

The T790M mutation in EGFR kinase causes drug resistance by increasing the affinity for ATP

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Lung cancers caused by activating mutations in the epidermal growth factor receptor (EGFR) are initially responsive to small molecule tyrosine kinase inhibitors (TKIs), but the efficacy of these agents is often limited because of the emergence of drug resistance conferred by a second mutation, T790M. Threonine 790 is the "gatekeeper" residue, an important determinant of inhibitor specificity in the ATP binding pocket. The T790M mutation has been thought to cause resistance by sterically blocking binding of TKIs such as gefitinib and erlotinib, but this explanation is difficult to reconcile with the fact that it remains sensitive to structurally similar irreversible inhibitors. Here, we show by using a direct binding assay that T790M mutants retain low-nanomolar affinity for gefitinib. Furthermore, we show that the T790M mutation activates WT EGFR and that introduction of the T790M mutation increases the ATP affinity of the oncogenic L858R mutant by more than an order of magnitude. The increased ATP affinity is the primary mechanism by which the T790M mutation confers drug resistance. Crystallographic analysis of the T790M mutant shows how it can adapt to accommodate tight binding of diverse inhibitors, including the irreversible inhibitor HKI-272, and also suggests a structural mechanism for catalytic activation. We conclude that the T790M mutation is a "generic" resistance mutation that will reduce the potency of any ATP-competitive kinase inhibitor and that irreversible inhibitors overcome this resistance simply through covalent binding, not as a result of an alternative binding mode.

lung cancer | tyrosine kinase | x-ray crystallography

Mutations in the tyrosine kinase domain of the epidermal growth factor receptor (EGFR) have recently been identified as a cause of nonsmall cell lung cancer (1–7). The most common oncogenic mutations are small, in-frame deletions in exon 19 and a point mutation that substitutes Leu-858 with arginine (L858R). These mutations likely cause constitutive activation of the kinase by destabilizing the autoinhibited conformation (8, 9), which is normally maintained in the absence of ligand stimulation. Importantly, the activating mutations have also been found to confer sensitivity to the small molecule tyrosine kinase inhibitors (TKIs) gefitinib and erlotinib (1–3). As first reported by Carey *et al.* (10) in studies with erlotinib, the mutant kinases bind the inhibitors more tightly than does the WT EGFR and additionally the deletion and L858R mutations markedly decrease the affinity of the kinase for ATP (8, 10), with which the inhibitors compete for binding. These two effects combine to yield the remarkable potency of gefitinib and erlotinib against tumors and cell lines that are "addicted" to the activated EGFR for survival (5, 11, 12).

Clinically, the efficacy of these TKIs is often of limited duration because of the emergence of drug resistance conferred by a second mutation: substitution of threonine 790 with methionine (T790M) (13–15). The T790M mutation accounts for about half of all resistance to gefitinib and erlotinib (16, 17). Threonine 790 is the gatekeeper residue in EGFR, so named

because its key location at the entrance to a hydrophobic pocket in the back of the ATP binding cleft makes it an important determinant of inhibitor specificity in protein kinases. Substitution of this residue in EGFR with a bulky methionine has been thought to cause resistance by steric interference with binding of TKIs, including gefitinib and erlotinib (13–15). However, the T790M mutant kinase remains sensitive to irreversible inhibitors, including CL-387,785, EKB-569, and HKI-272 (14, 15, 18–20). These compounds closely resemble the reversible anilinoquinazoline inhibitors, but contain a reactive Michael-acceptor group that forms a covalent bond with Cys-797 at the edge of the ATP-binding cleft (Fig. 1). The irreversible inhibitors are designed to target only this cysteine in EGFR because of their specific noncovalent interactions in the ATP binding pocket, which resemble those of reversible anilinoquinazoline compounds. Thus the fact that these irreversible TKIs still inhibit the T790M mutant is at odds with steric hindrance as a mechanism of resistance: the reversible inhibitor gefitinib and the irreversible inhibitor EKB-569 have identical aniline substituents that are expected to bind in the gatekeeper pocket (Fig. 1), so the same steric effects that block gefitinib binding should also prevent the initial binding of EKB-569 (and of the related compound HKI-272).

A number of observations indicate that in addition to conferring drug resistance, the gatekeeper mutation may derepress the catalytic activity of EGFR and other kinases. A germ-line T790M mutation has been discovered in a family with a hereditary predisposition to lung cancer, suggesting that this mutation confers a growth advantage in the absence of the selective pressure of TKIs (21). Consistent with this idea, introduction of the T790M in tandem with the L858R mutant in NIH 3T3 cells increases EGFR activity and enhances the transformed phenotype (22). Transgenic mice engineered with lung-specific expression of the T790M mutant develop lung adenocarcinomas (23), albeit with a longer latency than those harboring the L858R or combined L858R and T790M mutations (23, 24). The EGFR T790M mutation was also identified in an untreated case of Barrett's esophagus and the corresponding adenocarcinoma (25). Interestingly, the corresponding mutation in BCR-Abl

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Data deposition: The crystallographic coordinates and structure factors have been deposited in the Protein Data Bank, www.pdb.org (PDB ID codes 2JIT, 2JIU, and 2JIV).

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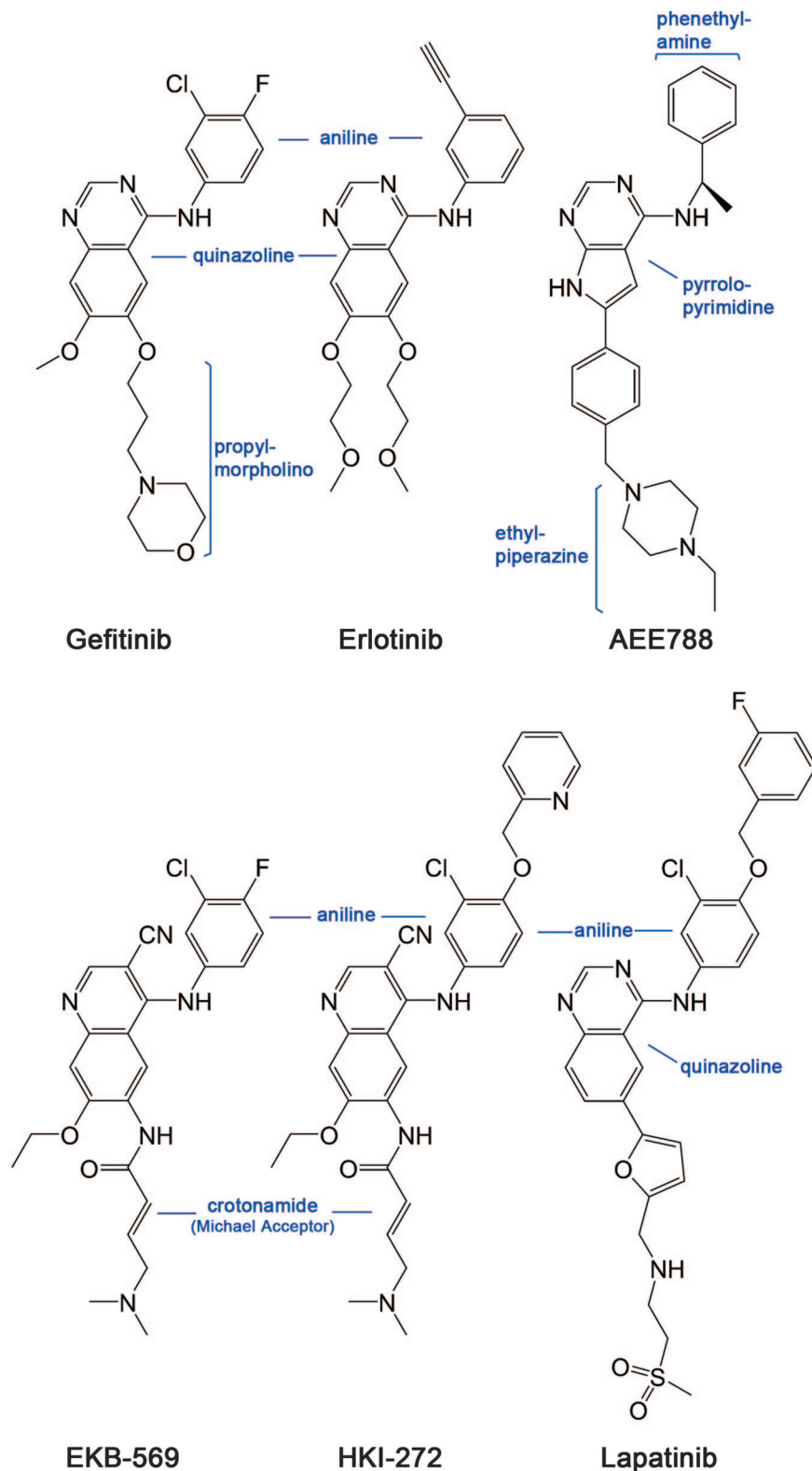


Fig. 1. Chemical structures of selected EGFR inhibitors. All compounds are drawn in a consistent orientation and conformation that reflects their approximate binding mode in the EGFR kinase. HKI-272 and EKB-569 are examples of irreversible inhibitors. Lapatinib and HKI-272 are thought to require the inactive conformation of EGFR for binding because of their additional aniline substitutions.

(T315I) confers resistance to imatinib and other TKIs in the treatment of chronic myelogenous leukemia and has also been found to preexist in untreated CML (26, 27). The equivalent mutation is found in v-Src (T338I) and has long been known to

confer transforming activity on c-Src (28). Despite the long history of interest in this key residue in control of tyrosine kinase activity, a structural understanding of its effects is lacking. To better understand its role in inhibitor resistance and kinase

Table 1. Inhibitor dissociation constants for the WT and mutant EGFR kinases

Kinase	K_d , nM		$K_d / K_{m[ATP]}$, $\times 10^{-3}$	
	Gefitinib	AEE788	Gefitinib	AEE788
WT	35.3 \pm 0.4	5.3 \pm 0.3	6.8	1.0
T790M	4.6 \pm 0.1	27.6 \pm 0.7	0.78	4.7
L858R	2.4 \pm 0.1	1.1 \pm 0.1	0.016	0.0074
L858R/T790M	10.9 \pm 0.6	18.6 \pm 0.5	1.3	2.2

The ratio $K_d / K_{m[ATP]}$ provides a relative estimate of inhibitor potency.

deregulation, we have studied the structural and enzymological effects of the T790M mutation in the context of both the WT and the L858R-mutant EGFR kinases.

Results

T790M Mutants Bind Gefitinib with Low Nanomolar Affinity. We first measured binding of gefitinib to the WT, L858R, T790M, and L858R/T790M mutants by using a direct binding assay in which intrinsic fluorescence of EGFR is quenched by titration with the inhibitor (8). Strikingly, the T790M mutation only modestly affects binding of gefitinib in the context of the L858R mutant (Table 1). The resistant L858R/T790M double-binds gefitinib with $K_d = 10.9$ nM, which is only ≈ 4 -fold weaker than the exquisitely sensitive L858R mutant ($K_d = 2.4$ nM). The T790M mutant binds gefitinib with $K_d = 4.6$ nM, nearly as tightly as the L858R mutant and considerably tighter than the WT kinase. The small difference in gefitinib affinity caused by introduction of the secondary T790M mutation is in stark contrast to the roughly two orders of magnitude differences observed in the sensitivity of cell lines bearing the L858R vs. L858R/T790M or exon 19 deletions with T790M mutations (13–15, 29), and therefore cannot explain the clinically observed drug resistance. We also examined binding of the pyrrolopyrimidine compound AEE788 (Novartis Pharmaceuticals), which binds in a manner similar to gefitinib despite the difference in chemical scaffold (8). The T790M mutant has a more dramatic effect on the affinity for AEE788, but notably the L858R/T790M double mutant retains 18.6 nM affinity for this compound (as compared with $K_d = 1.1$ nM for the L858R mutant). The larger effect on AEE788 as compared with gefitinib is not unexpected because the phenethylamine substituent on this inhibitor extends further into the hydrophobic pocket that is “guarded” by the gatekeeper residue (8).

Crystal Structures of T790M Mutant. Crystal structures of the T790M mutant show how inhibitors are accommodated in the presence of the gatekeeper mutation, in both the active and inactive conformations of the kinase. We determined structures of the T790M mutant alone and in complex with the irreversible inhibitor HKI-272 in the inactive conformation or in complex with AEE788 in the active conformation [see supporting information (SI) Table 3 for crystallographic statistics]. The structure of the T790M mutant in complex with AEE788 is shown in Fig. 2A. The compound binds in essentially the same manner observed in the WT enzyme, with the pyrrolopyrimidine core making two hydrogen bonds with the hinge region of the kinase and the phenethylamine substituent extending into the gatekeeper hydrophobic pocket. Comparison with the binding of AEE788 to the WT enzyme reveals only a small rotation of the phenethylamine substituent, which is in direct contact with the mutant gatekeeper residue. Comparison of the AEE788 complex with the structure of the T790M mutant in the absence of inhibitor (Apo-T790M) shows that the Met-790 side chain must adopt a different rotamer to accommodate the inhibitor (Fig. 2B).

The irreversible inhibitor HKI-272 is a 4-(arylamino)quinoline-3-carbonitrile compound and a potent inhibitor of both EGFR and ErbB2 kinases (14, 30). In complex with HKI-272, the EGFR kinase adopts an inactive conformation in which the regulatory C-helix is displaced from its active position (Fig. 2C). The enlarged hydrophobic pocket created by the outward rotation of the C-helix appears to be required to accommodate the bulky aniline substituent found in HKI-272. Both HKI-272 and lapatinib contain additional aromatic groups appended to the aniline ring (a 2-pyridinyl group in HKI-272 and a fluoro-phenyl group in lapatinib; Fig. 1). Thus it is not surprising that HKI-272, like lapatinib, binds the inactive conformation of the kinase and that the overall binding mode of the two compounds is similar (Fig. 2D). The quinoline core of HKI-272 forms a single hydrogen bond with the hinge region of the kinase in a manner analogous to anilinoquinazoline compounds (31, 32). The 2-pyridinyl group of HKI-272 is surrounded by hydrophobic residues in the expanded pocket, including Met-766 in the C-helix, Phe-856, and Met-790, the mutant gatekeeper residue. The nitrile substituent of HKI-272 also approaches the gatekeeper residue (extending to ≈ 3 Å from the methionine side chain). In addition to these noncovalent interactions of HKI-272, the expected covalent bond is formed between Cys-797 at the edge of the active site cleft and the crotonamide Michael-acceptor group on the inhibitor, rendering binding irreversible (Fig. 2C). Although the resolution of the structure is modest, electron density for the inhibitor and for the covalent bond is clear (SI Fig. 4).

The structure of the T790M mutant also suggests a possible mechanism of catalytic activation. We hypothesize that the mutation facilitates interconversion between the inactive and active conformations via direct interaction with the Asp-Phe-Gly sequence (DFG motif) at the base of the kinase activation loop (see SI Figs. 5 and 6 and related discussion in SI Text). The mutation may also enhance the stability of the active conformation (relative to the inactive), as it makes favorable hydrophobic interactions with Met-766 and Leu-777 in the active state.

Increased ATP Affinity of the L858R/T790M Mutant Confers Drug Resistance. The binding data and crystal structures clearly demonstrate that the gatekeeper mutation does not sterically block binding of reversible inhibitors. Why then does the T790M mutation confer resistance? Kinetic characterization of the WT and mutant EGFR kinases reveals a marked decrease in the Michaelis-Menten constant (K_m) for ATP in the drug-resistant L858R/T790M mutant as compared with the drug-sensitive L858R mutant (Table 2). As described (8, 10), the L858R mutant activates EGFR, but also reduces the apparent affinity for ATP (Table 2). Strikingly, the T790M mutation restores the ATP affinity to near WT levels in the L858R/T790M double mutant ($K_{m[ATP]} = 8.4$ μ M, as compared with $K_{m[ATP]} = 148$ μ M for the L858R mutant). In isolation, the T790M mutation does not significantly affect ATP affinity. We cannot explain structurally why the T790M mutation increases ATP affinity in the context of the L858R mutant, but not in the context of the WT enzyme.

We also find that the T790M mutation activates the kinase ≈ 5 -fold as compared with the WT enzyme (Table 2); this catalytic activation of the T790M mutant likely explains its presence as a germ-line mutation in a family predisposed to lung cancer (21). Although the L858R/T790M mutant has a modestly decreased k_{cat} relative to the L858R mutant, it is still much more active than the WT enzyme and also exhibits a 5-fold higher $k_{cat}/K_{m[ATP]}$ than the L858R mutant (Table 2).

Because TKIs such as gefitinib must compete with ATP for binding to the kinase active site, the enhanced ATP affinity is expected to decrease the apparent inhibitor potency. In the L858R/T790M mutant this “ K_m effect” combines with the small difference in binding affinity for gefitinib to dramatically de-

from rabbit muscle (Sigma-Aldrich; catalogue no. P-0294), 0.5 mM NADH, and 0.5 μ M EGFR kinase; ATP at varied concentration was added last to start the reaction. Steady-state initial velocity data were drawn from the slopes of the A_{340} curves and fit to the Michaelis-Menten equation to determine V_m and K_m values. To assure that our derived k_{cat} parameters reflected concentrations of active enzyme, we estimated the active enzyme concentration of every kinase preparation by titration of the samples with the tight binding inhibitor gefitinib or AEE788 (see below).

Inhibition assays were carried out by using the same kinetic assay method, with 10 mM $MgCl_2$ and 1.25 mM EGFR autophosphorylation site peptide (ENAEYLRVA) as the phospho-acceptor substrate. The ATP concentration was fixed at 10 μ M or 1 mM, and the indicated concentrations of the inhibitors were added before the addition of ATP.

Binding Constant Assay and Calculation of the K_i^{app} Values. The equilibrium fluorescence quenching method was used to obtain the binding constant and estimate the active enzyme concentration as described (8). Fluorescence mea-

surements were carried out in a nitrogen-sparged buffer containing 20 mM Tris, 0.5% glycerol, 250 mM NaCl, and 1 mM TCEP. The obtained K_d values and $K_{m,ATP}$ were used to calculate the K_i^{app} values using the following equation (40):

$$K_i^{app} = K_i(1 + [ATP]/K_{m,ATP}),$$

assuming that the K_d values obtained in the binding assays are equal to K_i under the condition of the above kinetic assays.

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