

Proteolytic cleavage of protein kinase C μ upon induction of apoptosis in U937 cells

Identification of the cleavage site and characterization of the fragment

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Received 27 October 1999

Edited by Julio Celis

Abstract Treatment of U937 cells with various apoptosis-inducing agents, such as TNF α and β -D-arabinofuranosylcytosine (ara-C) alone or in combination with the phorbol ester 12-O-tetradecanoylphorbol-13-acetate (TPA), bryostatin 1 or cycloheximide, causes proteolytic cleavage of protein kinase C μ (PKC μ) between the regulatory and catalytic domain, generating a 62 kDa catalytic fragment of the kinase. The formation of this fragment is effectively suppressed by the caspase-3 inhibitor Z-DEVD-FMK. In accordance with these *in vivo* data, treatment of recombinant PKC μ with caspase-3 *in vitro* results also in the generation of a 62 kDa fragment (p62). Treatment of several aspartic acid to alanine mutants of PKC μ with caspase-3 resulted in an unexpected finding. PKC μ is not cleaved at one of the typical cleavage sites containing the motif DXXD but at the atypical site CQND^{378/379}. The respective fragment (amino acids 379–912) was expressed in bacteria as a GST fusion protein (GST-p62) and partially purified. In contrast to the intact kinase, the fragment does not respond to the activating cofactors TPA and phosphatidylserine and is thus unable to phosphorylate substrates effectively.

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Key words: Protein kinase C μ ; Apoptosis; Caspase-3; Caspase-3 inhibitor; Cleavage site; Proteolytic fragment

1. Introduction

Human protein kinase C (PKC) μ (and its mouse homolog PKD) is a phospholipid-dependent, Ca²⁺-independent serine/threonine protein kinase which, like the c- and η -type PKC isozymes (for reviews, see [1–5]), is stimulated by diacylglycerol (DAG) or phorbol esters but differs from the other PKCs in some structural and enzymatic properties [6–13]. PKC μ contains a pleckstrin homology (PH) domain, two unique amino-terminal hydrophobic domains and it lacks the typical pseudosubstrate motif. Moreover, PKC μ fails to phosphorylate several PKC substrates and to be inhibited by a PKC

specific inhibitor. Also, the mechanism of activation of PKC μ appears to be different from that of the other DAG-activated PKCs. The cysteine-rich regions [14], the PH domain [15] and possibly an acidic domain [16,17] might play a role in the induction or suppression of PKC μ activity. In contrast to other PKCs [18–22], the role of phosphorylation of PKC μ for catalytic competence and activity of the kinase is not known. It has been suggested, however, that PKC μ is phosphorylated and activated by other members of the PKC family [23]. The cellular functions of PKC μ are not clear yet.

The activation of the caspase system is a critical event in apoptosis [24–26]. A number of signal transduction kinases, including several PKC isoenzymes, are subject to caspase-mediated breakdown. This results in the production of a catalytically active fragment of some kinases, whereas several other kinases are inactivated. For example, degradation upon induction of apoptosis of MEKK-1 [27–29], PKN [30], PKC δ [31–33], PKC ϵ [33] and PKC θ [33] generates an active fragment each, whereas Raf-1 [34], Akt [34] and PKC ζ [35] are inactivated during apoptosis. This is consistent with a model proposing the existence of pro-apoptotic and anti-apoptotic (pro-survival) kinases that are activated and inactivated, respectively, upon induction of apoptosis. Here, we show that, similarly to other PKCs, PKC μ undergoes specific proteolytic cleavage by caspases-3 upon induction of apoptosis in U937 cells, resulting in a 62 kDa catalytic fragment (p62).

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Reagents

12-O-Tetradecanoylphorbol-13-acetate (TPA) was supplied by Dr. E. Hecker, German Cancer Research Center (Heidelberg, Germany), and Gö6983 by Goedecke AG (Freiburg, Germany). Bryostatin 1 was provided by Dr. G.R. Pettit, State University of Arizona (Tempe, AZ, USA). Syntide 2 was synthesized by Dr. R. Pipkorn, German Cancer Research Center (Heidelberg, Germany). Recombinant PKC μ was expressed in a baculovirus-infected insect cell system as described previously [36].

Other materials were bought from the following companies: active human recombinant caspase-3 from Pharmingen (Hamburg, Germany); caspase-3 inhibitor Z-DEVD-FMK from Calbiochem (Schwalbach, Germany); bovine brain L- α -phosphatidylserine (PS), cycloheximide and β -D-arabinofuranosylcytosine (ara-C) from Sigma (Munich, Germany); [γ -³²P]ATP (specific activity, 5000 Ci/mmol) from Hartmann Analytic (Braunschweig, Germany); L-[³⁵S]methionine (specific activity, 1000 Ci/mmol) from Amersham Buchler

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Abbreviations: PKC, protein kinase C; TPA, 12-O-tetradecanoylphorbol-13-acetate; PS, L- α -phosphatidylserine; ara-C, β -D-arabinofuranosylcytosine; SDS, sodium dodecyl sulfate; PAGE, polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis

(Braunschweig, Germany); PKC μ specific polyclonal antibody sc-639 from Santa Cruz Biotechnology (Santa Cruz) and alkaline phosphatase-conjugated goat antibodies from Dianova (Hamburg, Germany); K252a from Fluka Chemie A.G. (Neu-Ulm, Germany); thrombin from Amersham Pharmacia (Freiburg, Germany); leupeptin and aprotinin from Roche Diagnostic (Mannheim, Germany).

2.2. Cell culture

Human U937 myeloid leukemia cells were grown in RPMI 1640 medium supplemented with 10% fetal bovine serum, 100 U/ml penicillin, 100 μ g/ml streptomycin and 2 mM L-glutamine. Cells were treated with various agents as indicated in the figure legends.

2.3. Preparation of cell extracts and immunoprecipitation

Cells were washed twice with phosphate-buffered saline (PBS) and stored at -75°C . Upon thawing, they were resuspended in lysis buffer (20 mM Tris-HCl, pH 7.5, 10 μ g/ml aprotinin and 10 μ g/ml leupeptin). The cell suspension was kept on ice for 30 min. Upon centrifugation at $100\,000\times g$ for 35 min, the supernatant (cell extract) was used for immunoprecipitation. The cell extract (1.5 mg protein) was incubated with 14 μ g/ml of the anti-PKC μ antibody sc-639 in lysis buffer containing 150 mM NaCl (total volume 1 ml) at 4°C for 1.5 h and subsequently with 30 μ l of protein-A-agarose at 4°C for 2 h. The precipitate was dissolved in 80 μ l phosphorylation buffer and phosphorylated as described below under Section 2.8.

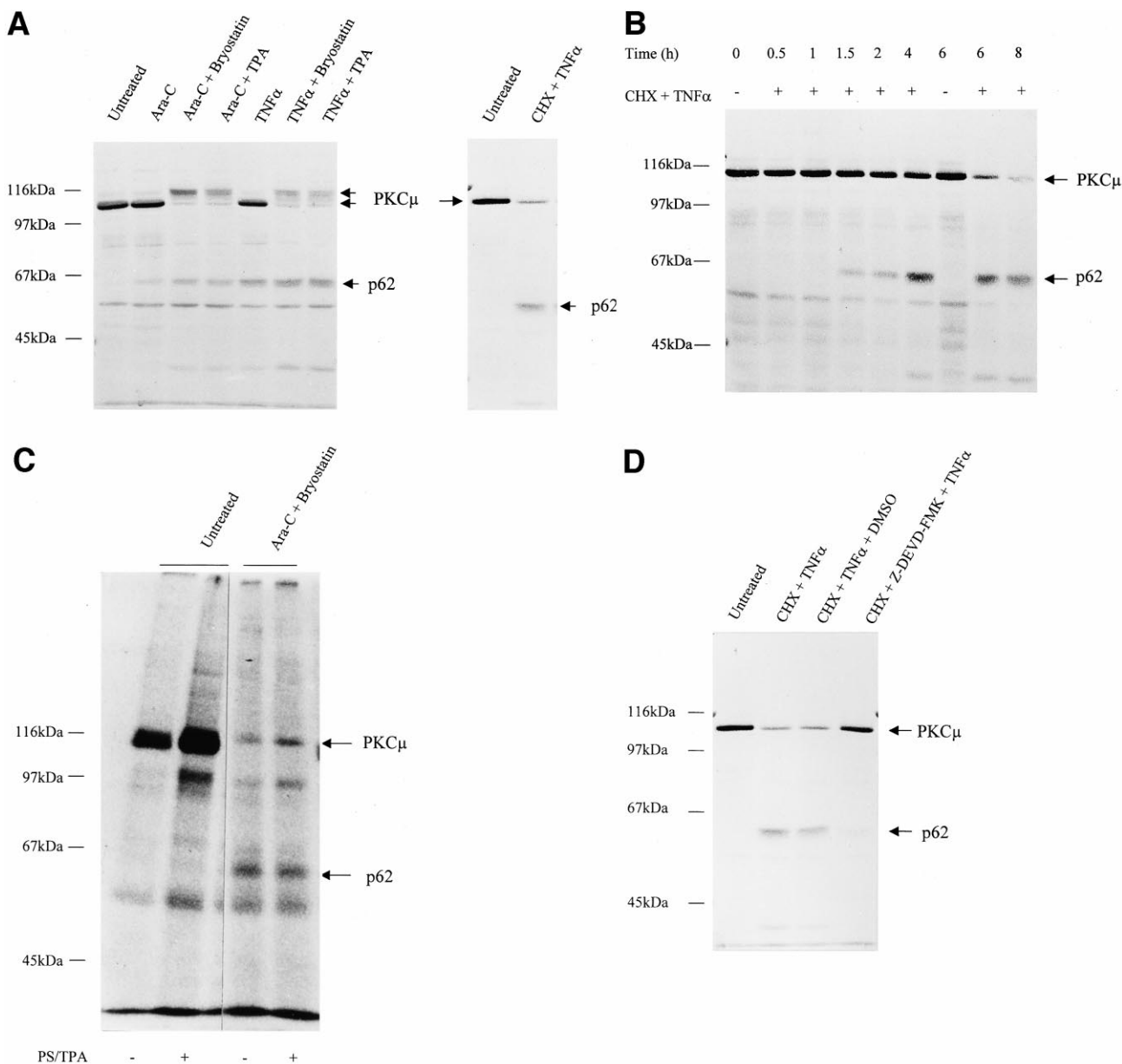


Fig. 1. Proteolytic cleavage of PKC μ in U937 cells upon treatment with various apoptosis-inducing agents. A: U937 cells remained untreated or were treated for 6 h with 10 μ M ara-C alone or together with 300 nM TPA or 300 nM bryostatin or with 50 ng/ml TNF α alone or together with TPA or bryostatin (300 nM each). In another experiment, U937 cells were pretreated with 5 μ g/ml cycloheximide (CHX) for 30 min and then treated with 50 ng/ml TNF α for 6 h. Cells were washed twice with PBS, resuspended in sample buffer and analyzed by SDS-PAGE. PKC μ and its fragment p62 (see arrows) were detected by immunoblotting using the PKC μ specific antibody sc-639 raised against a C-terminal peptide of PKC μ . B: Cycloheximide (CHX) and TNF α were applied to the cells as above for various times. PKC μ and p62 were visualized by immunoblotting (see arrows). C: Cells remained untreated or were treated with ara-C plus bryostatin as in A. Cell extracts were immunoprecipitated and the precipitates phosphorylated in the absence or presence of PS/TPA and applied to SDS-PAGE as described in the Section 2. Phosphorylated PKC μ and p62 were visualized by autoradiography (see arrows). D: Upon pretreatment with 5 μ g/ml cycloheximide (CHX, 30 min), cells were treated for 6 h either with 50 ng/ml TNF α alone, TNF α plus 40 μ l of the solvent DMSO or TNF α plus 100 μ M caspase-3 inhibitor Z-DEVD-FMK in 40 μ l DMSO. Preparation and processing of cell extracts were as in A.

2.4. Cleavage of recombinant PKC μ with caspase-3

Ten microliters of recombinant PKC μ was incubated with and without 16 μ g/ml recombinant caspase-3 at 37°C for 15 min and the reaction products were analyzed by immunoblotting or phosphorylated as described below under Section 2.8 and analyzed by sodium dodecyl sulfate-polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis (SDS-PAGE) (7.5%) and autoradiography of the gels.

2.5. In vitro translation of PKC μ wild-type and mutants

The PKC μ mutants (D391/A), (D349/A), (D388/A, D391/A), (D386/A), (D384/A) and (D378/A) were generated in two stages using the 'overlap extension' method as described previously [21]. [³⁵S]Methionine-labelled proteins (PKC μ wild-type and mutants) were synthesized by coupled transcription and translation reaction using the 'TNT Coupled Reticulocyte Lysate System' (Promega). Labelled proteins were incubated with and without 16 μ g/ml caspase-3 at 37°C for 15 min. Reaction products were analyzed by SDS-PAGE (7.5%) and autoradiography of the gels.

2.6. Bacterial expression of recombinant GST-p62

The p62 fragment of PKC μ (amino acid residues 379–912) was amplified from the full-length PKC μ cDNA, cloned into the bacterial expression plasmid pGEX-2T (Pharmacia), expressed as a GST fusion protein and purified by affinity chromatography on glutathione beads. This construct is termed GST-p62. Primers used to amplify this region were 5'-GGGGGATCCAGTGGCGAGATGCAAGATCCAGACCA and 5'-GGGGAATTCAGAGGATGCTGACACGCTCACCAGAGGCTT. The GST fusion protein of the fragment 392–912 was prepared in a similar way. GST was removed by treating the fusion proteins with 5 U/ml thrombin at room temperature for 2 h.

2.7. Protein kinase assay

Phosphorylation reactions with syntide 2 as substrate were carried out as described previously [12].

2.8. Autophosphorylation and phosphorylation of aldolase

Phosphorylation reactions were performed essentially as described for the protein kinase assay [12], but 37 μ M ATP containing 8 instead of 1 μ Ci [γ -³²P]ATP was added. Moreover, the substrate was omitted (autophosphorylation) or aldolase (5 μ g) was added instead of syntide 2 as a substrate. Proteins of the reaction mixture were separated by SDS-PAGE and visualized by autoradiography.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Generation of a 62 kDa fragment of PKC μ in vivo and in vitro

We noticed that between the regulatory and catalytic domain, human PKC μ contains two cleavage motifs of the classical type DXXD for the cysteinyl aspartate specific protease caspase-3. Therefore, we became interested in the question whether induction of apoptosis and, in this context, activation of caspase-3 might result in a specific fragmentation of PKC μ .

U937 cells were treated with ara-C or TNF α , i.e. agents known to induce apoptosis in these cells [37–39]. These treatments resulted in the generation of a PKC μ fragment with an apparent molecular weight of 62 kDa (p62), as demonstrated by immunoblotting using an antibody directed against a C-terminal peptide of PKC μ (Fig. 1A). The addition of bryostatin or TPA as well as the pretreatment for 30 min with cycloheximide augmented the effect of both agents on the fragmentation of PKC μ (Fig. 1A). Bryostatin and TPA alone were inactive in this respect (not shown). However, as previously described [13], these compounds caused a mobility shift of PKC μ , indicating its activation and (auto)phosphorylation. The combined effect of cycloheximide and TNF α was observed as early as 1.5 h upon treatment and reached a maximum at around 6 h (Fig. 1B). The fragment p62 was still able to autophosphorylate (Fig. 1C). In contrast to the intact

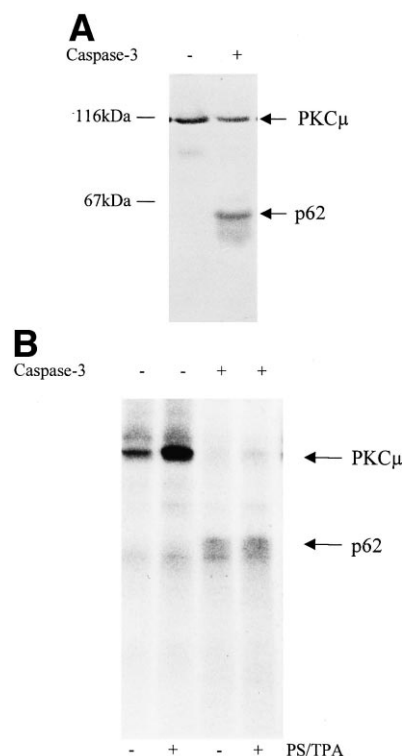


Fig. 2. Proteolytic cleavage of recombinant PKC μ by treatment with caspase-3 in a cell-free system. A: Ten microliters of recombinant PKC μ (a c-myc epitope-tagged PKC μ expressed in baculovirus-infected insect cells, see [36]) was incubated with or without 16 μ g/ml caspase-3 at 37°C for 15 min. Upon SDS-PAGE, PKC μ and its fragment p62 were visualized by immunoblotting (see arrows). B: Recombinant PKC μ was treated as in A. Subsequently, the mixture was phosphorylated in the absence or presence of 10 μ g PS and 100 nM TPA as described in Section 2. Phosphorylated PKC μ and p62 were visualized by autoradiography (see arrows).

PKC μ , however, its autophosphorylation could not be increased by PS/TPA.

The peptide Z-DEVD-FMK, an inhibitor of caspase-3, suppressed the TNF α /cycloheximide-induced cleavage of PKC μ (Fig. 1D), indicating that caspase-3 is the responsible enzyme. This conclusion was supported by the exclusive formation of a 62 kDa fragment upon treatment of recombinant PKC μ from baculovirus-infected insect cells in a cell-free system with caspase-3 for 15 min (Fig. 2A). Like the p62 fragment found in cells, the fragment produced by caspase-3 in vitro showed autophosphorylation that did not respond to PS/TPA (Fig. 2B). Another fragment of about 35 kDa was found only in vivo (Fig. 1A,B) but not in the cell-free system (Fig. 2A), indicating that it was not due to cleavage by caspase-3.

3.2. Identification of the cleavage site of PKC μ for caspase-3

To identify the caspase-3 cleavage site, we produced various aspartic acid to alanine mutants of PKC μ using an in vitro transcription/translation system and treated the cell extracts thus obtained with caspase-3. The proteolytic cleavage was determined by autoradiography of the ³⁵S-labelled proteins upon SDS-PAGE (Fig. 3). PKC μ contains a typical caspase-3 cleavage motif, i.e. D³⁸⁸HED³⁹¹, which upon cleavage at D³⁹¹/A³⁹² would give rise to a 62 kDa fragment. However, the D391A and D391A/D388A mutants were cleaved by caspase-3 as effectively as the wild-type (Fig. 3). Mutation of

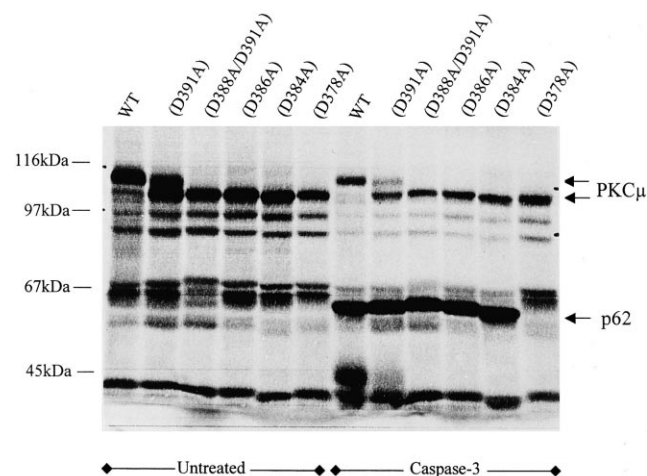


Fig. 3. Proteolytic cleavage of in vitro transcribed/translated PKC μ wild-type (WT) and mutants by caspase-3. PKC μ wild-type and mutants were synthesized in an in vitro transcription/translation system as described in Section 2. Various aspartic acid residues (D) were mutated to alanine (A) as indicated. The ^{35}S -labelled proteins were incubated with or without 16 μg caspase-3 at 37°C for 15 min. Upon SDS-PAGE, labelled proteins were visualized by autoradiography. PKC μ and p62 are indicated by arrows. In some experiments, a slower migrating form of PKC μ (possibly phosphorylated) is visible that has been observed previously [13].

another potential cleavage site for caspase-3, i.e. D 349 /S 350 , was equally ineffective (not shown). Therefore, we mutated other aspartic acid residues in this region, i.e. D 378 , D 384 and D 386 , even though these are atypical cleavage sites for caspase-3. Whereas mutation of D 384 and D 386 to alanine did not affect cleavage, the D 378 /A mutant was completely resistant to caspase-3 (Fig. 3). This demonstrated that PKC μ is cleaved by caspase-3 at the atypical site CQND 378 /S 379 . Atypical cleavage sites for caspase-3 have been reported previously [40–42].

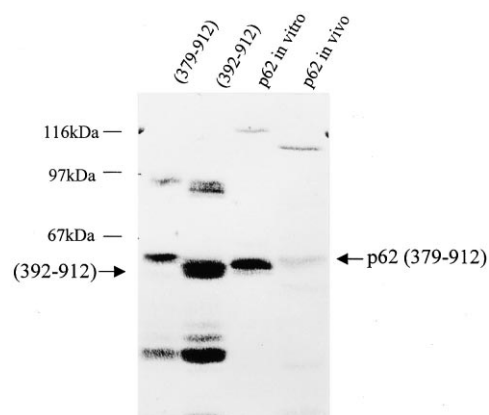


Fig. 4. Comparison of recombinant fragments of PKC μ with the p62 fragments produced in vitro and in vivo. Upon removal of the GST-tag by thrombin treatment (see Section 2), the bacterially expressed recombinant fragments (379–912) and (392–912) of PKC μ were applied to SDS-PAGE. In addition, caspase-3-treated PKC μ (p62 in vitro, see Fig. 2A) and an extract from cells treated with cycloheximide plus TNF α (p62 in vivo; see Fig. 1A,B) were applied to the gel. The recombinant fragments and p62 were visualized by immunoblotting.

3.3. Expression and characterization of the GST-tagged fragment 379–912 (GST-p62)

Two GST-tagged fragments were expressed in bacteria and partially purified by affinity chromatography, i.e. the fragment 379–912 corresponding to the atypical site D 378 /S 379 and the fragment 392–912 corresponding to the typical caspase-3 site D 391 /A 392 . Upon removal of the GST-tag with thrombin, the recombinant fragments were compared with the in vivo and in vitro fragments of PKC μ by immunoblotting. Fig. 4 shows that the latter fragments are identical in size with the recombinant fragment 379–912 but not with the fragment 392–912, indicating that caspase-3 indeed cleaves PKC μ at the atypical site D 378 /S 379 in vitro and in vivo.

The GST-tagged fragment 379–912 (GST-p62) was further characterized. Compared to intact PKC μ , GST-p62 exhibited

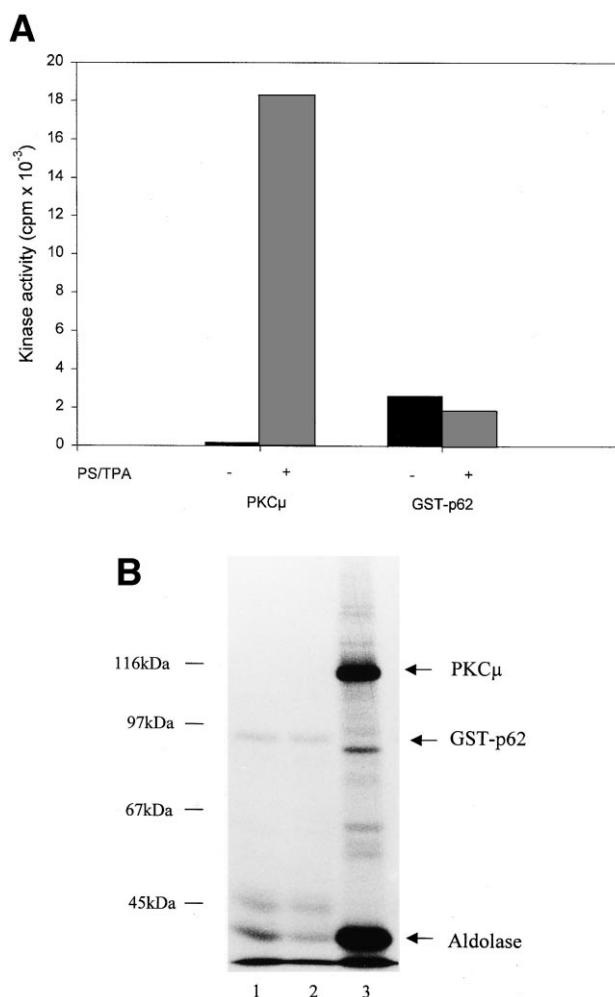


Fig. 5. Kinase activity of the recombinant fragment GST-p62. A: Equal amounts (as estimated by immunoblotting) of PKC μ (5 μl) or GST-p62 (2 μg protein) were used to phosphorylate syntide 2 and incorporation of phosphate was determined as described in Section 2. Phosphorylation of 5 μg syntide 2 was performed in the absence or presence of 10 μg PS/100 nM TPA. B: Five micrograms of aldolase was phosphorylated with equal amounts of PKC μ (3) or GST-p62 (2) in the presence of PS/TPA as described in Section 2. Phosphorylation with GST-p62 is shown also in the absence of PS/TPA (1) to allow for a comparison of the autophosphorylation of the recombinant fragment in the absence and presence of PS/TPA. Upon SDS-PAGE, phosphorylated proteins were visualized by autoradiography.

an around 15 times higher kinase activity in the absence of PS and TPA. In contrast to PKC μ , however, this basal kinase activity of the fragment could not be increased by PS/TPA, supporting the data on autophosphorylation of p62 in vivo (Fig. 1C) and in vitro (Fig. 2B). In fact, in the presence of PS/TPA, the fragment was much less active than intact PKC μ , as shown by phosphorylation of syntide 2 and aldolase (Fig. 5). Removal of the GST-tag did not affect the kinase activity of the fragment (not shown). Moreover, the fragment p62 was found to be more sensitive than PKC μ towards the kinase inhibitors K252a (IC₅₀ of 0.6 nM for the fragment as compared to 7 nM for the intact PKC μ) and Gö6983 (IC₅₀ of 2 μ M versus 20 μ M for intact PKC μ).

Considering these results, it is conceivable that the PKC μ fragment exhibits specific functions differing from those of the intact enzyme. In this context, it should be noted that localization experiments using GFP constructs indicate a differential subcellular localization of PKC μ and its fragment (Häussermann et al., unpublished observation). It has been reported that PKC μ might protect cells against apoptosis [43]. Thus, proteolytic cleavage of PKC μ upon induction of apoptosis possibly would abolish the protective effect. Moreover, the generated fragment might somehow support the apoptotic process (compare e.g. PKC δ [34]).

Acknowledgements: This work was supported by the Wilhelm Sander-Stiftung (97.090.1).

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