Article

Protein nitration is a physiological regulator of cardiac lactate dehydrogenase

active site loop mobility and activity

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Abstract (143 words)

Protein tyrosine nitration is considered one of the most relevant disease biomarkers of

oxidative stress. The mechanism of nitration, target protein and functional consequences

remain often unclear. We focus on a prominent protein band surprisingly nitrotyrosine

immunopositive under basal conditions in mouse, rat and pig heart and more so in

diabetes and myocardial stress. Upon purification, we identify it as lactate dehydrogenase

(LDH) and its basal nitration depending on NO synthase (NOS) and myeloperoxidase

(MPO), respectively. Surprisingly, we locate LDH nitration by MALDI-TOF mass

spectrometry not to a tyrosine but the C-terminal tryptophan, Trp-324. Molecular dynamics

simulations suggested that Trp-324 nitration restricts the interaction of the active site loop

with the C-terminal α-helix essential for activity, which was corroborated by an apparent

lower V_{max}. In summary, here we first extend protein nitration from pathology to physiology

as an additional mechanism of post-translational regulation.

Increased levels of reactive oxygen species (ROS), i.e. oxidative stress, is considered a

common mechanism of several cardiovascular and other disease states [1]. In concert with

different nitrogen species [2–4], ROS can lead to protein nitration, e.g. tyrosine residues

(NO_2Tyr). Tyrosine nitration is the most frequently used and considered the most robust

disease marker of oxidative stress [5–7]. Its detection relies mainly on NO_2Tyr specific

antibodies [8–10]. With respect to the nitrogen source, anti-NO_2Tyr immunopositive signals

are generally interpreted as a hallmark of nitric oxide (NO) being scavenged by superoxide

and intermediate peroxynitrite [9,11,12], although other mechanisms exist [13]. Regarding the

functional consequences of protein nitration few *in vitro* data exist suggesting mainly loss

of protein function correlating with disease severity [14–17]. *In vivo* data are lacking.

Moreover, little is known about the protein factors that govern other nitration sites, e.g.

tryptophan, and about the effects of the modification in protein structure and function [18].

Here, we address three major knowledge gaps in our understanding of protein nitration:

specificity, origin*,* and disease relevance.

Results

Development of an anti-nitrotyrosine antibody panel as biomarkers of disease-

relevant oxidative stress.

We started out by examining a panel of anti-NO_2Tyr antibodies (Fig. 1), including those

directed against carrier-linked NO_2Tyr or against H_2O_2/NO_2^- treated proteins (see

Supplementary Table 1). We tested these in rodent (rat) and, for later purification, also in

porcine tissues. Surprisingly we obtained signals already under physiological conditions.

The immunoreaction, however, varied greatly in protein band size and intensity. Two

polyclonal (pAb), pAb1 and pAb2, and one monoclonal antibody (mAb), mAb1, displayed

the most robust signals (Supplementary Fig. 1). The specificity of anti-NO_2Tyr antibodies

[19–23] is rarely validated, e.g. by antibody pre-absorption with free NO_2Tyr [11]. In our case,

pAb1 signals were partially blocked by pre-absorption with 3 mM NO_2Tyr. mAb1 showed

very little non-specific background whilst pAb2 exhibited moderate sensitivity with high

anti-NO_2Tyr specificity.

A prominent nitrotyrosine immunoreactive protein band was detected in mouse, rat

and pig heart under physiological conditions.

To conduct a tissue/species screen, we selected three antibodies, pAb1, pAb2, and mAb1,

from our original panel. Three proteins were consistently detected under basal conditions

and with apparent molecular weights of 70, 45 and 38 kDa, of which the latter gave the by

far the strongest signal in heart (Fig. 2a). Pre-incubation with free NO_2Tyr or NO_2BSA (3

mM) or nitro-group reduction [22], at least partially, blocked the pAb1 dependent signal.

Therefore, subsequent efforts were directed at identifying the nature of the NO_2Tyr positive

38 kDa protein and its site of nitration.

Upon purification, the 38 kDa nitrated protein was identified as LDH with lower V_{max}.

Using porcine heart, we isolated the NO_2Tyr immunoreactive 38 kDa protein by ion

exchange (Q Sepharose, QS) and affinity (Blue Sepharose, BS) chromatography (Fig. 2b).

The partially purified 38 kDa protein was stained by colloidal Coomassie Blue and

subjected to peptide mass fingerprinting using MALDI-TOF MS. Based on the NCBIprot

database most ions present in the spectrum of tryptic peptides matched LDH as the

primary protein component of the sample (Fig. 2c).

Next, we tested the effect of nitration on the enzyme activity by nitrating cardiac LDH *in*

vitro with increasing amounts of H_2O_2/NO_2^-. Indeed, higher nitration levels of LDH (NO_2-

LDH) (Fig. 2e) correlated with decreased V_{max} (Fig. 2f) and unchanged K_M. Our data

suggest therefore that protein nitration is not only a physiological event for cardiac LDH,

but also modulates enzyme activity by lowering V_{max}.

Nitrated LDH is increased in diabetes and myocardial stress.

To investigate whether NO_2-LDH is further increased in response to metabolic stress, we

investigated heart extracts from rat models of streptozotocin-induced short-term (ST) and

long-term (LT) diabetes mellitus [24] as well as a doxorubicin (DoxoR) induced mouse model

of cardiac stress [25] (Fig. 3a). Diabetic rats were sacrificed 3 (ST) and 16 (LT) weeks after

inducing diabetes at week 10. Using the pAb1, NO_2-LDH signals were significantly

increased in all three models when compared against healthy controls (Fig. 3b-c).

Immunosignals of pAb1 pre-absorbed with NO_2Tyr or anti-LDH wildtype antibody did not

show any significant change. In both diabetes mellitus models and doxorubicin-treatment

animals, levels of cardiac LDH were unchanged versus controls, indicating that indeed the

NO_2-LDH/LDH ratio was increased.

1 **Cardiac LDH nitration is lowered in eNOS-KO and MPO-KO mice.**

2 We next wanted to address our second goal, to understand the mechanistic origin of the

3 nitrogen in NO_2-LDH. Usually, it is assumed that protein nitration derives from peroxynitrite

4 from the reaction between $^\bullet$NO and $O_2^{\bullet-}$ [26]. However, another major source, not involving

5 de novo NO synthesis is frequently overlooked, i.e. MPO-catalyzed nitration using nitrite in

6 the presence of hydrogen peroxide [27] (Fig. 4a). To analyze this *in vivo*, we had to switch to

7 mouse models, i.e. eNOS-KO and MPO-KO lines. Indeed, we observed that NO_2-LDH

8 signals in heart tissue were not only reduced in eNOS-KO but also in MPO-KO mice when

9 compared to their respective WT litter mates (Fig. 4b). These results therefore indicated

10 that both pathways contribute to basal nitration of cardiac LDH. Moreover, we also

11 compared LDH nitration to oxidation and showed that oxidation occurred at lower

12 peroxynitrite concentrations and was half-maximal when LDH activity was still unchanged

13 (Supplementary Fig. 2).

14

15 **Further MALDI-TOF mass spectrometry analysis of the nitration site identifies the**

16 **nitrated residue as tryptophan and not tyrosine.**

17 A similarly frequent assumption about NO_2Tyr immunosignals is specificity with respect to

18 the nitrated amino acid. Other nitration target amino acids, however, have been reported,

19 most prominently tryptophan [28–30]. To identify the physiologically nitrated LDH residue(s),

20 heart tissue was homogenized and subjected to 2D-PAGE in-gel digestion prior to MALDI-

21 TOF MS analysis. Surprisingly, signals consistent with a nitrated tryptophan at position

22 324 of peptide 319-328 (SADTLWGIQK) of LDH (NO_2Trp-LDH) were detected (Fig. 5a).

23 We cannot exclude nitration of other peptides of LDH that were below our level of

24 detection. Nevertheless, our results strongly point to NO_2Trp being detected by the

25 supposedly anti-NO_2Tyr pAb1.

26

1 **NO₂Trp-LDH molecular dynamics simulations suggested higher restriction of the**

2 **activity-essential interaction of the active site loop with the C-terminal α-helix.**

3 Since we did observe a V_{max} effect on NO₂-LDH, we wanted to investigate whether there is

4 a likely structural correlate for this via Trp-324. We therefore modeled the nitration into the

5 structure of tetrameric and binary human LDH, and then performed molecular dynamics

6 simulations. For distance metrics of human LDH and key structural components refer to

7 Fig. 5b. The root-mean squared fluctuations (RMSF) of all atoms in each residue were

8 averaged across the four subunits in each combined 3.5 μs trajectory (Supplementary Fig.

9 3). Subtracting the wildtype tetramer (WT) RMSF from the T4N (tetramer with NO₂Trp-324

10 residue on each subunit) highlighted differences in mobility between the dynamics of the

11 WT compared with NO₂Trp-LDH (Fig. 5c). Positive values in the resulting graphs indicated

12 greater mobility of residues in T4N compared with WT and *vice versa*. Moreover, distance

13 histograms (Fig. 5d-e) show an increased mobility in the binary complexes compared with

14 the ternary, expressed as a broadening of the histograms.

15 We found that NO₂Trp-LDH weakened the interaction between α-H and the active site

16 loop. This decoupling led to a greater population of closed and "over-closed" states of the

17 T4N active-site loop. By corollary, in WT LDH, the open active-site loop states are partly

18 stabilized by interaction with the α-H helix. Therefore, nitration of LDH is expected to

19 decrease LDH activity, consistent with our enzyme-kinetic findings (see Fig. 2d-e).

Discussion

We here close three major knowledge gaps in our understanding of protein nitration:

specificity, origin, and disease relevance. With respect to the specificity of protein nitration,

a vast heterogeneity of proteins are detected by supposedly uniform anti-NO_2Tyr

antibodies. Moreover, tryptophan nitration (NO_2Trp) was a cofounding factor of our

apparent NO_2Tyr-immunosignals. Protein NO_2Trp formation has been described in

isolated proteins treated with H_2O_2/NO_2^- *in vitro* [31–34], peroxynitrite-exposed cells [35], and as

physiological modification during aging in rat heart mitochondria [29]. Trp is an alternative

target of nitration that deserves more attention [36,37] and immunosignals by anti-NO_2Tyr

antibodies should rather be interpreted as NO_2Tyr/ NO_2Trp signals unless purified and

chemically validated. Rebrin et al. [29] reported Trp nitration of succinyl-CoA:3-ketoacid CoA

transferase (SCOT), which could not be reproduced by Wang et al. [38]. Whether Trp

nitration has a functional consequence on SCOT remained unclear because both

activation and inactivation were observed [29]. In hindsight, SCOT nitration is also the first

documented example where Trp nitration has been mistaken as Tyr nitration based on

cross-reactivity of a supposedly NO_2Tyr specific antibody [39], and many more of these

examples may exist in the literature.

With respect to the origin of the nitrating nitrogen in NO_2Tyr/ NO_2Trp positive proteins, we

show that both eNOS/NO and MPO/nitrite pathways, and possibly others, need to be

equally considered and that the *a priori* assumption that NO_2Tyr immunosignals indicate

NO scavenging by superoxide is not valid. Nevertheless, the effects of KO of eNOS and

MPO are significant but not great. Previous data shows that NO modifications persist in

the absence of active NO synthesis and dietary NOx intake (e.g., in eNOS$^{-/-}$ animals on a

low-NOx diet and under the acute action of the NOS-inhibitor, L-NIO, or in Wistar rats on

low-NOx diet with chronic administration of L-NMMA) [40]. Moreoever, NO levels remain

essentially unchanged upon deletion of each NOS isoform. Accordingly, these findings

reflect the action of a compensatory mechanism that maintains basal levels of NO

metabolites in tissues e.g. constant upregulation of remaining NOSs in an attempt to

restore basal levels.

With respect to disease relevance, probably our most relevant finding is that protein

tryptophan nitration is a physiological event. This represents a similar dogma shift as for

ROS formation, which also should not be *a priori* considered as oxidative stress and a

disease marker. Thus, both ROS and reactive nitrogen and protein nitration represent

physiological events, even though they may be upregulated in disease as we show for

diabetes and cardiac stress (see Fig. 3).

Not many specific functional consequences have been described for protein nitration.

Assuming Trp nitration and activity modulation of both LDH (decreasing activity) and

SCOT (increasing activity) would occur, this may be a protective mechanism, allowing the

heart to better utilize ketone metabolism for energy production at a time when other

metabolic processes may be diminished [28,29]. Molecular dynamics simulations were

performed on NO_2-LDH, aiming to understand the impairment of the enzyme activity (see

Fig. 5). While differences in activity between WT and T4N of a factor of two is significant in

physiological terms, it corresponds to minor changes in the free energy states in the

catalytic process. The catalytic cycle of LDH is a well understood ordered bi-bi reaction

mechanism where substrate and product enter and leave the active-site, with concomitant

closing and opening of the active-site loop, after cofactor binding. Detailed kinetic

characterization of LDH from *Bacillus stearothermophilus* [41] and *Plasmodium falciparum* [42]

has revealed this loop movement to be a rate limiting step in the reaction mechanism. Any

perturbation of this delicately balanced conformational change is expected to compromise

the catalytic activity of the enzyme. We suggest that conformational movement of the

active-site loop in cardiac LDH is also a rate limiting step and the weakening of the

interaction between this loop and the α-H helix in T4N (as described in our results) is

responsible for the impaired catalytic activity. Whether tryptophan nitration effects the

conversion of either pyruvate or other 2-oxo/-2-hydroxy acids warrants further

investigation.

Like many enzymes, LDH post-transcriptional activity is regulated by phosphorylation and

acetylation of amino acid residues. The tyrosine kinase FGFR1 has been shown to directly

phosphorylate LDH at Y10 and Y83 [43]. Y10 phosphorylation of LDH promotes active,

tetrameric LDHA formation, whereas phosphorylation of Y83 promotes NADH substrate

binding. Our finding obviously promotes the opposite, suggesting an antagonistic effects of

tyrosine phosphorylation and tryptophan nitration. Inhibition of LDH reduces aerobic

glycolysis, gene transcription, channel complex regulation, molecular chaperones and cell

cycle regulation. Cells are then forced to use oxidative phosphorylation and pyruvate

enters the mitochondria. This leads to reactive oxygen species (ROS) generation [44]. Since

the nitration is already a ROS-induced event, this may be a mechanism of ROS-induced

ROS formation [45], which in heart is protective triggering for example capillary density and

angiogenesis [46,47].

In conclusion, cardiac LDH appears to be the first protein basally regulated by nitration

and not only a loss-of-function biomarker of metabolic stress. NO_2-LDH has a lower V_{max}

and the nitration is further increased under cardiac metabolic stress. Furthermore, *in vivo*

NO_2Tyr immunoreactivity not necessarily reflects Tyr nitration or solely NO scavenging.

Instead, it may indicate nitrite/MPO-dependent Trp nitration and physiological signaling.

This has wide implications on re-interpreting previous data using NO_2Tyr immunoreactivity

as a biomarker and on our understanding of nitration as a physiological protein

modification and signaling mechanism.

Methods

Detailed experimental procedures are provided in Supplementary Methods.

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analyzed data; and C.N., J.F., C.S., D.H.P., M.F., A.I.C. and H.H.H.W.S. wrote the paper.

Competing interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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1 **Data availability**

2 Data available from the corresponding authors upon reasonable request.

Figures and figure legends

Figure 1. Experimental outline for an anti-NO$_2$Tyr antibody-based biomarker

detection approach. Central panel: Antibody panel screening, an anti-NO$_2$Tyr antibody

panel was tested in porcine and rat tissues under physiological conditions. Different

antibodies might recognize different nitrated proteins (green and orange antibodies) or one

antibody might detect more than one nitrated protein (blue antibody). Right panel: A 38

kDa band was especially prominent and, subsequently, purified in large mammals and

identified via MALDI-TOF as LDH. NO$_2$-LDH activity was also assessed. We identified the

nitrated residue and simulated the effect of the nitration in the protein structure and

mechanism using human LDH. Left panel: Different rodent models, as well as knock-out

mouse models were used to elucidate the effects of NO$_2$-LDH in disease, diabetes and

myocardial stress, and the enzymatic sources of reactive nitrogen species (RNS) leading

to LDH nitration, respectively.

Figure 2. Screening of different native tissue homogenates identifies a 38 kDa band

in heart as major physiologically NO$_2$Tyr-immuno positive protein. Further

purification and MALDI-MS analysis identified the 38 kDa band as LDH. (a)

Immunopositive pig and rat tissues from Fig S1 were further analyzed by SDS-PAGE

under reducing conditions (dithiothreitol) and subsequent western blot. The band pattern

was different for all three polyclonal (pAb) or monoclonal (mAb) antibodies: pAb1, mAb1

and pAb2. The most intense NO$_2$Tyr immunopositive protein band at approximately 38

kDa (p38^{nt}) was detected using pAb1 in heart. (**b**) p38^{nt} was purified from porcine heart

homogenate by affinity (Blue Sepharose) followed by ion-exchange (Q-Sepharose)

chromatography. Purification steps were tracked via protein nitrotyrosine detection using

pAb1. *(c)* Purified cardiac p38^{nt} was cut out from the gel, digested with trypsin and

analyzed by mass spectrometry and peptide mass fingerprint analysis. Most peptide ions

detected were matched to lactate dehydrogenase: 11 ions matched to LDH (■) out of a

total of 20 detected, with 5 ions matching to the next best protein assignment, malate

dehydrogenase (MDH, □), identifying $p38^{nt}$ as LDH with a $p<0.05$. (**d**) LDH nitration was

assessed by quantitative western blot analysis using pAb1 (n=9). (**e**) Vmax[LDH] remained

unchanged up to an equimolar peroxynitrite:LDH ratio, and then decreased at a ratio of 10

(n=8). Data represent means ±SEM.

Figure 3. Pathological LDH nitration levels in short-term (ST) and long-term (LT)

diabetic disease models and an oxidative stress myocardial dysfunction model. (**a**)

Heart homogenates of ST and LT streptozotocin-treated diabetic rats or doxorubicin-

treated mice (DoxoR) were analyzed by SDS-PAGE and immunoblot analysis for LDH

nitration using the pAb1 antibody. In all three animal models, the relative NO_2-LDH signal

intensity was increased. In diabetes, the long-term model yielded higher values than the

short-term model, which may indicate either higher nitrosative stress, or, more likely,

accumulation of LDH nitration (**b**). The highest increase was observed in the doxorubicin

model (**c**). Data are expressed as % of untreated control animals (open bars) and

represent means ± SEM of n=6-18 experiments.

Figure 4. *In vivo* **genetic validation of reactive nitrogen species (RNS) sources**. (**a**)

Events leading to oxidized and nitrated LDH. RNS (represented as $NO_2^-/H_2O_2/ONOO^-$) can

nitrate LDH, resulting in decreased V_{max}. (**b**) Cardiac tissue was obtained from endothelial

nitric oxide synthase (eNOS) and myeloperoxidase (MPO) knock-out (KO), and the

respective wild-type (WT), mice. Basal nitration of LDH (p38^{nt}) was analyzed by

immunoblot, and immunosignals quantified densitometrically. Data are expressed as % of

control (i.e., of the respective WT animals) and represent means ± SEM of n=3-5 animals.

NO_2-LDH depended on both eNOS and MPO.

a NO₂-LDH MALDI-TOF MS-based residue identification

b Protein structure
WT human LDH

- β-K--β-L loop
- α-H C-terminal helix
- Active-site loop
- α-2G
- Pyruvate
- NADH

c WT and T4N backbone RMSF differences per residue

d Association of the active site with α-H (m:LH)

e Openness of the active site loop (m:LO)

Figure 5. Identification of LDH Trp-324 as physiologically nitrated and oxidized. The

interaction of the active site loop with the C-terminal α-helix is essential and

restricted in NO₂Trp-LDH. (**a**) Rat heart homogenate was subjected to 2D-PAGE and

Coomasie staining; spots were subjected to in-gel digestion and MALDI-TOF MS analysis.

Leftft panel: Mass spectrum derived from a spot corresponding to rat LDH over the range

m/z 600 to 2700. Right panel: An expansion of the same spectrum over the range m/z

1170 to 1230, showing peptide ions assigned primarily to the peptide 319-328

(319SADTLWDIQK328), and its oxidized and nitrated derivatives. Major peptide ions are

labeled with their observed m/z values and corresponding LDH mature protein amino acid

intervals, as assigned by Mascot™, and additionally by manual comparison to predicted

values calculated from the LDH sequence and oxidative and nitrative modifications. The

ions correspond to the peptide 319-328 Trp (W)-nitrated species (319-328 + NO2) and its

typical high energy decomposition product (319-328 + NO₂-O), as well as ions

corresponding to the characteristic family of Trp oxidation forms, hydroxytryptophan (319-

328 + Ox), didehydro-hydroxytryptophan (319-328 + Ox-2H), dihydroxytryptophan (319-

328 + 2Ox), and kynurenin (319-328 + Ox-C). Other peptide ions display single (+ Ox) and

double (+ 2Ox) oxidation, or didehydrogenation (- 2H). (**b**) Distance metrics mapped onto

the crystal structure of WT (1I0Z). Color scheme: β-K--β-K loop, dark blue; α-helix, pink;

active-site loop, green; α-2G, light blue; pyruvate, grey; NADH, cyan. Residue Trp-324 is

shown in space filling. (**c**) Plot of the differences between T4N and WT backbone RMSF

per residue (T4N – WT) in the binary complex. Structures are highlighted using the same

color scheme as previously described plus the juxtaposed loop to the C-terminal α-helix

which is highlighted in light orange. (**d** – **e**) Histograms of the distribution of distances. Blue

WT; Red T4N. Metrics m:LH (107:CB-326:CB) showing the juxtaposition of the active-site

loop and α-C-terminal helix and m:LO (103:CA-243:CB) showing the open/closed state of

the active-site loop.

anti-NO₂Tyr antibody based biomarker detection

a anti-NO₂ Tyr antibody screening

pAb1

mAb1

pAb2

p38nt antibody-guided purification

b Pig

H FT1 FT2 E

38 kDa

c MALDI-MS protein identification
Lactate dehydrogenase

11 hits
5 hits

d NO₂-LDH activity

Pig

e Pig

a

Disease specificity

Rat

Mouse
+
Doxorubicin

Diabetes

Short-term   Long-term

Cardiotoxicity

b

C

a

Enzymatic sources of RNS

eNOS

Diet

$NO \xrightarrow{O_2} NO_2 \rightarrow NO_2^-$

O_2^-

H_2O_2 MPO

$ONOO^-$

RNS-dependent protein nitration

b

Mouse

NO_2-LDH Immunosignal [% of control]

WT eNOS$^{-/-}$ WT MPO$^{-/-}$

a NO₂-LDH MALDI-TOF MS-based residue identification

b Protein structure
WT human LDH

Legend:
- β-K--β-L loop
- α-H C-terminal helix
- Active-site loop
- α-2G
- Pyruvate
- NADH

c WT and T4N backbone RMSF differences per residue

d Association of the active site with α-H (m:LH)

e Openness of the active site loop (m:LO)