Anoxic stress and rapid cold hardening enhance cold tolerance of the migratory locust ☆

Feng Cui [1], Hongsheng Wang [1], Hanying Zhang, Le Kang *

State Key Laboratory of Integrated Management of Pest Insects & Rodents, Institute of Zoology, Chinese Academy of Sciences, Beijing 100101, China

A B S T R A C T

Anoxia and rapid cold hardening (RCH) can increase the cold tolerance of many animals. However, mechanisms underlying these two kinds of stresses remain unclear. In this study, we aimed to explore the relationship of acclimation to cold stress with acclimation to anoxic stress in the migratory locust, *Locusta migratoria*. RCH at 0 °C for 3 h promoted the survival of cold stress-exposed locusts. Anoxic hypercapnia (CO_2 anoxic treatment) for 40 min exerted an effect similar to that of RCH. Anoxic hypercapnia within 1 h can all promote the cold hardiness of locusts. We investigated the transcript levels of six heat shock protein (Hsp) genes, namely, *Hsp20.5*, *Hsp20.6*, *Hsp20.7*, *Hsp40*, *Hsp70*, and *Hsp90*. Four genes, namely, *Hsp90*, *Hsp40*, *Hsp20.5*, and *Hsp20.7*, showed differential responses to RCH and anoxic hypercapnia treatments. Under cold stress, locusts exposed to the two regimens showed different responses for *Hsp90*, *Hsp20.5*, and *Hsp20.7*. However, the varied responses disappeared after recovery from cold stress. Compared with the control group, the transcript levels of six Hsp genes were generally downregulated in locusts subjected to anoxic hypercapnia or/and RCH. These results indicate that anoxic stress and RCH have different mechanisms of regulating the transcription of Hsp family members even if the two treatments exerted similar effects on cold tolerance of the migratory locust. However, Hsps may not play a major role in the promotion of cold hardiness by the two treatments.

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Introduction

Temperature is among the main determinants of insect distribution and activity. Survival at low temperatures is a common challenge for insects and other invertebrates living in seasonally cold environments. Winter survival for many insect species in temperate regions largely depends on their ability to avoid freezing by supercooling of extracellular body fluids [6]. Freezing hampers oxygen delivery to tissues. Thus, well-developed anoxia resistance is a component of natural freeze tolerance [25]. Oxygen supply is a key component in freezing survival because oxygen diffuses very slowly through ice, and breathing is arrested when tissues freeze. Staying in low-oxygen conditions has several physiological and biochemical consequences, including severe metabolic depression,

which significantly leads to reduced adenosine triphosphate (ATP) demands [38], decreased production of nicotinamide adenine dinucleotide phosphate enzyme and glutathione [12], and denaturation of enzymes caused by decreased pH [3]. Anoxia treatments can enhance the cold tolerance of insects [5]. Studies on goldenrod gall fly larva exposed to anoxia showed that increased HIF-1α expression can promote freezing survival [25]. However, information is lacking on the enhancement of insect cold tolerance by anoxia treatment.

Insects rely on various forms of cold hardening to cope with sub-zero temperatures [35]. Insects use environmental signals, such as decreasing temperature and photoperiod, to trigger seasonal cold hardening [7]. Insects are also capable of cold hardening on a short time scale, in a process known as rapid cold hardening (RCH) [20]. RCH is a physiological mechanism that enables survival of organisms under otherwise lethal low temperature conditions following pre-exposure to a less severe cold temperature [20]. RCH was initially regarded as physiologically interesting but ecologically irrelevant; currently, RCH is considered a common occurrence and is ecologically important in many insects [2]. Seasonal cold hardening controls the gradual and predictable transition to the overwintering phenotype, whereas RCH secures survival during sudden cold snaps, during which the insect is not in a cold

hardy state. These two types of cold hardening result in similar endpoints and share many similar basic mechanisms, such as cryoprotectant synthesis [19,41], membrane restructuring [28,30], and adjustment to ion transport [1,18]. However, special mechanisms for RCH have been reported recently. RCH has little effect on gene transcription [41,43], and fails to upregulate stress-related genes, e.g., heat shock proteins (Hsps), unlike cold acclimation [36,41,43]. Hsp is an important group of molecular chaperones that repair misfolded proteins in response to numerous environmental stresses [8,34]. Instead, RCH activates cell signaling pathways, such as calcium signaling [40] and MAP kinase signaling [13], and inhibit apoptotic cell death [48].

Adaptations to cold and anoxic stresses are not physiologically independent. In *Drosophila melanogaster*, RCH can be induced by a period of anoxia [27]. In the housefly *Musca domestica*, anoxia induces cold tolerance in the same way as RCH, but cold tolerance develops faster with anoxia treatment than with RCH treatment [5]. Anoxia changes the expression of several Hsp genes in the crucian carp, *Carassius carassius*, which survives in ice-locked ponds in the winter [37]. This response suggests that low temperature induces expression of Hsps, thereby enhancing anoxia tolerance to long-term low oxygen exposure. However, the molecular mechanisms underlying adaption to cold and anoxic stresses remain unclear.

The migratory locust, *Locusta migratoria*, has a broad geographic distribution from tropical to temperate zones [16]. The first instar hoppers are often subjected to subzero temperatures in early April following their emergence from the soil [44]. Previous studies in our laboratory confirmed that the mean supercooling point of first instar hoppers is $-13.0 \pm 1.4\,^\circ$C, and at this temperature, the hoppers suffer from freezing stress [44]. Overwintering eggs often showed high mortality during severely cold winter seasons under natural conditions. However, RCH can increase the cold tolerance of *L. migratoria* eggs, young hoppers, and adults [9,44]. RCH improves chill coma recovery of hoppers by inducing rapid recovery of hemolymph ion homeostasis [9].

In the present study, we used first instar hoppers of migratory locusts to explore the relationship between acclimation to cold stress and acclimation to anoxic stress. We determined whether the molecular stress responses of young hoppers subjected to anoxic hypercapnia are similar to or different from the stress responses of those subjected to RCH. We compared the effects of anoxic stress and RCH on the cold tolerance of locusts and explored the possible underlying mechanisms by monitoring the transcriptional levels of six Hsp genes.

Materials and methods

Locust rearing

The stock colony of the migratory locust (*L. migratoria* L.) used in this study originated from adults that were obtained in April 2003 from Huanghua County (38°25′N, 117°20′E), Hebei Province, China. The locusts were reared in large, well-ventilated wooden cages (height × length × width of 60 cm × 50 cm × 50 cm) at densities of approximately 1000 insects per container under a long-day photoperiod (14 h light/10 h dark cycle) and $30 \pm 1\,^\circ$C. First instar nymphs were used in all experiments. For each treatment, six replicates of 120 individuals were used.

RCH and anoxic hypercapnia treatments

For RCH treatment, 20 hoppers were maintained in a glass test tube (2.0 cm × 8.0 cm) covered with gauze at $0\,^\circ$C for 3 h. The expression of Hsp genes after RCH treatment was investigated using quantitative real-time PCR (qPCR). To test the effect of RCH on cold hardiness, the hoppers were subjected to cold stress ($-6\,^\circ$C) for 2 h following RCH treatment, and the survival ratio was calculated after 2 h of recovery at the rearing temperature ($30\,^\circ$C) with signs of movement. The expression of Hsp genes was immediately measured after cold stress or after 1, 2, and 4 h of recovery at the rearing temperature. The temperature was controlled by a programmable refrigerated bath (Polyscience, U.S.A.). Each treatment was performed in six replicates.

For anoxic hypercapnia treatment, 20 hoppers were maintained in a vacuum bag full of CO_2 for different durations (5, 10, 20, 40, 60, 120, and 240 min). One hour after recovery from anoxic hypercapnia or without recovery, the hoppers were subjected to freezing temperature at $-6\,^\circ$C for 2 h, and subsequently, the survival rates were calculated after 2 h of recovery at $30\,^\circ$C with signs of movement. The responses of Hsp genes were examined by qPCR after three treatments, as follows: (1) 40 min of anoxic hypercapnia; (2) 40 min of anoxic hypercapnia followed by 1 h of recovery from anoxic hypercapnia, and subsequent 2 h of exposure to $-6\,^\circ$C; and (3) 40 min of anoxic hypercapnia followed by 1 h of recovery from anoxic hypercapnia, and 2 h of exposure to $-6\,^\circ$C followed by 1, 2, or 4 h of recovery from cold stress. Each treatment was performed in six replicates.

qPCR

Total RNA was isolated from the hoppers using an RNeasy Mini kit and treated with DNase I (Qiagen, Hilden, Germany) according to the manufacturer's protocol. cDNA was reverse transcribed from 1 µg of total RNA using MLV reverse transcriptase (Promega, Madison, WI, USA). The transcriptional levels of six Hsp genes, including *Hsp90*, *Hsp70*, *Hsp40*, *Hsp20.7*, *Hsp20.6*, and *Hsp20.5*, and the β-actin reference gene, were quantified in six biological replicates of various treated and control groups (without anoxic hypercapnia or RCH treatment) with specific primers and methods, as described in previous studies [45,46]. The transcript levels of six Hsps were normalized by the β-actin transcripts.

Statistical analysis

Differences in survival ratios (after the arcsine and square root transformations) and Hsp transcriptional levels were compared by *t*-test for comparison of two means or by one-way ANOVA followed by a Tukey's test for multiple comparisons using SPSS 11.0 software (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA). Treatment differences were considered significant at $P < 0.05$. Values are reported as mean ± SE.

Results

Anoxic stress and RCH have similar effects on locust cold hardiness

The first instar hoppers were subjected to anoxic hypercapnia for 10, 20, or 40 min, and then exposed to $-6\,^\circ$C for 2 h immediately or 1 h after recovery from anoxic hypercapnia. The survival rate of the locusts with 1 h of anoxic hypercapnia recovery was significantly higher than that of the locusts that did not undergo anoxic hypercapnia recovery at each time point (10 min: $T = 9.61$, $P < 0.001$; 20 min: $T = 15.33$, $P < 0.001$; 40 min: $T = 21.24$, $P < 0.001$) (Fig. 1A). Anoxic hypercapnia recovery benefits the cold hardiness of locusts. Therefore, 1 h of anoxic hypercapnia recovery was used in later anoxic hypercapnia treatments. RCH ($0\,^\circ$C for 3 h) increased the survival rate of locusts under cold stress ($-6\,^\circ$C for 2 h) from 36% in the control to 74% ($P < 0.001$) (Fig. 1B). Anoxic hypercapnia treatment for 40 min resulted in a locust survival rate of 79% under cold stress, indicating that the effect of this treatment was comparable to that of