Published in final edited form as:

J Am Soc Mass Spectrom. 2016 August ; 27(8): 1376–1382. doi:10.1007/s13361-016-1410-4.

Cis→Trans Isomerization of Pro⁷ in Oxytocin Regulates Zn²⁺ Binding

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Abstract

Ion mobility/mass spectrometry techniques are employed to investigate the binding of Zn²⁺ to the nine-residue peptide hormone oxytocin (OT, Cys¹-Tyr²-Ile³-Gln⁴-Asn⁵-Cys⁶-Pro⁷-Leu⁸-Gly⁹-NH₂, having a disulfide bond between Cys¹ and Cys⁶ residues). Zn²⁺ binding to OT is known to increase the affinity of OT for its receptor. In the absence of Zn²⁺, we find evidence for two primary OT conformations, which arise because the Cys⁶-Pro⁷ peptide bond exists in both the *trans*- and *cis*-configurations. Upon addition of Zn²⁺, we determine binding constants in water of $K_A = 1.43 \pm 0.24$ and $0.42 \pm 0.12 \mu\text{M}^{-1}$, for the *trans*- and *cis*-configured populations, respectively. The Zn²⁺ bound form of OT, having a cross section of $\Omega = 235 \text{ \AA}^2$, has Pro⁷ in the *trans*-configuration, which agrees with a prior report, in which it was proposed that Zn²⁺ binds to the peptide ring and is further coordinated by interaction of the C-terminal, Pro⁷-Leu⁸-Gly⁹-NH₂, tail. The present work shows that the *cis*-configuration of OT isomerizes to the *trans*-configuration upon binding Zn²⁺. In this way, the proline residue regulates Zn²⁺ binding to OT and, hence, is important in receptor binding.

Keywords

Cis-trans isomerization; Oxytocin; Ion-mobility

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Electronic supplementary material The online version of this article (doi:10.1007/s13361-016-1410-4) contains supplementary material, which is available to authorized users.

Introduction

Oxytocin (OT) is a nine-residue peptide that facilitates labor and lactation [1], and is associated with psychological issues such as trust, fear, anxiety, aggression, and pair bonding [2, 3]. In the early 1950s, du Vigneaud and his collaborators isolated [4] and synthesized OT [5], as well as determined the sequence as Cys¹-Tyr²-Ile³-Gln⁴-Asn⁵-Cys⁶-Pro⁷-Leu⁸-Gly⁹-NH₂, with a disulfide bond between Cys¹ and Cys⁶ residues [6], forming a Cys¹-Tyr²-Ile³-Gln⁴-Asn⁵-Cys⁶ peptide ring and a Pro⁷-Leu⁸-Gly⁹-NH₂ tail. The structures of the ring and tail are of interest because they are implicated in divalent metal binding, which is known to increase the affinity of OT for its receptor [7]. With this interest, Bowers and coworkers used a combination of ion mobility spectrometry-mass spectrometry (IMS-MS) and theoretical methods to show that when Zn²⁺ binds to OT, it induces a structural change, and they proposed that this was key to the increased receptor affinity for the Zn²⁺-OT complex [8, 9]. Their calculations suggest two Zn²⁺-OT structures: one in which Zn²⁺ is octahedrally coordinated with backbone carbonyls associated with six residues (Tyr², Ile³, Gln⁴, and Cys⁶ of the ring, as well as Leu⁸ and Gly⁹ of the tail); and another having an additional interaction with the amino terminus [9]. In both of these configurations, the Cys⁶-Pro⁷ bond adopted a *trans*-orientation, although the *cis*-isomer was not specifically investigated. Electron capture dissociation studies are in agreement with both the ring and tail residues coordinated by Zn [10].

Although, the prior IMS work did not explicitly consider the presence of *cis*-configured Pro⁷ in OT, nuclear magnetic resonance (NMR) studies indicate that a proportion of the Cys⁶-Pro⁷ bond in OT exists in the *cis*-configuration [11]; several recent studies from our laboratory show that peptides containing a proline residue often exhibit multiple conformations resulting from coexistence of proline in *cis*- and *trans*-configurations [12–16]. Because of this, and the biological importance of understanding the regulation of OT, in this present study we explicitly investigate the role of *cis*- and *trans*-forms of the Pro⁷ residue when OT binds to Zn²⁺. As shown below, we find that, in agreement with the NMR studies [11], the free peptide samples both *cis*- and *trans*-configured proline residues; upon binding the *cis*-isomer of proline must isomerize to the *trans*-isomer, such that the Zn²⁺-OT complex favors the *trans*-configuration, a final configuration that is consistent with the structure proposed from theory [9]. The *cis*→*trans* isomerization of the Pro⁷ residue, which is penultimate to the ring, appears to be important in regulating metal binding, and hence receptor binding.

Experimental

IMS-MS

IMS theory and experimental techniques have been discussed elsewhere [17–22]. In these studies, experiments were performed using a home-built ion mobility spectrometer coupled to a time-of-flight mass spectrometer. Positively charged ions are produced *via* electrospray ionization (ESI) [23] on a Triversa Nanomate (Advion). Ions are then accumulated in a Smith geometry ion funnel [24] and pulsed into a 1.8 m long drift tube. The drift tube is operated with ~3 Torr of He buffer gas at 300 K and a weak electric field (~10 V·cm⁻¹). Ions

exit the drift tube through a differentially pumped region and are analyzed in the time-of-flight mass spectrometer [25].

Electrospray Ionization for Sampling Solution-Phase Structure

As noted, the present studies utilize ESI to sample biomolecule conformations that exist in solution. A number of studies have shown that populations of peptide and protein conformations observed in the gas phase are related to the populations from solution and under gentle conditions can be monitored by IMS-MS [16, 26–28]. That is, as ions are transferred from solution to the gas phase, information about populations of different conformations from solution is preserved [26, 29, 30]. Silveira et al. implemented cryogenic IMS-MS to provide further insight into how gas phase ions are produced *via* ESI [30]. They and others [26] hypothesize that ions become kinetically trapped by the evaporative cooling process associated with ESI. Therefore, solution-like populations are retained for several milliseconds, which is on the time scale of MS and IMS experiments, making these techniques useful for structural characterization [31, 32].

Assessing Whether IMS Intensities are Due to Solution- or Gas-Phase Populations

While it is often assumed that IMS peak intensities for ions produced by ESI reflect populations found in solution [16, 27, 28], it is important to directly test this, especially for small peptide systems, where ion activation can produce IMS distributions that correspond to “gas-phase” distributions [33]. We test this by gently activating mobility-selected ions and measuring the resulting distributions of structures using an IMS-IMS approach, as described in detail elsewhere [22]. Briefly, IMS-IMS-MS experiments are performed by operating the drift tube as two independent drift regions. Ions are mobility selected in the mid-funnel and are collisionally activated when a high field is applied across a 0.3 cm region. Ions are activated by collisions with the buffer gas and are annealed. Changes in the IMS distributions are then monitored as the new populations are separated in the second drift region.

Determination of Experimental Cross-Section

It is often useful to plot drift time distributions on a cross section scale. Recorded drift times are converted to collisional cross sections (Ω) using [34]:

$$\Omega = \frac{(18\pi)^{1/2}}{16} \frac{ze}{(k_b T)^{1/2}} \left[\frac{1}{m_i} + \frac{1}{m_B} \right]^{1/2} t_D \frac{E}{L} \frac{760}{P} \frac{T}{273.2} \frac{1}{N}, \quad (1)$$

where ze is the charge of the ion, k_b is Boltzmann's constant, m_i is the mass of the ion, m_B is the mass of the buffer gas, t_D is the time required to traverse the drift tube, E is the electric field, L is the drift tube length, T is the temperature, P is the pressure, and N is the neutral number density of the gas at STP.

Peptide Synthesis

Peptides (OT, and the alanine substituted sequence, Cys¹-Tyr²-Ile³-Gln⁴-Asn⁵-Cys⁶-Ala⁷-Leu⁸-Gly⁹-NH₂) were synthesized by Fmoc solid-phase synthesis on an Apex 396 peptide synthesizer (AAPPTec, Louisville, KY, USA) as described previously [13]. Fmoc side-chain protected amino acids and Wang-type polystyrene resins were used (Midwest Biotech, Fishers, IN, USA). Deprotections were performed with 20% piperidine in dimethylformamide, and 1,3-Diisopropylcarbodiimide/6-chloro-1-hydroxybenzotriazole was used as the coupling reagent. Peptides were cleaved from the resin with a solution containing trifluoroacetic acid:triisopropylsilane:methanol at a 18:1:1 ratio. Additionally, because the peptides contained cysteine residues, 5% 2,2'-(ethylenedioxy) diethanethiol was added. Peptides were washed, precipitated in diethyl ether, and the products were dried using a vacuum manifold.

Observation of [OT + Ca]²⁺ in the Mass Spectrum

In this study, ESI produces almost exclusively doubly-charged ions of OT (either [OT+2H]²⁺ or [OT+Zn]²⁺). All solutions are sprayed out of water or a mixture of water and methanol. Each sample contains 0.5 μM OT and Zn concentrations ranging from 0 to 6 μM. We note that, although extensive efforts to reduce Ca²⁺ in these experiments have been made, we observe [OT+Ca]²⁺ ions in the mass spectrum. Careful studies of the influence of this contaminant on Zn²⁺ binding have been carried out (see Supplemental Figure 1). The Ca²⁺-OT abundance does not appear to vary with introduction of Zn²⁺. Thus it appears to be a spectator in this system, and we do not consider it further.

Determination of Association Constants

The areas under each peak for both [OT+2H]²⁺ and [OT+Zn]²⁺ are integrated after normalization by total ion abundance. The areas of the unbound peaks can then be compared to the areas after addition of Zn²⁺ to determine the fraction bound. Association constants are determined by plotting the fraction of OT bound to Zn²⁺ as a function of the concentration of free Zn²⁺ in solution. The points are fit with a ligand binding, one site saturation model [35] using:

$$f = \frac{B_{max} * [Zn]}{\left(\frac{1}{K_A} + [Zn]\right)}, \quad (2)$$

where f is the fraction of OT bound to Zn²⁺, B_{max} is the maximum specific binding, $[Zn]$ is the free Zn²⁺ concentration, and K_A is the association constant.

Results and Discussion

Changes in Conformational Distribution of OT Conformations as a Function of Solution Composition

Figure 1 shows the collision cross section distributions of [OT+2H]²⁺ obtained from different water:methanol solutions. The distribution for [OT+2H]²⁺ shows two peaks,

corresponding to populations of structures with collision cross sections of $\Omega = 236$ and $243 \text{ \AA}^2$, respectively. In water, the $\Omega = 236 \text{ \AA}^2$ peak comprises ~40% of the distribution. As the amount of methanol in solution is increased, a shift in the distribution occurs, and at the final solution of 95:5 methanol:water, $\Omega = 236 \text{ \AA}^2$ ions are favored, comprising 83% of the distribution. Figure 1 also shows the distribution of conformations at pH 3 in water, which is dominated by $\Omega = 236 \text{ \AA}^2$ ions, comprising ~95% of the distribution. This distribution is interesting because the solution composition is identical to the one reported previously from NMR studies [11, 36], which found two populations corresponding to *cis*- and *trans*-proline configurations at relative abundances of ~10% and ~90%, respectively. The observed changes in the distribution of conformations as a function of solution composition are consistent with populations of conformations coming from solution. This agreement suggests that our $\Omega = 236$ and $243 \text{ \AA}^2$ peaks correspond to *trans*- and *cis*-isomers, respectively; however, we test this assignment rigorously below.

IMS-IMS-MS of OT

To further understand the relationship of the populations measured in Figure 1 as a function of solution composition, IMS-IMS-MS experiments were conducted. IMS-IMS-MS experiments for mobility selected $[\text{OT}+2\text{H}]^{2+}$ in Figure 2 show that regardless of which solution is used to produce ions, collisional activation (at our highest energies) results in an identical “gas-phase” distribution. As discussed in detail previously [33], observation of identical populations, regardless of which peak is selected (or which solution is used to produce ions) is evidence for a gas-phase, quasi-equilibrium distribution established in the absence of solvent by collisional activation. This quasi-equilibrium distribution favors the $\Omega = 236 \text{ \AA}^2$ structure, and is clearly different from the distribution produced under gentle ESI conditions, in which the populations are imposed from solution. Figure 2 also shows studies using more gentle activation conditions (60 V) reveal partial conversion of structures, which is consistent with this interpretation. Hereafter, we assume that the distributions recorded from our gentle experimental conditions correspond to solution populations.

Pro⁷→Ala Substitution of OT

As noted above, the abundances of peaks measured for the 100:0 water:methanol solution at pH = 3 are consistent with those reported for the same solution composition by NMR, and suggest assignments of $\Omega = 236$ and $243 \text{ \AA}^2$ are *trans*- and *cis*-isomers of Pro⁷, respectively. This assignment is rigorously tested by substituting an alanine for the proline to yield Cys¹-Tyr²-Ile³-Gln⁴-Asn⁵-Cys⁶-Ala⁷-Leu⁸-Gly⁹-NH₂, in which Cys⁶-Ala⁷ bond should favor the *trans* configuration [37], as illustrated by the data shown in Figure 3 that displays the collision cross sections for OT (Ala⁷) along with OT (Pro⁷). Note that the Pro⁷→Ala substitution yields a single conformation at $234 \text{ \AA}^2$, which makes up ~98% of the distribution. However, since alanine has a smaller intrinsic size parameter, the collision cross section has been corrected to account for the intrinsic size difference between proline and alanine [38, 39]. The resulting peak has a cross section of $236 \text{ \AA}^2$. This shows that the Pro⁷ residue in the more compact conformation is in the *trans* configuration. The loss in intensity for the $\Omega = 243 \text{ \AA}^2$ peak upon alanine substitution indicates that Pro⁷ in the elongated conformation is in the *cis*-configuration. Although proline is not penultimate to the N-

terminus, it is penultimate to ring, consistent with the importance of penultimate prolines to the conformational heterogeneity of peptides [15, 40].

Determination of Zn^{2+} -OT Association Constants for *trans*- and *cis*-OT

Figure 4 shows the collision cross section distributions for $[\text{OT}+2\text{H}]^{2+}$ and $[\text{OT}+\text{Zn}]^{2+}$ as a function of Zn^{2+} concentration. Two populations are observed for unbound $[\text{OT}+2\text{H}]^{2+}$. Solutions with 15 different concentrations of Zn^{2+} , ranging from 0 to 6 μM , have been investigated. The concentration of OT is held constant at 0.5 μM . When no Zn^{2+} is added to solution, the relative abundances of the *trans* ($\Omega = 236 \text{ \AA}^2$) and *cis* ($\Omega = 243 \text{ \AA}^2$) configurations are ~40% and ~60%, respectively. As more Zn^{2+} is added to solution, the overall abundance of $[\text{OT}+2\text{H}]^{2+}$ decreases and $[\text{OT}+\text{Zn}]^{2+}$ is observed in the mass spectrum. Interestingly, as the Zn^{2+} concentration increases, the decrease observed for free OT occurs in a conformation-specific fashion as seen in the mobility distribution. The abundance of the *trans*-configuration decreases relative to the *cis*-configuration, and at the final concentration of Zn^{2+} , the *trans*-configuration comprises ~12% of the total distribution of $[\text{OT}+2\text{H}]^{2+}$. It should be noted that the collision cross section for the *trans*-configuration in the $[\text{OT}+2\text{H}]^{2+}$ distribution and the single conformation for $[\text{OT}+\text{Zn}]^{2+}$ are very similar, suggesting that the Pro^7 bond in OT–Zn complex exists in the *trans*-configuration, which could be the reason that the *trans*-conformation for $[\text{OT}+2\text{H}]^{2+}$ is favored by Zn^{2+} , in agreement with previous modeling studies on OT–Zn complex [9]. Figure 4 also shows the Zn bound form of OT is comprised of only one peak with $\Omega = 235 \text{ \AA}^2$. These data suggest that zinc binds to the multiple OT conformations, and adds rigidity to the molecule, which is evident by one prominent peak in the collision cross section distribution. This further elucidates why zinc increases the affinity of OT to its receptor; it not only imposes a structural change to OT but it also gathers the multiple conformations of a dynamic peptide and adopts just one upon binding.

Differences in binding affinities for Zn^{2+} to the two prominent conformations for $[\text{OT}+2\text{H}]^{2+}$ can be calculated because of the conformational-specific binding. Many studies have been performed to determine binding constants for various protein–ligand complexes with ESI-MS [41–46]. In this study, we use IMS-MS data to calculate K_{AS} for Zn^{2+} bound to OT. Figure 5 shows the results from the fit of the titration data for both the *cis*- and *trans*-configurations of Pro^7 in OT. To obtain this plot, we integrate the area under the peaks corresponding to each conformation in the mobility distribution for $[\text{OT}+2\text{H}]^{2+}$ and $[\text{OT}+\text{Zn}]^{2+}$. From this, we can relate the drop in abundance for each conformation as the concentration of Zn^{2+} increases, to the individual conformers' contribution to the OT–Zn complex. From the data in Figure 5, we determine binding affinities for the *trans*- and *cis*-configurations with Zn^{2+} to be $1.43 \pm 0.24 \mu\text{M}^{-1}$ and $0.42 \pm 0.12 \mu\text{M}^{-1}$, respectively. Thus, the affinity of OT for Zn^{2+} , when Pro^7 exists as the *trans*-isomer, is more than three times greater than when Pro^7 exists as the *cis*-isomer. This difference in affinity ultimately requires that the *cis*-configuration isomerizes to the *trans*-isomer to stabilize the Zn^{2+} -bound structure. The final *trans*-Pro Zn^{2+} -OT structure is consistent with the theoretical structures proposed by Bowers and coworkers [9].

There are two mechanisms to consider when discussing ligand binding: conformational selection [47, 48] and induced fit [49–51]. In conformational selection, a biomolecule may sample many structures along its energy landscape, and binding occurs through selection by the ligand to a preferred unbound conformation while maintaining similar structure. In the induced fit mechanism, the ligand binds to the unbound conformation and induces a specific structural change. From our scenario it is not hard to imagine both mechanisms involved in the binding process. Because the unbound *trans*-isomer has a similar cross section to that of the bound complex, the mechanism could be classified as conformational selection. However, we also observe the depletion of the *cis*-isomer when Zn is added to solution. In one case, a *cis*→*trans* isomerization could occur prior to Zn²⁺ binding, allowing Zn²⁺ to bind to the preferred structure, maintaining the conformational selection mechanism. However, there is also a scenario where Zn²⁺ could bind to the *cis*-isomer, inducing a *cis*→*trans* isomerization, which would then be considered under the induced fit mechanism. It is reasonable to assume that a combination of both exist in this system; however, our experimental approach cannot distinguish between the two possible mechanisms.

Cis→Trans Isomerization of Proline Regulates Zn²⁺ Binding

Ultimately, the studies presented above (and prior NMR studies [11]) show that the proline residue in OT gives rise to a conformational heterogeneity that varies substantially in different solution environments. Thus, in some environments where the *cis*-isomer is favored, it will be the case that *cis*→*trans* isomerization of proline regulates Zn²⁺ binding, and thus directly affects receptor affinity. This new finding suggests that mutations (e.g., OT sequences in which the proline residue is replaced with a *trans*-favoring residue such as alanine) may influence receptor binding and, hence, physiological efficacy of OT in environments where the *trans* form is not favored for proline. Studies that examine related sequences would be interesting.

Conclusions

IMS-MS studies find that OT adopts multiple conformations in solution due to *cis-trans* isomerization of the Cys⁶–Pro⁷ bond. Upon binding Zn²⁺ to OT, the *cis*-isomer converts to the *trans*-isomer; this difference leads to unique binding affinities for the *trans*- and *cis*-configurations with Zn²⁺ of $K_A = 1.43 \pm 0.24 \mu\text{M}^{-1}$ and $0.42 \pm 0.12 \mu\text{M}^{-1}$, respectively. While previous studies have qualitatively demonstrated conformation specific binding of a ligand to a biomolecule [52, 53], we used IMS-MS techniques to resolve and quantify differences in binding affinities that are associated with different structures. The structural transition that occurs in this system suggests that the proline residue regulates Zn²⁺ binding to OT in environments where the *cis*-isomer of proline is favored in the Zn²⁺-free OT form. This finding suggests that a more efficacious form of OT (at least in terms of metal- and presumably receptor-binding interactions in *cis*-isomer favoring environments) might be created by removing the ability of the peptide to form the *cis*-isomer; e.g., one can imagine introducing a mutation at the 7th residue in which the proline residue is replaced by amino acids, which favor *trans*-isomer configurations. We note that while the OT sequence is highly conserved across many types of organisms [1], other biologically active peptides (e.g., vasopressin and vasotocin) incorporate similar ring structures with a proline residue

that is penultimate to the ring that may show similar behavior. We are currently investigating these systems.

Supplementary Material

Refer to Web version on PubMed Central for supplementary material.

Acknowledgments

The authors acknowledge David Smiley and the DiMarchi research group at Indiana University for assistance with the peptide synthesis. This work is supported by a grant from the NIH (R01 GM103725).

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Figure 1.

Collision cross section distributions for $[\text{OT}+2\text{H}]^{2+}$ obtained from different water/methanol solutions. The top trace is the distribution from a pH 3 aqueous solution identical to that used in a NMR study [11]

Figure 2.

Collision cross section distributions shown for $[\text{OT}+2\text{H}]^{2+}$ from IMS-IMS-MS experiments. (a) Selection and activation of conformation with $\Omega = 236 \text{ \AA}^2$. (b) Selection and activation of conformation with $\Omega = 243 \text{ \AA}^2$. The bottom trace for each represents the ESI source distribution from a solution of 50:50 water:methanol with 0.1% FA. Selection and activation experiments were performed by increasing the voltages until dissociation occurs (120 V for OT)

Figure 3. Collision cross section distribution for OT (Pro⁷) along with the distribution of OT (Ala⁷). For OT (Ala⁷), the black trace corresponds to the collision cross section adjusted to correct for the size difference between alanine and proline, and the red trace is the cross section without correction

Figure 4.

Collision cross section distributions for $[\text{OT}+2\text{H}]^{2+}$ and $[\text{OT}+\text{Zn}]^{2+}$. $[\text{OT}+2\text{H}]^{2+}$ distributions are displayed as the black trace and $[\text{OT}+\text{Zn}]^{2+}$ distributions as the red trace. The concentration of Zn (μM) is displayed on the left side of each trace. Distributions are normalized by total abundance of $[\text{OT}+2\text{H}]^{2+}$ and $[\text{OT}+\text{Zn}]^{2+}$. OT-Zn complex structure is adapted from ref. [9]

Figure 5.

K_A s for the individual conformations of OT with Zn. The fraction bound of OT is plotted as a function of free Zn²⁺ concentration (μM). The solid curve is the fit for the *trans* configuration data and the dashed line is the fit for the *cis* configuration data