Effect of Stapling on the Thermodynamics of Protein-Peptide Binding

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Abstract

Protein-protein interaction (PPI) is one of the key regulatory features to drive biomolecular processes and hence is targeted for designing therapeutics against diseases. Small peptides are a new and emerging class of therapeutics owing to their high specificity and low toxicity. For achieving efficient targeting of the PPI, amino acid side chains are often stapled together resulting in the rigidification of these peptides. Exploring the scope of these peptides demands a comprehensive understanding of their working principle. In this work, two stapled p53 peptides have been considered to delineate their binding mechanism with mdm2 using computational approaches. Addition of stapling protects the secondary structure of the peptides even in the case of thermal and chemical denaturation. Although the introduction of a stapling agent increases the hydrophobicity of the peptide surprisingly the enthalpic stabilization decreases. This is overcome by the lowering of the entropic penalty and the overall binding affinity improves. The mechanistic insights into the benefit of peptide stapling can be adopted for further improvement of peptide therapeutics.

Introduction

Proteins are part of several important biomolecular processes like enzyme catalysis, signal transduction, etc. and they regulate these processes at different stages. Regulation of these processes by protein is governed by specific protein-protein interactions.[1] In the diseased condition, these sophisticated protein-protein interactions are compromised, inhibited, or dis-regulated.[2] The strategy to design ways to fight diseases involves restoring those interactions by using some chemical moieties which can mimic one of the original partners in the protein-protein interaction.[3] Different types of molecules are used as therapeutics[4] e.g. small organic molecules,[5] peptides,[6] biologics like growth factor, antibodies[7] etc. The small molecule inhibitors (having molecular weight bellow 500 Da) and the biologics (having molecular weight above 5000 Da) form the two ends of the molecular inhibitors in terms of molecular weight.[8] The small molecule inhibitors, due to their size has high oral bioavailability, cellular permeability but because of their chemical nature, they often lack target selectivity. On the other hand, the biologics are very target specific due to their larger interaction area with their target and shows high affinity. Unfortunately because of their size, they suffer from low membrane permeability and metabolic stability. Considering the advantages and disadvantages of these two classes, the third class of therapeutic having a molecular weight in between small molecules and biologics is emerging as a potential improvement.[9,10] These are orally bioavailable, cell-permeable and they have lower manufacturing costs.[11] Members of this class are mainly peptides derived from naturally occurring proteins and their modified or engineered versions. The design of these bio-active molecules has been immensely improved in the last decade to increase their efficiency by introducing chemical modifications to their conformation. One such chemical modification is known as 'cross-linking' or 'stapling' and the modified peptides are known as 'stapled peptide'.[12,13] The side chains of some suitably positioned amino acids are replaced by a variety of chemical moiety, and joined together using ring-closing metathesis. This puts a restrain to the backbone conformations of the peptide which results in a loss of conformational flexibility

and the entropic penalty during complexation is reduced. The design of a stapled peptide can be modulated by controlling two factors - (i) nature of stapling agent and (ii) stapling position. The most used stapling agent is a simple aliphatic hydrocarbon chain although several other modifications are also used like lactam,[14] aromatic hydrocarbon[15] etc. The most optimized stapling positions are $i{-}i{+}4$ and $i{-}i{+}7$ where the amino acid at the ith position is cross-linked with the amino acid at $(i{+}4)$th and $(i{+}7)$th position respectively. There are some example of $i{-}i{+}3$[16] and $i{-}i{+}11$[17] stapled peptide also. Examples of proteins targeted by stapled peptide are mdm2/mdmx,[18] anti-apoptotic Bcl-2 family proteins,[19] estrogen receptor[20] etc. Among these targeting mdm2 is very important in the context of designing therapeutics.

The p53 tumor suppressor is a crucial modulator of growth arrest and apoptosis in response to cellular damage and stress.[21] For example, in response to DNA damage, it controls the growth arrest to allow DNA repair or propagates apoptosis. These prevent the proliferation of damaged cells and transfer of lethal mutations to the next generation of cells.[22] In normal cellular condition, p53 is present in the cell in very low concentration and their tumor suppressor function is agonized by mdm2.[23] Interestingly mdm2 is overexpressed in cells for different types of tumors.[24,25] The cancerous cells produce more mdm2 to inactivate p53 to ensure their growth. Designing compounds that can prevent the interaction between p53 and mdm2 is therefore an attractive strategy to restore p53 tumor-suppressor activity in tumors. There are approaches to design both small-molecule inhibitor[26,27] as well as peptide-based inhibitor,[28] 'stapled peptide' in particular. Significant numbers of stapled peptides have been proposed and their mdm2-bound structures have been solved using X-ray crystallography[29] and NMR spectroscopy,[16] yet only a few of them has been successful in clinical trials. For example, a stapled peptide developed by Chang *et al.* as a dual inhibitor of mdm2 and mdmx has passed the phase-III clinical trial.[30] This limitation of the designed peptides demands a detailed understanding of the binding mechanism of stapled peptides with mdm2. The structural details available from Crystallographic and NMR structure are not sufficient as it

does not consider the dynamic aspect of the protein-peptide interaction. However, a computational approach combining molecular modeling and molecular dynamics simulation can provide significant insight in this context. Significant progress has been made by several research groups in this direction which includes comparisons of stapled and unstapled peptide binding, benchmarks of stapling position on the peptide from the calculated thermodynamic properties,[31–34] comparison of performances of force fields to model stapled peptide,[35] and development of new simulation methodology which can address the kinetics of binding.[36] Most of these studies consider to address the changes in p53 conformation inside the binding pocket upon addition of the stapling agent. Though that gives a considerable picture of the binding process the whole picture will not be clear without considering the free state conformations. While going from its free state (having large numbers of possible conformations) to the mdm2-bound state (having effectively reduced numbers of conformations), the p53 peptide will undergo a large conformational change. This transformation from high entropy state to low entropy state will cause entropic penalty to the overall binding energy. Since stapling agents introduce positional restrain in the peptide that can be expected to influence the free sate and hence the entropic penalty value. Therefore it is equally important to compare the free-state conformation of p53 and stapled p53.

The binding of mdm2 with three peptides p53, p53 with an aliphatic hydrocarbon staple, and a biaryl aromatic staple has been studied extensively in this communication using all-atom molecular dynamics simulation accumulating 19 μS simulation time. The free peptides have been simulated in the aqueous solution, at a higher temperature (330K) and in the presence of 8M urea to check their efficiency in restricting conformational flexibility. The p53 with the aliphatic staple is conformationally more restricted than wild-type p53 and for p53 with the aromatic staple, the flexibility is even less than that. The addition of stapling agents makes the peptides susceptible to thermal and chemical denaturation also. Though the addition of stapling agent increases the hydrophobicity of the peptides, the enthalpy values do not improve. Instead the preferential binding of mdm2 with stapled peptides compared

to the wild-type p53 is guided by lowering of entropic penalty which is proportional to the restriction in the conformational flexibility of the peptides. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study of this kind where extensive quantification of the thermodynamics of p53-mdm2 binding in the presence of two stapling agents and the conformational sampling of the peptides in different environments have been combined to get a comprehensive understanding of the relation between conformational rigidification and binding efficacy. The finding from this investigation can be adopted further to design more efficient stapling agents with enhanced binding efficacy.

Methods and Materials

Modeling

The 13-residue stretch of human tumor suppressor p53 (sequence:ETFSDLWKLLPEN) which is a natural binding partner of mdm2 is considered as the system of interest. Two stapling agents were used in this investigation, one is a aliphatic hydrocarbon chain and another is a biaryl linker (Figure 1).

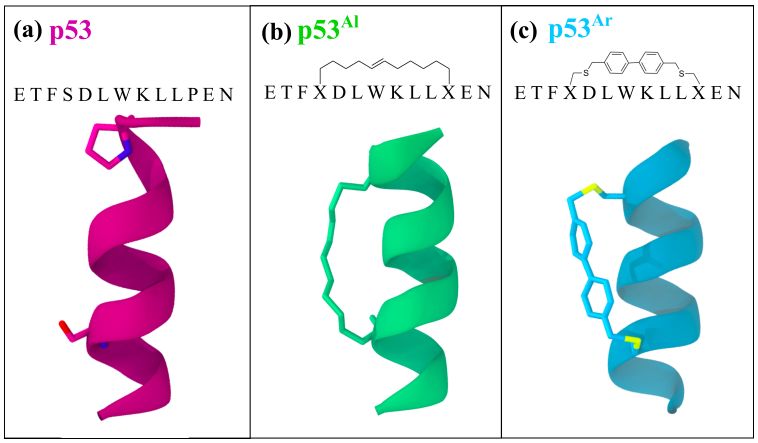

Figure 1: Sequences and structures of the three peptides - a) p53, b) $p53^{Al}$, and c) $p53^{Ar}$. The stapling positions in $p53^{Al}$ and $p53^{Ar}$ have been marked with X in the sequence. The peptide structures are shown in ribbon representation and the residues S4 and P11 for p53 and the stapling agents for $p53^{Al}$ and $p53^{Ar}$ are shown in stick representation.

The structure of wild-type p53 is taken from its crystal structure with mdm2 (Pbd Id: 1YCR).[37] The p53 with aliphatic stapling agent attached to residues S4 and P11 is obtained from crystal structure 3V3B[29] and is labeled as $p53^{Al}$. The other stapled peptide is modeled based on $p53^{Al}$ where the all hydrocarbon stapling agent is replaced by a biaryl system connected to positions 4 and 11 via sulfur linkage. The motivation for the design is to consider a stapling agent that is different from an aliphatic staple in terms of stiffness and bulkiness. This stapling agent is termed as aromatic staple and it is termed as $p53^{Ar}$. (Figure 1).

The detailed system compositions and simulation environments have been listed in Table 1. The system identifiers defined in the table will be followed throughout the rest of the manuscript. Several simulations are performed where the wild type p53 and its stapled variations were considered in free state in different environments and also in complex with mdm2. Equilibrium molecular dynamics simulations often sample conformations that

Table 1: Details of the system compositions, simulation environments, and simulation times for different systems.

	System identifier	Protein	Peptide	Temp.	Conc. of urea	Simulation time
1.	p53	–	p53	310K	–	1 μS
2.	p53_330K	–	p53	330K	–	1 μS
3.	p53_urea	–	p53	310K	8M	1 μS
4.	$p53^{Al}$	–	p53 with aliphatic staple	310K	–	1 μS
5.	$p53^{Al}$_330K	–	p53 with aliphatic staple	330K	–	1 μS
6.	$p53^{Al}$_urea	–	p53 with aliphatic staple	310K	8M	1 μS
7.	$p53^{Ar}$	–	p53 with aromatic staple	310K	–	1 μS
8.	$p53^{Ar}$_330K	–	p53 with aromatic staple	330K	–	1 μS
9.	$p53^{Ar}$_urea	–	p53 with aromatic staple	310K	8M	1 μS
10.	mdm2	mdm2	–	310K	–	1 μS
11.	mdm2+p53	mdm2	p53	310K	–	$3 \times 1\mu$S
12.	mdm2+$p53^{Al}$	mdm2	p53 with aliphatic staple	310K	–	$3 \times 1\mu$S
13.	mdm2+$p53^{Ar}$	mdm2	p53 with aromatic staple	310K	–	$3 \times 1\mu$S
						19 μS

are around the global minima and thus are restricted in terms of sampling other regions of the conformational energy landscape. To overcome this and to sample conformations which differ from the native helical peptide two unfolding inducing conditions were used -

(i) Simulation at a higher temperature 330K and (ii) Simulation in the presence of 8M urea which is known to be standard and used for studying denaturation of several proteins.[38,39] All the three peptides were simulated in these two conditions. To model the binding of the peptides with mdm2, three complex structures are generated - mdm2+p53, mdm2+p53^{Al} and mdm2+p53^{Ar}. The first two structures are modeled according to their crystal structure 1YCR and 3V3B respectively. The mdm2+p53^{Ar} is modeled by replacing p53^{Al} from mdm2+p53^{Al} and removing the small amount steric overlap by simple energy minimization. Simulation details of the systems are provided in Table 1.

Simulation details

CHARMM36 parameters[40] for protein is used to model the peptides and the protein-peptide complexes except for the stapling agents. The stapling agents are modeled using a combination of CHARMM parameter for proteins and small molecules (CGENFF).[41] For p53^{Al}, first the side chains of S4 and P11 are replaced by that of lysine. Then the ϵ $-NH_2$ groups are replaced by an aliphatic chain of suitable length and the end of the two side chains are joined. The carbon atoms up to δ carbon are parameterized using CHARMM36 protein force-field whereas the parameter for the rest is from CGENFF of CHARMM. This strategy has been successfully used to model stapled peptide in several studies.[20,42] Each of the systems is solvated in a waterbox made of TIP3P water[43] where the size of the waterbox was determined by maintaining a distance of at least 1 nm between the water box edge and protein/peptide atoms. For the removal of initial steric clashes, a 5000-steps energy minimization was performed for each system using the steepest descent method.[44] Subsequently, a 500 ps equilibration in the NVT ensemble was performed to equilibrate each system at 310K to avoid void formation in the box followed by a 5 ns equilibration at isothermal-isobaric (NPT) ensemble to attain a steady pressure of 1 atm. The temperature was kept constant at 310 K by applying the V–rescale thermostat[45] and the pressure was maintained to be at 1 atm using Parrinello-Rahman barostat[46] with a pressure relaxation time of 2

ps, used for the attainment of desired pressure for all simulations. The production runs for 1000ns with a time step of 2 fs is performed. All the simulations are performed in GROMACS.[47] Short-range Lennard–Jones interactions are calculated using the minimum image convention.[48] For estimating non-bonding interactions including electrostatic as well as van der Waals interactions, a spherical cut-off distance 1 nm is chosen. Periodic boundary conditions have been used in all three directions to remove edge effects. SHAKE algorithm[49] is applied to constrain bonds involving the hydrogen atoms of the water molecules. Long-range electrostatic interactions are calculated using the particle mesh Ewald (PME) method.[50] The frames in the trajectory are saved at a frequency of 2 ps for analyses. To extract different structural properties, in-built modules of GROMACS,[47] VMD[51] and some in-house scripts were used.

binding energy calculation

The standard free energy of binding (ΔG) is calculated using the MM-GBSA (Molecular Mechanics with Generalized Born and Surface Area) protocol.[52,53] In practice, the simulations of the free and the complexed states are performed using explicit water to get the conformational microstates of the solute, and then the free energy of solvation of these conformations are estimated using an implicit environment after removal of explicit water molecules. The total free energy (G) is calculated using the following equation -

$$\mathrm{G} = \mathrm{E}_{\mathrm{internal}} + \mathrm{E}_{\mathrm{vdw}} + \mathrm{E}_{\mathrm{elec}} + \mathrm{E}^{\mathrm{Polar}}_{\mathrm{Solvation}} + \mathrm{E}^{\mathrm{Nonpolar}}_{\mathrm{Solvation}} - \mathrm{TS} \tag{1}$$

The first three terms represent the components of energy arising from the motion within the molecule (e.g., bond vibration, angle bending, dihedral rotation, etc.), van der Waals interactions, and electrostatic interactions, respectively. The fourth and fifth terms represent the solvation free energy calculated considering implicit environments in two separate parts, i.e., polar and non-polar components. The last term is solute entropy, where T represents

the absolute temperature and S is the entropy of the solute, whereas the solvation entropy is already incorporated in solvation energy terms.[52] The sum of the first five terms is considered as enthalpy, H although it includes the solvation entropy term. The values are averaged over the total simulation time and the free energy change is quantified as -

$$\Delta G = G_{mdm2+p53} - G_{mdm2} - G_{p53} \tag{2}$$

Different components of binding free energy are averaged over 50000 conformations of each system. Three independent simulation of mdm2+p53, mdm2+p53^{Al}, and mdm2+p53^{Ar} are used for the calculation to obtain statistically significant values. The values calculated for the three simulations are summarized in Supporting Information Tables (Table S1-S12) and an average of the three simulations is provided in Table 2.

Results

Stapling agent reduces conformation flexibility

The conformations of the 13-residue p53 peptide in the presence and the absence of the stapling agents obtained from the micro-second long simulation will provide an idea of the effect of the stapling agent on the behavior of the free peptide. To compare the effect of stapling agents on the conformations, a conformational energy landscape is constructed considering two important structural parameters of the peptide, backbone RMSD (root mean square deviation) and R_g (radius of gyration). The RMSD and R_g are plotted in a scatter plot for each conformation from the simulation of different systems (Figure 2).

Although several other collective variables can be used to form this kind of conformational energy surface[54–56] RMSD and R_g has been found useful in understanding the conformational transition in many cases.[57–59] The major energy minimum points in the energy landscape have been labeled with the uppercase alphabet and the conformation of the corresponding

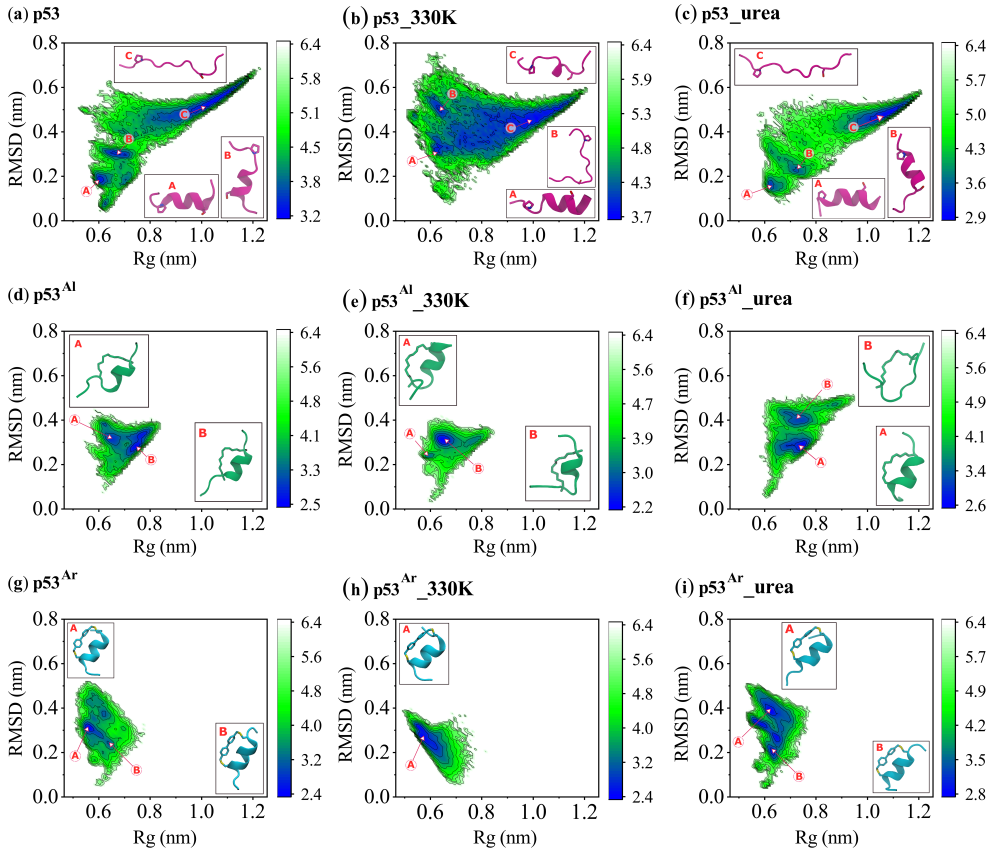

Figure 2: 2D histogram of RMSD (Root mean square deviation)-Vs-R_g (Radius of gyration) plot for the p53 peptide and the p53 peptide with aliphatic and aromatic staples in different conditions (i.e. in the aqueous medium, at high temperature, and in the presence of urea) showing conformational restriction in the presence of stapling agents. The blue-to-green-to-white color scale represents increasing conformational free energy in kcal/mol. The major energy basins in the energy profiles are marked with upper case alphabets (A, B, and C) and the conformations of the peptide corresponding to the energy basins are shown inside the plot within rectangular boxes.

structure has been shown within the plot. The plot clearly shows that the wild-type p53 has wider distribution in all the three conditions compared to $p53^{Al}$ and $p53^{Ar}$ systems. The distribution of the plot is restricted more along the R_g axis compared to RMSD. This can be explained by the fact that although there are deviations of the peptide conformation starting from the initial conformation in the presence of the stapling agent, the overall shape of the peptide is maintained. There are multiple minima present as separate islands on the free energy landscape of the p53 (Figure 2a) system whereas in the case of the stapled systems only one or two very closely spaced minima are present. Although in the case of both $p53^{Al}$

and $p53^{Ar}$ the energy landscapes look similar i.e. small energy surface distributed around one or two closely spaced minima there is a crucial difference in their appearance in $p53^{Al}$, $p53^{Ar}$ and $p53^{Ar}_{330K}$ from the rest. If we considered a diagonal connecting the two most populated energy minima, along that line both RMSD and R_g increases simultaneously. Whereas, in case of $p53^{Al}$, $p53^{Ar}$ and $p53^{Ar}_{330K}$ the diagonal is opposite in direction i.e. conformation with higher R_g is associated with lower RMSD. Thus the addition of a stapling agent can successfully reduce the structural changes quantified in terms of both RMSD and R_g.

The peptide binds to mdm2 to occupy its binding pocket in a conformation which is a helix. The helical conformation is crucial for the orientation of the binding pocket anchoring residues of p53 e.g F3, W7, and L10. Thus it will be interesting to look into the helical propensity of the peptide in the presence of thermal and chemical denaturing agents and how that is altered when a stapling agent is introduced.

Stapling enhances backbone rigidity to restrict unfolding

The helical propensity of the peptide is quantified as fraction helicity using the following formula as implemented in PLUMED[60] -

$$f_H = \frac{\text{No. of six-residue stretch with RMSD less than 0.8 Å}}{\text{Total number of possible six-residue stretch in the peptide}} \tag{3}$$

The time evolution of f_H is calculated for the peptides in different system and presented in Figure 3. In Figure 3a, the helical fractions of p53, $p53^{Al}$, and $p53^{Ar}$ in aqueous solution were plotted together.

It can be seen that the helical fraction of p53 gradually decreases to zero at 350ns and rest of the simulation, the peptide was in a coiled conformation. Upon addition of stapling agents the helical fraction was maintained and it was more effective for $p53^{Ar}$ compared to $p53^{Al}$. To check the effectiveness of the stapling agents in maintaining the helicity, two external unfolding agents were employed to facilitate the unfolding of the peptide. The peptides were

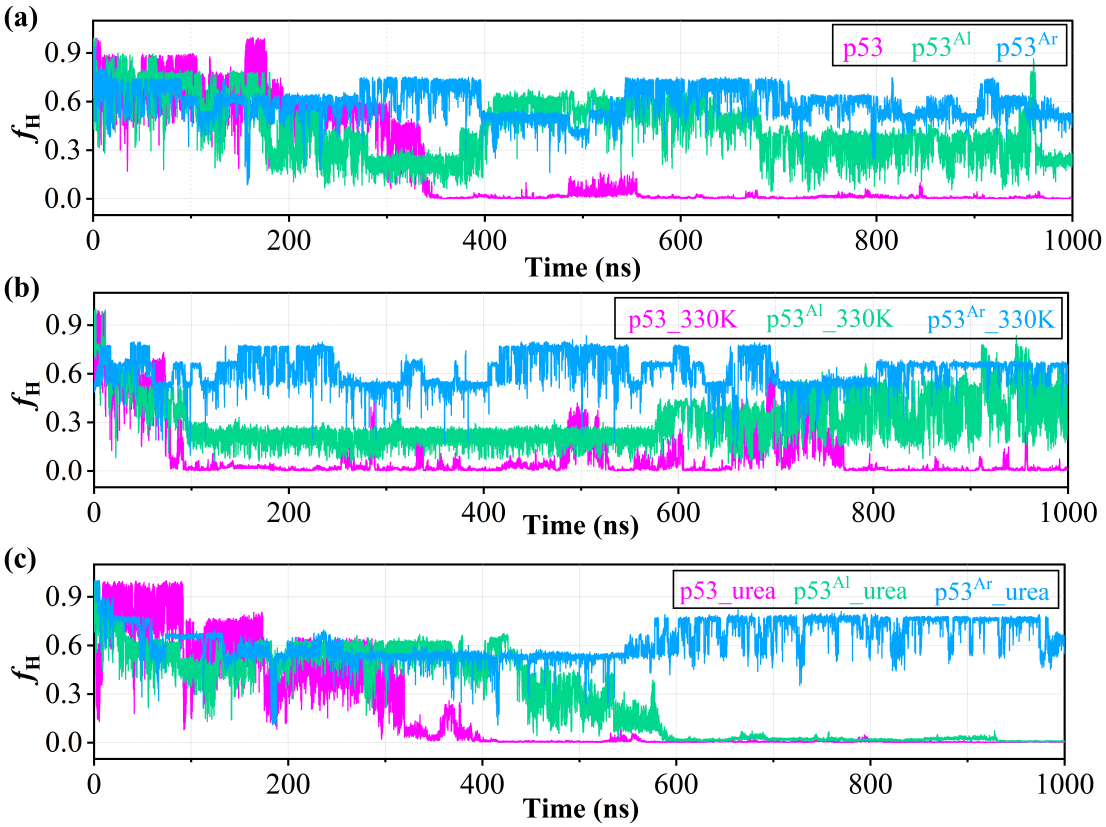

Figure 3: Time evolution of helical fraction (f_{H}) of p53, p53^{Al}, and p53^{Ar} in a) aqueous solution, b) at high temperature and c) in the presence of urea. The f_{H} is calculated according to equation 1. The p53 loses helicity in all the conditions (magenta lines), p53^{Al} maintains the helicity in aqueous environment and at high temperature but loses helicity after 600 ns in the presence of urea (green lines) whereas p53^{Ar} remains in helical conformation in all conditions (cyan lines).

simulated at 330 K to model thermal denaturation and to model chemical denaturation, the peptides were simulated in an 8M urea solution. At 330K the p53 unfolds at an earlier time (100ns). The addition of aliphatic and aromatic staples can reduce the extent of unfolding where aromatic stapling agent is found to be more effective than the aliphatic one. To check the exposure of the peptide backbone to the solvent the radial distribution functions of water and urea molecules were calculated around backbone atoms and shown in Figure 4. In all the cases the wild type p53 systems show maximum abundance of solvent around their backbones whereas it decreases as the stapling agents are added. In aqueous solution and at 330K, both p53^{Al} and p53^{Ar} have distribution of water significantly below that of the p53

(Figure 4A and Figure 4b). In the presence of 8M urea, the distribution of water and urea for p53^{Al} is close to that of p53 while p53^{Ar} shows a lower distribution of water and urea (Figure 4c and Figure 4d). This difference signifies that the p53^{Ar} system is more susceptible to both thermal and chemical denaturation whereas the p53^{Al} is less effective to reduce the extent of unfolding in the presence of urea.

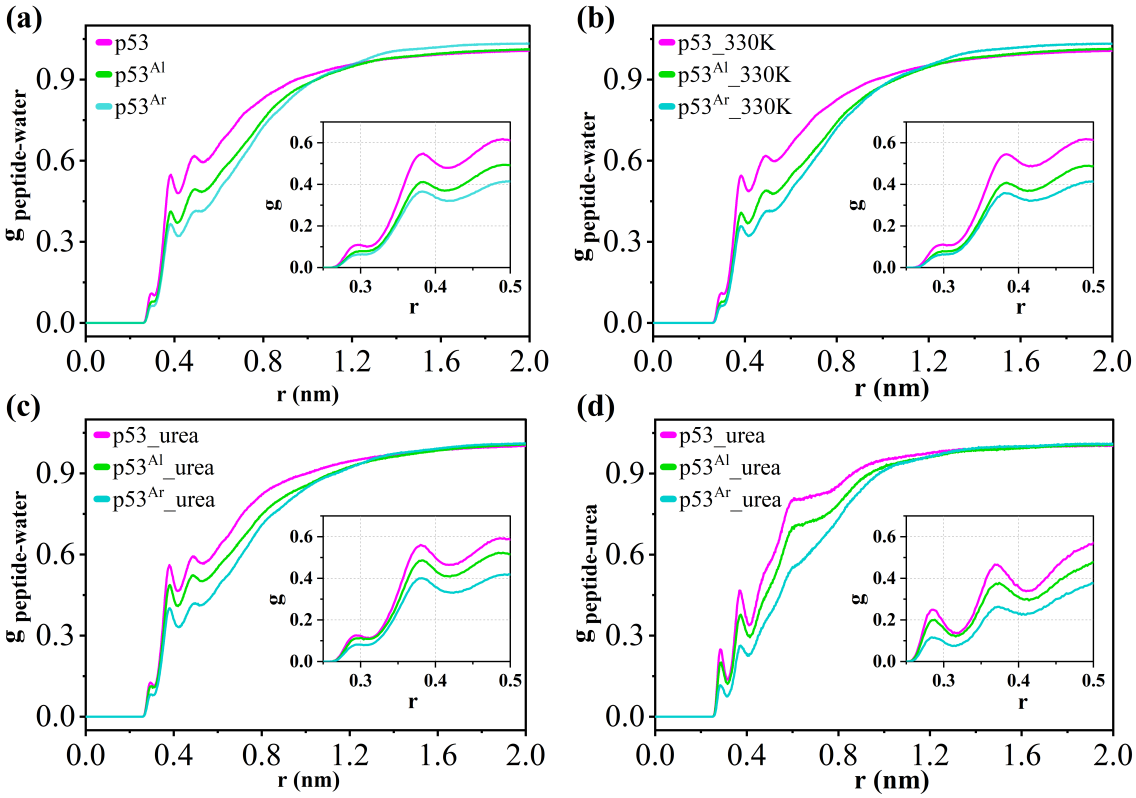

Figure 4: Radial distribution function (rdf) of water around protein for different systems in a) aqueous solution, b) at 330K, and c) in the presence of urea. The rdf of urea around protein for all three systems is shown d). The rdf is calculated for the center of mass of water or urea molecules around the backbone atoms of protein (i.e. C, N, and CA). In all cases p53 has highest value of rdf because of the higher accessibility of the backbone atoms due to unfolding (magenta lines). Rdfs for p53^{Al} and p53^{Ar} appear below that of p53 ensuring the lower solvent exposure of backbone atoms and hence maintaining the helical conformation (green and cyan lines respectively).

Overall the structural changes of p53 and its stapled variants in water and in the presence of thermal and chemical denaturant show that there is a significant reduction of the conformational flexibility when the S4 and P11 side chains were modified and joined together like

a stapled residue. This restriction in the conformations and modification of the amino acid side chain of p53 will influence the binding to its partner mdm2. Although the effect can influence the binding in many ways it could be categorized into two major types - (i) The interaction of the polar S4 and P11 with mdm2 binding pocket residue will be compromised and instead there will be additional interaction of hydrophobic stapling agent with the binding pocket. A resultant of these will be reflected in the protein-peptide interaction. (ii) The energetic cost to bring the peptide from a free state to a mdm2-bound state will be different when the conformation in the free state itself is modified. To understand these in detail, the free enegry of mdm2-p53 binding has been calculated using MM-GBSA protocol which is a well standardized protocol for calculating binding free energy.

Entropy determines the binding affinity

The binding free energy was estimated considering one microsecond long simulation of mdm2+p53, mdm2, and p53 systems. The average binding free energy was quantified considering both enthalpy and entropy. The enthalpy was calculated using the MMGBSA protocol, a formalism used to find the solvation energy using a continuum model for solvent. The conformational entropy is estimated considering quasi harmonic approximation on the ensemble of conformations. These values are further averaged over the three simulations of the protein+peptide systems. The results for the three systems are summarized in Table 2. The values of separate simulations are summarized in the supporting information Tables. The MMGBSA formalism is successfully used for the calculation of binding free energies of protein-small molecule and protein-peptide binding and shows reasonable agreement with the experimentally determined binding energies.[61] There are also successful applications of this method in estimating the binding energies of small molecules,[62] peptides[63] and stapled peptides[32] with mdm2. At this point it is important to note that the relative difference in the calculated binding energies of the systems under investigation is more useful than the absolute binding free energy values.

Table 2: Binding free energy of mdm2-p53 binding. All energy values are in kcal/mol.

Energy components	p53	$p53^{Al}$	$p53^{Ar}$
ΔE_{Elec}	-196.81	-149.18	-190.80
ΔE_{Vdw}	-67.74	-64.59	-63.11
$\Delta E_{Internal}$	9.79	11.71	7.86
$\Delta E_{Solv(polar)}$	197.80	153.79	196.78
$\Delta E_{Solv(non\text{-}polar)}$	-4.32	-4.11	-3.77
$\Delta E_{Elec+Solv(polar)}$	1.00	4.60	7.98
ΔH	-61.28	-52.39	-53.04
$-T\Delta S$	54.10	28.09	18.88
ΔG	-7.18	-24.30	-34.16

The components of binding energy show that the overall binding energies $p53^{Al}$ and $p53^{Ar}$ are more favorable than p53. Interestingly, the enthalpy and entropy values follow the opposite order. Despite the addition of the stapling agent the enthalpy is found to be reduced for the stapled systems. The analyses of individual energy components of enthalpy evident that the lowering of enthalpy is originated mainly from two quantities, ΔE_{Vdw} and $\Delta E_{Elec+Solv(polar)}$ representing the change in van der Waals energy and total polar interaction energy respectively. There is a loss of $\sim$3 and $\sim$4 kcal/mol in the van der Waals interaction energy for $p53^{Al}$ and $p53^{Ar}$ respectively when the stapling agents are added. The $\Delta E_{Elec+Solv(polar)}$ is a sum of ΔE_{Elec} and and $\Delta E_{Solv(polar)}$. The first term is the change in electrostatic interaction upon complexation. The second term is the change in polar solvation energy between the protein-peptide complex in the aqueous medium and the protein and the peptide separately. The values of these two terms are usually complementary to each other i.e. if there is a gain in the interaction energy upon binding it is usually associated with a loss in the polar solvation energy because the protein-solvent polar interactions for the residues forming the binding interface are replaced by the protein-protein electrostatic interactions. Here the electrostatic interaction is reduced in the stapled peptides and the loss in polar solvation (i.e. positive $\Delta E_{Solv(polar)}$) decreases (mainly for $p53^{Al}$). A combination of these results in an overall unfavorable change in polar interaction for the stapled peptides compared to the wild-type p53. In contrary to enthalpy, the $T\Delta S$ follows the reverse order.

The value of TΔS itself is negative here i.e. going from the 'free' state to the 'mdm2-bound' state the peptide loses entropy. Interestingly the amount of entropy loss has been significantly reduced when the stapling agents were added. This reduction in entropic penalty has significantly contributed to the overall free energy. Overall the binding of stapled p53 peptides is thermodynamically more favorable than the wild-type peptide.

Since both the free state of p53 and its mdm2-bound conformation have roles to play in determining the binding efficiency, a comparison of the important features of mdm2 binding in the two states will be insightful to rationalize the binding free energy values. In the next section, two such key features will be discussed in detail.

Stapling reduces the cost of conformational transition upon binding with mdm2

The crystal structures of p53-mdm2 complexes show that the binding of p53 with mdm2 is guided by anchoring of three hydrophobic residues into the binding pocket which are F3, W7, and L10 and the p53 peptide fit into the binding pocket with a helical conformation. These two important features i.e. the helicity of the peptide and the orientation of the three residues were monitored in the free and mdm2-bound state of p53. A comparison of helicity of the free and mdm2-bound conformation is presented in Figure 5. For p53 the helical fraction in the mdm2-bound state is maintained around 0.5 whereas the free state looses its helicity after 350ns. Thus the transition from free to mdm2-bound state will require large amount of energy for unfolded $\rightarrow$ folded transition. While considering the aliphatic stapled system, although there are fluctuations in the helical fraction there are significant overlaps between them and the average f_H values remain in the same range. Interestingly p53^{Ar} and mdm2+p53^{Ar} have higher f_H value throughout the simulation with good overlap between them. This reduces the energetic cost required to change the peptide conformation prior to binding with mdm2 making the process more feasible compared to that for p53. A comparison of structural rigidity of the peptide in the binding pocket of the protein

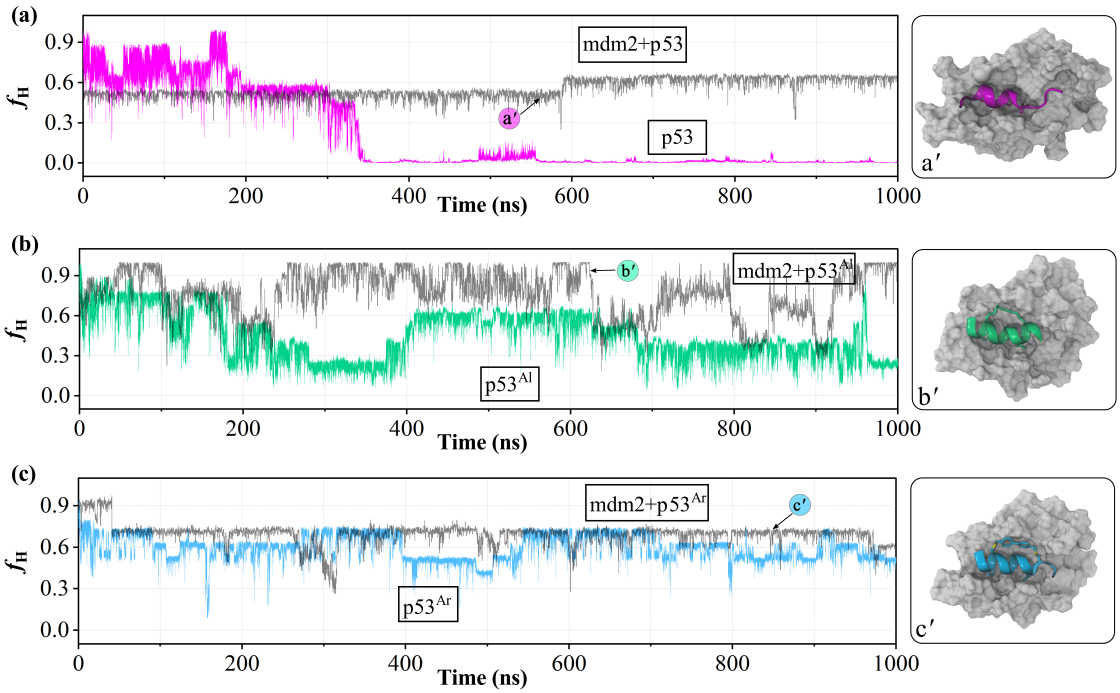

Figure 5: Time evolution of helical fraction (f_{H}) of a) p53, b) p53^{Al}, and c) p53^{Ar} in free and mdm2-bound state. The f_{H} of mdm2-bound state is shown in gray lines in each plot. The f_{H} is calculated according to equation 1. The helicity of p53 in free and mdm2-bound state is significantly different (a) whereas they have considerable overlap for p53^{Al} (b) and high degree of overlap for p53^{Ar} (c). A representative conformation of each of the mdm2-bound states of the three peptides is shown next to the plots. The mdm2 is shown in light gray surface whereas the p53, p53^{Al}, and p53^{Al} are shown in magenta (a), green (b), and cyan (c) ribbon respectively.

can be well understood from the visualization of the simulation of mdm2+p53 (Movie S1), mdm2+p53^{Al} (Movie S2), and mdm2+p53^{Ar} (Movie S3) respectively.

To compare the relative orientation of the three anchoring residues, two distances among them have been monitored throughout the simulation time which are r_{F3-W7} and r_{W7-L10}. A plot of r_{F3-W7}-Vs-r_{W7-L10} is shown in Figure 6. The magenta points in Figure 6b represents the distances for the free p53 and the points encircled in black are distances calculated from the mdm2+p53 system. A overlap of these shows that the free peptide deviates by a large in terms of the favorable distance for complexation. As a result the cost of reorienting the residues as suitable for complexation will be energetically costly. This overlap for the p53^{Al} and p53^{Ar} systems depicts that the points for free and mdm2-bound states are quite close to

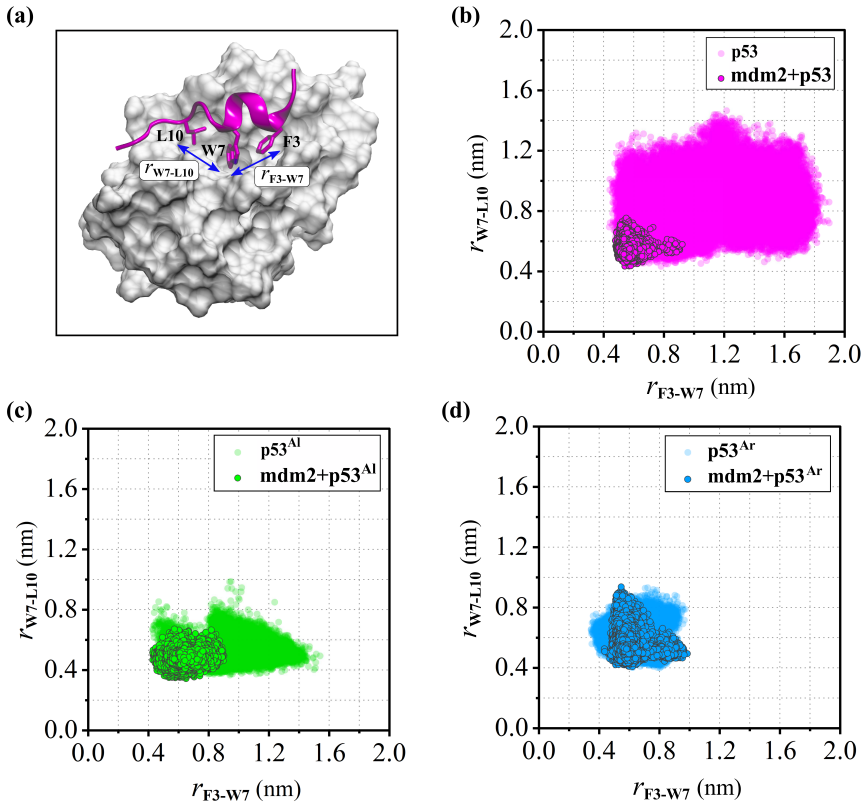

Figure 6: a) anchoring of F3, W7, and L10 (magenta sticks) into the binding pocket of mdm2 (white surface). Overlap of the plots of r_{F3-W7}-vs-r_{W7-L10} for the free and mdm2-bound states of b) p53, c) p53^{Al}, and d) p53^{Ar}. Distances for the mdm2-bound state are plotted as circle with gray circumference while those from free state has no circumference. The free-state conformations of p53 is widely distributed and it has very small overlap with the mdm2-bound state (b) whereas for both p53^{Al} (c) and p53^{Ar} (d) the free and bound state distance distributions overlap with each other. This signifies lower costs of conformational transition upon mdm2-binding for p53^{Al} and p53^{Ar} compared to p53.

each other specifically for p53^{Ar} system. This ensures an energetically favorable transition from free to complexed state. The effect of the stapling agent in maintaining this orientation is even more evident if the free peptide simulation in different conditions are considered (Figure S1).

Discussion

The conformational dynamics of wild-type p53 and its two stapled versions p53^{Al} and p53^{Ar} have been monitored in their free states in water and in their complexes with mdm2. The

peptides are more flexible in the free state than when they are bound to mdm2 binding pocket and this flexibility is also influenced by the addition of stapling agents. The conformational flexibility has been measured using two properties, RMSD and R_g. The plot clearly shows that change in both RMSD and R_g is significantly large and the R_g-Vs-RMSD plot spans over a wide area (Figure 2a(i)). This is significantly reduced when the stapling agent is added by replacing the amino acids S4 and P11 (Figure 2b(i) and Figure 2c(i)). This reduction in overall structural change is initiated by the cross-linking of S4 and P11 and a restriction in the backbone atom motion in that region can influence the helical propensity of the peptide. This is confirmed by comparing their helicities during the simulation. The p53 loses its helicity after 350ns whereas the stapled peptides maintain the helical fraction in the range 0.4 to 0.7 throughout the simulation (Figure 3a). Since the equilibrium simulation of the peptide in water has its limitation in sampling all possible conformations, two external conditions are imposed that can accelerate the sampling of conformations distant from the stable helical conformation. This will sample the unfolded conformations of the wild-type p53 and also check the endurance of the staple peptides in these adverse environments. The result shows that indeed they are capable of restricting the conformational sampling (Figure 2). In the condition of thermal denaturation both $p53^{Al}$ and $p53^{Ar}$ are capable of preventing the unfolding (Figure 3b) whereas in the presence of urea, there is significant loss of helicity of the $p53^{Al}$ after 600ns (Figure 3c).

To estimate the influence of these stapling agent-induced conformational changes on the binding of p53 with mdm2, two important structural factors of p53 are checked that facilitate its binding. One of them is the helical structure of the peptide and another is the relative orientation of the three anchoring residues F3, W7, and L10. The values of these two structural parameters are compared for the free peptides and their mdm2-bound states in Figure 5 and Figure 6 respectively. The difference between the average helicities of the peptide in the mdm2-bound state and the free state is a determinant of the relative ease with which it can bind with mdm2 considering a population shift model. This differences

(Δf_H) are approximately 0.7, 0.3 and 0.1 for p53, p53^{Al}, and p53^{Ar} respectively. Thus the energetic barrier for conformational switching from free to complex state follows the order - p53^{Ar} < p53^{Al} < p53. A closer look into the distances between the anchoring residues *i.e.* r_{F3-W7} and r_{W7-L10} in free and complex states indicates the maximum overlap for p53^{Ar} (Figure 6c) and a significant overlap for p53^{Al} (Figure 6b) whereas for p53, the points for complex state overlaps only with a small part of the free state distribution (Figure 6a).

The advantages of cross-linking two amino acid side chains quantified through the above structural parameters are further verified by considering the calculation of thermodynamics of mdm2-p53 binding. The binding free energy follows the trend $\Delta \mathrm{G}_{\mathrm{p53^{Ar}}} < \Delta \mathrm{G}_{\mathrm{p53^{Al}}} < \Delta \mathrm{G}_{\mathrm{p53}}$. This justifies the idea that restraining the peptide conformation and inducing helical propensity using a stapling agent can enhance the binding affinity. The experimental binding affinity of the p53 and p53^{Ar} are reported to be 700 nM and 55 nM respectively which follows the same order found from our calculations.[29] The origin of this enhanced free energy of binding can be understood if the enthalpy and entropy of the binding process are considered separately. Although the addition of stapling agent results in a compact conformation of the peptides inside the binding pocket, the binding enthalpy is increased (*i.e.* unfavorable). The hydrophobic nature of the long stapling agent spanning over seven residues induces significant van der Waals interaction with the protein but is not sufficient to compensate for the loss of electrostatic interaction. The gain in helicity of the peptide due to the introduction of the stapling agent at the 11th position induces conformation restriction to the residues E12 and N13 also. As a result it loses some of the polar interaction with mdm2 in mdm2+p53^{Al} as well as in mdm2+p53^{Ar}. This results in the increase in ΔH value (Table 2). Interestingly the change in entropy plays an important role to recover this loss. The change in conformational entropy (ΔS) is defined as -

$$\Delta \mathrm{S} = \mathrm{S}_{\mathrm{mdm2+p53}} - \mathrm{S}_{\mathrm{mdm2}} - \mathrm{S}_{\mathrm{p53}}. \tag{4}$$

Due to the large conformational freedom of the free peptide, S_{p53} has a very high value and that results in an overall negative ΔS. The addition of a stapling agent has reduced the conformational flexibility of the free peptide as reflected in the R_g-vs-RMSD plot and in the helicity values (Figure 2 and 3a). This reduces the free state entropy value of $p53^{Al}$ and $p53^{Ar}$ significantly. Since the conformational fluctuations of the complex states (the first term at the right-hand side of the equation) are almost similar for the three complexes except for the difference in some of the amino acids at the binding pocket, the major changes in ΔS arise from the entropy of the free peptide (the third term at the right-hand side of the equation). Due to the smaller values of $S_{p53^{Al}}$ and $S_{p53^{Ar}}$ the $\Delta S_{p53^{Al}}$ and $\Delta S_{p53^{Ar}}$ are less negative than ΔS_{p53}. This decrease in the entropic penalty is large enough to overcome the increase in enthalpy and the free energy of binding decreases. This favors the binding of stapled peptide over the wild-type p53. Thus the conformational restrictions of free peptides checked using simulations in several conditions have their influence on the entropy values. The structure of the two stapling agents and the thermodynamic parameters justify that a restriction of the peptide conformation is fruitful to enhance the binding affinity and the stiffness of the stapling agent is beneficial for the binding. The understanding of the chemical nature of the stapling agent and its binding efficiency can be used as a guiding principle to design more effective therapeutic against mdm2 in the future. A successful adoption of the strategy described in this work can lead to opening of new avenues towards designing therapeutics against many other diseases.

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