Characterization of Molybdenum Cofactor from *Escherichia coli*

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Received for publication 2 July 1979

Molybdenum cofactor activity was found in the soluble fraction of cell-free extracts of *Escherichia coli* grown aerobically in media supplemented with molybdate. Cofactor was detected by its ability to complement the nitrate reductase-deficient mutant of *Neurospora crassa*, nit-1, resulting in the in vitro formation of nitrate reductase activity. Acid treatment of *E. coli* extracts was not required for release of cofactor activity. Cofactor was able to diffuse through a membrane of nominal 2,000-molecular-weight cutoff and was insensitive to trypsin. The cofactor was associated with a carrier molecule (approximately 40,000 daltons) during gel filtration and sucrose gradient centrifugation, but was easily removed from the carrier by dialysis. The carrier molecule protected the cofactor from inactivation by heat or oxygen. *E. coli* grown in molybdenum-free media, without and with tungsten, synthesized a metal-free "empty" cofactor and its tungsten analog, respectively, both of which were subsequently activated by the addition of molybdate. Empty and tungsten-containing cofactor complemented the nitrate reductase subunits in the nit-1 extract, forming inactive, but intact, 7.9S nitrate reductase. Addition of molybdate to the enzyme complemented in this manner restored nitrate reductase activity.

Molybdoproteins from diverse phylogenetic sources contain an identical structural and functional component, a molybdenum cofactor, which binds the metal in a catalytically active configuration. Much genetic (1, 20) and biochemical evidence indicates that the cofactor is a component of all molybdoenzymes, with the single exception of nitrogenase. This enzyme possesses a cofactor containing iron, as well as molybdenum, i.e., FeMoco (21, 22).

Even though progress has been made on the isolation and structural characterization of the molybdenum cofactor (21; B. E. Hainline, J. L. Johnson, and K. V. Rajagopalan, Fed. Proc. 38: 314, 1979), little is known about the biosynthetic events preceding its insertion into the apoprotein. It is known, however, that a number of genes regulate cofactor synthesis; for example, five *cnx* genes in *Aspergillus nidulans* (20) and five similar genes in *Neurospora crassa* (A. B. Tomsett and R. H. Garrett, Abstr. Annu. Meet. Am. Soc. Microbiol. 1979, H62, p. 129) participate in the synthesis of molybdenum cofactor.

The most widely used system for assaying the molybdenum cofactor is the complementation of the *N. crassa* mutant nit-1 (7, 10, 11, 17, 18). This mutant lacks cofactor, but retains the structural gene for nitrate reductase and synthesizes a protein with NADPH-cytochrome c reductase activity. This protein sediments on sucrose gradients at 4.5S (23), in contrast to the wild-type nitrate reductase from *N. crassa* which sediments at 7.9S and is composed of two similar subunits (2, 19). When a cell-free extract of nit-1 is mixed with a source of molybdenum cofactor, the nit-1 protein and the cofactor associate into the 7.9S species which expresses both NADPH-nitrate reductase and NADPH cytochrome c reductase activities (7, 18). The addition of molybdate to the complementation mixture stimulates the nitrate reductase activity (11). The nitrate reductase so formed is identical to native enzyme in molecular weight, sedimentation coefficient, and substrate affinities (7, 18).

Once incorporated into a molybdoenzyme, the molybdenum cofactor forms a stable association with the protein. Methods of effecting its release from various molybdoenzymes include treatment of the molybdoprotein with acid (7), organic solvents (21), or sodium dodecyl sulfate (B. E. Hainline, J. L. Johnson, and K. V. Rajagopalan, Fed. Proc. 38: 313, 1979). Most studies on the cofactor have utilized the material released from molybdoproteins. However, a few reports have dealt with molybdenum cofactor found in the free form in cell extracts from various sources. Nason et al. (17) initially used crude extracts of *Neurospora* lacking nitrate.
reductase. Ketchum and co-workers (8, 9) detected cofactor in extracts from a number of different bacteria and found that it was a small molecule, since it could diffuse across a dialysis membrane. Such extracts did not require prior acid treatment to release the cofactor. Johnson et al. (6) used a cell-free extract of Escherichia coli to complement apo-sulfite oxidase of rat liver.

In this paper, we report on the state of the molybdenum cofactor in E. coli. In this work, cell-free extracts were used as the source of the cofactor for complementation of the nitrate reductase subunits in nit-1 extracts of N. crassa. These studies have revealed the presence of free cofactor in extracts of E. coli, which appears to be loosely associated with a large-molecular-weight carrier molecule from which it is easily removed by dialysis. Cells grown on molybdenum-deficient media synthesized a cofactor lacking molybdenum, i.e., empty cofactor. Inclusion of tungsten in the molybdenum-deficient media led to the accumulation of tungsten-containing cofactor. The empty cofactor or the tungsten-containing cofactor analog could complement with nit-1 to form an intact, but inactive, nitrate reductase. The activity of this enzyme could subsequently be restored by the addition of molybdate.

A preliminary account of these results has appeared (N. K. Amy and K. V. Rajagopalan, 1979, Abstr. Int. Congr. Biochem. 03-1-S152).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Growth of E. coli. The E. coli culture (ATCC 9723e) was routinely grown under aerobic conditions in media composed of 30 g of Trypticase soy broth (BBL Microbiology Systems, Cockeysville, Md.) per liter, 5 g of yeast extract per liter, and 1 mM sodium molybdate. The minimal medium used for several experiments contained (g/liter): Na₂HPO₄·7H₂O, 11.3; KH₂PO₄, 3; NaCl, 0.5; NH₄Cl, 1.0; glycine or serine, 0.04; and Na₂MoO₄·2H₂O, 0.24. The following components of the minimal medium were autoclaved separately and added aseptically (per liter): CaCl₂, 11 mg; MgSO₄·7H₂O, 0.24 g; and glucose, 2 g. For growth studies on molybdenum-free medium, the molybdate was omitted from minimal medium. Tungsten-containing medium was prepared by adding 1 mM Na₂WO₄ to molybdenum-free minimal medium. Cultures were maintained on agar slants.

Cells were grown at 37°C with vigorous shaking on a rotary shaker until late log phase; they were then harvested, washed twice with 0.25 M sucrose, and frozen as a pellet at -70°C until used.

Growth of Neurospora. N. crassa wild type (STA-4) and mutant strain nit-1 (allele 34547) were obtained from the Fungal Genetics Stock Center, Humboldt State University Foundation, Arcata, Calif. Neurospora mycelia were grown in liquid culture on Fries basal medium essentially as described previously (2). The nit-1 mycelia were grown for 40 h in medium containing 80 mM ammonium chloride, washed with distilled water, and then transferred to fresh medium containing 20 mM sodium nitrate as the sole nitrogen source for 4 h. The mycelia were collected by filtration, washed, pressed to dryness, frozen in liquid nitrogen, and stored at -70°C until used.

Preparation of extracts. The E. coli cell pellet was suspended in 10 mM phosphate buffer (pH 7.4) with 0.5 mM EDTA; 10 ml of buffer was used per g of cell pellet. Cells were disrupted by passage through a French pressure cell at 20,000 lb/in²; then the extract was centrifuged at 12,000 x g for 10 min and the supernatant was used.

Crude extracts of Neurospora were prepared by homogenizing mycelia in 2 volumes of cold 0.1 M phosphate buffer (pH 7.4) with 0.5 mM EDTA, 1 mM dithiothreitol, and 0.1 mM phenylmethylsulfonyl fluoride in a cold Duall tissue grinder. The homogenate was centrifuged for 15 min at 27,000 x g, and the supernatant, designated the crude extract, was used.

Assays. E. coli extracts were assayed for the presence of molybdenum cofactor by the complementation assay using the Neurospora mutant nit-1. Typically, 5 to 50 μl of E. coli extract and 100 μl of nit-1 crude extract were added to 10 mM phosphate buffer (pH 7.4) with 0.5 mM EDTA and 20 mM Na₂MoO₄ in a final volume of 250 μl. This mixture was incubated for 10 min at room temperature; then samples were removed and assayed for NADPH-nitrate reductase activity.

The NADPH-nitrate reductase activity (EC 1.6.6.3) of Neurospora extracts was assayed as described by Garrett and Nason (4) by measuring the production of nitrite by the diazo-coupling colorimetric assay. A solution of freshly prepared Na₂SO₃ was added to this assay mixture, to a final concentration of 5 mM, to inhibit nitrite reductase activity in crude extracts (26).

The NADPH-cytochrome c reductase activity was assayed as described previously (4). Kinetic data were obtained with a Gilford model 2000 recording spectrophotometer. The nitrate reductase activity (EC 1.7.99.4) in E. coli extracts was assayed by the method of MacGregor et al. (16), using reduced methyl viologen as the electron donor and measuring the production of nitrite.

Activity units for all assays are reported as nanomoles of substrate transformed per minute. Cofactor activity unit is defined as the amount of cofactor that will reconstitute 1 U of nitrate reductase activity per 10 min of complementation incubation. Protein concentration was measured by the Coomassie brilliant blue G-250 BioRad protein assay, using gamma globulin as the standard.

Subcellular fractionation. For the subcellular localization experiments, the E. coli cells were disrupted with a French pressure cell, and the extract was clarified by centrifugation at 5,000 x g for 10 min (crude homogenate). Samples were centrifuged at 198,000 x g for 2 h. The resulting pellet was washed with homogenization buffer; then both the 198,000 x g supernatant and the resuspended pellet were centrifuged at 198,000 x g for an additional 1 h. The pellet was resuspended in homogenization buffer to the original volume, and all samples were assayed for cofactor activity.
activity and for reduced methyl viologen-nitrate reductase activity.

**Dialysis experiments.** The dialysis experiments were performed with dialysis tubing (flat width, 1 cm) which had been boiled in an EDTA solution and then washed. The dialysis sac containing the nit-1 extract was placed in a test tube containing E. coli extract and incubated at room temperature with stirring. Samples were removed from inside the sac at intervals and assayed for NADPH-nitrate reductase activity.

**Sephadex G-25 gel filtration.** The gel filtration experiments with Sephadex G-25 were performed by using Pharmacia PD-10 pre-poured columns according to the manufacturer’s directions. Each column had a bed volume of 9.1 ml and a bed height of 5 cm and was equilibrated with 10 mM phosphate buffer (pH 7.4) with 0.1 mM EDTA and eluted with the same buffer. Typically, a 2.5-ml sample volume was applied; the excluded volume fraction was 3.5 ml and the included volume fraction was 7 ml.

**Sucrose density gradient centrifugation.** Iso-kinetic sucrose gradients were prepared, and the sedimentation coefficients were calculated as described by McCarty et al. (12, 13). The gradients were prepared from 5 and 25% sucrose solutions in 0.1 M phosphate buffer (pH 7.4) with 0.1 mM EDTA and 1 mM dithiothreitol. The gradients were prepared and maintained at 4°C and were allowed to equilibrate for several hours before use. Samples of 100 to 300 µl were layered onto the gradients, which were centrifuged in a Beckman SW41 swinging-bucket rotor for 22 h at 41,000 rpm at 4°C. The gradients were fractionated by puncturing the bottom of the tubes and collecting the fractions by gravity. Catalase, nitrate reductase from wild-type Neurospora, and the NADPH-cytochrome c reductase from nit-1 extracts were used as standards for the calculation of sedimentation coefficients.

**Tungsten-185 incorporation studies.** The experiments for the incorporation of $^{185}$W into nitrate reductase formed by the complementation of $^{185}$WO₄²⁻-grown E. coli and nit-1 were performed as follows. The E. coli cultures were grown in 100 ml of molybdenum-free media to which 1 mCi of $^{185}$WO₄ (specific activity, 11.8 mCi/mg) was added. The cells were grown for 17 h at 37°C; they were then harvested and lysed as usual. A 6-ml amount of the E. coli extract was applied to Sephadex G-25 columns to remove unbound isotope, and the excluded fractions were used. Complementation of these fractions with 10 ml of nit-1 extract was allowed to proceed for 30 min at room temperature. No molybdate was added to the complementation mixture.

The NADPH-nitrate reductase formed by the complementation of nit-1 with the $^{185}$WO₄²⁻-containing E. coli extract was partially purified and concentrated by precipitation with 33 to 50% ammonium sulfate. The resulting pellet was desalted on Sephadex G-25, applied to six identical sucrose gradients, and then centrifuged at 41,000 rpm for 22 h. The fractions containing the $^{185}$W-nitrate reductase were pooled from each of the six gradients, concentrated by precipitation with 50% ammonium sulfate, and then desalted on Sephadex G-25. This sample was subjected to a subsequent sucrose gradient centrifugation and assayed. Samples of 0.1 to 0.25 ml from each fraction of the sucrose gradient were added to 5 ml of Aquasol-2 (New England Nuclear Corp.) and counted in a refrigerated Intertechnique SL-30 liquid scintillation counter.

**Analysis of molybdenum.** Samples were assayed for molybdenum on a Perkin-Elmer model 107 atomic absorption spectrophotometer fitted with a graphite atomizer (HGA model 2000).

**Materials.** NADPH, cytochrome c, methyl viologen, trypsin (type III), and chloramphenicol were purchased from Sigma Chemical Co. Pepsin and chymotrypsin were from Worthington Biochemicals Corp. Thermolysin was from Calbiochem. Sucrose was analytical reagent grade from Mallinckrodt. The dye reagents for the assay were from Bio-Rad Laboratories. All other chemicals were reagent grade. The radioactive $^{185}$W was purchased from New England Nuclear as sodium orthotungstate in 0.94 N sodium carbonate with 99% radionuclidic purity. The 2,000-molecular-weight cutoff dialysis tubing was Spectrum por membrane tubing no. 6 from Spectrum Medical Industries.

**RESULTS**

**Characterization of E. coli cofactor activity.** To optimize the complementation of E. coli extracts with nit-1, we examined the reaction conditions. As can be seen in Fig. 1, the complementation activity increased linearly with in-
creasing amounts of *E. coli* extract added to 50 µl of nit-i, until a saturation point was reached. All subsequent assays were carried out with an excess of the nit-i extract so that a quantitative determination of the amount of cofactor in the *E. coli* extract could be made. Complementation of nit-i with *E. coli* extracts increased linearly with time of incubation at room temperature for at least 20 min (Fig. 1, inset). Complementation was inhibited by high concentrations of phosphate. No complementation activity was detected when either nit-i or *E. coli* extract was excluded from the complementation mixture.

Complementation activity was observed when *E. coli* extracts were incubated with nit-i without additional molybdate in the complementation mixture, but activity was stimulated severalfold by the addition of molybdate (Fig. 2). No inhibition of activity was detected when 5 mM sodium tungstate was added in the presence of 1 mM molybdate to the complementation mixture.

The optimal temperature of the complementation assay was 23 to 30°C, with greatly decreased activity at 0°C (Table 1). Lack of complementation at 37°C reflects the heat lability of the nit-i extract. The cofactor activity in crude extracts of *E. coli* was stable at 37°C for 30 min.

No stimulation of complementing activity was observed when 80 to 400 µM NADPH was added to the complementation mixture. The addition of 4 µM flavin adenine dinucleotide (FAD), either with the NADPH or alone, had no effect.

To rule out the possibility that the nit-i homogenate was supplying an additional unidentified low-molecular-weight component which could stimulate complementation with *E. coli*, the nit-i extract was precipitated by 35 to 50% ammonium sulfate fractionation, chromatographed on Sephadex G-50, and then assayed. The nit-i extract was also fractionated by sucrose density centrifugation, and the 4.5S peak of nitrate reductase monomer was isolated and assayed. In both cases, the *E. coli* extract was still able to complement with the nit-i.

Based on the above findings, complementation assays with nit-i and *E. coli* extracts were routinely performed by mixing 5 to 20 µl of *E. coli* extract with 100 µl of nit-i extract for 10 min at room temperature with 8 mM sodium molybdate added to the reaction mixture. Samples of 20 to 50 µl were removed and assayed for NADPH-nitrate reductase activity.

To estimate the efficiency of the complementation of *E. coli* cofactor with nit-i, we mixed excess *E. coli* extract with nit-i extract and allowed the complementation to approach completion. Under these conditions, the specific activity of the reconstituted nitrate reductase was 13 nmol of NO₂⁻ formed/min per mg of nit-i protein. This value compares favorably with the specific activity of wild-type Neurospora nitrate reductase, which is 15 nmol of NO₂⁻ formed/min per mg of protein in crude extracts (2).

**Subcellular localization of cofactor**. The nitrate reductase in *E. coli* is a membrane-bound molybdoenzyme which functions under anaerobic conditions to use nitrate as the terminal electron acceptor in place of oxygen (24). To determine whether the *E. coli* nitrate reductase was the source of the molybdenum cofactor activity in the extracts, we performed a subcellular fractionation. The extract was centrifuged at 198,000 × g for 2 h to pellet the membrane fraction. The resulting supernatant and pellet were each assayed for nitrate reductase activity and for cofactor activity (Table 2). All of the cofactor activity that was initially found in the crude homogenate before centrifugation was removed in the 198,000 × g supernatant fraction. No cofactor activity was found in the washed pellet fraction, whereas 91% of the *E. coli* nitrate reductase activity was found in the pellet fraction. The *E. coli* nitrate reductase activity in extracts does not interfere with the assay for the NADPH-nitrate reductase which is the basis for the complementation since the former is unable to use NADPH as an electron donor.

### Table 1. Effect of temperature on complementation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Temp (°C)</th>
<th>Cofactor units/ml</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>223</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The *E. coli* extract was incubated with the nit-i for 10 min at the indicated temperature; then samples were removed and assayed for NADPH-nitrate reductase activity at room temperature.*
enzymes and exists either free or loosely bound in the *E. coli* extracts.

**Sephadex G-25 gel filtration.** Further experiments were performed to determine whether all the *E. coli* cofactor was present exclusively in the low-molecular-weight fraction in a dialyzable form. The *E. coli* extract was applied to a Sephadex G-25 column (PD-10), and the fractions from this column were assayed for cofactor activity. Cofactor activity was found in both the included and excluded fractions, but predominantly in the fractions corresponding to the excluded volume of the column (Table 3). This result could indicate that there are two pools of cofactor in the *E. coli* extract, a pool of dialyzable, low-molecular-weight cofactor and a pool of cofactor bound to a large-molecular-weight species which was excluded from the G-25. To test this hypothesis, a portion of the cofactor which eluted in the excluded volume of the G-25 column was either chromatographed on a second G-25 column or dialyzed against nit-1. The cofactor activity from the fraction which had been excluded on the first G-25 column again was found to partition in both the excluded and included fractions of the column (Table 3). In addition, the cofactor from this fraction was able

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**Table 2. Subcellular fractionation of *E. coli* extract**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fraction</th>
<th>Cofactor units/ml</th>
<th>MVH-NR/ml</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Crude homogenate</td>
<td>234</td>
<td>451</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>198,000 × g supernatant</td>
<td>262</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>198,000 × g pellet</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>394</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Reduction methyl viologen-nitrate reductase (MVH-NR) activity.
 b The 198,000 × g pellet was resuspended in buffer to the original volume of crude homogenate.

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**Fig. 3. Time course of formation of nitrate reductase during the dialysis of *E. coli* against nit-1.** Samples of the nit-1 extract were removed from the dialysis sac at intervals and assayed for NADPH nitrate reductase activity. Symbols: ●, control; ○, 1 mg of trypsin per ml added to the *E. coli* extract.

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**Table 3. Fractionation of cofactor activity on successive Sephadex G-25 columns**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Column</th>
<th>Cofactor units</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Applied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First</td>
<td>571</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second</td>
<td>284b</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Numbers in parentheses are percentages recovered.
 b From excluded fraction of first column.
to dialyze through a membrane to complement nit-1. These results indicate that the molybdenum cofactor is loosely associated with a macromolecule, but the association is easily disrupted by gel filtration or dialysis.

Since the dialysis of the cofactor across the membrane was stimulated by trypsin added to the E. coli extract, it was necessary to test whether the partition of the cofactor during G-25 gel filtration was due to a proteolytic enzyme in the crude extract which stimulated release of the cofactor from the carrier. To test this possibility, E. coli cells were homogenized in 10 mM phosphate buffer (pH 7.4) with 1 mM phenylmethylsulfonyl fluoride, a protease inhibitor. The extract was then applied to a G-25 column, as described previously. The partition of cofactor activity in the phenylmethylsulfonyl fluoride-treated extract was the same as in the control extract, indicating that proteolysis was probably not responsible for the separation of the cofactor from the carrier molecule.

Acid treatment. Ketchum et al. (7) found that it was necessary to acid-treat molybdenum enzymes to release the molybdenum cofactor for reconstitution with nit-1. E. coli extracts display significant cofactor activity without prior acid treatment, but extracts were acid-treated to determine whether additional cofactor activity could be released. The E. coli extracts were acidified with 0.1 N NaCl adjusted to pH 2 with HCl, incubated in ice for 2.5 min, and assayed. As can be seen in Table 4, no additional cofactor activity was released with acid treatment of extracts; in fact, substantial activity was lost. When the acid-treated extract was neutralized with NaOH and then applied to a G-25 column, cofactor activity again was found partitioned in both the excluded and included fractions, indicating that the release of molybdenum cofactor in E. coli did not require acid treatment, as is required with molybdoenzymes, and that the association between cofactor and carrier molecule was not disrupted by acid treatment. There was, however, a small increase in the proportion of the cofactor activity found in the included fraction. Possibly, some carrier protein was denatured by the acid treatment.

Further experiments in which E. coli extracts were incubated for 2 h with 0.1 N NaCl adjusted to various pH values with HCl or NaOH indicated that the cofactor activity in E. coli extracts was relatively stable from pH 3 to 11. Activity was sharply reduced below pH 3.

Estimation of size of active cofactor. In an attempt to estimate the size of the cofactor and the molecule it is associated with, E. coli extracts were subjected to sucrose density gra-

dient centrifugation, and each fraction from the gradient was assayed with nit-1 extract for complementing activity. Cofactor activity was found in a broad region, with a peak in the region of 3.5 to 4.3S.

When E. coli extracts were fractionated by Sephadex G-100 gel filtration chromatography, two peaks of cofactor activity were present (Fig. 4). There was a peak of cofactor activity in the large-molecular-weight fraction which eluted in the same region as ovalbumin (molecular weight, 40,000). The large-molecular-weight fraction of cofactor activity was polydisperse in both sucrose gradient centrifugation and gel filtration, which may indicate that cofactor was associated with carriers of different sizes or may reflect the fact that cofactor constantly comes off the carrier during fractionation. The second peak of cofactor activity was not associated with the major protein peak. When fractions from this peak were rechromatographed on a Sephadex G-25 column, cofactor activity was found exclusively in the included volume. When similar fractions were chromatographed on a Sephadex G-10 column, cofactor activity was eluted exclusively in the excluded volume. The molecular weight of the free cofactor was estimated to be

| Table 4. Sephadex G-25 fractionation of acid-treated E. coli extracts |
|----------------------|------------------|
| Fraction             | Cofactor units   |
| Crude extract        | 147              |
| Extract after acid treatment | 88              |
| Units of acid-treated extract applied to G-25 column | 197          |
| Excluded             | 81               |
| Included             | 116              |

![Fig. 4. Sephadex G-100 gel filtration of E. coli extract. A 1-ml amount of E. coli extract was applied to a column of Sephadex G-100 (1.5 by 47 cm) equilibrated in 10 mM phosphate buffer, pH 7.4, with 0.5 mM EDTA and 10 mM ascorbic acid. The arrow indicates the peak of elution of the ovalbumin marker.](http://jb.asm.org/Downloaded from http://jb.asm.org/ on July 6, 2017 by guest)
between 700 and 5,000 from the exclusion limits of Sephadex G-10 and Sephadex G-25.

**Stability of cofactor.** Pienkos et al. (21) reported the isolation of molybdenum cofactor from acid-treated xanthine oxidase and found that the isolated cofactor was oxygen labile. We compared the stability of the E. coli cofactor under aerobic and anaerobic conditions, using both the cofactor found in crude extracts, which would be associated with the carrier molecule, and the cofactor from the included fraction on gel filtration, which would be free from the carrier molecule. As can be seen in Table 5, the cofactor from the crude extract was more stable under all conditions than the cofactor which was free from protein. The cofactor from the crude extract was stable at 0°C when exposed to either aerobic or anaerobic conditions for 2 h. However, 42% of the cofactor activity was lost by incubation of the crude extract at 37°C in air, and anaerobic conditions offered some protection. On the other hand, the included fraction lost 40% of its cofactor activity after 2 h at 0°C under either aerobic or anaerobic conditions. At 37°C, however, anaerobic conditions offered significant protection from inactivation. From these data we conclude that the cofactor from E. coli is somewhat oxygen labile and that the carrier molecule stabilizes the cofactor from inactivation by heat or oxygen.

**Effect of molybdenum-free or tungsten-containing media on cofactor activity of E. coli.** It has been shown previously that Neurospora wild-type mycelia grown on tungsten-containing media can incorporate this metal into a cofactor which, when added to nit-1 extracts, led to the formation of an inactive, 7.9S species of nitrate reductase which contained tungsten (10). In the present studies, E. coli cultures were grown in various media to determine the conditions required for the formation of cofactor in the absence of molybdate. For these experiments, E. coli cells were grown in molybdenum-free media, transferred to fresh media with the various additions for 4 h, harvested, and assayed in either the presence or absence of molybdate in the complementation mixture (Table 6). Extracts from cells which were transferred to molybdenum-free or tungsten-containing media showed no cofactor activity when molybdate was omitted from the complementation mixture. However, the presence of molybdate in the complementation mixture led to the appearance of nitrate reductase activity. Even the E. coli cells which had been transferred to molybdenum-containing media showed a two- to threefold increase in cofactor activity when molybdate was added to the complementation mixture. Apparently cofactor synthesis occurred even when E. coli cells were grown in molybdenum-free or tungsten-supplemented media, and this molybdenum-free cofactor was subsequently activated by the addition of molybdate to the complementation mixture.

To determine whether molybdate could activate cofactor in vivo in the absence of protein synthesis, we transferred cells from molybdenum-free media to media with 1 mM molybdate plus chloramphenicol (200 µg/ml) to inhibit new protein synthesis. As can be seen in Table 6, no cofactor activity was detected in the sample exposed to molybdate in the presence of chloramphenicol when assayed without molybdate. However, when molybdate was added to the complementation assay, cofactor activity was detected. To determine whether chloramphenicol prevented the molybdate uptake, we assayed the molybdenum content of the extracts. Similar amounts of molybdenum were detected in extracts of cells exposed to molybdate alone or to molybdate plus chloramphenicol. In four similar experiments in which E. coli cultures were transferred to media with molybdate plus chloramphenicol, no cofactor activity was detected when assayed without molybdate.

### Table 5. Stability of E. coli molybdenum cofactor

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Incubation conditions</th>
<th>Cofactor units/ml</th>
<th>Crude extract</th>
<th>Included fraction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aerobic, 0°C, initial time</td>
<td>686</td>
<td>19.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aerobic, 0°C</td>
<td>668</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anaerobic, 0°C</td>
<td>658</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aerobic, 37°C</td>
<td>393</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anaerobic, 37°C</td>
<td>504</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The fractions were incubated for 2 h and then assayed for cofactor activity. The samples were made anaerobic by repeated purging with oxygen-free N₂ and then were sealed.

*The included fraction was obtained from G-100 gel filtration and was free from protein.

### Table 6. Molybdenum cofactor activity of E. coli exposed to various media

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Growth conditions</th>
<th>Cofactor units/mg of protein</th>
<th>Mo in extract (ng/mg of protein)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mo-free</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Na₂WO₄ (1 mM)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Na₂MoO₄ (1 mM)</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>1.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Na₂MoO₄ (1 mM) + chloramphenicol (200 µg/ml)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.88</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*E. coli cells were grown aerobically on molybdenum-free minimal media until late log phase; then the culture was divided into four aliquots and transferred to fresh minimal media with the various additions for 4 h.

*Assay conditions.
phenicol, no cofactor activity was detected in three experiments when the samples were assayed without molybdate; in one experiment, activity of less than 10% of the level in cells grown in medium containing no chloramphenicol was seen.

To investigate further whether the *E. coli* cofactor from extracts of cells grown in molybdenum-free or tungsten-containing media was associated with a carrier, cell-free extracts from *E. coli* exposed to the various media were chromatographed on Sephadex G-25 and assayed for cofactor activity (Table 7). The molybdenum cofactor activity from molybdenum-grown *E. coli* was found in both fractions on Sephadex G-25 chromatography; the molybdenum cofactor activity from *E. coli* grown in molybdenum-free media, tungsten-containing media, or media containing molybdate plus chloramphenicol was eluted in both the excluded and the included fractions. These samples were assayed with molybdate in the complementation mixture. These results indicate that the cofactor without molybdenum was not localized in a different type of cellular association than the molybdenum-containing cofactor.

**Sucrose gradient centrifugation.** It has been established that sucrose gradient centrifugation of nit-1 extract generates two peaks of NADPH-cytochrome c reductase activity: a 4.5S peak, which is the enzyme induced by nitrate and is FAD dependent, and an 11S peak which is constitutive, does not require FAD, and is unrelated to the nitrate reductase activity (23). Complementation of nit-1 with a source of molybdenum cofactor leads to a diminution of the 4.5S peak of NADPH-cytochrome c reductase activity and the concomitant appearance of a 7.9S peak displaying both NADPH-cytochrome c reductase and NADPH-nitrate reductase activities (17). The 7.9S peak of nitrate reductase was also formed by nit-1 complemented with *E. coli* extract, as reported previously (18).

To determine whether the presence of molybdenum or tungsten in the cofactor was a prereq-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Total cofactor units</th>
<th>Total cofactor units</th>
<th>Total cofactor units</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Applied</td>
<td>Excluded</td>
<td>Included</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mo-grown <em>E. coli</em></td>
<td>1,760</td>
<td>1,290 (75)*</td>
<td>426 (25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mo-free</td>
<td>590</td>
<td>349 (88)</td>
<td>44 (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W-grown</td>
<td>1,578</td>
<td>664 (41)</td>
<td>960 (59)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mo + chloramphenicol</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>73 (54)</td>
<td>62 (46)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Numbers in parentheses are percentages recovered.*

**Fig. 5. Sucrose density gradient centrifugation of extracts of molybdenum-free *E. coli* complemented with nit-1.** The NADPH-nitrate reductase activity was detected only after the fractions from the gradient had been incubated for 5 min with 1 mM sodium molybdate.
from still fractions of this, however, display NADPH-nitrate reductase activity after the addition of molybdate.

The question remained whether the cofactor present in extracts of tungsten-grown E. coli was devoid of metal or contained tungsten. To answer this, extracts from E. coli grown in media with $^{185}$W$_2$O$_4$ were used for complementation with nit-1, and a partially purified mixture was applied to sucrose gradients (Fig. 7). When the fractions from the gradient were assayed for nitrate reductase activity in the presence of molybdate, the peak of activity corresponded with some of the radioactivity (Fig. 7A). The fractions which corresponded to the nitrate reductase were pooled, concentrated, and centrifuged on another sucrose gradient. As can be seen in Fig. 7B, there was a single peak of radioactivity. When molybdate was added to the fractions from the gradient, the peak of NADPH-nitrate reductase activity coincided with the peak of $^{185}$W. In addition, when the above experiment was repeated including molybdate in the initial incubation of $^{185}$W$_2$O$_4$-grown E. coli extract with nit-1, radioactivity from tungsten was not associated with the nitrate reductase activity (not shown). These data show that the cofactor can incorporate tungsten and that tungsten-containing cofactor molecules can function to cause the dimerization of the nitrate reductase subunits in nit-1. However, the tungsten is loosely bound in this cofactor, as evidenced by the facts that (i) the incorporation of the $^{185}$W was very low compared to the amount of nitrate reductase present and (ii) the tungsten was easily replaced by molybdenum, as shown by the restoration of nitrate reductase when molybdate was added to the fractions from the gradients.

**DISCUSSION**

The molybdenum cofactor of E. coli was found in the soluble fraction of the cell extract. Acid treatment was not required for release of...
complementing activity. In cell-free extracts, regardless of growth and cell disruption conditions, the cofactor was associated with a large-molecular-weight carrier, which stabilized it considerably and from which it could be removed by dialysis or gel filtration. Although the nature of this carrier molecule is not yet known, the cofactor is clearly associated with a species of approximately 40,000 molecular weight during gel filtration on Sephadex G-100 and on sucrose gradient centrifugation. All attempts to purify the carrier molecule by conventional techniques failed because of the ease with which the cofactor dissociates from it. Whether or not the cofactor is specifically associated with a carrier molecule in vivo remains to be determined. Treatment of cell-free extracts with trypsin stimulated the appearance of dialyzable cofactor. Possibly trypsin, by hydrolyzing the carrier molecule, facilitates dissociation of the cofactor.

Nason et al. (18) and MacGregor and Schnaitman (14) tested extracts of E. coli for cofactor activity and found none in the soluble fraction, but did find some in extracts which had been acid-treated. These results differ from the data reported here for several reasons. Nason et al. used E. coli which had been grown in the absence of added molybdenum and did not add molybdate to the complementation mixture. Consequently, the pool of free molybdenum-containing cofactor may have been low, with the result that activity in the supernatant fraction was not detectable. Activity found after acid treatment correlated with the proportion of formate-nitrate reductase in the fractions assayed. Acid treatment of this membrane-associated enzyme would have released the molybdenum cofactor.

MacGregor and Schnaitman (14) assayed extracts of E. coli which had been grown anaerobically with nitrate. Under these conditions, the formate-nitrate reductase activity is maximally induced. Cofactor activity was detected only after acid treatment (molybdate was not added to the complementation mixture). This may reflect the high level of nitrate reductase formed under the growth conditions and depletion of the pool of free cofactor due to its incorporation into the enzyme.

Under the optimal growth and assay conditions reported here, we found 30-fold more complementing activity than reported previously in E. coli. A small amount of formate-nitrate reductase was present in our preparations. Although acid treatment made cofactor from this enzyme available, such treatment inactivated the large pool of soluble cofactor.

We found that the addition of molybdate to the complementation mixture increased the amount of nitrate reductase activity obtained. Lee et al. (11) also reported that the addition of molybdate to the complementation mixtures containing nit-1 and acid-treated molybdoenzymes stimulated the complementation. They suggested that the added molybdate stabilized the cofactor and compensated for the metal lost from the cofactor on aging. However, even when E. coli cells were grown in media containing 1 mM molybdate, freshly prepared extracts were stimulated by the addition of molybdate to the complementation mixture. The molybdenum may indeed be in a labile association with the cofactor and require additional molybdate for stabilization. Alternatively, a pool of molybdenum-free cofactor may exist in E. coli in vivo.

Previously reported results have shown that Neurospora, grown in molybdenum-deficient or tungsten-containing media, synthesized an inactive nitrate reductase that sedimented at 7.8S (25). Lee et al. (10), using extracts of tungsten-grown wild-type Neurospora to complement nit-1, also observed an inactive, 7.9S nitrate reductase. Our results with empty cofactor and tungsten-containing cofactor correlate with these results and, in addition, show that the cofactor alone is the functional element which unites the subunits supplied by nit-1. Neither molybdenum nor tungsten is necessary for the cofactor to supply that function.

Our results, however, differ from those mentioned above in one aspect. The inactive nitrate reductase formed in vivo by growth of Neurospora on molybdenum-deficient media could not be activated by addition of molybdate to cell-free extracts (25). We found that the 7.9S species of nitrate reductase, formed by complementation using empty or tungsten-containing cofactor, could be activated by the addition of molybdate.

It is important to note that the cofactor in E. coli is synthesized constitutively, as was reported for the cofactor from Neurospora (17) and Aspergillus (3). It is synthesized under conditions in which the formate-nitrate reductase of E. coli is not induced and is also synthesized in the absence of molybdenum. This stands in contrast to the regulation of the molybdenum cofactor (FeMoco) of nitrogenase, which has been found only in acid-treated extracts of nitrogenase and whose synthesis is repressed by ammonia (21).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research was supported by Public Health Service training grant 5T32ES07002 and grant GM00091 from the National Institutes of Health.
LITERATURE CITED


