Inhibition of Nucleoside Transport by p38 MAP Kinase Inhibitors

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Key words: Nucleoside transporter, p38 MAP kinase, SB203580, SB203580-iodo, SB202474, SB220025, NBMPR
Abstract

While investigating the ability of p38 MAP kinase to regulate cytarabine (Ara C)-dependent differentiation of erythroleukemia K562 cells, we observed effects that indicated that the imidazoline class of p38 MAP kinase inhibitors prevented nucleoside transport. Incubation of K562 cells with SB203580, SB203580-iodo or SB202474, an analogue of SB203580 that does not inhibit p38 MAPK activity, inhibited the uptake of [3H]-Ara C or [3H]-uridine and the differentiation of K562 cells. Consistent with the effects of these compounds on the nitrobenzylthioinosine (NBMPR)-sensitive equilibrative transporter (ENT1), incubation with SB203580 or SB203580-iodo eliminated the binding of [3H]-NBMPR to K562 cells or membranes isolated from human erythrocytes. Furthermore, using a uridine-dependent cell type (G9c), we observed that SB203580 or SB203580-iodo efficiently inhibited the salvage synthesis of pyrimidine nucleotides in vivo. Thus these studies demonstrate that the NBMPR-sensitive equilibrative nucleoside transporters are novel and unexpected targets for the p38 MAP kinase inhibitors at concentrations typically used to inhibit protein kinases.
Introduction

Nucleoside transporters are essential for the salvage pathway synthesis of nucleic acids and the transport of a wide range of nucleoside analogues used in the treatment of human neoplastic and viral diseases, including leukemia and AIDS (1,2). Most mammalian cells co-express several nucleoside transporter isoforms at the plasma membrane that differ in their cation dependent, permeant selectivities and inhibitor sensitivities and can generally be assigned to one of two major classes designated as the equilibrative or concentrative transporters (3). The Na⁺-independent equilibrative transporters (ENTs), transport nucleosides by chemical gradients and can be further divided into equilibrative-sensitive (es) and equilibrative insensitive (ei) (encoded by ENT1 and ENT2 gene, respectively) based on sensitivity, or insensitivity, to the high affinity antagonist nitrobenzylthioinosine (NBMPR) (3,4). The es transporters are widely expressed, whereas ei are found as a minor component in intestine, hematopoetic cells, skeletal muscle and cardiovascular tissue (3-5).

The MAP kinases are a large family of enzymes responsible for relaying cell surface signals to the nucleus and other intracellular targets (6). Not surprisingly these enzymes are highly desirable targets for pharmacological inhibitors of cell signaling. SB203580 was identified as one of the first highly selective inhibitors of the stress-activated p38 mitogen-activated protein kinases (p38 MAPK) and was shown to block the production of TNF-α and IL-1β release from lipopolysaccharide (LPS)-stimulated monocytes (7). Considerable evidence now suggests that SB203580 exerts its anti-inflammatory actions by binding to the ATP binding site and inhibiting the activity of p38 MAPK (7-9). SB203580 and related analogues have also been shown to inhibit the production of INF-γ, IL-2, and TNF-α by lymphocytes stimulated with LPS, phorbol myristate acetate (PMA), sorbitol, and anti-CD3 plus anti-CD28 mAbs (10-13).
Since this initial discovery a wealth of studies has contributed to the discovery and design of a series of pyrimidine analogues as additional p38 MAPK inhibitors, some of which are currently in clinical trials for rheumatoid arthritis (14-16).

While investigating the involvement of p38 MAPK in the regulation of erythroid cell differentiation, we observed effects of SB203580 that were inconsistent with inhibition of this kinase. Instead our results suggested that there were additional effects on the transport of nucleosides or nucleoside analogues into K562 cells. In this report we describe evidence for the equilibrative nucleoside transporters as additional targets for inhibition by the imidazoline class of p38 MAPK inhibitors.
Material and Methods:

Cell cultures and reagents. Human erythroleukemia K562 cells and G9c cells were cultured as described earlier (17). Uridine (35-50 Ci/mmoll) was purchased from ICN Biomedicals (Costa Mesa, Calif., USA). $[^{3}H]$ NBMPR (22.5 Ci/mmoll) and $[^{5-3}H]$ cytosine-$[D$-arabinofuranoside ($[^{5-3}H]$ Ara C; 15-30 Ci/mmoll) were from Moravek Biochemicals (Brea, Calif., USA). Uridine, propidium (PI), and NBMPR (nitrobenzylthioinosine, 6-[(4-nitrobenzyl) thio]9-([D-ribofuranosyl] purine), Histopaque were obtained from Sigma (St Louis, MO, USA). SB202190 [4-(4-fluorophenyl)-2-(4-hydroxyphenyl)-5-(4-pyridyl)1H-imidazole], SB202474, SB203580 [4-(4-fluorophenyl)-2-(4-methylsulfinylphenyl)-5-(4-pyridinyl) imidazole], SB203580-Iodo [4-(3iodophenyl)-2-(4-methylsulfinylphenyl)-5-(4-pyridyl)1H-imidazole], SB220025 [5-(2-amino-4-pyrimidinyl)-4-(4-fluorophenyl)-1-(4-piperidinyl) imidazole] were purchased from Calbiochem-Novabiochem (La Jolla, CA, USA).

Measurement of erythroid differentiation of K562 cells by benzidine staining. Erythroid differentiation was determined by measuring hemoglobin production by benzidine staining (17). Benzidine dihydrochloride (2 mg/ml) was prepared in 0.5 M (3%) acetic acid and H$_2$O$_2$ (1%) was added immediately before use. The cell suspensions were mixed with the benzidine solution in a 1:1 ratio and counted in a hemocytometer after 5 min. Blue cells were considered positive for hemoglobin and at least 1000 cells were counted per sample.

Uptake assays of $[^{3}H]$-Ara C by K562 cells. Uptake assays of $[^{3}H]$-Ara C was conducted in RPMI 1640 medium at 37°C. 5×10$^5$ K562 cells/sample were washed once with RPMI 1640 medium and then resuspended in 400 μl RPMI 1640 medium. After preincubation with SB analogues or control DMSO for 15 min, equal volume of RPMI 1640 medium containing $[^{3}H]$-
labelled Ara C (100 nM) plus inhibitors or control DMSO was added for 30 min. Uptake of [³H]-labelled Ara C was stopped by five rapid washes with ice-cold RPMI 1640 medium containing 200 μM unlabelled competing Ara C. Non-specific binding was measured in the presence of 200 μM unlabelled Ara C. The cell pellets were lysed in 10% sodium dodecyl sulfate (SDS) before quantification of radioactivity.

Uptake assays of [³H]-Uridine. Uridine uptake assays were conducted as described previously (18) at room temperature in sodium-containing buffer (20 mM Tris/HCl, 3 mM K₂HPO₄, 1 mM MgCl₂·6H₂O, 2 mM CaCl₂, 5 mM glucose and 130 mM NaCl, pH 7.4) or sodium-free transport buffer (20 mM Tris/HCl, 3 mM K₂HPO₄, 1 mM MgCl₂·6H₂O, 2 mM CaCl₂, 5 mM glucose and 130 mM N-methyl-D-glucamine (NMDG)/HCl, pH 7.4). 5x10⁵ K562 cells/sample or G9c cells were washed once with transport buffer and then resuspended in 400 μl transport buffer. After preincubation with SB analogues, NBMPR, or DMSO for 15 min, uptake assays were started by adding equal volume of transport buffer containing [³H]-labelled uridine (10 μM) plus inhibitors or DMSO. Uptake assays were stopped by five rapid washes with ice-cold transport buffer containing 1mM unlabelled competing uridine. The cell pellets were lysed in 10% SDS before quantification of radioactivity.

Equilibrium binding of [³H]-NBMPR by intact cells. Binding of NBMPR to K562 cells was measured using an assay described in detail previously (19). Briefly, total binding (5x10⁵ cells/assay) was assessed in transport buffer described above, to which had been added graded concentrations (0.05-5 nM) of [³H]-NBMPR. Alternatively, K562 cells were first incubated with various concentrations of SB analogues, and then 0.5 nM [³H]-NBMPR was added. Binding was
assessed at room temperature for 45 min. Non-specific binding was determined by addition of
10 μM of non-radioactive NBMPR in a set of replicate assay mixtures.

**Preparation of membranes and photo affinity labeling of membranes with [3H]-NBMPR.**
Buffy coats from normal donors were obtained from the American Red Cross (Charlotte, NC).
The human erythrocytes were isolated by density-gradient centrifugation (2600 rpm) using Histopaque 1077 (Sigma). Human erythrocyte ghost membranes were prepared as described earlier (20). [3H]-NBMPR binding assays were performed at room temperature in 10 mM Tris (pH 7.1) containing 0.01% 3-[3-cholamidopropyl] dimethylammoniol]-1-propanesulfonate (CHAPS, w/v). Incubations were initiated by adding an aliquot of 3 μg of erythrocyte ghost membranes to a glass tube containing the 0.5 nM [3H]-NBMPR in the absence or presence of various concentrations of SB203580-iodo. Incubations were terminated after 45 min by dilution with 5 ml of ice-cold 10 mM Tris (pH 7.1) followed by rapid filtration through Whatman GF/B filters which were then washed once with 5 ml of ice-cold 10 mM Tris (pH 7.1). Nonspecific binding of [3H]-NBMPR was determined in the presence of 10 μM NBMPR.

**Analysis of intracellular nucleotides by HPLC.** G9c cells (1×10^7) treated as described in the figure legends, harvested and the samples prepared and analyzed for nucleotides as described previously (21).
Results

SB203580 Prevents the Ara C-Dependent Differentiation of K562 Cells Through Inhibition of Ara C Uptake

Incubation of human K562 erythroleukemia cells with 50 nM Ara C increased the benzidine-positive staining of these cells in a time-dependent manner with approximately 80% differentiation occurring after 96 h. To determine if p38 MAPK was involved in regulating the differentiation of these cells, K562 cells were co-incubated with Ara C and SB203580. Addition of 10 µM SB203580 inhibited greater than 90% of the Ara C-dependent differentiation of these cells after 96 h (Fig. 1A). To further investigate the influence of p38 MAPK inhibitors on this process, we examined whether these compounds affected the uptake of Ara C into cells. K562 cells were incubated with 50 nM [3H]-Ara C and increasing concentrations of SB203580, or SB203580-iodo, an analog of SB203580 with similar inhibitory effects on p38 MAPK (22). Surprisingly, both SB203580 and SB203580-iodo significantly inhibited the uptake of [3H]-Ara C into K562 cells in a dose-dependent manner (Fig. 1B).

Inhibition of [3H]-Uridine Uptake by p38 MAPK Inhibitors

Because these results suggested that nucleoside transport was affected by these compounds, we examined whether the uptake of [3H]-uridine was prevented by the p38 MAPK inhibitors. Incubation of K562 cells with 4 different SB derivatives (Fig. 2A) demonstrated that SB203580-iodo, SB203580 and SB202474 inhibited the uptake of [3H]-uridine in a dose-dependent manner whereas SB220025 was without effect (Fig. 2B). SB202474 does not inhibit p38 MAPK whereas SB220025 inhibits this kinase with a Ki similar to SB203580 (7,14). Thus these results demonstrated that the effects on [3H]-uridine uptake occurred independently of p38
MAPK inhibition. Analysis of the data revealed an IC$_{50}$ of (93.5±1.5 nM) and (689.4 ± 222.2 nM) for SB203580-iodo and SB203580, respectively (Fig. 2B). In addition, the related compound SB202190 also inhibited [³H]-uridine uptake in a dose-dependent manner (data not shown).

**Effects of p38 MAPK Inhibitors on Equilibrative Binding of [³H]-NBMPR to Intact K562 Cells or Human Erythrocyte Membranes**

Since previous studies suggested that the majority of nucleoside uptake in K562 cells occurred by NBMPR-sensitive, equilibrative transporters (23), we investigated whether the uptake of [³H]-NBMPR was prevented by the p38 MAPK inhibitors. Addition of [³H]-NBMPR to K562 cells demonstrated that this compound was rapidly transported into K562 cells in a time-dependent manner (data not shown). Incubation of K562 cells with SB203580-iodo potently inhibited the uptake of [³H]-NBMPR into these cells (Fig. 2C). Moreover, using isolated human erythrocyte membranes, we found that SB203580-iodo directly interfered with the binding of [³H]-labeled NBMPR to nucleoside transporter with an IC$_{50}$ of 0.5 M (Fig. 2C).

**Inhibition of Salvage Pyrimidine Nucleotide Synthesis by SB203580-iodo or NBMPR-mediated Inhibition of Nucleoside Transport.**

Finally, the efficacy of the SB derivatives in preventing the uptake and salvage of pyrimidine nucleosides was further evaluated using a uridine-dependent cell model system (G9c). The G9c cell line is a CHO cell line that lacks the capacity for de novo pyrimidine synthesis and requires exogenous uridine to synthesize pyrimidine ribo (or deoxy) nucleotides for cell growth (24). G9c cells were first deprived of uridine for 24 h, then incubated with
increasing concentrations of SB203580-iodo, NBMPR, or DMSO for additional 8 h in the presence or absence of 5 μM uridine. Removal of uridine from the growth media resulted in the depletion of the UTP and CTP pools whereas the purines, ATP and GTP were unaffected (Fig. 3). Addition of 5 μM uridine to the growth media restored the intracellular pyrimidine nucleotide pools, however addition of SB203580-iodo and NBMPR prevented pool restoration in a dose-dependent manner (Fig. 3). By contrast, coincubation of uridine-starved G9c cells with SB203580-iodo or NBMPR alone for an additional 8 h had no obvious effect on pyrimidine pools in comparison with the uridine-starved G9c cells (data not shown). These results indicated that inhibition of nucleoside transporters by the SB analogues was sufficient to inhibit the salvage of pyrimidine nucleosides in vivo.

Discussion

The salvage of pyrimidine nucleosides is critically dependent on facilitated transport into cells. In addition, cellular uptake of chemotherapeutic nucleoside analogues such as cytarabine (1-β-D-arabinofuranosylcytosine; Ara C) or gemcitabine (2', 2'-difluorodeoxycytidine, dFdC) occurs by equilibrative nucleoside transport (25-28). The results of the current study demonstrate that the uptake of nucleosides and nucleoside analogues is potently inhibited by the imidazoline class of p38 MAPK inhibitors. While our results do not eliminate a role for p38 MAPK in Ara C-mediated differentiation of K562 cells, these data show that the SB compounds inhibit nucleoside transport independently of p38 MAPK activity. Specifically, SB202474, an analog of SB203580 that does not inhibit p38 MAPK (7), dose-dependently inhibited nucleoside transport. Consistent with this observation, incubation of K562 cells with SB202474 also prevented the Ara C-dependent differentiation of these cells in a dose and time dependent
manner (72 h: Control (4.4±0.8%), 10μM SB202474 (4.8±0.4%), 50μM SB202474 (9.0±0.4%), 50nM Ara C (33.7±3.0%), 50nM Ara C plus 10μM SB202474 (20.1±2.1%), and 50nM Ara C plus 50μM SB202474 (8.8±3.0%); 96 h: Control (8.2±1.6%), 10μM SB202474 (9.1±2.0%), 50μM SB202474 (9.9±1.9%), 50nM Ara C (72.9±6.9%), and 50nM Ara C plus 10μM SB202474 (50.8±6.6%), 50nM Ara C plus 50μM SB202474 (9.4±1.5%)). The observation that SB202474 was less effective than either SB203580 or SB203580-iodo suggests that the absence of a fluorobenzyl ring may reduce the efficiency of nucleoside transport inhibition (See Fig. 2A). By contrast, SB220025, a novel inhibitor of p38 MAPK with similar potency (IC\textsubscript{50}=60 nM) (29) to SB203580 (IC\textsubscript{50}= 48 nM) (7,14), failed to inhibit nucleoside transport in K562 cells. Thus these results show that some SB analogues inhibit nucleoside transport in a p38 MAPK-independent manner and provide insight into the structure/activity relationship of these compounds.

The results of our studies demonstrate that the equilibrative transporters are targets for inhibition by this class of p38 MAPK inhibitors. In human erythroleukemia (K562) cells, approximately 80-90% of total nucleoside transport activity occurs by equilibrative, NBMPR-sensitive (es) transport whereas the remainder occurs by an NBMPR-insensitive (ei) transport process (23). Using K562 cells as a model system, we observed that greater than 90% of the uridine transport was inhibited by the SB compounds. Moreover using K562 cells or membranes from erythrocytes we demonstrated a specific, competitive inhibition of NBMPR binding, strongly indicating that the SB analogs inhibited the activity of human ENT1.

The pattern of nucleoside transporter expression has been shown to vary according to the cell line or origin (1). Our data demonstrating that the SB analogues completely prevented the salvage of pyrimidine nucleosides and that SB203580-iodo was more effective than NBMPR at inhibiting uridine transport or the repletion of intracellular pyrimidine nucleotide pools in G9c
cells suggests additional effects of these compounds on the ei or concentrative transporters. Measuring uridine uptake in the presence of NBMPR in these cells demonstrated that the SB compounds inhibited both ei and es nucleoside transporters (data not shown). Whether there are similar inhibitory effects of these compounds on other types of nucleoside transporters (i.e. concentrative) remains to be determined.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by NIH grants RO1-GM 59767, and AHA EI grant to L.M.G., a Leukemia Research Foundation grant to M.H., and grant RO1-CA34085 to B.S.M. Robin Varney is acknowledged for her excellent technical assistance.

References


**Abbreviations:** Ara-C, 1-β-D-arabinofuranosylcytosine; CNT, concentrative nucleoside transporter; ENT, equilibrative nucleoside transporter; NBMPR, nitrobenzylmercaptopurine ribonucleoside (6-[(4-nitrobenzyl) thiol]-9-β-D-ribofuranosyl purine); HPLC, high-performance liquid chromatography; LPS, lipopolysaccharide; PMA, phorbol myristate acetate; NMDG, N-methyl-D-glucamine.

**Figure Legends**

**Fig. 1. Effects of SB203580 on Ara C-induced erythroid differentiation of K562 cells and [3H]-Ara C uptake in K562 cells.** (A) K562 cells were exposed to 50 nM Ara C in the presence or absence of SB203580 at concentrations and times indicated. The percentages of hemoglobin containing cells that stained positive for benzidine were obtained by counting at least 1000 cells per sample under microscopy using 100× magnification. Data represents the mean ± S.D. of triplicate samples of n=3 experiments. (B) K562 cells were incubated with 50 nM [3H]-Ara C in the presence of 0.1–10 µM of the p38 inhibitor SB203580, SB203580-iodo, or DMSO for 30 min. The effects of SB203580 and SB203580-iodo on [3H]-Ara C uptake was determined as described in Materials and Methods and the data represent the assay of duplicate samples.

**Fig. 2. Structures of SB class of p38 MAPK inhibitors; Effects on [3H]-Uridine and [3H]NBMPR Uptake in K562 cells and Human Erythrocyte Membrane Proteins.** (A) The chemical structures of the four SB analogues used in this study are shown. (B) The indicated compounds were tested for their capacity to inhibit the uptake of 5 µM [3H]-uridine in K562
cells. The IC\textsubscript{50} of SB203580 and SB203580-iodo on uridine uptake was determined by incubation with 5 \( \mu\text{M} \) \([\text{H}]\)-uridine in the presence of 0.01–10 \( \mu\text{M} \) SB203580, SB203580-iodo, or DMSO control for 1 min. (C) Three \( \mu\text{g} \) of human erythrocyte membrane proteins or 5x10\textsuperscript{5} K562 cells/sample were incubated in sodium containing transport buffer containing 0.5 nM \([\text{H}]\)-NBMPR in the presence of 0.05–10 \( \mu\text{M} \) of SB203580-iodo. The effects of the SB compounds on binding of \([\text{H}]\)-NBMPR were determined as described in Materials and Methods. Data are shown as percentage of control binding where the “control” was the binding of 0.5 nM \([\text{H}]\)-NBMPR in the absence of inhibitors. Each point represents the mean ±SD from n=2 experiments conducted in duplicate.

**Fig. 3. Effects of SB Analogues and NBMPR on Intracellular Ribonucleotide Pools in Uridine-starved G9c cells.** CAD deficient (G9c) cells were starved for uridine for 24 h, then incubated with SB203580-iodo, NBMPR, or DMSO at the concentration indicated in the absence or presence of 5 \( \mu\text{M} \) uridine for an additional 8 h. Intracellular UTP, CTP, GTP and ATP were extracted and measured as described in Materials and Methods. The levels of intracellular ATP, GTP, CTP, UTP of unstarved G9c cells are 29.8, 6.8, 5.3, 18.7 nmol/1[\( \times \)]10\textsuperscript{7} G9c cells, respectively; the levels of intracellular ATP, GTP, CTP, UTP of starved G9c cells are 38.6, 10.7, 0.7, 0.6 nmol/1[\( \times \)]10\textsuperscript{7} G9c cells, respectively. Data shown is plotted as the percentage of the G9c starvation control and represents the mean of duplicate samples.
**Fig. 1A**

Benzidine-positive stained K562 cells (%)

- 0.1% DMSO
- Ara C 50nM
- Ara C 50nM + 10uM SB 203580
- Ara C 50nM + 5uM SB 203580
- Ara C 50nM + 1 uM SB 203580
- Ara C 50nM + 0.5 uM SB 203580

Time of 50 nM Ara C treatment (hrs)

**Fig. 1B**

Cellular uptake of $^3$H-Ara C in K562 cells (% of control)

- SB 203580
- SB 203580-Iodo

Concentrations of SB 203580 and SB 203580-Iodo (uM)
Fig. 2A:

SB 202474

SB203580

SB220025

SB203580-iodo

Fig. 2B:

Cellular [3H] uridine uptake in K562 cells (% of control)

Concentrations of SB analogues (μM)
Fig. 2C

![Graph showing concentrations of SB 203580-iodo (uM) vs. [3H]NBMPR binding (% of control).]

- Erythrocyte membrane protein
- K562

Concentrations of SB 203580-iodo (uM)

Fig. 3

![Graph showing intracellular NTP levels (% of starve-U control) for various conditions.]

- S-con
- S-U DMSO control
- S+5uM U
- S+5uM U+SB-iodo 10 uM
- S+5uM U+SB-iodo 5uM
- S+5uM U+SB-iodo 1uM
- S+5uM U+NBMPR 10 uM
- S+5uM U+NBMPR 1 uM

Intracellular NTP levels (% of starve-U control)
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*J. Biol. Chem.* published online June 20, 2002

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