

Autoregulation of I κ B α activity

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ABSTRACT Transcription factor NF- κ B regulates the expression of a plethora of genes. The activity of NF- κ B proteins is regulated by I κ B proteins. We report that induction of I κ B α , a member of the I κ B family of proteins, is preceded by activation of NF- κ B complex. The promoter of the I κ B α gene contains a κ B site that is directly involved in its induction by the NF- κ B complex. Degradation of I κ B α protein precedes activation of NF- κ B DNA binding activity, whereas newly synthesized I κ B α protein inhibits NF- κ B activity. If the degradation of I κ B α is prevented, the induction of DNA binding activity of NF- κ B complex is severely curtailed. These data suggest the existence of an autoregulatory loop whereby I κ B α regulates the activity of transcription factor NF- κ B, which in turn regulates the I κ B α activity.

Nuclear factor NF- κ B was identified as a lymphoid-specific heterodimeric protein complex that binds to a decameric sequence motif located in the immunoglobulin κ light chain enhancer (1). Subsequently, it was shown that the NF- κ B transcription factor participates in the regulation and transcriptional activities of many cellular and viral genes (2–4). Molecular cloning of the p50 and p65 subunits, the two components of the NF- κ B complex, revealed a region in the N-terminal half of these proteins that shares extensive sequence homology with protooncogene *rel* and the *Drosophila* morphogen dorsal (5–9). The Rel homology region contains the DNA binding and the dimerization domain (4, 9). A number of other genes have now been identified as members of the Rel/NF- κ B/dorsal gene family, which include genes for RelA (p65), RelB, p52, and p100 (4, 10–13). The NF- κ B transcription factor is constitutively present and active only in the nucleus of a few subsets of cells, such as B cells and monocytes (1, 14). In general, NF- κ B is found in the cytoplasm of many other cell types in an inactive form (4, 15). This inactive form contains an inhibitor protein, I κ B, that is complexed with the RelA/p65 subunit of NF- κ B and thought to retain the p50–p65 complex in the cytoplasm (4, 16). A number of I κ B proteins have now been identified and molecularly cloned, including I κ B α (MAD-3, pp40, and RL/IF-1), p105, I κ B γ (C-terminal portion of p105), bcl3, and cactus in *Drosophila* (17–26).

Upon stimulation of cells with a variety of agents, including tumor necrosis factor α , phorbol 12-myristate 13-acetate (PMA), lipopolysaccharide (LPS), and interleukin 1, I κ B α presumably dissociates from the complex and NF- κ B translocates to the nucleus, where it can modulate the expression of a number of genes. Although there is evidence that I κ B α is a phosphoprotein (16, 27–31) and that its activity is modulated by phosphorylation, *in vivo* the critical sites of phosphorylation of I κ B α have not yet been identified. The model for activation of NF- κ B assumes that upon induction, the nascently phosphorylated form of I κ B α is released from NF- κ B complex and rapidly degraded (32–34). Interestingly, I κ B α mRNA is induced upon transfection of cells with

RelA/p65 (32–34) or during differentiation of pre-B to B cells, where NF- κ B activity is constitutively activated (S.M., unpublished data). Thus, it is paradoxical that I κ B α gene product is both the inhibitor and the target of NF- κ B complexes. We therefore undertook a study of the regulation of I κ B α to specifically determine whether I κ B α gene induction by κ B proteins is mediated by cis elements containing κ B sites. Recently, several investigators have reported a similar mechanism for regulation of I κ B α gene expression (32–35).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Nuclear Extract Preparation and Electrophoretic Mobility Shift Assay. 70Z/3 cells were grown in RPMI 1640 medium containing 10% (vol/vol) fetal calf serum and 50 μ M 2-mercaptoethanol to 10⁶ cells per ml and treated with PMA (50 ng/ml) or LPS (10 μ g/ml) and with or without cycloheximide (20 μ g/ml) for the indicated times. L-1-Tosylamido-2-phenylethyl chloromethyl ketone (TPCK; 5–100 μ M) was added 1 h prior to the PMA or LPS treatment. The nuclear extracts were prepared by the method of Andrews and Fallar (36). The protein concentration of extracts was \approx 5 mg/ml. For mobility shift assays, 10 μ g of nuclear extract was incubated with 1 μ g of poly(dI-dC) (Pharmacia) in 15 μ l of binding buffer [75 mM NaCl/15 mM Tris-HCl, pH 7.5/1.5 mM EDTA/1.5 mM dithiothreitol/25% (vol/vol) glycerol/bovine serum albumin (20 μ g/ml)] for 30 min at 4°C. ³²P-labeled double-stranded oligonucleotides containing the κ B site (underlined) found in the Ig κ gene (5'-CTCAACA-GAGGGGACTTTCGAGAGGCCAT-3') or the κ B site (underlined) found in I κ B α gene (5'-CTGGCTTGGAAATTC-CCCGCGCTGAC-3') were included as probes. The mutant κ B site for Ig κ (5'-CTCAACAGAGTTGACTTTTCGAG-AGGCCAT-3') or I κ B α (CTGGCTTCGAAATTAATTGCGCCTGAC-3') were used for competition studies (where underlined bases are the mutated sequences). The binding of the probe was performed for 20 min at room temperature. Reaction products were analyzed on 4% polyacrylamide gels containing 0.25 \times TBE (22.5 mM Tris/22.5 mM borate/0.5 mM EDTA, pH 8.0) buffer.

Northern Blot Analysis, Primer Extension, and DNA Sequencing. 70Z/3 cells stimulated by PMA or LPS in the presence or absence of TPCK or cycloheximide were harvested at the same time intervals as in the electrophoretic mobility shift assay and RNAs were isolated as described by Chomczynski and Sacchi (37). RNA (25 μ g) was electrophoresed through a 1.2% agarose gel containing formaldehyde, transferred to a Hybond nylon filter (Amersham), UV-crosslinked, and hybridized with ³²P-labeled 1.1-kb mouse I κ B α cDNA (*Eco*RI-*Eco*RI) probe.

Total RNA (25 μ g) isolated from WEHI231 cells was hybridized with 0.1 ng of the ³²P-end-labeled primer (5'-CGTGCCAGCTGGCTGGCTGAAACACCG) in 40 mM Pipes, pH 6.4/1 mM EDTA, pH 8.0/0.4 M NaCl/80%

(vol/vol) formamide for 8 h at 37°C. After ethanol precipitation, primer extension was carried out at 42°C for 2 h in 50 mM Tris-HCl, pH 7.6/60 mM KCl/10 mM MgCl₂/all four dNTPs (each at 2.5 mM)/1 mM dithiothreitol/RNase inhibitor (1 unit/ μ l)/actinomycin D (50 μ g/ml)/50 units of murine leukemia virus reverse transcriptase. The reaction products were treated with 5 μ g of RNase or 150 units of S1 nuclease at 37°C for 30 min, extracted with phenol/chloroform, precipitated with ethanol, and analyzed in 12% denaturing polyacrylamide gels along with DNA sequencing reaction products of the κ B α genomic clone using the same primer and DNA size marker (³²P-end-labeled MspI-digested pBR322 DNA fragments). κ B α cDNA clones and one genomic clone containing the 1.6-kb upstream region of the κ B α gene were analyzed by DNA sequencing using a Sequenase kit (United States Biochemical).

Transient Transfections and Chloramphenicol Acetyltransferase (CAT) Assays. The 1.6-kb *HindIII*-*Nar* I and 0.2-kb *Eco*0109I-*Nar* I genomic fragments of κ B α gene promoter were cloned into the *HindIII* and *Xba* I sites in pBLCAT3 vector (see Fig. 3A). By using PCR-mediated site-directed mutagenesis, a mutant κ B site (5'-CGAAATTAATT-3', where underlined bases are the mutated sequences) was generated in the 0.2-kb (*Eco*0109I-*Nar* I) κ B α gene promoter. For construction of the expression plasmid for p65, p50, and c-Rel, the 1.8-kb *Bam*HI-*Eco*RI c-Rel cDNA was inserted into the *Bam*HI-*Eco*RI sites of the expression plasmid pCMX (38), the 2.5-kb *Sac* II (blunted)-*Xho* I p65 cDNA was ligated into *Eco*RV-*Xho* I site in the pCMX vector, and the 1.3-kb *Nco* I p50 cDNA was ligated to *Bam*HI-*Nhe* I site of pCMX plasmid. The κ B α promoter-CAT plasmid (5 μ g) and pCMXp65, pCMXp50, and pCMX c-Rel expression plasmids (5–10 μ g) were used in each cotransfection. Forty-eight hours after calcium phosphate transfection, cells were collected, the relative transfection efficiency was determined by cotransfected LacZ expression plasmid (1 μ g, Rous sarcoma virus LacZ), and subsequent β -galactosidase activities in cell extracts were used to normalize the transfection efficiencies.

CAT activity (percent conversion to acetylated chloramphenicol) was determined by phosphor image analysis.

Western Blot Analysis. 70Z/3 cells were grown to 10⁶ cells per ml, treated with PMA (50 ng/ml) or LPS (10 μ g/ml) in the presence or absence of cycloheximide (20 μ g/ml), lysed, and subjected to immunoprecipitation with anti-p65 sera raised against the N-terminal 19-aa peptide (MDDLFLPILFPSEPA-QASGP). The precipitates were resolved by SDS/PAGE, transferred to nylon membranes (Immobilon-P; Millipore), and detected with κ B α antibody specific for the N terminus (aa 1–56) of κ B α protein. The subsequent Western blot analysis was carried out with ECL Western blotting kit (Amersham) by the manufacturer's recommendations.

RESULTS

Induction of κ B α Gene. Electrophoretic mobility shift assays and Northern blot analyses were performed using pre-B (70Z/3) cells stimulated by either PMA or LPS (Fig. 1). The NF- κ B DNA binding activities can be detected within 15 min after LPS or PMA stimulation (Fig. 1A, lanes 2–7), whereas the expression levels of κ B α mRNA lagged and increased to the maximum by 60 min (Fig. 1B, lanes 4 and 9). These results suggest that κ B α is likely to be one of the target genes regulated by NF- κ B proteins. It is not clear from our data whether the κ B α gene is regulated by complex I (p50-p65 heterodimer) or complex 2 (p50-p50 homodimer) (Fig. 1A; S.M., unpublished data).

κ B α Promoter Has a κ B Binding Site. We next cloned the promoter and other upstream sequences of murine κ B α gene. The sequence of 651 nt upstream of the κ B α mRNA

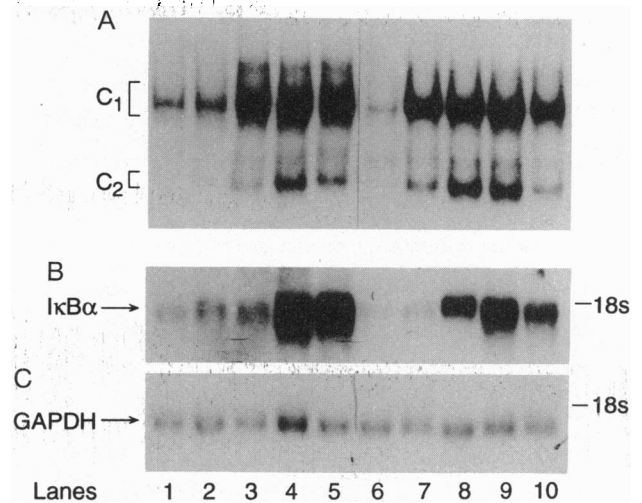


FIG. 1. Induction of NF- κ B DNA binding activities and κ B α mRNA in 70Z/3 cells treated with PMA or LPS. Lanes: 1–5, 70Z/3 cells plus LPS; 6–10, 70Z/3 cells plus PMA; 1 and 6, 0 min; 2 and 7, 15 min; 3 and 8, 30 min; 4 and 9, 1 h; 5 and 10, 2 h. (A) Electrophoretic mobility shift assays of NF- κ B DNA binding activities in the nuclear extracts of PMA- or LPS-treated 70Z/3 cells at the indicated times. C1 is likely to be p50-p65 heterodimer and C2 is a p50-p50 homodimer (S.M., unpublished data). (B and C) Northern blot analysis of κ B α mRNA induction by PMA or LPS in 70Z/3 cells at the same times used in the electrophoretic mobility shift assay. Glyceraldehyde-3-phosphate dehydrogenase (GAPDH) mRNA levels were analyzed as an internal control for loading.

transcription start site is shown in Fig. 2A. Sequence analysis reveals the presence of a TATA box, a κ B binding site, and many other previously identified cis-regulatory elements, including SP-1, a possible AP-1 site, AP-2, AP-3, CREB, interferon γ response element, etc. (Fig. 2A). The κ B site (GGGAATTTCC) in the κ B α promoter is identical to the κ B site in the promoter region of tumor necrosis factor α (4). To define the mouse κ B α gene transcription initiation site, primer-extension reactions were performed (Fig. 2B), which revealed a 96-bp DNA fragment with or without S1 nuclease digestion (Fig. 2B, lanes 2 and 3). The same primer was also used in the nucleotide sequence reactions and the products were analyzed on the same gel carrying the primer-extension reaction products (Fig. 2B, lanes 4–7), thus allowing direct gel comparison of the size of primer-extension products and the sequencing products. The results show that the initiation of transcription started 75 bp upstream of ATG (marked by a thick arrow). The TATA element is located 26 bp upstream of the transcription initiation site (Fig. 2A). We conclude that κ B α gene contains a bona fide NF- κ B binding site.

κ B α Gene Promoter Is Inducible with p65. To determine whether the κ B site identified in the κ B α promoter is functional, 1.6-kb *HindIII*-*Nar* I and 0.2-kb *Eco*0109I-*Nar* I genomic fragments of κ B α gene promoter were cloned into pBLCAT3 vector (Fig. 3A). By using PCR-mediated site-directed mutagenesis, a mutant κ B site was generated in the 0.2-kb (*Eco*0109I-*Nar* I) fragment of κ B α gene promoter (Fig. 3A). High levels of CAT activities were detected in COS cells cotransfected with the 1.6-kb or 0.2-kb κ B α gene promoter-CAT construct and the expression vector encoding the p65 subunit of NF- κ B (Fig. 3B, lanes 5 and 6). Little or no CAT activity was detected in the cells cotransfected with κ B α gene promoter-CAT construct with mutant κ B site (plasmid C; Fig. 3B, lane 4). Increased transactivation was observed when p65 was cotransfected with a construct generating p50 (lanes 8 and 9) but c-Rel was unable to transactivate either construct A or B (data not shown).

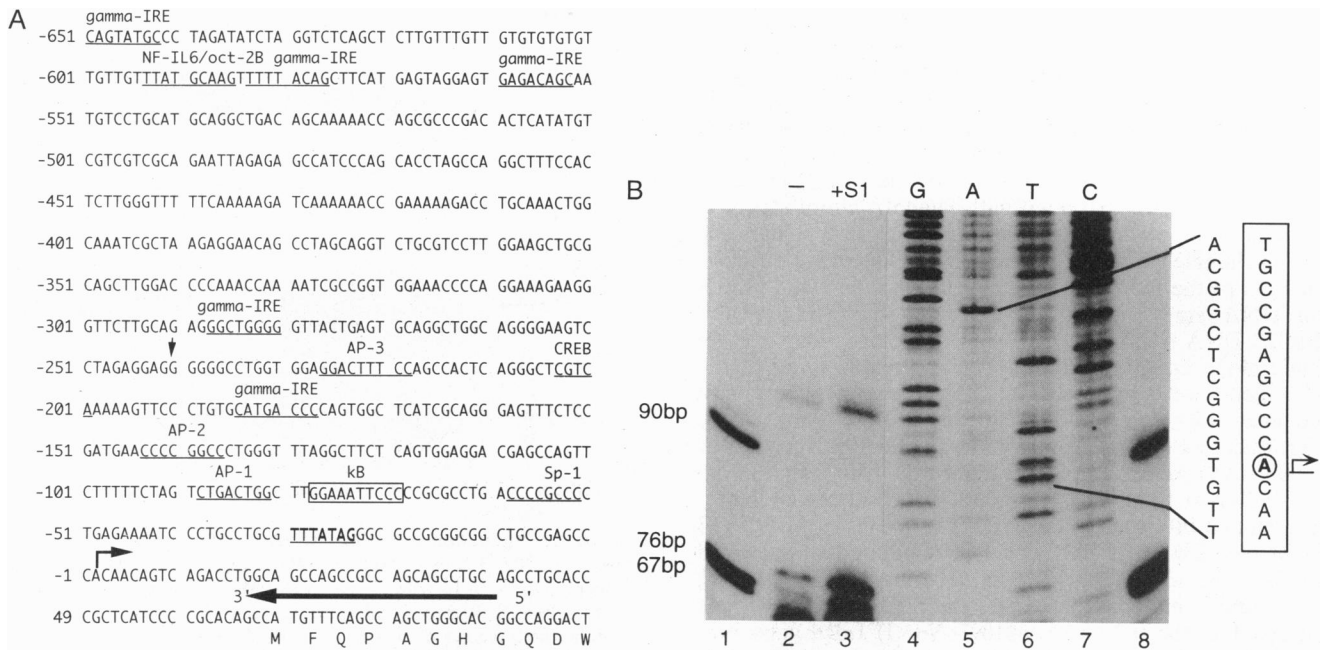


FIG. 2. (A) Analysis of $I\kappa B\alpha$ promoter. Genomic DNA containing $I\kappa B\alpha$ promoter was molecularly cloned from a mouse 3T3 library (Stratagene). The nucleotide sequence of the $I\kappa B\alpha$ promoter region is shown. The thin arrow marks the start site of transcription determined by primer-extension analysis. $I\kappa B\alpha$ cDNA coding sequence is shown with the amino acid sequence, and the primer used for primer-extension and DNA sequencing analyses is underlined with a thick arrow; TATA box and other known nuclear protein binding motifs are indicated. The κB site is indicated by a box. The nucleotide sequence is numbered with respect to the nucleotide start site (position +1, the start site) and the upstream sequence from the mRNA start point is indicated with negative numbers. The DNA sequence of $I\kappa B\alpha$ promoter region was analyzed by the computer program, SIGNAL SCAN (39). Gamma-IRE, interferon γ response element. (B) The primer-extension analysis for determining the start site of transcription. The primer sequence is indicated in A; molecular size markers are in lanes 1 and 8. The primer-extension products and S1 nuclease-treated primer-extension products are shown in lanes 2 and 3, respectively. By using the same primer, $I\kappa B\alpha$ genomic clone was subjected to DNA sequence analysis and the reaction products were electrophoresed in lanes 4–7. The DNA sequence in the vicinity of the primer-extension product is indicated. The start site is indicated with an arrow.

Regulation of $I\kappa B\alpha$ Gene. Since $I\kappa B\alpha$ regulates the activity of NF- κB complexes in the cytoplasm, it was of interest to study whether $I\kappa B\alpha$ provides an autoregulatory loop for regulation of κB proteins. We therefore studied the kinetics of induction of $I\kappa B\alpha$ mRNA and protein and its correlation to NF- κB DNA binding activity. Fig. 4A shows that using an oligonucleotide probe corresponding to the κB site present in the $I\kappa B\alpha$ promoter (κB - $I\kappa B\alpha$), the κB binding activity is detected within 15 min of the addition of PMA to 70Z/3 cells, reaches a maximum by 60 min, and rapidly declines to basal levels by 4 h (Fig. 4A, lanes 2–6). Interestingly, the expression of $I\kappa B\alpha$ mRNA is induced maximally by 60 min (Fig. 4B, lane 4), then declines, and remains essentially unchanged for the next 24–48 h (Fig. 4B). This result correlates well with the synthesis of $I\kappa B\alpha$ protein, which is hardly detectable by 30–60 min after induction, and then the level increases and essentially remains unchanged (Fig. 4D). A simple interpretation of this data will be that upon induction with PMA, the $I\kappa B$ protein is dissociated from NF- κB complex and is rapidly degraded, allowing the NF- κB complex to traverse to the nucleus and activate genes containing κB sites, one of which is the $I\kappa B\alpha$ gene. Once $I\kappa B\alpha$ protein is synthesized, it binds to NF- κB complex and keeps it sequestered in the cytoplasm, thus providing the autoregulatory loop.

NF- κB Complex Induces $I\kappa B\alpha$ Gene Expression. To test whether activated NF- κB complex, upon stimulation with PMA or LPS, is directly involved in the induction of $I\kappa B\alpha$ gene expression, we blocked the activation of NF- κB complex by a chymotrypsin protease inhibitor, TPCK. Fig. 5A shows that TPCK (50 μM) prevents LPS-induced NF- κB activity in 70Z/3 cells. Little or no $I\kappa B\alpha$ mRNA was detected upon stimulation in the presence of TPCK (Fig. 5B). TPCK was not a general inhibitor of transcription because the levels of GAPDH mRNA were essentially unchanged (Fig. 5B).

Similar results were obtained with c-fos mRNA, which has short half-life (30 min) (data not shown). Although mecha-

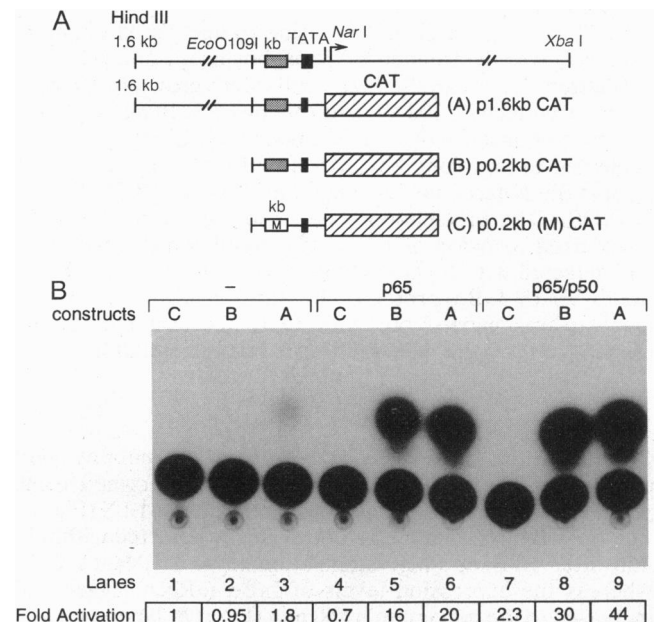


FIG. 3. Analysis of the $I\kappa B\alpha$ promoter. (A) Schematic diagram of the $I\kappa B\alpha$ genomic clone and the reporter constructs. Plasmids A and B represent the 1.6-kb and 0.2-kb upstream fragments linked to CAT gene whereas plasmid C contains the 0.2-kb fragment but the κB site is mutated. (B) CAT assays for analysis of $I\kappa B\alpha$ promoter. The reporter plasmids were cotransfected in COS cells with p65 and p50 expression plasmids. The results shown here are representative of five CAT assays.

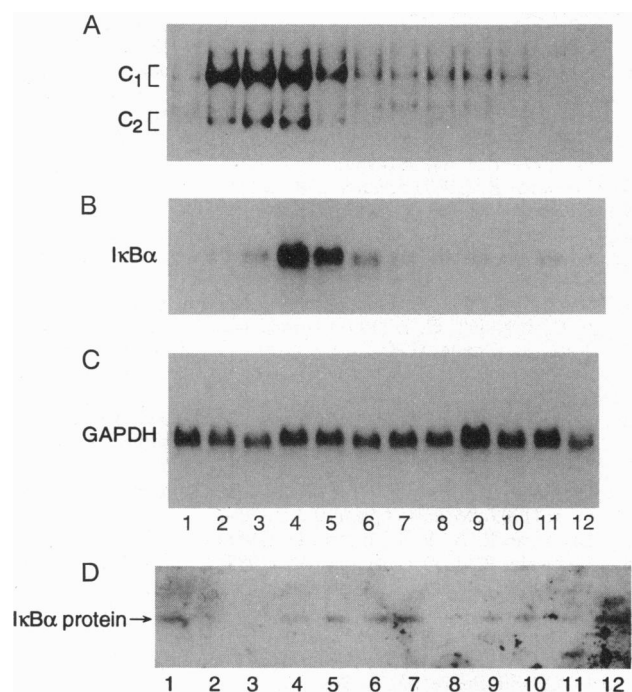


FIG. 4. Kinetics of activation of NF- κ B and I κ B gene expression. Lanes: 1, 0 min; 2, 15 min; 3, 30 min; 4–12, 1, 2, 4, 6, 8, 12, 24, 32, 48 h, respectively. (A) Time course of activation of NF- κ B activity after addition of PMA to 70Z/3 cells. (B) Induction of I κ B α mRNA. (C) Control GAPDH mRNA. (D) Western blot using I κ B α antibodies.

nism of TPCK inhibition of I κ B α mRNA or NF- κ B activity is not understood, it is likely that it prevents degradation of I κ B α protein and, thereby, does not allow activation of NF- κ B complex. In agreement with this proposal, degradation of I κ B α protein is inhibited in a B-cell line (WEHI 231) upon addition of TPCK (S.M., unpublished data).

If the newly synthesized I κ B α is required to inhibit the NF- κ B activity, then its inhibition should allow constitutive

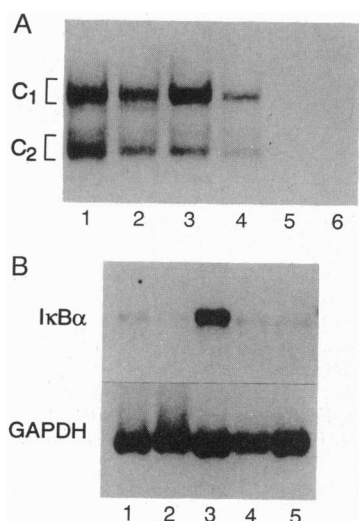


FIG. 5. Inhibition of NF- κ B activity with TPCK. (A) NF- κ B activity in LPS-stimulated 70Z/3 cells (30 min) in the absence and presence of increasing concentrations of TPCK. Lanes: 1–6, 0, 5, 10, 25, 50, and 100 μ M TPCK, respectively. (B) Induction of I κ B α mRNA in 70Z/3 cells stimulated with LPS for 15 or 30 min, in the absence or presence of 50 μ M TPCK. Lanes: 1, no addition; 2, LPS for 15 min; 3, LPS for 30 min; 4, TPCK plus LPS for 15 min; 5, TPCK plus LPS for 30 min.

activity of the NF- κ B complex, as there will be no blocking protein to sequester it in the cytoplasm. In Fig. 6, we show that as expected, NF- κ B activity is transiently induced for \approx 2 h upon stimulation of 70Z/3 cells with PMA; however, the NF- κ B activity can be detected for nearly 12 h if induction is carried out in the presence of cycloheximide, an inhibitor of protein synthesis. The I κ B α mRNA is, however, induced and the levels remain high because of the sustained amount of activated NF- κ B complex or because no I κ B α protein is being translated in the presence of cycloheximide (Fig. 6). The lack of newly synthesized I κ B α protein may in part be responsible for sustained activation of NF- κ B activity.

DISCUSSION

We have demonstrated that transcription of I κ B α , the inhibitor of activity of NF- κ B complex, is rapidly induced by NF- κ B complex in pre-B-cell line 70Z/3 upon treatment with PMA or LPS. The induction of I κ B α mRNA is likely mediated directly by the κ B site present in the upstream promoter element of I κ B α gene. I κ B α is further regulated posttranscriptionally, since the stability of I κ B α protein is greatly reduced upon activation of NF- κ B activity (Fig. 4E; refs. 32–34).

Several investigators have recently shown that activation of cytoplasmic NF- κ B complex is accompanied by modification of I κ B α protein leading to its rapid degradation (32–34). The release of I κ B α from the dormant cytoplasmic NF- κ B complex in response to external signals leads transport of NF- κ B complex to the nucleus, resulting in κ B-site DNA binding activity. The release and degradation of I κ B α protein are prerequisites for activation of NF- κ B DNA binding activity. Furthermore, I κ B α gene expression is induced after activation of NF- κ B DNA binding activity. It thus

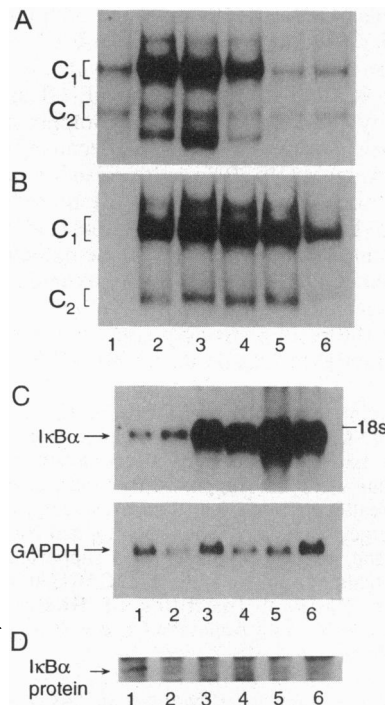


FIG. 6. Effects of cycloheximide on induction of NF- κ B activity. (A) Induction of NF- κ B activity with PMA in 70Z/3 cells using κ B site from the I κ B α promoter as probe. Lanes: 1, 0 min; 2, 15 min; 3, 1 h; 4, 2 h; 5, 6 h; 6, 12 h. (B) Same as in A except cycloheximide (20 μ g/ml) was added at the time of induction. (C) Induction of I κ B α mRNA in the presence of cycloheximide. (D) The levels of I κ B α protein during the time course of induction in the presence of cycloheximide.

appears that in the uninduced cell—for instance, the pre-B cell line 70Z/3—the NF- κ B complex is present in an inactive form in association with I κ B α protein. After addition of external signals in the form of PMA or LPS, the I κ B α protein, known to be associated with the p65 subunit of the p50–p65 NF- κ B complex, is modified, presumably by phosphorylation, and rapidly degraded. It is not clear at present whether phosphorylation is a signal for release or degradation of I κ B α proteins. However, it is now well established that free I κ B α protein is unstable and can be stabilized by association with p65 (33, 34). Once the p50–p65 complex is released from the complex with I κ B α , it traverses to the nucleus and binds to cognate κ B DNA binding sites. The promoter of I κ B α gene contains κ B sites and, hence, is a target of NF- κ B complex. The newly synthesized I κ B α protein can then bind to NF- κ B proteins in the cytoplasm and prevent their translocation to the nucleus and, thereby, regulates the transcription of genes containing κ B sites, including that of I κ B α gene. The product of I κ B α gene is a negative regulator of the NF- κ B complex, but its synthesis is dependent on the presence of activated NF- κ B complex. Therefore, the regulator of I κ B α gene is regulated by the I κ B α gene product, thereby providing the autoregulatory loop in the regulation of expression of genes containing a κ B site. In this manuscript we provide crucial data supporting this model. These data are as follows. (i) DNA binding activity of NF- κ B complex precedes the transcription of I κ B α gene (Figs. 1 and 4). (ii) The I κ B α gene promoter contains a κ B site that when linked to a reporter gene is induced by p65, a member of the κ B DNA binding proteins (Fig. 3). Interestingly, no transcription from I κ B α gene promoter could be detected when transfected with protooncogene *rel* (data not shown), in agreement with results reported (35), suggesting that members of the κ B family may have different functions. (iii) The level of I κ B α protein decreases immediately upon the addition of PMA or LPS, which parallels the increase in NF- κ B DNA binding and transactivation activity (Fig. 4). The levels of I κ B α protein then increase leading to decrease in NF- κ B activity or no NF- κ B activity (Fig. 4). (iv) NF- κ B complex directly activates the transcription of I κ B α mRNA because TPCK, which blocks the activity of NF- κ B complex, also inhibits transcription of I κ B α mRNA (Fig. 5). (v) In the presence of cycloheximide, no I κ B α protein is resynthesized and, consequently, sustained NF- κ B activity can be detected for >12 h (15, 33). Although TPCK and cycloheximide are general inhibitors of proteases and protein synthesis, respectively, nevertheless, the results strongly support the proposed autoregulatory model for regulation of NF- κ B/I κ B proteins.

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