Technical Note

Automated removal of phospholipids from membrane proteins for H/D exchange mass spectrometry workflows
Kyle W. Anderson, Elyssia S. Gallagher, and Jeffrey W. Hudgens

Anal. Chem., Just Accepted Manuscript • DOI: 10.1021/acs.analchem.8b00429 • Publication Date (Web): 03 May 2018

Downloaded from http://pubs.acs.org on May 4, 2018

Just Accepted

“Just Accepted” manuscripts have been peer-reviewed and accepted for publication. They are posted online prior to technical editing, formatting for publication and author proofing. The American Chemical Society provides “Just Accepted” as a service to the research community to expedite the dissemination of scientific material as soon as possible after acceptance. “Just Accepted” manuscripts appear in full in PDF format accompanied by an HTML abstract. “Just Accepted” manuscripts have been fully peer reviewed, but should not be considered the official version of record. They are citable by the Digital Object Identifier (DOI®). “Just Accepted” is an optional service offered to authors. Therefore, the “Just Accepted” Web site may not include all articles that will be published in the journal. After a manuscript is technically edited and formatted, it will be removed from the “Just Accepted” Web site and published as an ASAP article. Note that technical editing may introduce minor changes to the manuscript text and/or graphics which could affect content, and all legal disclaimers and ethical guidelines that apply to the journal pertain. ACS cannot be held responsible for errors or consequences arising from the use of information contained in these “Just Accepted” manuscripts.

Kyle W. Anderson,†‡* Elyssia S. Gallagher,†‡* Jeffrey W. Hudgens†‡

†Biomolecular Measurement Division, National Institute of Standards and Technology, Gaithersburg, MD 20899, United States
‡Institute for Bioscience and Biotechnology Research, Rockville, MD 20850, United States

ABSTRACT: Membrane proteins are currently the most common targets for pharmaceuticals. However, characterization of their structural dynamics by hydrogen/deuterium exchange mass spectrometry (HDX-MS) is sparse due to insufficient automated methods to handle full-length membrane proteins in lipid bilayers. Additionally, membrane lipids used to mimic the membrane environment and to solubilize membrane proteins can impair chromatography performance and cause ion suppression in the mass spectrometer. The workflow discussed herein advances HDX-MS capabilities and other MS applications for membrane proteins by providing a fully automated method for HDX-MS analysis based on a phospholipid removal scheme compatible with robotic handling. Phospholipids were depleted from protein samples by addition of zirconium oxide beads, which were subsequently removed by inline filtration using syringeless nanofilters. To demonstrate this method, single-pass transmembrane protein FcγRIIa (CD32a) providing a fully automated method for HDX-MS analysis based on a phospholipid removal scheme compatible with robotic handling. Phospholipids were depleted from protein samples by addition of zirconium oxide beads, which were subsequently removed by inline filtration using syringeless nanofilters. To demonstrate this method, single-pass transmembrane protein FcγRIIa (CD32a) expressed into liposomes was used. Successful depletion of phospholipids ensured optimal liquid chromatography mass spectrometry (LC-MS) performance, and measurement of peptides from the transmembrane domain of FcγRIIa indicated phospholipids associated with this region were either not present or did not shield the transmembrane domain from digestion by pepsin. Furthermore, amino acid sequence coverage provided by this method was suitable to enable future measurement of structural dynamics of ectodomain, transmembrane domain, and endodomain of FcγRIIa. Moreover, this method is the first to enable fully automated HDX-MS on full-length transmembrane proteins in lipid bilayers, a notable advancement to facilitate understanding of membrane proteins, development of pharmaceuticals, and characterization for regulatory agencies.

EXPERIMENTAL SECTION

Materials. Full-length FcγRIIa (0.05 µg/µL) in liposomes was purchased from Abnova Corporation (Taipei, Taiwan). Abnova Corporation expressed FcγRIIa in vivo in wheat germ expression system with proprietary liposome technology to produce FcγRIIa in liposomes. During production, wheat embryos were thoroughly washed to remove endosperm contaminants. Wheat germ expression systems produce properly folded proteins with disulfide bonds; however, this system does not provide glycosylation and phosphorylation is poor.9 Pierce Tris(2-carboxyethyl)phosphine HCl (TCEP-HCl) was purchased from Thermo Fisher Scientific (Waltham, MA). Zirconium(IV) oxide 5 µm powder was purchased from Sigma-Aldrich (St. Louis, MO). Nanofilter vials (Part No. 25535) with 0.2 µm pore size and polyethersulfone (PES) membranes were purchased from Thomson Instrument Company (Oceanside, CA). A calibrated Thermo-Fisher Model Orion 3-Star Benchtop pH meter (Thermo Scientific, Pittsburgh, PA) coupled to a Catalog# 13-620-223A double junction Refillable Glass pH Electrode (Fisher Scientific, Pittsburgh, PA) was used to measure pH.

Sample Handling and Automated Phospholipid Removal. FcγRIIa was provided in 25 mmol/L Tris-HCl, pH 8.0, and time point measurements. Thus, the automated, robust workflow for HDX-MS analysis of membrane proteins provided herein can facilitate studies of MPs through the elimination of the arduous labor required by manual workflows.
2 % glycerol at 0.05 µg/µL. Denaturation, membrane removal, inline proteolysis, desalting, and analytical separation were performed by a fully-automated HDX PAL robot (LEAP Technologies, Carrboro, NC). Experiments to study effects of ZrO₂ were conducted with H₂O. Since the primary application of this method of phospholipid removal from transmembrane proteins in lipid bilayers was developed for HDX-MS workflows, the sample handling procedure mimicked a complete HDX-MS workflow in all other respects, as shown in Scheme 1. PAL robot transferred 25 pmol of FcγRIIa in 17.5 µL to an exchange vial containing 13 µL of 25 mmol/L Tris-HCl, pH 8.0, in H₂O. Next, 27 µL of sample was aspirated from the exchange reaction vial and added to the base of a filter system rather than a traditional quench vial. Filter bases contained 18 µL of 6 mol/L guanidine HCl, 0.1 mol/L sodium phosphate (pH 2.5), 0.4 mol/L TCEP-HCl, and 0.4 mg ZrO₂ at 1 °C. During an actual HDX experiment, the low pH and low temperature would quench labeling and reduce back-exchange of deuterons with protons in subsequent steps. TCEP was included to reduce the two disulfide bonds in FcγRIIa.

Scheme 1. Comparison of automated HDX-MS workflows with and without phospholipid removal steps.

Differences between workflows, including changes in temperature (ΔT) and time (Δt) are indicated in blue. All steps after H/D exchange are maintained at pH 2.5 for both workflows and temperature was held at 1 °C, with exception of transfer syringe, unless otherwise noted. The increment in time for all phospholipid removal and filtration steps is 70 s.

The notable addition to this workflow is 0.4 mg ZrO₂ per reaction to bind phospholipids. Sample was mixed twice by syringe and given an incubation time of 1 min, as previously reported, prior to dilution with 20 µL H₂O for a final volume of 65 µL. Dilution prior to filtration allows less material to be used for reactions prior to dilution and greater sample recovery after filtration, due to higher ratio of injection volume to filter dead volume. The dilution step does not affect pH. Next, a nanofilter cartridge, stored in the exchange drawer, was moved by the PAL robot arm to a position above filter base and slightly pressed into filter base. The whole filter assembly was then moved to the vial well of a LEAP X-Press module, and X-Press compressed the filter assembly to separate denatured protein from phospholipids bound to ZrO₂ particles. Mechanical operations for filtration increase sample handling by 40 s, pH 2.5 is conserved during processing, and the supernatent temperature is largely determined by the transfer syringe temperature. Changes in temperature and time indicated in Scheme 1 can be used to estimate the increase in back exchange within a user’s apparatus for a particular protein. More information about the X-Press, including videos of operation, is available at leap-wiki.com mediawiki/index.php?title=LEAP_X-Press Filtration_Station. 50 µL of filtered sample was injected into sample loop, passed through immobilized pepsin column (Enzyme BEH, 2.1 mm x 30 mm, 5 µm, Waters, Milford, MA) for 3 min, and collected on C18 guard column (1.0 mm, 5 µm, Grace Discovery Sciences), which was then washed for 30 s to remove additional salts. Additionally, an adjustable back pressure regulator (P-880, IDEX Health and Science LLC, Oak Harbor, WA) was added to waste valve after trap column to increase back pressure for pepsin column to 100 bar.

LC-MS. Peptides from C18 guard column eluted into a C18 Hypersil GOLD analytical column (1.0 mm x 5 cm, 1.9 µm, Thermo Scientific) at a flow rate of 50 µL/min from Dionex Ultimate 3000 HPLC with water containing 0.1 % formic acid (v/v) as solvent A and acetonitrile containing 0.1 % formic acid (v/v) as solvent B. Peptides were eluted using the following gradient: 5 % to 15 % solvent B in 1 min, 15 % to 50 % solvent B in 7 min, 50 % to 95 % solvent B in 0.5 min, 95 % solvent B for 1.5 min, and 95 % to 5 % solvent B in 0.5 min. Temperature of all LC connection lines and valves in the HDX PAL compartment was maintained at 1 °C. Peptides were analyzed using a Thermo LTQ Velos Orbitrap Elite (Thermo Fisher, San Jose, CA) using the following settings: spray voltage, 3.7 kV; sheath gas flow rate, 25; capillary temperature, 270 °C; and resolution, 60000. MS data were acquired by the Orbitrap to accurately measure precursor ion masses; product ions were then obtained by collision induced dissociation and measured in the LTQ Velos ion-trap. Data-dependent acquisition was performed for the six most abundant ions per full scan. To increase the number of identifications, dynamic exclusion was used to exclude an ion for 40 s after the ion was detected twice within a 30 s interval.

To reduce carryover between protein samples, the following washing steps were performed. First, after each sample injection, the protease column was washed with 50 µL of 1.5 mol/L guanidine-HCl in water containing 0.1 % formic acid. Second, after each chromatographic separation, a short blank was run to wash the C18 Hypersil GOLD analytical column. Additionally, after each protein sample, a full PAL-Orbitrap system blank was run twice using H₂O in place of protein. These washing steps removed all carryover as determined by MS/MS analyses of blank runs. During the course of this study, changes in peak widths, retention times, and intensities were not observed.

Peptide Mapping. LC-MS/MS data of pepsin digests were processed with Genedata Expressionist 11.0 (Lexington, MA) for peptide identification. Expressionist 11.0 parameters were: enzyme, none; MS tolerance, 10 ppm; MS/MS tolerance, 0.5
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Phospholipid depletion by zirconium oxide. ZrO$_2$ was previously shown to bind to the phosphate head group of phosphatidic acid (PA), phosphatidylcholine (PC), phosphatidylethanolamine (PE), phosphatidylglycerol (PG), phosphatidylserine (PS), and sphingomyelin (SM) for use as a solid-phase extraction for LC-MS applications. ZrO$_2$ is also well suited for HDX as its zeta potential is optimal at low pH.$^{12}$ An alternative approach could be to pack ZrO$_2$ particles into a column for inline removal of phospholipids prior to proteolysis; however, ZrO$_2$ would need to be regenerated after several samples to maintain efficient binding capacity. To circumvent column regeneration and ensure that every sample is exposed to active ZrO$_2$, ZrO$_2$ is added in solution.

When developing methods for HDX-MS, the exposure time and quantity of added ZrO$_2$ are carefully considered. Using an excess of ZrO$_2$ reduces the duration of exposure required to sufficiently deplete phospholipids. Short wait times provide the benefit of reduced back exchange. Likewise, smaller reaction volumes are used to ensure more efficient mixing of ZrO$_2$ with sample by using few PAL syringe mixing strokes, as additional mixing strokes increase sample contact with room temperature syringe and overall duration. Both factors can contribute to back exchange. We were able to use the same number of mixing strokes as for a conventional method at these volumes. We recognize that a cold syringe, available in some robotic systems, and an additional cold drawer for storing filters can further reduce the back exchange.

To assess the amount of phospholipids removed from protein samples following ZrO$_2$ treatment, MS/MS scans were screened for common phospholipid precursors and confirmed by fragmentation data. Since wheat germ was the expression system used for liposome production, abundant phospholipids previously identified in wheat germ were used for our screening.$^{13}$ Results of ZrO$_2$ depletion of phospholipids from liposomes derived from wheat germ are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. Intensities of phospholipid cations after treatment with ZrO$_2$ particles.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Ion m/z</th>
<th>Adduct</th>
<th>Formula</th>
<th>Intensity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LPC(18:1)</td>
<td>522.356</td>
<td>[M + H]$^+$</td>
<td>C$<em>{22}$H$</em>{34}$O$<em>{6}$N$</em>{2}$</td>
<td>31.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LPC(18:0)</td>
<td>524.371</td>
<td>[M + H]$^+$</td>
<td>C$<em>{22}$H$</em>{35}$O$_{6}$N</td>
<td>9.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LPC(16:0)</td>
<td>496.340</td>
<td>[M + H]$^+$</td>
<td>C$<em>{20}$H$</em>{32}$O$_{6}$N</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LPC(18:3)</td>
<td>518.324</td>
<td>[M + H]$^+$</td>
<td>C$<em>{22}$H$</em>{34}$O$<em>{6}$N$</em>{2}$</td>
<td>ND</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LPC(18:2)</td>
<td>520.340</td>
<td>[M + H]$^+$</td>
<td>C$<em>{22}$H$</em>{35}$O$_{6}$N</td>
<td>ND</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LPE(16:0)</td>
<td>478.293</td>
<td>[M + H]$^+$</td>
<td>C$<em>{18}$H$</em>{30}$O$<em>{6}$N$</em>{2}$</td>
<td>ND</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LPE(18:3)</td>
<td>454.293</td>
<td>[M + H]$^+$</td>
<td>C$<em>{20}$H$</em>{32}$O$<em>{6}$N$</em>{2}$</td>
<td>ND</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PE(18:3/18:2)</td>
<td>738.506</td>
<td>[M + H]$^+$</td>
<td>C$<em>{22}$H$</em>{34}$O$<em>{6}$N$</em>{2}$</td>
<td>ND</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PE(18:0/18:3)</td>
<td>714.507</td>
<td>[M + H]$^+$</td>
<td>C$<em>{20}$H$</em>{32}$O$<em>{6}$N$</em>{2}$</td>
<td>ND</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PE(18:2/18:2)</td>
<td>740.524</td>
<td>[M + H]$^+$</td>
<td>C$<em>{22}$H$</em>{34}$O$<em>{6}$N$</em>{2}$</td>
<td>ND</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PE(16:0/18:3)</td>
<td>716.523</td>
<td>[M + H]$^+$</td>
<td>C$<em>{20}$H$</em>{32}$O$<em>{6}$N$</em>{2}$</td>
<td>ND</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Lyso phosphatidycholine (LPC); lyso phosphatidylethanolamine (LPE); phosphatidylethanolamine (PE); phosphatidic acid (PA). Signal presented as 1 x 10$^4$ intensity units. Phospholipids with no MS/MS data are listed as not detected (ND).

To remove the ZrO$_2$ particles, syringeless nanofilters were used. Polyethersulfone (PES) was selected for filter membrane material because of its low binding capacity for protein. Despite the low bind nature of PES, initial trials using Whatman Mini-UniPrep filter cartridges determined that thick PES filter membranes bound an appreciable amount of protein; its 50 µL dead volume required unreasonably large sample volumes. Although we succeeded in reducing protein binding on standard size filter membranes by first blocking with lysozyme and then washing three times to remove unbound lysozyme before sample treatment, introduction of additional proteins into sample processing and added steps for blocking were counterproductive to development of a robust automated method. Therefore, standard filters were replaced with Thomson nanofilters with thin PES filter membranes and only 8 µL dead volume. We mention our experience with larger filters to stress the importance of using nanofilters to permit membrane protein concentrations within the range typical for soluble proteins for analysis by HDX-MS. This is particularly important as preparations of membrane proteins expressed or reconstituted into lipid bilayers are typically of low yield relative to preparations for soluble proteins.

A soluble protein, PP2C$\alpha$, was compared with and without filtration and ZrO$_2$ treatment (Figure S-1). Within the measurement uncertainties, both conditions produced the same result, confirming that addition of ZrO$_2$ and filtration do not negatively impact signal intensity or sequence coverage of proteins in general. However, ZrO$_2$ may bind phosphoproteins,$^{13}$ similar to TiO$_2$, a potential disadvantage of this method. For HDX-MS studies on phosphorylated proteins, protein loss could be mitigated by performing in-solution digest; only phosphopeptides from protein digests would be bound by ZrO$_2$, allowing measurement of all other portions of the protein.

**Figure 1. Sequence coverage of FcγRIIa.** (A) Amino acid sequence coverage of FcγRIIa with regions with detected peptides shown in red and regions without detected peptides shown in black. (B) Sequence coverage mapped onto PDB 3RY6 FcγRIIa structure. FcγRIIa termini not included in crystal structure were appended as representations, joined using blue asterisks to PDB 3RY6 structure. Representation of C-terminus is shown in lipid bilayer for reference.

**Sequence coverage of FcγRIIa.** Full-length FcγRIIa expressed into liposomes was selected as a model protein to demonstrate this method. FcγRIIa is a transmembrane protein with three distinct domains: ectodomain, transmembrane domain, and endodomain. A 66 % sequence coverage of full-length FcγRIIa was obtained with coverage in all domains and mapped onto structure PDB 3RY6$^{16}$ (Figure 1). Measurement of peptides from the transmembrane domain indicated that phospholipids associated with this region were either not pre-
sent or did not shield the transmembrane domain from digestion by pepsin. More significant is the ability of this method to facilitate measurement of structural perturbations of the endodomain, which contains an immune receptor tyrosine activating motif (ITAM) responsible for the function of FcγRIIA. While FcγRIIA and FcγRIIB both have similar ectodomains enabling them to bind Fc with the same affinity, they differ in cytosolic motifs with FcγRIIB containing an immune receptor tyrosine inhibitory motif (ITIM). Therefore, structural studies using truncated FcγRIIA containing only ectodomain would be similar to that for FcγRIIB; however, studies using full-length FcγRIIa/b would permit measurement of structural changes unique to ITAM/ITIM in the cytosol as it relates to receptor function.

CONCLUSIONS

The robust, fully automated method described herein may advance the field of structural characterization of membrane proteins and be of high value in developing pharmaceuticals targeting membrane proteins. Beyond HDX-MS, our automated method for phospholipid removal could be adapted for other MS applications. For example, proteomics of extracellular vesicles is a growing field in precision medicine, but yield of extracellular vesicles and their protein contents is low. Our method to remove phospholipids could be used for protein enrichment to increase the number of protein identifications by MS to supplement methods being developed for proteomics on extracellular vesicles. The adaptable nature of our method for various applications suggests the fecundity of this technique and, coupled with the easy integration and relatively low cost, this automated workflow could have a profound impact on membrane protein studies.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Corresponding Author
*E-mail: kyle.anderson@nist.gov

ORCID
Kyle W. Anderson: 0000-0002-2808-3026
Elyssia S. Gallagher: 0000-0002-5411-7285
Jeffrey W. Hudgens: 0000-0003-2805-1048

Present Addresses
#Department of Chemistry, Baylor University, Waco, TX

Author Contributions
K.W.A., E.S.G., and J.W.H. designed experiments. K.W.A. conducted experiments, analyzed data, and wrote the manuscript. All authors reviewed results and approved the manuscript.

Notes
The authors declare no competing financial interest. Certain commercial materials, instruments, and equipment are identified in this manuscript in order to specify the experimental procedure as completely as possible. In no case does such identification imply a recommendation or endorsement by the National Institute of Standards and Technology nor does it imply that the materials, instruments, or equipment identified are necessarily the best available for the purpose.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

K.W.A. and E.S.G. were supported by National Academy of Sciences National Research Council postdoctoral fellowships.

REFERENCES

(11) Lu, X.; Claus, J.; Bell, D. Enrichment of Phospholipids from Biological Matrices with Zirconium Oxide-Modified Silica Sorbents. Sigma-Aldrich Co.


---

for TOC only