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Insights Into the Allosteric Inhibition of Ubc9, the SUMO E2 Enzyme

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Abstract

Conjugation of the small ubiquitin-like modifier (SUMO) to protein substrates is an important disease-associated posttranslational modification, though few inhibitors of this process are known. Here, we report the discovery of an allosteric small molecule binding site on Ubc9, the sole SUMO E2 enzyme. An X-ray crystallographic screen was used to identify two distinct small molecule fragments that bind to Ubc9 at a site distal from its catalytic cysteine. These fragments and related compounds inhibit SUMO conjugation in biochemical assays with potencies of 1.9–5.8 mM. Mechanistic and biophysical analyses, coupled with molecular dynamics simulations, point toward ligand-induced rigidification of Ubc9 as a mechanism of inhibition.

Abstract

From a Distance: The allosteric regulation of enzyme activity is an attractive avenue in chemical biology, but often difficult to achieve. Two small molecule inhibitors of the SUMO E2 enzyme Ubc9 are discovered through an X-ray fragment screen to bind to a previously unknown allosteric site. This interaction and its effect on sumoylation activity are discussed at length.

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Supporting information for this article is given via a link at the end of the document.

Keywords

Ubc9; Sumoylation; Drug Discovery; X-ray Crystallography

The posttranslational modification of protein substrates with a SUMO tag occurs via a tightly regulated E1/E2/E3 enzymatic cascade, and modulates a broad variety of cellular functions.^[1] Ubc9 is the only E2 enzyme involved in the conjugation of all three SUMO isoforms to many diverse substrates within the proteome. As a central enzyme in the sumoylation cycle, Ubc9 is required for normal embryonic development, and is dysregulated in a variety of disease states such as cancer^[2] and ischemia.^[3] Ubc9 has been suggested as a potential anti-cancer target for small molecule inhibitors, notably for MYC^[4] and RAS/Raf^[5] driven cancers as well as in multiple myeloma.^[6] Despite its relevance to disease, it has been challenging to identify small molecules that modulate the function of Ubc9. In related ubiquitin-like signaling pathways, inhibitors of E1^[7] and E3^[8] enzymes are now clinically used as anticancer chemotherapeutics. In contrast, very few reversible inhibitors of any of the ~40 known ubiquitin and ubiquitin-like E2 conjugating enzymes have been discovered,^[9] only one of which has been characterized in complex with the protein.^[10] Thus, new experimentally validated chemical inhibitors of Ubc9 would provide substantial insight into targeting this important enzyme, and potentially E2 enzymes in general.

One powerful approach to identify ligands for challenging protein targets is fragment-based inhibitor discovery.^[11] In general, fragment-based approaches leverage sensitive techniques such as NMR, thermal shift, surface plasmon resonance (SPR), or X-ray crystallography to identify low molecular weight ligands that bind weakly but specifically to target proteins.^[12] Weak leads identified through fragment-based approaches can provide excellent starting points for the development of highly active inhibitors, even in cases where the targets are considered to be challenging, such as protein-protein interactions or so-called “undruggable” targets.^[13]

As part of a larger program aimed toward identifying chemical inhibitors of Ubc9, we elected to pursue an X-ray crystallographic fragment screening strategy (See Supporting Information).^[14] Ubc9 crystals diffracting to a resolution of 1.12 Å (PDB ID: 5F6E) were soaked with a series of cocktails, each comprised of three shape-diverse fragments. A total of 352 fragments were screened using this approach, and ligands **1** and **2** (PDB ID: 5F6V, 5F6X, respectively) were identified to bind to Ubc9 (Figure 1). To independently validate the screening results and acquire high quality data sets, each fragment was then soaked separately into Ubc9 crystals (PDB ID: 5F6W, 5F6Y). Both fragments bound to the same previously unknown allosteric site on Ubc9, remote from the catalytic cysteine. The identification of this small molecule binding site was unanticipated, and to our knowledge has not been predicted.^[15] Fragment **1**, 2,2'-bisphenol, binds to Ubc9 through a network of hydrogen bonds (Figure 1C). Fragment **2** interacts with Ubc9 at the same site, though primarily through hydrophobic interactions (Figure 1D). In comparison to the *apo* structure of Ubc9, few structural changes were observed upon compound binding (r.m.s.d=0.19 Å over 122 Cα atoms, Supplementary Figure S3).

To validate the binding of each fragment to Ubc9 in solution, a ¹H-¹⁵N heteronuclear single quantum correlation (HSQC) NMR chemical shift perturbation experiment was performed.^[16] Upon addition of either fragment **1** (Figure 2A) or **3** (a more readily available derivative of **2**, Figure 2B), several statistically relevant chemical shift perturbations were observed, indicating specific binding of both fragments to Ubc9. In both cases, several shifted residues were clustered in or near the binding site identified by X-ray crystallography. In particular, chemical shift perturbations were observed for Lys59 and Leu60, both of which make direct contact with the two fragments. Thus, the binding of both fragments could be mapped to the same allosteric binding site observed in crystal structures and confirmed that the interactions also occur in solution.

Next, the affinity of each fragment for Ubc9 was measured via SPR (Supplementary Figure S9). For compound **3**, an equilibrium dissociation constant (K_d) was estimated to be 280 μM. For compound **1**, saturable binding was not achieved, indicating a K_d of greater than 2 mM. Both fragments were next tested in a biochemical enzymatic activity assay previously developed in our laboratory^[9b] (Supplementary Figure S1) to evaluate chemical inhibition of sumoylation by monitoring conjugation of SUMO-1 to a small peptide substrate at lower enzyme concentrations. Fragments **2** and **3** displayed only weak inhibitory activity up to the limit of solubility. However, fragment **1** completely inhibited sumoylation with an IC_{50} of 5.8 ± 0.1 mM. Despite weaker affinity, we considered **1** a more desirable starting point for further study due to superior activity in the biochemical assay, superior solubility, along with a well-defined binding mode that leverages specific hydrogen bonding interactions between the ligand and Ubc9.

We next synthesized several derivatives of **1** for evaluation (Table 1). HSQC analysis and biochemical evaluation showed several chemotypes were able to bind to Ubc9 and inhibit sumoylation. Of particular note are compounds **6** and **8**, which we were able to obtain crystal structures of in complex with Ubc9 at 1.55 Å (PDB ID: 5F6D and 5F6U, respectively), showing these compounds bind at the same allosteric site as **1**. Furthermore, the activity of **8** demonstrates that the core structure of these fragments can be elaborated

without diminishing affinity or activity. Thus, these fragments are suitable for chemical optimization to generate higher affinity inhibitors.

We next sought to probe the mechanism of action of **1** through a series of thioester bond forming reactions using fluorescently labeled SUMO-1. As expected, **1** had no effect on the formation of the E1-SUMO thioester at relevant concentrations (Figure 3A). However, **1** inhibited formation of the E2-SUMO thioester at concentrations that correlated well with the IC₅₀ of the compound (Figure 3B). Furthermore, **1** also inhibited the conjugation of SUMO to a recombinant protein fragment of RanGAP1 (Figure 3C) and to the full-length recombinant protein substrate IκBα (Figure 3D). To demonstrate that the inhibition of sumoylation was the result of specific binding to this allosteric site, we prepared two Ubc9 binding site mutants. Wild-type Ubc9 (Figure 3E) was compared to both K59A (Figure 3F) and E42A (Figure 3G) mutants. In each case, Ubc9 was able to conjugate SUMO to a fluorescent peptide substrate, confirming that the enzymes remain catalytically competent. However, neither mutant was inhibited by **1** at any concentration. Thus, mutation of the binding site residues abolishes inhibitory activity and confirms that specific binding to this site is responsible for inhibition.

To further investigate the structural basis for chemical inhibition, we performed molecular dynamics (MD) simulations on Ubc9 both in the presence and absence of either **1** or **8**. Simulations were examined utilizing principal component analysis (PCA), a technique used to reduce sets of multidimensional variables that describe conformational dynamics into non-degenerate components. The first of these principal components (PC1), which contributes most to the description of overall atomic motions throughout the MD simulations, can be analyzed directly or through the use of covariance matrices, which correlate residue fluctuations.^[17]

In both cases, covariance matrices of the *apo* protein revealed a large number of residues with high correlation, confirming that Ubc9 is moderately flexible (Figure 4A, Supplementary Figure S8).^[18] In the presence of inhibitor the majority of these covariances change considerably, particularly in two loop regions near residues 30 and 133, (Figure 4B, Supplementary Figure S8B). Additionally, comparison of root mean square fluctuation (RMSF) values for PC1 in the presence of inhibitor demonstrated a substantial decrease in RMSF for almost all residues (Figure 4C, Supplementary Figure S8C). The largest changes were observed near residues 50-90 (adjacent to the binding site) and 120-140 (near the active site loops). These experiments, supported by network analysis^[19] (Supplementary Figure S6) and pathway analysis (Supplementary Figure S7), point toward a model whereby the ligand binding event modulates the dynamics of Ubc9, rather than its conformation, and results in a rigidification of the protein in general with pronounced effects near the active site loops in addition to the binding site.

In summary, we report the discovery of a previously unknown allosteric small molecule binding site on the backside of Ubc9, distal from the catalytic site. The experiments described here indicate that **1** and related chemotypes bind to Ubc9 and allosterically inhibit sumoylation by rigidification of Ubc9, ultimately blocking formation of the E2 thioester. Although it remains unclear whether this small molecule binding pocket plays a role in the

overall regulation of sumoylation *in vivo*, studies on related E2 enzymes have shown “backside” protein-protein interactions are involved with the allosteric regulation of their enzymatic activity.^[20] In addition, a number of protein-protein interactions occur in close proximity to this site on Ubc9, including the noncovalent association with SUMO-1,^[21] the binding of the SUMO E3 ligase RanBP2,^[22] and the binding of the SUMO E1 heterodimer, Aosl/Uba2.^[23] Thus, compounds that bind to this site could perturb a variety of protein-protein interactions that are important for Ubc9 activity in addition to having allosteric effects on Ubc9 itself. Further, this work indicates that allosteric small molecule binding to Ubc9 may be a viable strategy for the chemical inhibition of sumoylation and could provide the basis for a general strategy to inhibit E2 enzymes in general. Work is currently underway to leverage this information into the design of more potent inhibitors of Ubc9.

Supplementary Material

Refer to Web version on PubMed Central for supplementary material.

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Figure 1.

(A) Crystal structure of **1** in complex with Ubc9, showing the allosteric binding site relative to the catalytic cysteine (Cys93). (B) Structures of fragments **1** and **2**, identified through an X-ray crystallographic screen. Crystal structure of the allosteric binding pocket with bound fragments (C) **1** and (D) **2** overlaid onto the $F_o - F_c$ electron density map contoured at 3.0σ level (1.49 and 1.56 Å resolution, respectively), calculated with the fragment omitted from the model. Hydrogen bonds are indicated with yellow dashes.

Figure 2.
 ^1H - ^{15}N HSQC chemical shift perturbations of Ubc9 in the presence of (A) **1** and (B) **3** with residues having statistically relevant perturbations highlighted in yellow and the catalytic cysteine-93 in red.

Figure 3.

Effects of **1** on (A) E1~SUMO thioester formation, (B) E2~SUMO thioester formation, (C) IκBα sumoylation, and (D) RanGAP1 sumoylation by a fluorescent SUMO protein.

Sumoylation of a fluorescent substrate peptide utilizing (E) wild-type Ubc9, (F) Ubc9-K59A mutant, and (G) Ubc9-E42A mutant. In all cases, -ATP conditions were used in the negative control (NC) lane, except (A) and (B) which use -E1 and -E2 conditions, respectively. GA = ginkgolic acid, 30 μM.

Figure 4. Molecular dynamics simulations of Ubc9. Covariance matrices in the absence (A) and presence (B) of compound **1**. (C) RMSF diagrams of PC1 in the absence (black) and presence (red) of **1**.

Table 1

Inhibitory concentrations and HSQC data for selected compounds.

Entry	Structure	IC ₅₀ (mM)	¹ H- ¹⁵ N HSQC ^[a]	
			K59	L60
1		5.8 ± 0.1
3		>3 ^[b]
4		1.9 ± 0.1
5		>20
6		>3 ^[b]
7		3.1 ± 0.3

Entry	Structure	IC ₅₀ (mM)	¹ H- ¹⁵ N HSQC ^[a]	
			K59	L60
8		3.0 ± 2.3

^[a]¹H-¹⁵N HSQC using 200 μM Ubc9 in a saturated solution of the compound of interest. Images indicate chemical shifts of selected residues for *apo* (red) and bound (blue) Ubc9. See Supplementary Information for full HSQC spectra.

^[b]IC₅₀ measurement is limited by compound solubility in assay buffer.