtained from the American Type Culture Collection (ATCC, Manassa, VA). Cells were grown and maintained in DMEM supplemented with 10% heat-inactivated fetal calf serum, penicillin (100 U/ml) and streptomycin (100 μ g/ml).

Expression of IKK α and IKK β in COS-7 cells and IKK assay

The expression plasmids pRc β Actin-3xHA-IKK α encoding wild-type human HA-IKK α was kindly provided by Dr. M. Karin (University of California, San Diego, CA), and described previously (DiDonato *et al.*, 1997). pFlagCMV-IKK β encoding Flag-IKK β , and the constructs for constitutively active mutants of IKK α and IKK β were kind gifts of Dr. F. Mercurio (Signal Pharmaceuticals, San Diego, CA) (Mercurio *et al.*, 1997). Wild-type NF- κ B-inducing kinase (NIK) construct was a gift from Dr. J.-H. Kim (Korea University, Seoul, South Korea). The cDNA for HA-IKK α was subcloned between *Hind*III and *Xho*I sites of pCR3.1 (Invitrogen, Groningen, Netherlands). Expression vectors encoding IKK α (C178A) and IKK β (C179A) mutants with alanine instead of cysteine at appropriate sites were prepared by site-directed mutagenesis using an overlap extension method (Ho *et al.*, 1989). Mutations were verified by DNA-sequencing analysis. COS-7 cells grown in 12-well plates were transfected with plasmid vectors and expressed IKK was isolated by immunoprecipitation as described previously (Jeon *et al.*, 2000). *In vitro* kinase assay was performed with immune complexes in kinase buffer containing 2-5 μ Ci of [γ -³²P]ATP and GST-I κ B α (2 μ g). Samples were analyzed by SDS-PAGE on a 12.5% gel and electrophoretically transferred to polyvinylidene fluoride membrane (Millipore, Bedford, MA). Phosphorylated GST-I κ B α was visualized by autoradiography and quantitated in a phosphor image analyzer (BAS-2500; Fujifilm, Tokyo, Japan). The membrane was subsequently probed with appropriate antibodies to determine the amount of IKK α or IKK β .

Results

Inhibition of IKK β by gold occurs through modification of Cys-179

Previously, thiol-reactive 15dPGJ₂ and arsenite were shown to inhibit IKK by complexing Cys-179 of IKK β (Kapahi *et al.*, 2000; Rossi *et al.*, 2000). To determine whether gold compounds inhibit IKK also by reacting with Cys-179 of IKK β (and equivalent Cys-178 of IKK α), COS-7 cells were transfected with expression

constructs for wild type HA-IKK α and Flag-IKK β and mutants in which the cysteine residues were substituted with alanine. After treatment with various doses of auranofin, cells were lysed and IKK was isolated by immunoprecipitation using anti-tag antibodies. The immune complexes were used to determine kinase activity with GST-I κ B α as a substrate (Figure 1). Because IKK α and Cys \rightarrow Ala variants of IKK α and IKK β expressed alone in the absence of stimuli showed low I κ B kinase activity (Jeon *et al.*, 2000;

data not shown), an IKK-activating kinase, NIK, was coexpressed with IKK α or IKK β . Our result revealed that auranofin inhibited both wild type HA-IKK α and mutant HA-IKK α (C178A) in a similar way (Figure 1A). By contrast, a remarkable difference in their susceptibility to auranofin was detected between wild type Flag-IKK β and C179A mutant of IKK β (Figure 1B). The wild type IKK β -Flag was inhibited by auranofin in a dose-dependent manner, and enzyme activity was reduced by more than 80% at 30 μ M auranofin. However, no inhibitory effect was seen in cells expressing Flag-IKK β (C179A) treated with 10 and 30 μ M auranofin.

Previous studies showed that gold and other thiol-reactive agents directly inhibit IKK complex *in vitro* (Jeon *et al.*, 2000; Kapahi *et al.*, 2000; Rossi *et al.*, 2000). We thus examined whether Cys-178 of IKK α and Cys-179 of IKK β are involved in inhibition of IKK after exposure of enzyme to gold compounds and other thiol-reactive agents *in vitro*. Wild type and C178A and C179A mutants of IKK α -HA and IKK β -Flag, respectively, were expressed in COS-7 cells, and isolated by immunoprecipitation. The immune complex was used to determine IKK activity in the presence or absence of various concentrations of hydrophilic gold compound, aurothiomalate, a reducing agent dithiothreitol, and other thiol-blocking agents such as *N*-ethylmaleimide and 15dPGJ $_2$ (Figure 2). Addition of thiol-modifying agents, aurothiomalate, *N*-ethylmaleimide and 15dPGJ $_2$ inhibited IKK α and β activity dose-dependently, while decreasing concentrations of dithio-

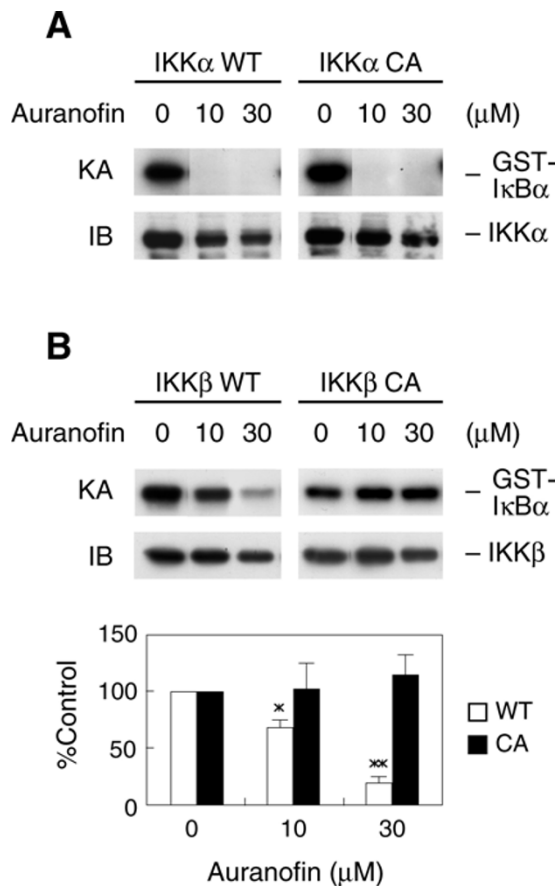


Figure 1. Gold inhibits IKK β through modification of Cys-179 in its activation loop. (A) COS-7 cells were transiently transfected with wild type HA-IKK α (IKK α WT) or HA-IKK α (C178A) (IKK α CA) expression vectors along with NIK expression vector. After 46 h, the cells were treated for 2 h with 0–30 μ M auranofin. Kinase assay (KA) was performed with immune complex obtained from cell lysate (120 μ g protein), and the expression level of enzyme was measured by immunoblotting (IB) with anti-HA antibody. (B) COS-7 cells were transfected with wild type Flag-IKK β (IKK β WT) or Flag-IKK β (C179A) (IKK β CA) expression vectors together with NIK expression vector, and treated with auranofin as in (A). Immune complex prepared from cell lysate (20 μ g protein) was used for kinase assay and immunoblotting analysis. IKK activity was determined by measuring the radioactivity of GST-I κ B α by phosphor image analysis and calculated as a percent of control (lower histogram). The results are presented as mean \pm SD ($n = 3$), and the statistical significance of difference was determined by Student's *t*-test. * $P < 0.05$; ** $P < 0.01$.

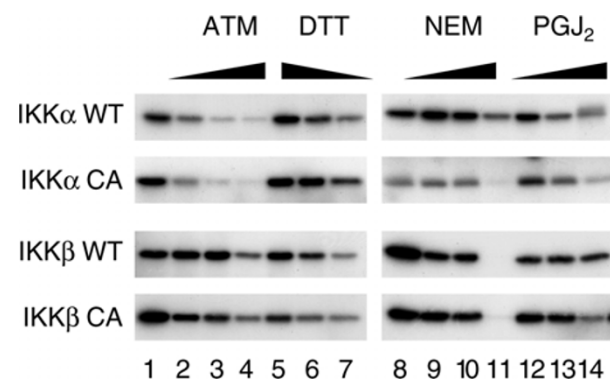


Figure 2. Inactivation of IKK β (C179A) as well as IKK α (C178A) by *in vitro* exposure to thiol-reactive agents. COS-7 cells were transiently transfected with expression vectors for wild type HA-IKK α (IKK α WT), HA-IKK α (C178A) (IKK α CA), wild type Flag-IKK β (IKK β WT), or Flag-IKK β (C179A) (IKK β CA), together with NIK expression vector. After 48 h, cells were lysed, immunoprecipitated with anti-tag antibodies, and equal aliquots of immune complex were assayed for IKK activity in the absence (lanes 1 and 8) or presence of various concentrations of aurothiomalate (ATM, 10, 30, and 100 μ M, lane 2–4), dithiothreitol (DTT, 300, 100, and 0 μ M, lane 5–7), *N*-ethylmaleimide (NEM, 0.1, 0.3, and 1 mM, lane 9–11), and 15dPGJ $_2$ (PGJ $_2$, 3, 10, and 30 μ M, lane 12–14). The data represent two experiments.

threitol in the reaction mixture reduced enzyme activity. 15dPGJ₂ inhibited IKK β to 35% of control at 3 μ M concentration and no additional inhibition was observed at increasing concentrations of 15dPGJ₂. Mutant enzymes IKK α (C178A) and IKK β (C179A) were also sensitive to inhibition caused by addition of thiol-reactive agents or depletion of reducing agent in the reaction mixture.

Effect of thiol-reactive agents on constitutively active variants of IKK α and β

The IKK α and IKK β are activated by phosphorylation of serine residues in their activation loops by upstream kinases and autophosphorylation (Mercurio *et al.*, 1997; Ling *et al.*, 1998; Delhase *et al.*, 1999). These serine residues are located near the Cys-178 and Cys-179 of IKK α and β , respectively, indicating a possibility that thiol-reactive agents inhibit IKK activation by interfering with phosphorylation of these serine residues. To test this possibility, we used constitutively active IKK α and β variants, HA-IKK α (S176E, S180E) and Flag-IKK β (S177E, S181E), in which the two phospho-acceptor serine residues in the activation

loop were substituted with glutamate. COS-7 cells transfected with wild type or constitutively active mutants of HA-IKK α and Flag-IKK β were treated with auranofin for 2 h, and IKK activity of immunoprecipitated enzyme was measured (Figure 3). Auranofin inhibited both wild type and constitutively active forms of HA-IKK α and Flag-IKK β .

Discussion

In this study, we examined whether the inhibitory effect of gold compounds on IKK activity occurs through modification of Cys-178 and Cys-179 of IKK α and β , respectively. Previously, Cys-179 of IKK β has been shown to be involved in inhibition of IKK by cyclopentenone PGs and arsenite (Kapahi *et al.*, 2000; Rossi *et al.*, 2000). Our result showed that when an IKK β mutant that contains alanine instead of Cys-179 was expressed in COS-7 cells, it was resistant to inhibition by a cell-permeable gold compound, auranofin, indicating that gold inhibits IKK by modifying Cys-179 of IKK β . Our result agrees with the previous results obtained with cyclopentenone PGs and arsenite, confirming a role of Cys-179 of IKK β as a common target for various thiol-reactive agents. By contrast, this protective effect of Cys \rightarrow Ala mutation was not observed in cells expressing an equivalent IKK α mutant, IKK α (C178A). These results demonstrate a critical difference in catalytic and regulatory mode of enzyme activity between IKK α and IKK β , despite their identical substrate specificity and homologous structures. Genetic analysis of IKK function revealed that IKK α -deficient mice display abnormalities in skin and limb development, whereas deletion of IKK β gene causes embryonic death due to massive liver apoptosis and IKK β -deficient cells are sensitive to TNF-induced apoptosis (reviewed in Gerondakis *et al.*, 1999; Zandi and Karin, 1999). Moreover, studies with these knockout mice showed that NF- κ B and IKK activation in response to TNF and IL-1 are severely impaired in IKK β -deficient cells, whereas inactivation of IKK α gene had less effect. Taken together, these results indicate an essential role of IKK β in IKK and NF- κ B activation by proinflammatory signals, and suggest that anti-inflammatory effect of gold compounds appear mainly through modification of Cys-179 of IKK β .

We observed that IKK α (C178A) mutant was inhibited by auranofin as effectively as wild type IKK α . This result suggested that gold compounds inhibit IKK α by reacting with group(s) other than Cys-178 in IKK α . Our result also showed that *in vitro* exposure of mutant enzymes, including IKK β (C179A), to thiol-reactive agents reduced enzyme activity in a similar way to wild type enzymes. This result also suggested

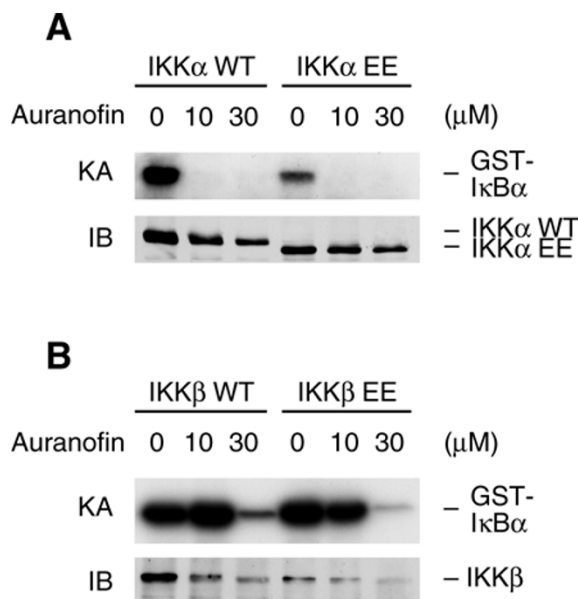


Figure 3. Constitutively active IKK α and IKK β are inhibited by gold. (A) COS-7 cells were transiently transfected with wild type HA-IKK α (IKK α WT) or HA-IKK α (S176E, S180E) (IKK α EE) expression vectors along with NIK expression vector and treated with auranofin as described in Figure 1. Kinase assay (KA) was performed with immune complex obtained from cell lysate (120 μ g protein), and the expression level of enzyme was measured by immunoblotting (IB) with anti-HA antibody. (B) COS-7 cells were transfected with wild type Flag-IKK β or Flag-IKK β (S177E, S181E) expression vectors together with NIK expression vector, and treated with auranofin as in (A). Immune complex prepared from cell lysate (20 μ g protein) was used for kinase assay and immunoblotting analysis.

the presence of group(s) in the IKK β molecule other than Cys-179, which is(are) sensitive to oxidation or modification by reactive agents. This sensitive site of IKK β (C179A) seems to be protected from inhibition by gold inside the cell, where redox balance maintains a more reduced state and competing thiols are more abundant than *in vitro* assay system. In a previous study, *in vitro* incubation of protein phosphatase 1B with reactive oxygen species, such as H₂O₂ or superoxide anion (O₂⁻), has been shown to induce oxidation at multiple sites in addition to Cys-215, which acts as a specific regulatory site for reactive oxygen species in the cell (Barrett, 1999).

Cys-179 is critically positioned within the activation loop of IKK β , suggesting that modification of this residue can interfere phosphorylation of adjacent Ser-177 and Ser-181 and thus activation of enzyme. We tested this possibility by employing constitutively active versions of IKK α and IKK β , in which the two serine residues were replaced with acidic glutamate residues. Our result showed that the mutant enzyme of IKK α and IKK β were inhibited by auranofin in a similar degree with wild type enzymes (Figure 3). Gold compounds and other thiol-reactive agents were also shown to directly inhibit activated IKK isolated from cells stimulated with LPS or TNF (Jeon *et al.*, 2000; Kapahi *et al.*, 2000; Rossi *et al.*, 2000). These results suggest that the modification of Cys-179 by gold and other thiol-reactive agents interfere formation of active conformation of IKK even when the two serine residues are in phosphorylated state and Cys-179 plays a pivotal role in the conversion of inactive enzyme to an active form.

In summary, our results show that antirheumatic gold compounds inhibit NF- κ B activation by modifying Cys-179 of IKK β , and the effect appears through direct inhibition of activated enzyme. NF- κ B controls the expression of diverse inflammatory and immune response mediators, and the abnormal, constitutive activation of NF- κ B has been associated with numerous chronic inflammatory diseases, including rheumatoid arthritis, asthma, inflammatory bowel disease, ulcerative colitis and atherosclerosis (Barnes and Karin, 1997). Understanding the inhibitory mode gold compounds in IKK activation will benefit development of novel strategies to treat these diseases.

Acknowledgement

This work was supported by grants from the Ministry of Health and Welfare, Republic of Korea (02-PJ1-PG3-20908-0023) and Rheumatism Research Center grant by Korean Science and Engineering Foundation (#R11-2002-003). We thank Drs. M. Karin, F. Mercurio, and J.-H. Kim for IKK and NIK expression plasmids.

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