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Biophysical and structural characterization of novel RAS-binding domains (RBDs) of PI3Ka and PI3K γ

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Abstract

Phosphatidylinositol-3-kinases (PI3Ks) are lipid kinases that phosphorylate phosphatidylinositol 4,5-bisphosphate to generate a key lipid second messenger, phosphatidylinositol 3,4,5bisphosphate. PI3Ka and PI3K γ require activation by RAS proteins to stimulate signaling pathways that control cellular growth, differentiation, motility and survival. Intriguingly, RAS binding to PI3K isoforms likely differ, as RAS mutations have been identified that discriminate between PI3Ka and PI3K γ , consistent with low sequence homology (23%) between their RAS binding domains (RBDs). As disruption of the RAS/PI3Ka interaction reduces tumor growth in mice with RAS- and epidermal growth factor receptor driven skin and lung cancers, compounds that interfere with this key interaction may prove useful as anti-cancer agents. However, a structure of PI3Ka bound to RAS is lacking, limiting drug discovery efforts. Expression of full-length PI3K

Author Contributions

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Conflict of Interest

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The coordinates & structure factors have been deposited in the Protein Data Bank under the accession number 6VO7.

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Declaration of interests

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isoforms in insect cells has resulted in low yield and variable activity, limiting biophysical and structural studies of RAS/PI3K interactions. This led us to generate the first RBDs from PI3Ka and PI3K γ that can be expressed at high yield in bacteria and bind to RAS with similar affinity to full-length PI3K. We also solved a 2.31 Å X-ray crystal structure of the PI3Ka-RBD, which aligns well to full-length PI3Ka. Structural differences between the PI3Ka and PI3K γ RBDs are consistent with differences in thermal stability and may underly differential RAS recognition and RAS-mediated PI3K activation. These high expression, functional PI3K RBDs will aid in interrogating RAS interactions and could aid in identifying inhibitors of this key interaction.

Graphical Abstract



Keywords

RAS; Phosphoinositide 3-kinase (PI3K); protein/protein interactions; cell signaling; cancer

Introduction

Phosphatidylinositol-3-kinases (PI3Ks) are a family of lipid kinases that mediate a host of cellular functions, including cellular growth, differentiation, motility and survival. Upon activation, Class I PI3Ks (α , β , δ , and γ) convert the membrane phospholipid phosphatidylinositol 4,5-bisphosphate (PIP₂) to a key lipid second messenger, phosphatidylinositol 3,4,5-triphosphate (PIP₃). The product, PIP₃, can activate multiple targets, including AKT, to promote cell survival, growth, proliferation and metabolism [1].

Class I PI3Ks are obligate heterodimers that consist of a catalytic subunit (p110) and a regulatory subunit. While the p110 subunit contains the kinase domain that catalyzes production of PIP₃, the regulatory subunit interacts with the catalytic subunit to downregulate substrate access and kinase activity [2]. There are several classes and isoforms of PI3K, but only three Class I PI3Ks, PI3K α , PI3K γ , and PI3K δ , have been shown to be activated by RAS subfamily proteins [3–7]. While PI3K α and PI3K β are ubiquitously

expressed, PI3K γ and PI3K δ isoforms are predominantly found in leukocytes [8]. Activation of these PI3K isoforms requires binding of receptor tyrosine kinases (RTKs) or heterotrimeric G-protein $\beta\gamma$ subunits to the regulatory subunit to release inhibitory interactions with the catalytic subunit in conjunction with RAS binding to the catalytic domain [9].

While RAS binding to the p110 catalytic subunit of PI3Ka, δ , and γ isoforms promote kinase activation, how RAS binds and activates the PI3Ka is poorly understood. RAS proteins are the founding members of the RAS superfamily of GTPases. The three isoforms (HRAS, KRAS, and NRAS) function as highly regulated molecular switches that cycle between inactive GDP- and active GTP-bound states. GTP binding causes a conformational change in RAS that confers higher affinity binding to downstream effectors, including PI3Ks. This in turn promotes effector activation and downstream signaling [10]. Oncogenic point mutations that occur in roughly 30% of cancers cause constitutive activation of RAS and its downstream targets, including RAF kinases and PI3Ks, resulting in deregulated growth control. PI3Ka is also frequently mutated or amplified in several common cancers, such as breast, ovarian, colon, endometrial, gastric, cervical and lung cancer [11]. Of note, several studies have shown that disruption of the RAS/PI3Ka interaction in RTK and RASdriven cancers has resulted in improved survival of tumor-bearing mice in both lung and skin cancer models, a reduction in tumor initiation and growth, and tumor-induced angiogenesis [12–15]. While these studies suggest that targeting the RAS/PI3Ka binding interface may be a clinically effective approach, a clear strategy has not been established as a structure of the KRAS/PI3Ka complex is lacking. The low sequence homology (23%) between the RBDs of PI3Ka and PI3K γ makes it difficult to extrapolate known RAS/PI3K γ binding determinants to that of PI3Ka. Moreover, RAS mutants (G12R, E37G and Y40C) have been identified that show differential binding and activation of PI3Ka and PI3K γ isoforms [16–18]. These observations suggest that the interaction of RAS with these PI3K isoforms is distinct.

Class I PI3Ks are large heterodimers that are difficult to generate for biophysical and structural studies, as they require baculovirus-mediated insect cell expression, and result in low yield and variable activity. Truncated PI3K constructs that only contain the RBD of PI3K can be expressed in bacteria; however, these constructs show greatly reduced affinity compared to the full-length PI3K and require an affinity or fluorescent tag to maintain solubility [4,19–22]. To help overcome the obstacles associated with studying KRAS/PI3Ka interactions, we designed novel, soluble RBDs for both PI3Ka and PI3Ky to facilitate biochemical and structural characterization of RAS/PI3K interactions. Both constructs can be expressed at high yield in *E. coli* and retain GTP-dependent binding to KRAS similar to their full-length counterparts. We also solved a 2.3 Å X-ray crystal structure of the truncated PI3K-RBD. While the structure is similar to the RAS binding domain in the context of the full-length p110 subunit, intriguingly, structural differences are observed between the PI3Ka and PI3K γ RBDs, consistent with differences in thermal stability observed between these two isoforms. The observed structural differences between the PI3K isoforms likely underly differential RAS recognition and RAS-mediated PI3K activation. Our structural and biophysical characterization of these novel PI3K RBDs validate their use in delineating differential binding interactions between RAS, PI3K α , and PI3K γ , and provides a platform for the development of inhibitors that ablate this key interaction.

Results

Designing novel PI3K RBDs as tools to investigate RAS/PI3K interactions

In an effort to improve recombinant expression of the PI3Ka-RBD, we inspected the fulllength crystal structure [23] to identify a minimal globular domain. Shown in Fig. 1 is the 3D structure and individual domains of the PI3K catalytic subunit (p110a) in complex with the N-terminal and inter-SH2 domains (niSH2) of the regulatory p85a subunit [23]. All five domains of p110a are shown, which consist of the adapter binding domain, the RBD, C2, helical domain and kinase domain. A commonly referenced GST-PI3Ka-RBD construct colored in red (Fig. 1), shows reduced binding relative to full-length PI3K and requires GST fusion to retain solution stability [4]. As the construct contains unstructured termini that likely de-stabilize the protein, these regions were excluded from our PI3Ka-RBD construct. The truncated RBD domain we constructed is colored in cyan (Human PI3Ka residues: 157-300; Fig. 1). To improve parity when comparing isoforms of PI3K RBDs, a truncated RBD construct was also generated for PI3K γ , based on an alignment of this minimal PI3Ka-RBD within the full-length structure of PI3K γ complexed to HRAS^{G12V} (PDB ID: 1HE8). Although these two class I PI3Ks share significant structural similarity (1.0 Å RMSD of 80 Ca atoms) and are of similar length, they differ significantly in primary sequence. Structure-based sequence alignment of the PI3K α and PI3K γ RBDs (Fig. 1B) revealed that the amino acid sequence of these two RBDs are only 23% identical. Notably, key residues within the PI3Kγ-RBD critical for RAS binding (Fig. 1B, red stars), F221, T232, K251 and K255, are distinct from the PI3Ka-RBD.

Novel PI3K RBDs bind RAS in a GTP-dependent manner

Both the PI3Kα-RBD and PI3K γ -RBD domains were cloned into a pCDB24 bacterial expression vector, recombinantly expressed at high levels and subsequently purified to obtain ~15 mg of protein per liter. Given their high-level expression, we next evaluated binding of the PI3K RBDs to the KRAS GTPase. We conducted isothermal titration calorimetry (ITC) measurements, as this approach allows assessment of binding affinity, stoichiometry and thermodynamics. As shown in Fig. 2, results obtained from ITC experiments verified that both PI3K RBDs bound to KRAS^{WT} loaded with the non-hydrolysable GTP analog, GMPPCP (guanosine-5'-[(β , γ)-methyleno]triphosphate). KRAS^{WT}-GMPPCP bound to the PI3K α -RBD (Fig. 2A) with a K_d of 2.19±0.48 µM and to the PI3K γ -RBD (Fig. 2B) with a K_d of 2.29±0.38 µM. These binding affinities are similar to previously reported values for full-length PI3K [16,18]. The interaction is GTP-dependent, as binding of the PI3K RBDs is not detectable for KRAS^{WT} loaded with guanosine diphosphate (GDP) (Fig. 2A–D, Table 2).

Structural characterization of the PI3K RBDs

After validating that our minimal PI3K RBDs bind to KRAS in a GTP-specific manner, we sought to structurally characterize the PI3K RBDs. Initially, we performed circular dichroism (CD), with detection at 222 nm, as a function of temperature to monitor the thermal unfolding of the PI3K RBDs. Results from these experiments revealed that the PI3K α -RBD possesses a significantly higher thermal stability, with a melting temperature (T_m) of 53.8°C compared to 39.0°C for the PI3K γ -RBD (Fig. 3A). Given the enhanced

stability of the PI3Ka-RBD, we employed NMR spectroscopy to conduct preliminary characterization studies. We prepared ¹³C/¹⁵N-enriched PI3Ka-RBD and collected a ¹H-¹⁵N 2D HSQC NMR spectrum as shown in Supp. Fig. 1. Enrichment with ¹⁵N allows detection of NH groups, including the peptide backbone, and provides a site-specific probe for every amino acid, with the exception of proline. The NMR spectrum shown in Supp. Fig. 1 is well dispersed, with ~82% of the backbone amides detectable. Moreover, the backbone amides display an average linewidth of 25.5 Hz and 13.7 Hz along the ¹H and ¹⁵N dimension, respectively, indicative of a well folded monomeric protein (16.7 kDa). Given the quality of the NMR data, we sought structure determination by crystallography.

We were able to successfully obtain PI3Ka-RBD construct crystals in the C2221 space group with a single molecule in the asymmetric unit. The crystals refined to a resolution of 2.31 Å and the structure was refined with residual values of 19.68 % (R_{work}) and 25.52 % (R_{free}) (Fig. 3B). Additional X-ray data and refinement statistics for the PI3Ka-RBD are listed in Table 1. The X-ray diffraction data yielded a mostly complete structure, except for 4 unobservable residues (199–202) in a flexible loop region between β -strands 1 and 2 and 16 unobservable sidechains (S173, I197, V198, D203, K204, K206, E218, S231, S236, E237, K240, K249, E263, K264, E291 and M299). The PI3Ka-RBD crystal structure aligns well with the correlated residues of the previously deposited full-length PI3Ka structure (Fig. 3C,D) (PDB: 5XGH), with a C^a least squares quadratic RMSD value of 1.22 Å. Residues 228-247 were not present in the 5XGH molecular replacement search model, yet electron density maps fully supported building this region into our construct model. While these residues are absent in the full-length structure, the remainder of the RBD construct structure superposes well, except for the absence of RBD residues 199-200 in the flexible loop region between β -strands 1 and 2. Secondary structural element notation is provided in Fig. S1. The superposition of the PI3Ka-RBD crystal structure onto the BRAF-RBD crystal structure [24] is provided in Fig. 3E. The BRAF-RBD structure is smaller (11.26 kD compared to 16.78 kD for PI3Ka-RBD) and obtained at a slightly higher resolution (82 residues, 1.993 Å) than the PI3Ka-RBD (143 residues, 2.31 Å). The core RMSD for secondary structural alignment is 2.05 Å from 61 aligned residues, 4 gaps and 13% sequence identity. The PI3Ka-RBD has 33 N-terminal residues pre-alignment and 10 C-terminal residues postalignment. Even though these RBD constructs are from different RAS effectors, their secondary structures align well, especially in the beta sheet region. The BRAF-RBD possesses an additional smaller β -strand, located between β 3 and H5, that is not defined in the PI3Ka-RBD. Other differences between PI3Ka-RBD and the BRAF-RBD include a longer Helix 3 in the PI3Ka-RBD as well as the loop region between β 1 and β 2. Moreover, H4 and H6 are not present in the BRAF-RBD structure. Residues 202–204 following \$3 are the only missing region in the BRAF-RBD, where the PI3Ka-RBD structure is missing residues 199–202 between β 1 and β 2.

Oncogenic KRAS mutants bind PI3K similar to KRAS^{WT}, while T208D PI3Ka-RBD mutant abolishes RAS binding

As RAS mutations have been identified that differentially interact with PI3Ka and PI3K γ , we conducted additional ITC studies to investigate binding of two oncogenic KRAS mutants to the two PI3K isoforms. We selected KRAS^{G12V} and KRAS^{Q61H} because they are among

the most prevalent KRAS mutations found at the 12 and 61 positions in human cancer. Using ITC, we determined the affinity, stoichiometry and thermodynamics associated with these binding interactions. The PI3Ka and PI3K γ RBDs bound GMPPCP-loaded KRAS^{G12V} with a K_d of 2.29±0.53 µM and 2.41±0.57 µM, respectively, and KRAS^{Q61H} with a K_d of 4.00±0.50 µM and 2.6±1.4 µM, respectively (Fig. 4A–D). As shown in Table 2, all binding affinities between the PI3K RBDs and KRAS^{G12V} and KRAS^{Q61H} are comparable to KRAS^{WT}-GMPPCP. We also performed an additional ITC experiment to further validate that our PI3Ka-RBD construct behaves similar to the full-length protein. Previous work investigating KRAS/PI3Ka interactions have used a point mutation in PI3Ka (T208D) to abrogate KRAS/PI3Ka binding [12]. This residue is also conserved in PI3K γ and plays a key role in binding [18]. To evaluate whether our PI3Ka-RBD retains this crucial interaction, we performed ITC with PI3Ka^{T208D}-RBD and KRAS^{WT}-GMPPCP. As shown in Fig. 4E and Table 2, we did not observe detectable binding to KRAS^{WT}-GMPPCP.

PI3Ka and PI3Ky RBDs differ in secondary structure and stability

As the PI3K γ -RBD displayed a greatly reduced stability via our CD thermal melt analysis (Fig. 3A), we examined known structures of the PI3K RBDs to provide an explanation for differences in stability between the two PI3K RBDs. Using existing crystal structures of full-length PI3K α (Fig. 5A, cyan) and PI3K γ (Fig. 5A, green) ([23] and [18] for PI3K α and PI3K γ , respectively), we identified two regions in both RBDs that differ. The first region consists of a flexible loop in PI3K γ that is disordered in every PI3K γ structure except the HRAS^{G12V}/PI3K γ structure [18], which is bound to RAS. In PI3K α , this region is more ordered and possesses helical secondary structure (Fig. 5A, yellow). The second region that differs corresponds to the N- and C- termini, which pack against each other with higher helical character in PI3K α compared to PI3K γ (Fig. 5A, orange) (Supp. Fig. 2).

To investigate differences in secondary structure between our truncated PI3Ka and PI3K γ RBDs, we collected far UV-CD spectra and predicted secondary structure content. As shown in Fig. 5B, the PI3Ka-RBD shows higher helical content (35.1±4.1%) compared to the PI3K γ -RBD (14.6±2.8%). The helical content is consistent with RBDs in the context of the full-length protein crystal structures (Supp. Table 1), suggesting that the termini of the PI3K γ -RBD construct is unstructured. In contrast, calculations of secondary structure for the PI3Ka-RBD requires partial helicity at the termini to match the CD data. Combining our CD thermal stability and secondary structure analysis, our data indicates that the PI3Ka-RBD is more stable, likely due to enhanced helical structure relative to the PI3K γ -RBD.

Discussion

Use of RBDs to Investigate RAS/PI3K Binding Determinants

Most effectors engage RAS using two types of ubiquitin-like domains, commonly referred to as RAS binding (RB) and RAS association (RA) domains [25]. Class I PI3Ks comprise key downstream effectors of RAS that contain an RBD within the catalytic subunit. RAS binding to PI3K via this domain plays an important role in kinase activation to promote PIP₃ production [7,26,27]. Constitutive PIP₃ production can occur in contexts where PI3Ka is mutated or amplified, which frequently occurs in breast, ovarian, colon, endometrial, gastric,

cervical and lung cancer [11], or in RTK or RAS-driven cancers. Seminal studies in the RAS field have shown that introduction of two germline RBD mutations in mice (T208D/K227A) abolishes binding between RAS and PI3Ka, while the same mutations reduce oncogenic RAS-driven lung and skin tumorigenesis in mice and mouse embryonic fibroblasts MEFs [12] and causes regression of established lung tumors and long-term tumoristasis in mice [13]. Moreover, disrupting this key interaction reduces tumor growth, metastasis, and tumorinduced angiogenesis in both lung carcinoma and melanoma transplanted tumors [28], without causing toxicity. In addition, EGFR-mutant lung adenocarcinoma in mice containing the PI3KaT208D/K227A mutations inhibit tumor onset and cause significant regression of established tumors and increased survival [15]. This work highlights a route to target aberrant PI3K signaling without the use of PI3K inhibitors. While significant attention has been given to generating isoform specific PI3K inhibitors [29,30], PI3K inhibitors possess high cellular toxicity [31]. By targeting the RAS/PI3Ka interaction, a loss of RAS binding will attenuate PI3K activity, rather than eliminate it. While these studies suggest that targeting the RAS/PI3Ka binding interface may be a clinically effective strategy in RASand EGFR-driven cancers, a structure of the KRAS/PI3Ka complex is lacking and the low sequence homology between PI3Ka and PI3K γ makes it difficult to correlate known RAS/ PI3Ky interactions to PI3Ka.

PI3K RBDs that can be expressed at high yield in bacteria have not been successfully generated [4,19–21], limiting characterization of RAS binding interactions and pharmacological approaches to targeting this key interaction. As RBDs for several RAS effectors have successfully been generated, we postulated that the PI3K RBDs require additional sequence elements outside of the core ubiquitin-like fold to stabilize the RBD. One example where a RAS effector utilizes these additional contacts to stabilize the ubiquitin fold can be seen in the NORE1A RBD, where an N-terminal α-helix and short β-strand form hydrophobic interactions with $β_1$ and helix $α_2$ [32]. Inspection of sequence conservation and 3D structures of PI3Ks led to the generation of truncated RBDs that express in high yield and bind to KRAS in a GTP-dependent manner. While our PI3K RBDs contain most determinants associated with RAS/PI3Kγ binding, a residue (E919) outside the RBD in the kinase domain of PI3Kγ, has been shown to make contact with residue 73 in RAS. However, this interaction does not appear to contribute significantly to the overall binding affinity, as mutation of this residue (E919K) in PI3Kγ did not affect binding [18].

Only four out of twelve amino acids in the PI3K γ -RBD involved in RAS binding (T232, K234, K251, L258) are strictly conserved in the PI3K α -RBD, with T251 and K232 shown to be absolutely critical for binding to RAS switch 1 residues D33, D38 and E37 [18]. Two other residues in PI3K γ critical for RAS binding, F221 and K255, are not conserved between the two PI3K isoforms. The lack of sequence homology, 23% overall between the two RBDs, and the observation that KRAS^{G12R} fails to bind PI3K α but retains binding to PI3K γ suggests that binding determinants between these two PI3K isoforms differ [16]. Consistent with these observations, KRAS^{Y40C} selectively binds PI3K α but has severely attenuated binding to PI3K γ [17,18]. Computational analysis of the KRAS/PI3K α complex predicts that these two PI3K isoforms differentially engage RAS. Results from MD simulations indicate that while many RAS contacts remain in place, particularly for

antiparallel β -sheet interactions upon binding with PI3Ka and PI3K γ , new switch I and switch II contacts are predicted to form [33].

RAS Affinity for Novel PI3K RBDs is similar to p110

KRAS binding to full-length PI3Ka (K_d of 1.85±0.07 µM for GTP-KRAS^{WT}/PI3Ka (p110a) has been previously evaluated [16]. While a K_d is lacking for full-length PI3K γ bound to RAS, a slightly truncated p110 γ construct containing all known RAS binding determinates was reported to bind HRAS^{G12V} with a K_d of 2.9±0.4 µM [18]. Notably, our truncated PI3K RBDs show similar affinity to GMPPCP-loaded KRAS relative to these larger/full-length proteins. Moreover, both PI3K RBDs bind in a GTP-dependent manner and retain comparable K_d 's and G values for the oncogenic KRAS^{G12V} and KRAS^{Q61H} mutants. In addition, our PI3Ka^{T208D}-RBD mutant failed to bind KRAS^{WT} as measured by ITC. This RBD mutant was previously shown to abolish KRAS/PI3Ka binding [12]. With our novel PI3K RBDs in hand, we then conducted biophysical and structural analyses to evaluate structural differences between the two isoforms.

Thermodynamics of KRAS/PI3K RBD Binding

As shown in Table 2, our ITC analysis indicates that binding of RAS to the PI3K RBDs is driven by both favorable enthalpy and entropy contributions. The PI3K RBDs are more structurally similar to the RALGDS-RBD [34] and bind with similar affinity to RAS relative to the CRAF-RBD [35]. However, RALGDS binding to RAS possesses a negative entropic contribution which is counteracted by a large negative change in enthalpy [36]. This may be due to release of water or conformational changes that restrict mobility upon complex formation.

Additional Helical Content in PI3Ka-RBD Correlates with Higher Stability

One of the most striking differences with our novel PI3K RBDs is a significant difference in thermal stability. The PI3K γ -RBD possesses a 14.8°C lower T_m relative to the PI3K α -RBD. The difference in stability and secondary structure may be due to additional helical content and termini packing of the PI3K α -RBD compared to the PI3K γ -RBD. Helical content observed within the RBD domain of full-length PI3K crystal structures matched the CD measurements reported here for the truncated RBD constructs (Supp. Table 1), indicating that the more stable PI3K α -RBD contains ~20% more helical content than PI3K γ -RBD.

Based on full-length structures, differences in secondary structure are present at two locations within the PI3K isoforms (Fig. 5). The C-terminus of the PI3K α -RBD contains a short helix that forms interactions with the N-terminus, whereas the PI3K γ -RBD contains three proline residues that likely prevent secondary structure formation and helical packing with the N-terminus (Fig. 5A, orange, Supp. Fig. 2). Additionally, the yellow region indicated in Fig. 5A highlights a flexible loop in PI3K γ , which is visible in the HRAS^{G12V}/ PI3K γ structure, but absent in the other 92 deposited PI3K γ structures (Supp. Fig. 3). With RAS bound to PI3K γ , the unstructured loop is stabilized and makes several key contacts with RAS. In contrast, the corresponding region in PI3K α forms an additional helix, α 4 (Supp. Fig. 4), which is only present in 27 of the 43 deposited PI3K α structures (Supp. Fig.

3). Based on these findings, we postulate that the PI3K γ -RBD is dependent on RAS complex formation to promote structural stability.

To investigate whether differences in stability observed for the two RBD constructs may also apply to RBD domains in the context of the full-length proteins, we conducted *in silico* analysis. Results from these analyses suggest PI3Ka may form more intramolecular contacts with other components of the p110 subunit compared to PI3K γ . The interface size for the PI3Ka-RBD and the remainder of the protein is larger, and the interactions are stronger than those observed within the PI3K γ crystal structure (Supp. Table 2). However, based on these predictions, the PI3Ka-RBD should be less stable from the full-length protein. Since this is not what our CD thermal data shows, we hypothesize that the contacts the PI3K RBDs makes with the rest of the protein do not significantly contribute to the PI3K RBDs stability in isolation. Therefore, the PI3K α -RBD might have other structural features that contribute to it being less stable than the PI3K α -RBD. The untethered termini may differentially affect the two RBD isoforms resulting in reduction of secondary structure. While termini truncation may contribute to the reduced stability of PI3K γ relative to PI3K α , our analysis suggests that PI3K γ stability is more dependent on RAS complex formation."

Comparison of PI3K RBD Tertiary Structure with BRAF and RALGDS RBDs

Further comparison of the PI3K α -RBD structure to the well-characterized BRAF-RBD and RALGDS-RBD shows many similarities, including the common ubiquitin-like fold and antiparallel β -sheet pairing with RAS. The PI3K α -RBD differs from these RBDs by containing additional helices and one less β -sheet. In addition to the aforementioned α 4 helix, additional helices in the PI3K α -RBD can be found at the N-terminal (α 1 and α 7) and C-terminal (α 6) end of the protein. These additional helices are outside the RAS binding region, except for α 4, which packs against part of the ubiquitin-like fold responsible for key switch 1 contacts with RAS. The presence of α 4 likely helps stabilize this part of the structure and leads to novel RAS contacts. The yellow helix described in Fig. 5A is also absent in the BRAF-RBD [24] and RALGDS-RBD [34].

PI3K RBDs May Facilitate RAS/PI3Ka Drug Discovery Efforts

One approach to reduce toxicity associated with PI3K kinase inhibitors is to decrease PI3K activity to levels that attenuate signaling. As RAS acts synergistically with RTKs to increase kinase activity (~30–200 fold compared to basal levels) [6,7], interfering with either of these activating agents may attenuate PI3Ka activity and toxicity. Identification of compounds that interfere with RAS/PI3Ka association represents an attractive approach, as disrupting RAS/PI3Ka complex formation using PI3Ka mutants defective in RAS binding has been shown to reduce tumorigenicity in RAS- and RTK-driven lung and skin cancer without causing toxicity[12–15]. Several promising drug discovery efforts aimed at disrupting RAS/ effector protein-protein interactions (PPI) have recently been developed. A notable example includes allosteric KRAS^{G12C} inhibitors that target and stabilize the inactive GDP-bound form of RAS. These covalent inhibitors show efficacy with low toxicity and are in clinical trials, with Amgen 510 awaiting FDA approval for second-line treatment of patients with non-small cell lung cancer ([37–39]. Moreover, direct inhibitors of KRAS/effector PPI, including PPIN compounds, have recently been developed. The PPIN inhibitors interfere

with effector association both *in vitro* and in *vivo* and inhibit downstream signaling of mutant RAS proteins in colorectal adenocarcinoma (DLD-1) cell lines [40]. Thus, characterizing binding determinants between wild-type and oncogenic RAS mutants with PI3Ka and PI3K γ will provide insights into how PI3K isoforms differentially recognize RAS. This knowledge, in turn, will expediate drug discovery efforts that aim to inhibit the RAS/PI3Ka interaction, a key interaction in EFGR- and RAS-driven cancers. Due to difficulties associated with generating full-length PI3K from insect cells, our novel PI3K RBDs, which express at high yields in bacterial cell culture, will facilitate future structural and biophysical studies to characterize RAS interaction that may aid in development of RAS/PI3Ka inhibitors.

Materials and Methods

Recombinant Protein Expression

Human PI3Ka-RBD (residues 157–300), PI3K γ -RBD (residues 193–316) and KRAS4B (residues 1–169, C118S) were subcloned into pCDB24 expression vectors containing an N-terminal 10-histidine tag and a SUMO cleavage site. In addition, wild-type human KRAS4B (residues 1–169, C118S) and KRAS-4B^{G12V} and KRAS4B^{Q61H} were subcloned into a pET21 vector that encodes an N-terminal 6-histidine tag and a TEV protease cleavage site. The PI3K RBDs and all of the KRAS plasmids were expressed in BL21 (DE3) RIPL cells and were grown at 37°C in Luria-Bertani (LB) medium. The cells were grown to an *OD*₆₀₀ of ~0.5. The temperature was then reduced to 18°C for 30 minutes (min), protein expression induced with 500 µM Isopropyl β-D-1-thiogalactopyranoside (IPTG), and the cells grown for 16 hours (h) at 18°C. Cell pellets were obtained upon centrifugation at 4,500 x g for 30 min.

Protein Purification

PI3K RBDs—Following centrifugation, the PI3K RBDs pellets were resuspended in lysis buffer (50 mM HEPES, 200 mM NaCl, 20 mM Imidazole, and 10% glycerol, pH 8.0) and sonicated in the presence of a Roche protease inhibitor cocktail tablet (Roche Ref.# 05892970001). The PI3K cell lysates were subsequently centrifuged at 15,000 x g for 30 min. The supernatants were then purified using nickel-nitrotriacetic acid-agarose affinity (Ni-NTA agarose) chromatography. The supernatants were applied to the Ni-NTA agarose column, washed with 5 column volumes (CV) lysis buffer, 10 CV wash buffer (50 mM HEPES, 1 M NaCl, 30 mM Imidazole, 10% glycerol, 5mM β-mercaptoethanol (BME), pH 8.0) and again with 5 CV lysis buffer. The protein was eluted with 50 mM HEPES, 200 mM NaCl, 500 mM Imidazole, 5 mM BME and 10% glycerol, pH 8.0. The eluted protein was cleaved of its histidine tag using the Ubl-specific protease 1 (ULP1) from Saccharomyces cerevisiae during overnight dialysis in 50 mM HEPES, 500 mM NaCl, and 5 mM βmercaptoethanol (BME), pH 8.0 at 4°C. Following dialysis, the tag was removed via the Ni-NTA agarose column. The PI3K RBDs were purified more than 95% by size exclusion chromatography (SEC) using a Sephadex S-75 (S-75) column and verified using SDS-PAGE analysis.

Wild-type and mutant KRAS4B—The pellet containing all KRAS proteins was resuspended in lysis buffer (50 mM HEPES, 150 mM NaCl, 20 mM imidazole, 5 mM MgCl₂, 15 μ M guanosine diphosphate (GDP), and 5mM BME, pH 7.75) and then sonicated. The supernatant was collected after centrifugation at 15,000 x g for 30 min and then applied to a Ni-NTA agarose column. The protein was washed with 5 CV lysis buffer, 10 CV wash buffer (50 mM HEPES, 750mM NaCl, 30 mM Imidazole, 5 mM MgCl₂, 15 μ M GDP, and 5mM BME, pH 7.75), and then 5 CV lysis buffer. The protein was eluted with 50 mM HEPES, 150 mM NaCl, 500 mM imidazole, 5 mM MgCl₂, 15 μ M GDP, and 5 mM BME, pH 7.75. Either the TEV protease or ULP1 was used to cleave the his-tag during overnight dialysis at 4°C in 50 mM HEPES, 150 mM NaCl, 5 mM MgCl₂, 15 μ M GDP and 5 mM BME. An S-75 size exclusion column was used to purify the protein to greater than 95% purity, as verified through SDS-PAGE analysis.

Circular Dichroism (CD) Thermal Melts and Spectral Scans

CD measurements were performed on a Jasco J-815 CD spectrometer using sparged 10mM $KH_2PO_4^{3-}/K_2HPO_4^{3-}$, pH 7.4 at 20°C. CD thermal melts were collected on both the PI3Ka and PI3K γ RBDs using a 1-mm cuvette using 30 μ M protein. Thermal melts were obtained at 222 nm, over a temperature range of 20–95°C, using a temperature increment of 1°C/min. The midpoint of the thermal transition (T_m) was obtained through non-linear fitting of the thermal denaturation using the Gibbs-Helmhotz equation and plotted as the mean \pm SEM in GraphPad Prism. Wavelength scans were collected from 190–280 nm for both PI3K RBDs, with measurements taken every 1 nm.

Isothermal Titration Calorimetry (ITC)

For all ITC experiments, KRAS was either bound to guanine diphosphate (GDP) (Thermo Fisher Scientific #J61646) or a non-hydrolysable analog of GTP, guanosine-5'- $[(\beta, \gamma)$ methyleno]triphosphate GMPPCP (Sigma #M3509). For GDP studies, KRAS was purified in the presence of 15 μ M GDP and then the protein was verified to only contain GDP via HPLC. To load KRAS with GMPPCP, KRAS proteins were loaded with five-fold excess guanine mono-phosphate (GMPPCP) (Sigma) in 20 mM HEPES (pH 8.0), 50 mM NaCl, 125 mM ammonium sulfate, 1 mM MgCl₂, 1 mM ethylenediaminetetraacetic acid (EDTA), 100 µM ZnCl₂ and then incubated for 48 h at 4°C in the presence of alkaline phosphatase agarose beads derived from cow intestine (Sigma). Following incubation, KRAS-GMPPCP protein was exchanged into 20 mM HEPES, 50 mM NaCl, 5 mM MgCl₂, and 1 mM TCEP, which is the same buffer all ITC experiments were performed in. Nucleotide loading was then verified using HPLC. RAS proteins (~200-250 µM) were injected into the sample cell containing PI3K RBDs (~10–15 µM) using a MicroCal PEAQ-ITC (Malvern Paranalytical) or Microcal iTC200 (Malvern Paranalytical). The ITC experiment was performed at a 1:15-1:20 effector to RAS molar ratio at 25°C, stirring speed of 650 rpm, an initial delay of 120 seconds, with 19 2-µL injections spaced 180 seconds apart. To take into account heat of dilution, either the heat associated with the last few injections when saturation occurred was subtracted from all of the heat peaks (control subtraction) or the heat produced from KRAS injected into the sample cell containing only buffer was subtracted. All data was analyzed using a nonlinear least square algorithm and fit to a one-site model provided in Origin 7, the accompanying software for the ITC instruments.

NMR Analyses

To generate ${}^{13}C/{}^{15}N$ -enriched PI3Ka RBD, pCDB24 construct containing our gene of interest, was expressed in BL21(DE3)-RIPL *E. coli* bacterial strain in minimal medium [41] containing 1 g/L ${}^{15}NH_4Cl$ and 3g/L ${}^{13}C$ -glucose (Cambridge Isotope Laboratories) as the sole source of nitrogen and carbon, respectively. The cells were grown at 37°C to an OD₆₀₀ ~ 0.8 and induced with 500 µM IPTG followed by incubation at 18°C. After 22 h, the cells were harvested at 4 °C and 5000 x g and then purified as described above. ${}^{13}C/{}^{15}N$ -enriched PI3Ka protein (157 µM) was equilibrated in 20 mM HEPES (pH 6.8), 50 mM NaCl and 5 mM DTT containing 5% (v/v) D₂O. Two-dimensional NMR ${}^{1}H_{-}{}^{15}N$ HSQC spectrum of ${}^{13}C/{}^{15}N$ -labelled PI3Ka RBD was acquired on a Bruker Avance 850 MHz (19.97 T field strength) spectrometer at 25 °C, using a cryogenic (TCI) 5 mm triple-resonance probe equipped with z-axis gradient. NMR data was collected using a spectral width of 13 ppm and 33 ppm and complex points of 1024 and 256 along the ${}^{1}H$ and ${}^{15}N$ dimension, respectively. The NMR data was processed using NMRPipe [42] and the spectrum was visualized using SPARKY [43].

Computational Analysis

The PI3Ka RBD (residues 157–300) and PI3K γ RBD (residues 193–316) sequences were selected for expression *in vitro* based on visual inspection of the full-length crystal structures (PDB ID: 3HHM and 1HE8, respectively). All images of molecular structures were created with PyMol [44]. The endpoints for the PI3Ka construct was selected based on the sequence that was expected to form a minimal globular unit. The PI3K γ RBD was created based on this PI3Ka construct.

Amino Acid Occupancy—Crystal structures for PI3K α and PI3K γ were extracted from the Protein Data Bank (PDB) based on Uniprot Accession codes P42336 and P48736, respectively. A bash script was written to count the number of PDB files that contain a defined residue (i.e. sufficient electron density to resolve the residue) and the results were plotted with MS Excel.

Sequence Alignments—A structure-based sequence alignment for the RBD domains of PI3K γ and PI3K α (PDB ID: 3HHM and 1HE8, respectively) was created with PyMol. The alignment applied the BLOSUM62 substitution matrix and was followed by 10 cycles of iterative refinement of the C α atoms with a RMSD of 0.97 Å for 80 residues. The sequence alignment was exported to clustalw format for image processing with Jalview [45]. Conservation scores were calculated based on the AMAS method [46].

Protein Crystallization and X-ray Diffraction Studies

The PI3Ka-RBD protein was brought to a concentration of 725 μ M in crystallization buffer (20 mM HEPES, 50 mM NaCl, 3 mM (tris(2-carboxyethyl)phosphine) (TCEP), pH 7.4). Crystals were obtained through the sitting-drop vapor diffusion method. Using a 96-well plate set-up, three 0.3 μ L drops were equilibrated against a reservoir volume of 30 μ L. Initial PI3Ka RBD construct crystals were obtained from a mother liquor solution of 0.17M ammonium acetate, 0.085M sodium citrate HCl, and 25% w/v PEG4000, pH 5.6, equilibrated against an identical reservoir solution at 20°C in 7 days. As the crystals were of

low quality, they were crushed and a 1:100 seed stock was used to perform random microseed matrix screening [47]. The final PI3Kα RBD crystal was obtained from a mother liquor of 0.7 M sodium citrate and 0.1 M Tris-HCl at pH 8.5, equilibrated against an identical reservoir solution at 20°C in 3 days. The crystals were cryo-protected by briefly dipping them in reservoir solution enhanced with 15% ethylene glycol and then flash frozen in liquid N₂. Data were collected at 100 K on the SER-CAT ID22 beamline at the APS synchrotron facility, utilizing a wavelength of 1.00 Å. All data were scaled and integrated using HKL2000 [48], molecular replacement (MR) was performed with Phaser-MR [49] from the PHENIX [50] suite of programs. Truncation of the full-length PI3Kα (PDB ID: 5XGH) [51] to include only the residues of the PI3Kα-RBD construct design (residues 157–300) provided the search model for MR. Model building and manual placement of waters utilized COOT [52] and refinement was carried out using phenix.refine [53]. Alignment calculations were performed via COOT. X-ray data collection and refinement statistics are provided in Table 2.

Supplementary Material

Refer to Web version on PubMed Central for supplementary material.

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Macromolecular X-ray Crystallography Core/UNC Macromolecular Interactions Facility

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Highlights

• KRAS selectively binds and activates different PI3K isoforms

- PI3Ka is a key therapeutic target as mutations in PI3Ka are present in (~15– 30%) of cancers
- Novel, truncated PI3Ka/PI3K γ constructs bind RAS in a GTP-dependent manner similar to full-length
- Structural characterization of novel PI3Ka RAS binding domain reveals it retains similar structure as the full-length protein
- Novel PI3K constructs will aid in characterizing RAS/PI3K interactions and drug discovery efforts

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Figure 1.

Generation of PI3K α and PI3K γ RAS binding domains (RBD) for high level bacterial expression. (*A*) Domains within the catalytic (p110 α) and regulatory subunit (p85 α). The adaptor binding domain (ABD) is shown in green, RBD in red (Rodriguez-Viciana et al, 1996), truncated RBD in cyan (Residues 157–300), C2 domain in blue, helical domain in purple and helical domain in yellow, with linker regions in gray. The N-terminal iSH2 domain within the regulatory subunit is shown in orange (PDB ID: 3HHM). (*B*) Structurebased sequence alignment for both the PI3K γ (PDB ID: 1HE8) and truncated PI3K α (PDB ID: 3HHM) RBDs created using PyMol {DeLano, 2002 #422}. Red stars indicate residues in PI3K γ that contact HRAS^{G12V} in the HRAS^{G12V}/PI3K γ crystal structure (PDB ID: 1HE8) and red boxes indicate the four residues shown to be critical for HRAS^{G12V}/PI3K γ binding. Secondary structural elements are shown for the RBDs (α : α -helix in blue; β : β strand in peach) of p110 γ (PDB ID: 1E8X) and p110 α (PDB ID: 3HHM). Unobserved residues in the p110 α RBD (PDB ID: 3HHM) (Res. 254–265) are shown in green.



Figure 2.

KRAS binds to both PI3Ka and PI3K γ RBDs in a GTP-dependent manner. ITC experiments were performed with either 12 µM PI3Ka or PI3K γ RBD in the presence of varying concentration of KRAS^{WT} (0–215 µM) at 25°C. Isothermograms of (*A*) KRAS^{WT}-GMPPCP injected into a cell containing PI3Ka-RBD, (*B*) KRAS^{WT}-GMPPCP injected into a cell containing PI3K γ -RBD, (*C*) KRAS^{WT}-GDP injected into a cell containing PI3Ka-RBD and (*D*) KRAS^{WT}-GDP injected into a cell containing PI3K γ -RBD. *Top panel* shows titration curve obtained for 20 automatic injections, 2 µL each, of KRAS^{WT}. The *bottom panel* shows the integrated curve showing experimental (**■**) points and the best fit (—). All data was processed and curve fitting was used with a single site model in Origin 7.0. Data is representative of N=3 for KRAS^{WT-GMPPCP} experiments and N=2 for KRAS^{WT-GDP} experiments. Binding stoichiometry (*N*), *K*_d enthalpy (H) and entropy (S) values were calculated in Origin 7.0 and reported as the mean ± std. dev. in Table 2.



Figure 3.

Structural characterization of PI3Ka-RBD. (*A*) CD thermal unfolding as quantified by the loss of mean residue ellipticity at 222 nm for 30 μ M PI3Ka-RBD (red) and PI3K γ -RBD (blue) over a temperature range of 20–90°C at pH 7.4. Data was normalized to the maximum and minimum ellipticity. Thermal denaturation curves and the midpoint of the thermal transition (*Tm*) were calculated by fitting the data using the Gibbs-Helmhotz equation. Results were graphed in GraphPad Prism and reported as the mean ± S.E. (error bars) (N=3 for PI3Ka, N=2 for PI3K γ , each performed in duplicate). (*B*) X-ray crystallographic structure of the PI3Ka-RBD (residues 157–300) (PDB: 6VO7). The structure was refined to a resolution of 2.31 Å, with residual values of 19.65 % (R_{work}) and 25.52 % (R_{free}). The structure is complete, save for 4 unobservable residues in the flexible loop region between β strands 1 and 2, and 16 unobservable residue sidechains. Superposition of (*C*) PI3Ka-RBD crystal structure (teal) onto the full length PI3Ka structure (PDB: 5XGH, yellow), (*D*) PI3Ka-RBD crystal structure (teal) overlayed with the RBD contained within the PI3Ka full-length crystal structure (PDB: 5XGH, yellow, correlated construct residues 157–300, C^a

least squares quadratic (LSQ) RMSD 1.22 Å), (*E*) PI3K α -RBD crystal structure (teal) overlayed with B-RAF-RBD (PDB: 3NY5, gold). The 4 β -strands align well between the B-RAF-RBD and PI3K α -RBD, with similar orientations observed for the conserved helices adjacent to the beta sheets.



Figure 4.

Oncogenic KRAS (G12V, Q61H)-GMPPCP shows similar binding to PI3Ka and PI3K γ RBDs relative to KRAS^{WT} while binding to PI3Ka(T208D)-RBD is not detectable. ITC experiments were performed with either 12 μ M PI3Ka or PI3K γ RBD in the presence of varying concentration of KRAS (0–215 μ M) at 25°C. Isothermograms of (*A*) KRAS^{G12V}-GMPPCP injected into a cell containing PI3Ka-RBD, (*B*) KRAS^{G12V}-GMPPCP injected into a cell containing PI3Ka-RBD, (*B*) KRAS^{G12V}-GMPPCP injected into a cell containing PI3Ka-RBD, (*C*) KRAS^{Q61H}-GMPPCP injected into a cell containing PI3Ka-RBD, (*D*) KRAS^{Q61H}-GMPPCP injected into a cell containing PI3Ka-RBD and (*E*) KRAS^{WT}-GMPPCP injected into a cell containing PI3Ka(T208D)-RBD. *Top panel* shows titration curve obtained for 20 automatic injections, 2 μ L each, of KRAS^{WT}. The *bottom panel* shows the integrated curve showing experimental (**■**) points and the best fit (—). All data was processed and curve fitting was used with a single site model in Origin 7.0. Data is representative of N=2 for all experiments. Binding stoichiometry (*N*), *K*_d enthalpy (H) and entropy (S) values were calculated in Origin 7.0 and reported as the mean ± std. dev. in Table 2.



Figure 5.

PI3Kα RBD possess higher helical content relative to the PI3Kγ-RBD. (*A*) Structures of the PI3Kα-RBD (cyan, left) and PI3Kγ (green, right), with proposed regions of differential structure colored in yellow and orange. The RBD domains were extracted from full-length PI3K structures (PDB ID: 3HHM & 1HE8 for PI3Kα and PI3Kγ, respectively. Two regions are highlighted in both PI3K RBDs, with one being a flexible loop in yellow in PI3Kγ (residues for PI3Kα = 229–244 and PI3Kγ = 253–268) and the terminal residues in orange (residues for PI3Kα = 157–167 & 290–300 and PI3Kγ = 191–198 & 309–316). (*B*) Circular dichroism (CD) spectral scans of PI3Kα (red) and PI3Kγ (blue) were collected at 20°C from 200–280 nm at pH 7.4. The PI3Kα RBD possesses 20.5% higher helical content relative to the PI3Kγ-RBD. Results are reported as the mean ± S.E. (error bars) (N=3 for PI3Kα, N=2 for PI3Kγ, each performed in duplicate).

Table 1.

X-ray data collection and refinement statistics for PI3Ka-RBD. Values in parentheses are for the highest resolution shell.

	PI3Ka RBD		
PDB Entry	6VO7		
Data Collection			
Wavelength (Å)	1.00		
Temperature (K)	100		
Space Group	C222 ₁		
Unit-cell parameters (Å)			
a	71.55		
b	83.91		
С	63.99		
Unique reflections	8,574 (414)		
Completeness (%)	98.8 (97.4)		
$\mathbf{R}_{\mathrm{merge}}\left(\% ight)^{b}$	17.1 (83.2)		
$I/\sigma_{(I)}$	21.0 (1.7)		
Redundancy	5.8 (5.0)		
Refinement			
Resolution (Å)	2.31		
$\mathrm{R}_{\mathrm{work}}\left(\% ight)^{\mathcal{C}}$	19.68 (25.65)		
$\mathbf{R}_{\mathrm{free}}\left(\%\right)^{d}$	25.52 (34.84)		
No. of protein atoms	1,109		
No. of solvent atoms	26		
R.m.s.d from ideal geometry e			
Bond lengths (Å)	0.011		
Bond angles (°)	0.950		
<u>Ramachandran plot (%)</u> f			
Most favored region	97.06		
Addl allowed region	2.94		
Outliers			

 ${}^{b}R_{merge} = \frac{1}{h} \frac{i[|I_{i}(h) - \langle I(h) \rangle|}{h} \frac{i}{i}I(h)] \times 100\%$, where $I_{i}(h)$ is the i^{th} measurement and $\langle I(h) \rangle$ is the weighted mean of all measurements of I(h).

 $^{C}R_{WOTK} = |F_{O} - F_{O}/F_{O} \times 100\%$, where F_{O} and F_{C} are the observed and calculated structure factors, respectively.

 d_{Rfree} is the R factor for the subset (~9%) of reflections selected before and not included in the refinement.

e Root-mean-square deviation.

^f The Ramachandran plot was created via MolProbity.

Table 2.

GTP-bound KRAS^{WT} and oncogenic KRAS mutants bind with a similar affinity to the PI3K RBDs, while the T208D mutant in the PI3K α -RBD does not show detectable binding. All values are for GMPPCP-bound KRAS, except where designated otherwise. Binding stoichiometry (*N*), K_d , enthalpy (H), and T S values were calculated in Origin 7.0 and reported as the mean ± std. dev. as determined by three independent experiments. Gibbs free energy (G) values were calculated using the Gibbs free energy equation and ITC-derived derived H and S values.

RAS protein	Effector	n	K_{d} (μM)	H (kcal/mol)	T S (kcal/mol/deg)	G (kcal/mol
KRAS ^{WT}	PI3Ka-RBD	0.88±0.06	2.2±0.5	-6.12±1.08	1.6±1.3	-7.72
KRAS ^{WT}	PI3Kγ-RBD	0.82±0.08	2.3±0.4	-7.42 ± 0.93	0.30±1.0	-7.72
KRAS ^{WT-GDP}	PI3Ka-RBD	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
KRAS ^{WT-GDP}	PI3Kγ-RBD	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
KRAS ^{G12V}	PI3Ka-RBD	1.07±0.14	2.3±0.5	-3.82 ± 0.37	4.11±0.3	-7.93
KRAS ^{G12V}	PI3Kγ-RBD	0.81±0.16	2.4±0.6	-4.16±0.28	2.96±0.4	-7.12
KRAS ^{Q61H}	PI3Ka-RBD	1.06±0.17	4.0±0.5	-2.59 ± 0.50	4.7±0.6	-7.29
KRAS ^{Q61H}	PI3Kγ-RBD	0.910±0.01	2.6±1.4	-2.97±0.63	4.7±1.3	-7.67
KRAS ^{WT}	PI3Ka-RBD(T208D)	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A