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Light-Responsive Capture and Release of DNA in a Ternary Supramolecular Complex**

Siva Krishna Mohan Nalluri, Jens Voskuhl, Jelle B. Bulicma, Egbert J. Boekema, and Bart Jan Ravoo*

One of the main advances in supramolecular chemistry has been the progress from the general principles of molecular recognition and self-assembly to applications in medicine and material sciences. The correction of genetic defects and disorders by gene therapy is an important challenge in modern medicine. Cationic amphiphiles,[1] polymers,[2] and dendrimers[3] have been investigated for their propensity to transfect DNA and RNA in the form of nanoscale “lipoplexes” and “polyplexes”. Several approaches have been proposed to develop transfection agents which also include a release mechanism, such as release triggered by a change in pH,[4] the reduction of disulfides,[5] and the light-induced dissociation of covalent bonds.[6]

The light-induced release of DNA or RNA from a carrier system is a most elegant way to combine efficiency, mild conditions, and the absence of any additives. Photolabile esters can easily be dissociated upon irradiation at 350 nm.[6,7] On the other hand, also noncovalent complexes can be light-sensitive. Azobenzenes constitute a well-known class of light-responsive compounds that can be reversibly isomerized from cis to trans form by irradiation at 350 nm and from cis to trans form by irradiation at 455 nm. The inclusion of azobenzene as a guest into a cyclodextrin host is light-responsive: the rodlike and apolar trans isomer forms a stable inclusion complex with α-cyclodextrin (α-CD) as well as with β-cyclodextrin (β-CD), while the bent and polar cis isomer does not fit in either CD. The light-controlled molecular recognition of CDs with azobenzenes has been used to develop light-responsive hydrogels,[8] molecular shuttles,[9] micelles and vesicles,[10] surfaces,[11] and drug-delivery vehicles.[12]

Herein, we report the self-assembly of a ternary supramolecular system based on a light-responsive azobenzene–spermine conjugate 2, and DNA.

Azobenzene–spermine conjugate 2 binds to CD vesicles through inclusion of the hydrophobic trans-azobenzene group and to negatively charged DNA through an electrostatic interaction of the positively charged spermine unit. The surface of the CD vesicles decorated with conjugate trans-2 displays multiple protonated spermine groups and thus exhibits high-affinity multivalent DNA binding. A ternary complex (“supramolecular lipoplex”) is formed between CD vesicles, conjugate trans-2, and DNA through multiple noncovalent interactions. Upon UV irradiation, trans-2 isomerizes to cis-2, and conjugate cis-2 detaches from the vesicle surface. As a consequence, the multivalent display of spermine groups is disrupted and the resulting low-affinity monovalent spermine units readily dissociate from the DNA. Hence, the ternary supramolecular complex disassembles and DNA is effectively released upon UV irradiation. Furthermore, upon visible-light irradiation, the conjugate cis-2
isomerizes back to trans-2 and the ternary complex is formed again. The light-responsive ternary complex is illustrated in Figure 1.

Amphiphilic α-CD 1a and β-CD 1b were synthesized as reported previously. Unilamellar CD bilayer vesicles with a diameter of 100–150 nm were prepared in buffer at pH 7.2 by extrusion. Conjugate 2 was synthesized as reported in the Supporting Information. The reversible photoisomerization of conjugate 2 is shown in Figures S1 and S2 in the Supporting Information. The interaction of conjugate trans-2 with α-CD and β-CD was measured by using isothermal titration calorimetry (ITC). It was found that trans-2 forms inclusion complexes with α-CD (Kₐ ≈ 6 × 10⁸ M⁻¹) as well as with β-CD (Kₐ ≈ 4 × 10⁸ M⁻¹). The ITC data are summarized in Table S1 in the Supporting Information.

The ternary supramolecular system of α-CD 1a, conjugate trans-2, and single-stranded DNA (ssDNA) was investigated in particular detail. The optical density (OD600) of a solution of vesicles of α-CD 1a at a concentration of 30 μM is less than 0.05. When conjugate trans-2 is added to vesicles of α-CD 1a, there is no change in either the OD600 or the average vesicle diameter (Figure 2A and 3A). However, the ζ-potential of the vesicles increases from roughly −26 mV in the absence of guest[15] to about +11 mV upon addition of trans-2 (Figure 3C), indicating that the surface of the CD vesicles displays a high density of positively charged spermine groups. When 50-mer ssDNA is added to the binary mixture of vesicles of α-CD 1a and conjugate trans-2, the OD600 increases from approximately 0.05 to 0.9 within 30 min (Figure 2A). According to dynamic light-scattering (DLS) measurements, the average particle size increases to more than 1000 nm (Figure 3A). These observations indicate that rapid aggregation of vesicles occurs in the ternary complex of vesicles 1a, conjugate trans-2, and ssDNA. In every other combination (i.e. absence of vesicles of 1a, absence of conjugate 2, and/or absence of ssDNA), no aggregation was observed (see Figure S4 in the Supporting Information). Furthermore, the ζ-potential of the ternary complex is approximately +0.4 mV (Figure 3C). The near-neutral ζ-potential of the ternary complex indicates that positively charged spermine-decorated vesicles and negatively charged DNA aggregate upon charge neutralization. Indeed the rate and extent of formation of the ternary complex is dependent on the surface coverage of positively charged spermine moieties at the vesicle surface. If less conjugate trans-2 is added to the vesicles of α-CD 1a, the surface density of trans-2 will be lower and hence the vesicles interact more slowly with ssDNA and it takes longer before the aggregation reaches a maximum OD600 (Figure 2A). The maximum OD600 was plotted against the concentration of trans-2 and the overall positive (P)/negative (N) charge ratio in the ternary system. The P/N ratio was calculated by assuming that there are 3 positive charges per trans-2 and 50 negative charges for each 50-mer ssDNA. As shown in Figure 2B, aggregation has a threshold P/N ratio close to 1.0.

Figure 1. The light-responsive formation and dissociation of a ternary complex of vesicles of composed of CD (α-CD 1a or β-CD 1b), azobenzene–spermine conjugate trans-2, and DNA (50-mer single-stranded DNA (ssDNA) or salmon testes double-stranded DNA (dsDNA) consisting of 2000 base pairs).

Figure 2. Formation of a ternary complex of vesicles of α-CD 1a, conjugate trans-2, and 50-mer ssDNA. A) Time-dependent measurement of OD600. B) Maximum OD600 versus concentration of trans-2 and P/N charge ratio. Concentrations: [1a] = 30 μM and [ssDNA] = 1.6 μM in aqueous buffer (2 mM HEPES and 10 μM EDTA at pH 7.2).
The critical role of charge neutralization was confirmed by the fact that the addition of excess spermine·4HCl (50 mM) leads to an immediate dissociation of the ternary complex: excess spermine screens the electrostatic interaction and in addition may act as a competitive monovalent binder to DNA (see Figure S5 in the Supporting Information). Also the addition of enzyme DNase I (30 U/ml) leads to slow dissociation of the ternary complex (see Figure S5 in the Supporting Information). This observation can be explained by the fact that the ternary complex dissociates upon enzymatic hydrolysis of the captured DNA.

Most interestingly, UV irradiation of the ternary complex of vesicles of α-CD 1a, conjugate trans-2, and 50-mer ssDNA at 350 nm for 40 min decreases both the OD600 from roughly 0.52 to 0.12 and the average particle size from more than 1000 nm to about 200 nm (Figure 3A,B). The ζ-potential of the remaining particles decreases from approximately +0.4 mV to ~20.6 mV (Figure 3C). UV irradiation induces the photoisomerization of trans-2 to cis-2 (see Figures S1 and S2) and the OD600, DLS and ζ-potential measurements consistently indicate that the ternary system dissociates into its components (CD vesicles, cis-2, and ssDNA) upon UV irradiation. As shown in Figure 3B, the dissociation of the ternary complex occurs within the first 20 min of UV irradiation. The negative surface potential of the ternary system after UV irradiation can be ascribed to the fact that the positively charged spermine groups of cis-2 dissociate from the surface of the vesicles, since only trans-azobenzenes form inclusion complexes with α-CD. As a consequence, the spermine groups are no longer displayed in a high-affinity multivalent arrangement, and they readily dissociate from the DNA since monovalent binding is insignificant at these concentrations.[16] The negatively charged vesicles do not bind to negatively charged ssDNA because of electrostatic repulsion. We conclude that ssDNA is released from the vesicle surface upon UV irradiation of the ternary system.

Upon subsequent irradiation of the ternary system of vesicles of α-CD 1a, conjugate cis-2, and ssDNA with visible light at 455 nm for 40 min (to convert cis-2 to trans-2), both the OD600 increases from approximately 0.14 to 0.53 and the average particle size increases from roughly 200 nm to more than 1000 nm (Figure 3A,B). The ζ-potential increases from about ~20.6 mV to ~4.4 mV (Figure 3C). The OD600, DLS, and ζ-potential measurements consistently indicate that the ternary complex of vesicles of 1a, conjugate trans-2, and ssDNA reassembles upon visible-light irradiation. In other words, the light-induced formation and dissociation of the ternary complex is reversible and thus allows the light-responsive capture and release of low-molecular-weight DNA. The reversibility of the light-induced formation of the ternary complex is quantitative over two cycles provided.

The critical role of charge neutralization was confirmed by the fact that the addition of excess spermine·4HCl (50 mM) leads to an immediate dissociation of the ternary complex: excess spermine screens the electrostatic interaction and in addition may act as a competitive monovalent binder to DNA (see Figure S5 in the Supporting Information). Also the addition of enzyme DNase I (30 U/ml) leads to slow dissociation of the ternary complex (see Figure S5 in the Supporting Information). This observation can be explained by the fact that the ternary complex dissociates upon enzymatic hydrolysis of the captured DNA.

Most interestingly, UV irradiation of the ternary complex of vesicles of α-CD 1a, conjugate trans-2, and 50-mer ssDNA at 350 nm for 40 min decreases both the OD600 from roughly 0.52 to 0.12 and the average particle size from more than 1000 nm to about 200 nm (Figure 3A,B). The ζ-potential of the remaining particles decreases from approximately +0.4 mV to ~20.6 mV (Figure 3C). UV irradiation induces the photoisomerization of trans-2 to cis-2 (see Figures S1 and S2) and the OD600, DLS and ζ-potential measurements consistently indicate that the ternary system dissociates into its components (CD vesicles, cis-2, and ssDNA) upon UV irradiation. As shown in Figure 3B, the dissociation of the ternary complex occurs within the first 20 min of UV irradiation. The negative surface potential of the ternary system after UV irradiation can be ascribed to the fact that the positively charged spermine groups of cis-2 dissociate from the surface of the vesicles, since only trans-azobenzenes form inclusion complexes with α-CD. As a consequence, the spermine groups are no longer displayed in a high-affinity multivalent arrangement, and they readily dissociate from the DNA since monovalent binding is insignificant at these concentrations.[16] The negatively charged vesicles do not bind to negatively charged ssDNA because of electrostatic repulsion. We conclude that ssDNA is released from the vesicle surface upon UV irradiation of the ternary system.

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Most interestingly, UV irradiation of the ternary complex of vesicles of α-CD 1a, conjugate trans-2, and 50-mer ssDNA
that the irradiation time is sufficient (40 min at 350 nm and 40 min at 455 nm), the vesicle concentration is limited to 30 μM (so that the maximum OD600 is about 0.5), and the concentration of ssDNA is approximately 2.0 μM.

In the same way, experiments were performed with vesicles of β-CD 1b (instead of α-CD 1a). The inclusion complexes of trans-2 with α-CD and β-CD are of comparable stability (see Table S1 in the Supporting Information), and the addition of conjugate trans-2 and 50-mer ssDNA to vesicles of β-CD 1b leads to the formation of a light-responsive ternary supramolecular complex (see Figure S6 in the Supporting Information). Also in this case, electrostatic complexation has a threshold P/N ratio close to 1.0. Light-induced formation and dissociation of the ternary complex is quantitatively reversible and thus allows the light-responsive capture and release of DNA.

Also the interaction of CD vesicles (α-CD 1a as well as β-CD 1b), conjugate trans-2, and double-stranded (ds) DNA consisting of 2000 base pairs (instead of 50-mer ssDNA) resulted in the formation of ternary complexes (see Figures S7 and S8 in the Supporting Information). The average particle size increases to more than 1000 nm. Complex formation has a threshold P/N ratio close to 1.0. The P/N ratio was estimated by assuming that there are 3 positive charges per trans-2 and 4000 negative charges per dsDNA. The ζ-potential of the ternary complex is close to neutral. The ζ-potential from about −15.4 mV. The decrease of ζ-potential from a high-affinity multivalent display to a low-affinity monovalent binding mode. We envisage that the incorporation of selective target ligands at the surface of vesicles[134] along with the light-responsive conjugates could make these systems versatile for the capture, delivery, and release of molecular-weight DNA and RNA to target cells for gene therapy.

In summary, a light-responsive ternary complex is formed by self-assembly of three components: vesicles of amphiphilic CDs, azobenzene–spermene conjugates trans-2, and 50-mer ssDNA. The photoisomerization of azobenzene leads to a light-responsive capture and release of ssDNA. The key innovation in this ternary system is a light-induced switch from a high-affinity multivalent display to a low-affinity monovalent binding mode. We envisage that the incorporation of selective target ligands at the surface of vesicles[134] along with the light-responsive conjugates could make these systems versatile for the capture, delivery, and release of molecular-weight DNA and RNA to target cells for gene therapy.

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Upon UV irradiation, a photostationary state with roughly 20% remaining trans-2 is obtained (see the Supporting Information). It can be estimated that in a charge-neutral complex, ssDNA will only carry a few residual units of trans-2 (i.e. too little for multivalent interaction), whereas dsDNA will carry many hundreds of units of residual trans-2 (i.e. more than enough for multivalent interaction).