Synthesis and activity of *Helicobacter pylori* urease and catalase at low pH

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Abstract

**Background**—*Helicobacter pylori* produces large amounts of urease presumably to be prepared for the rare event of a sudden acid exposure. The hypothesis that *H pylori* is acid sensitive and protein production is inhibited by low pH was examined.

**Methods**—*H pylori* or its soluble enzymes were incubated buffered or unbuffered at a pH ranging from 2–7 in the presence of 5 mM urea for 30 minutes. After exposure, urease and catalase activities of whole cells, supernatants, and soluble enzyme preparations were measured at pH 6–8. Newly synthesised enzyme was quantified by immunoprecipitation of 

**Results**—Exposure to buffer below pH 4 resulted in loss of intracellular urease activity. In soluble enzyme preparations and supernatant, no urease activity was measurable after incubation at pH<5. In contrast, catalase in whole cells, supernatant, and soluble enzyme preparations remained active after exposure to pH≥3. Exposure below pH 5 inhibited synthesis of total protein including nascent urease and catalase. At pH 6 or 7, urease represented 10% of total protein, catalase 1:5%. Exposure of *H pylori* to unbuffered HCl (pH>2) resulted in an immediate neutralisation; urease and catalase activities and synthesis were unchanged.

**Conclusion**—Low surrounding pH reduces activity of urease and synthesis of nascent urease, catalase, and presumably of most other proteins. This suggests that *H pylori* is not acidophilic although it tolerates short-term exposure to low pH.

**Keywords:** *Helicobacter pylori*, pH, urease, catalase.

*Helicobacter pylori* causes chronic active gastritis, and is closely associated with the development of peptic ulcer disease. The bacterium exclusively colonises gastric mucosa including areas with and without acid secretion. In vivo and in vitro, *H pylori* produces large quantities of urease, which converts urea into ammonium permitting neutralisation of gastric acid. Native urease of *H pylori* has a molecular mass of approximately 550 kilodalton (kDa) and is a nickel containing protein consisting of six copies each of two subunits (UreA–30 kDa and UreB–62 kDa) in a one:one molar ratio. The low Michaelis constant (K<sub>m</sub>) of *H pylori* urease permits this enzyme to be catalytically efficient even at low urea concentrations. Urease is clearly central to the pathogenesis of *H pylori* infection. This activity is necessary for the survival of *H pylori* in acidic environment in vitro. Although urease negative *H pylori* mutants were unable to colonise the gastric mucosa in an animal model, this was pH independent. Thus, the role of urease in vivo is probably not only its acid neutralising capacity.

Nevertheless, protection against acidity seems sufficiently important, that *H pylori* produces urease in large quantities. This is even more surprising because *H pylori* is usually found underneath the mucous layer where pH approaches neutrality. Thus, exposure to low acidity seems to be a very rare event occurring only if the mucous layer is damaged mechanically or by chemical agents such as aspirin or during first infection. However, the route of infection is unknown and it might happen during food intake, when gastric pH is already raised. Thus, although neutralisation of acid is probably rarely necessary, large amounts of urease is synthesised even in a situation where no acid is present.

Based on these findings we hypothesised that *H pylori* is very sensitive to acid exposure and the large stock of urease is necessary to protect *H pylori* against a sudden drop in pH where no time is available to up regulate production of the enzyme.

In contrast, in *Streptococcus salivarius* a urease positive bacterium found in dental plaque, regulation of urease levels by pH has been demonstrated. Other species regulate urease synthesis in response to urea or available nitrogen concentration. In *H pylori* and *Escherichia coli* containing cloned *H pylori* urease genes, neither nitrogen limitation nor addition of urea seen to stimulate synthesis of the urease structural subunits.

The aim of this study was to evaluate the effect of exposure of *H pylori* cells to pH values, which vary within the physiological gastric range from 2 to 7, on the synthesis and activity of urease. The direct effect of different pH values on the activity of crude enzyme was tested by exposing fresh preparations of soluble *H pylori* enzymes to the same pH values as intact *H pylori* cells. Experiments were conducted in buffered and unbuffered solutions both containing urea. Exposure to buffered solutions allowed us to evaluate the effect of exposure to a constant pH even in the presence...
of urea hydrolysis. In experiments using the unbuffered solutions, bacterial ammonia was expected to increase the pH gradually. These latter experiments allowed us to study the effect of a transient exposure to low pH as it may occur in the stomach. For comparison with urease, catalase was used in this study to control for non-specific effects of low surrounding pH on enzyme synthesis and activity. By analogy to other bacteria, catalase is assumed to protect *H pylori* against the damaging effect of hydrogen peroxide by converting H$_2$O$_2$ to H$_2$O+O$_2$. The native catalase of *H pylori* has a molecular mass of 165–200 kDa; subunits have a molecular mass of 50–92 kDa. No evidence exists that catalase production is regulated by the surrounding pH in *H pylori* or other bacterial species.

**Methods**

**Bacterial strains**

*H pylori* strain UMA841 was isolated from gastric biopsy specimens from a patient undergoing endoscopy at the University of Maryland, School of Medicine, Baltimore, Maryland. The strain has been characterised as reported earlier.

**Culture conditions and preparation of bacterial suspensions**

 Cultures were grown on 10% sheep blood agar supplemented with vancomycin (10 μg/ml), polymyxin (2-5 IU/ml), and trimethoprim lactate (5 μg/ml). Cultures were incubated at 37°C in a microaerobic environment generated by an activated Campypak (Becton-Dickinson, Baltimore, MD). *H pylori* were cultured for 72 hours before use in experiments.

**Exposure of *H pylori* cells to various pH steps and measurement of urease and catalase activity in cells and supernatant**

Bacteria were suspended to an OD$_{600}$ of 2.5 in 2 ml HCl adjusted to an initial pH of 2, 3, 4 or 5, or in 0.1 M sodium phosphate at pH 6 or 7 or in 0.1 M citrate-phosphate buffer at a pH of 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, or 7. All solutions contained 5 mM urea (Sigma) and had an osmolality of 300 mmol. The pH was controlled and corrected if necessary before each experiment. *H pylori* cells were incubated in the various solutions for 30 minutes under microaerobic conditions at 37°C. After incubation, samples were taken for determination of viable counts (CFU/ml) by direct plating of 10-fold dilutions. Cells and supernatant were separated by centrifugation (5000 rpm, 20 min, 4°C). The pH of the supernatant was determined using a pH meter (Corning, model 320). Cells were washed twice and lyzed in a French pressure cell at 20 000 psi (SLM Aminco, Urbana, IL). Proteins in the supernatant were concentrated by filtration using a centrifugal concentrator (Centrisart L, Sartorius, Goettingen, Germany) with a cut off size of 20 kDa. Concentrated proteins were solubilised in 20 mM sodium phosphate buffer, pH 6.8. Enzyme activities were determined for whole cells, soluble enzyme preparations, and supernatants as described below immediately after each experiment.

**Exposure of *H pylori* whole cells to various pH values and measurement of urease and catalase synthesis by immunoprecipitation**

In a second series of experiments that involved radio-labelling of proteins, *H pylori* cells were deprived of L-methionine by preparing suspensions of the bacteria (OD$_{600}$=2.5) in a L-methionine free medium (Difco) and incubating the suspensions for 90 minutes at 37°C under microaerobic conditions. After incubation of the cells in the various pH solutions, incubations were continued after addition of 63 μCi of [35S]-methionine (600 Ci/mmol; Dupont, New England Nuclear, Boston, MA). After incubation for 30 minutes, labelling was stopped by addition of unlabelled L-methionine to a final concentration of 8 mg/ml. Cells and supernatant were separated; cells were washed twice and resuspended in 200 μl of 50 mM TRIS-HCl buffer containing 1% SDS, pH 8, and lysed by boiling for 10 minutes. Soluble protein was used for immunoprecipitation as described below.

**Exposure of *H pylori* cytosolic enzymes to solutions of various pHs and measurement of urease and catalase activity**

*H pylori* cells were harvested from plates and lysed by passage through a French pressure cell at 20 000 psi. After centrifugation (12 000 rpm, 5 min, 4°C), 50 μl of soluble enzyme (approximately 150 μg protein) were added to 2 ml of each HCl, phosphate, or citrate buffer adjusted to various pH values; solutions were incubated for 30 minutes as described in the first experiment. After incubation, cellular proteins were separated from the buffer solutions as described above. Enzyme activities were determined as described below immediately after each experiment.

**Urease activity**

Urease activity was measured using the phenol red assay of Hamilton-Miller and Gargan as calibrated for quantitative determination as described previously. Rates of urea hydrolysis were expressed as mmol NH$_3$/min/mg protein. For each experiment, protein concentration was determined by the BCA method according to the instructions of the manufacturer (Pierce, Rockford, IL) using bovine serum albumin as a standard.

**Catalase activity**

Catalase activity was determined by observing the disappearance of H$_2$O$_2$ as measured by its absorbance at 240 nm. The 2 ml reaction mixture contained 11 mM H$_2$O$_2$, 10 mM potassium phosphate, pH 6.8. The reaction
was started by adding 5 µl of soluble enzyme preparation or concentrated supernatants. Absorption was monitored for one minute at 23°C. Based on the initial rate, catalase activity was expressed as the disappearance of H₂O₂ in mmol/min/mg protein. The calculation was based on a standard curve determined from the absorption of 0–11 mM H₂O₂ under the same conditions. The results were normalised for the protein concentration of the enzyme preparations.

\[ \text{Effect of pH on urease and catalase in } \text{H pylori} \]

Statistical analysis
Results for enzyme activities and results of immunoprecipitation studies were compared by the non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis test. If this test showed statistical significance (p<0.05), individual comparisons were performed using the test procedure described by Nemenyi.

Results

Duration of acid exposure to \text{H pylori}
Conditions were established whereby \text{H pylori} was either briefly exposed to acidic conditions or where acidic conditions were held constant despite active urea hydrolysis. When \text{H pylori} was incubated in unbuffered HCl of pH 2 containing 5 mM urea, pH increased during five minutes to values above 4 (Fig 1). Incubation in HCl of pH 3, 4 or 5 containing 5 mM urea increased the pH to values above 7 within the first minute. The increase in pH was assumed to be due to neutralisation of unbuffered HCl by ammonia produced by hydrolysis of urea. The pH of citrate or phosphate buffers, however, remained unchanged during 30 minutes of incubation with \text{H pylori}. Although all buffers contained 5 mM urea, neutralisation by ammonia did not change the pH.

Viability of \text{H pylori} after incubation at various pHs
Survival of \text{H pylori} after incubation for 30 minutes in citrate buffer, phosphate buffer, or unbuffered HCl is shown in Figure 2. With a starting inoculum of approximately $2 \times 10^8$ cfu/ml, only exposure to pH 2 citrate buffer reduced viability significantly (p<0.05). A tendency for reduced viability was also found after exposure to pH 3 citrate buffer or pH 2 unbuffered HCl compared with viability after exposure to pH 7. However, these differences were not statistically significant.

\[ \text{Figure 1: pH of unbuffered HCl solutions of pH 2, 3, 4, and 5 during incubation of H pylori cells. H pylori was suspended in HCl solutions of various pH containing 5 mM urea. pH was measured over time; the initial pH is given at the start of each curve. Each point represents the mean (SD) of four experiments, unless SD is smaller than the point.} \]
activity, catalase activity was not affected by incubation at pH 3 or after incubation in HCl at pH 2.

To evaluate whether release of enzyme from whole cells was responsible for the reduction in enzyme activity at certain pH levels, enzyme activity was also measured in the supernatant. Similar to the results in the intracellular enzyme activity, reduced urease activity was found after incubation in citrate buffer at pH 2 and 3. Catalase activity was also reduced in the supernatant after incubation in citrate buffer at pH 2. Under none of the conditions was an increase of enzyme activity found as compared with the results at pH 7.

Synthesis of nascent urease and catalase
Newly synthesised enzyme was measured by immunoprecipitation of [35S]-methionine labelled protein. Labelling was performed during incubation in solutions of various pH. As shown in Figure 4, incubation in unbuffered HCl or phosphate buffer of pH 6 or 7 did not affect urease or catalase production. Urease and catalase represented approximately 10% and 1% respectively, of newly synthesised protein in unbuffered HCl (pH 2-5) and phosphate or citrate buffer (pH 6-7). In contrast, incubation in citrate buffer, pH 2-5 significantly inhibited nascent synthesis of urease and catalase.

To control for any loss of newly synthesised enzyme by release into the supernatant, immunoprecipitation of urease and catalase was also performed using the supernatant. Although comparatively more urease and catalase was found in the supernatant at low pH in citrate buffer, the total amount of precipitated counts at pH 2, 3, 4 and 5 in citrate buffer was lower than 10% compared with the counts at pH 6 or 7. Thus, the reduced amount of precipitated urease or catalase from the cells at low pH was not due to a loss of proteins into the supernatant.

Urease and catalase stability
The Table shows the activity of the crude cytosolic enzyme after incubation in solutions of various pH values. Enzyme activities were determined after raising the pH in all groups to 6-8. Urease activity was reduced after exposure of the enzyme to citrate buffer at a pH below 5. In contrast, catalase activity was only affected by exposure to pH 2 in HCl. Thus, exposed urease is not resistant to the effects of low pH unless it is cell associated or cytoplasmic, while catalase is relatively more resistant.

Discussion
The natural environment of *H pylori* is the human gastric mucosa. The bacterium is usually found beneath the mucus layer in an area where the pH approaches neutrality. Nevertheless, it could be assumed that *H pylori* might be exposed suddenly for short periods to lower pH values either during disruption of
Effect of pH on urease and catalase in H pylori

Figure 4: Nascent enzyme synthesis during incubation of H pylori at various pHs. Suspensions of H pylori in HCl at pH 2, 3, 4, 5 or phosphate buffer at pH 6, 7 (upper panels) or in citrate buffer at pH 2-7 (lower panels) were labelled with [35S]-methionine. All solutions contained 5 mM urea. Urease and catalase synthesis was determined by immunoprecipitation using polyclonal antisera directed against the small (UreA) and large (UreB) structural subunits of H pylori urease and against the H pylori catalase holoenzyme. Each data point represents one of three independent experiments.

The effect of pH on the enzymes was examined at three levels: (a) the effect on the enzyme activity when crude cytosolic enzyme preparations were exposed directly to low pH; (b) the effect on intracellular enzyme activity when intact H pylori cells were exposed to such conditions; and (c) the effect on the synthesis of nascent enzyme during exposure of intact H pylori cells to various pH levels.

The results of this study supports the initial hypothesis. As also shown by others, prolonged exposure to low pH reduces viability. Furthermore, exposure of H pylori to low pH decreases protein synthesis, including urease and catalase. Exposure to low pH also abolishes activity of free and cellular urease. The detrimental effect of low pH depends on the duration of exposure and acid concentration. However, the inhibition of protein synthesis seems to be reversible because viability was not affected by exposure to pH 3, 4, or 5. Free catalase seemed to be more stable than urease when exposed directly to low pH; only exposure to pH 2 reduced catalase activity significantly.

Intracellular enzyme activity is defined by the sum of the rates of new synthesis, degradation, and release. Low pH inhibited production of both urease and catalase. Thus, intracellular enzyme activity measured after acid exposure was due to preformed enzyme. After exposure to citrate buffer at pH 2, bacterial viability and activities of both enzymes were considerably reduced. Under this condition, many bacterial cells were lysed and the released enzyme was inactivated by the low pH as shown in the experiments where free enzymes were exposed to low pH. The most interesting events occurred after exposure to pH 3. Here, viability was not significantly decreased, and catalase activity was only mildly decreased. As only intracellular urease activity was reduced, it could be assumed that the intracellular pH was reduced to a level where the intracellular enzyme was inactivated. As shown in the experiments with free enzyme, this presumably occurs below a pH of 5. After exposure of the H pylori cells to citrate buffer of pH 4, intracellular urease remained active, whereas free enzyme was destroyed showing
that the cells were able to cope with that extracellular pH and maintain the intracellular pH at a physiologically functional level. Although we did not measure intracellular pH, the comparison of intracellular urease activity and activity of free urease at various pH levels allows us to speculate indirectly on the intracellular pH of H pylori after exposure to low pH. H pylori seems to maintain an intracellular pH above 5 if exposed to a pH of 4. This also explains why H pylori is able to grow at low pH values. It further seems that H pylori restores its normal intracellular pH after a short-term exposure to pH below 4 permitting normal protein production and survival. The precise mechanisms of maintenance of intracellular pH in H pylori are unknown. However, a H pylori P type ATPase has recently been characterised, which is probably a cation transporter and might be responsible for the regulation cytoplasmic pH.

Although H pylori can survive transient periods of low surrounding pH, both urease production and urease stability are sensitive to low pH. In contrast with other urease positive bacteria such as Streptococcus salivarus, urease production is not stimulated during exposure to low pH. The amount of enzyme activity in the cell is reduced when H pylori is exposed to low pH depending on duration of exposure and level of acidity. Brief exposure to low buffered acidity above pH 2 neither completely inhibited urease activity nor stimulated it. These findings are in some contrast with the idea that the major role of H pylori urease is its protective function against acidity. However, the extreme range of pH in its natural environment and the acid sensitivity of H pylori urease explains why such high amounts of urease are prepared even without preceding acid exposure. H pylori seems not to be acidophilic and needs the stock of urease for its protection against a sudden drop in pH. As soon as the short-term episode of low pH is overcome, the bacterium is able to restore its normal intracellular pH and to replace the destroyed proteins.

Our findings support the concept that H pylori is not acidophilic and does not seem to thrive in an acidic environment. A key enzyme of the organism, urease, is not acid stable and its synthesis is not stimulated by low pH. In addition, the metabolism of the bacterium, as measured by incorporation of radio-labelled methionine into protein, functions optimally at near neutral pH and is dramatically reduced at low pH. Indeed, the preferred environment would seem to be under the mucous layer of the gastric mucosa where the pH may approach neutrality. There is no evidence that the ulcerogetic activity of acid is amplified by stimulation of the bacterial virulence factor urease.

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