# Bacterial Glutathione: a Sacrificial Defense against Chlorine Compounds†

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Aerobic organisms possess a number of often overlapping and well-characterized defenses against common oxidants such as superoxide and hydrogen peroxide. However, much less is known of mechanisms of defense against halogens such as chlorine compounds. Although chlorine-based oxidants may oxidize a number of cellular components, sulfhydryl groups are particularly reactive. We have, therefore, assessed the importance of intracellular glutathione in protection of Escherichia coli cells against hydrogen peroxide, hypochlorous acid, and chloramines. Employing a glutathione-deficient E. coli strain (JTG10) and an otherwise isogenic glutathione-sufficient E. coli strain (AB1157), we find that glutathione-deficient organisms are approximately twice as sensitive to killing by both hydrogen peroxide and chlorine compounds. However, the mode of protection by glutathione in these two cases appears to differ: exogenous glutathione added to glutathione-deficient E. coli in amounts equal to those which would be present in a similar suspension of the wild-type bacteria fully restored resistance of glutathione-deficient bacteria to chlorine-based oxidants but did not change resistance to hydrogen peroxide. Furthermore, in protection against chlorine compounds, oxidized glutathione is almost as effective as reduced glutathione, implying that the tripeptide and/or oxidized thiol undergo further reactions with chlorine compounds. Indeed, in vitro, 1 mol of reduced glutathione will react with  $\sim$ 3.5 to 4.0 mol of hypochlorous acid. We conclude that glutathione defends E. coli cells against attack by chlorine compounds and hydrogen peroxide but, in the case of the halogen compounds, does so nonenzymatically and sacrificially.

Aerobic organisms have numerous and often redundant defenses against oxidants. The natural abundance of superoxide (O2 and hydrogen peroxide (H2O2) makes superoxide dismutase, catalase, and peroxidases preeminently important oxidant defenses. These enzymatic systems, along with antioxidants such as tocopherols, retinoids, and ascorbate, provide effective protection against reasonable challenges with activated oxygen species. There are, however, other oxidants against which no obvious defenses are known. Important among these are the chlorine compounds hypochlorous acid (HOCl), monochloramine (NH<sub>2</sub>Cl), and taurine monochloramine, which are generated by mammalian neutrophils (10, 20, 27). Hypochlorous acid, in particular, is a strong electrophile and will oxidize a large number of biological molecules, especially those containing thiols, thioethers, and conjugated double bonds (5, 25).

Therefore, it is no surprise that both mammalian neutrophils and water treatment facilities use chlorine and its reactive derivatives as effective bactericides (22). In tests on dilute bacterial suspensions (free of other organics), HOCl has a 50% lethal dose (LD<sub>50</sub>) of 0.2 to 3.0  $\mu$ M against most bacteria tested, and there is evidence that chlorine generated by the mammalian neutrophil myeloperoxidase (MPO)-H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>-chloride system is equally effective (24). Interestingly, no significant bacterial resistance to chlorine compounds (with the possible exception of *Cryptosporidium parvum* [13]) has been found, despite decades of water treatment with powerful chlorine-based oxidants. Previous studies have identified several poten-

tial bacterial targets of chlorine oxidants such as the electron transport chain (2), iron sulfur centers (15), the membrane-associated origin of DNA replication (16), adenine nucleotides (1–3), important metabolic enzymes such as succinate oxidase (17), and unsaturated fatty acids within membranes (26).

Knowing of the very facile reactions between hypochlorous acid and sulfur compounds (18, 24), we hypothesized that glutathione (GSH), the predominant intracellular thiol compound in Escherichia coli and many other bacteria (8), might represent an important defense against attack by hypohalous acids such as hypochlorous acid. We have tested this idea, employing an otherwise isogenic pair of E. coli strains, one of which lacks GSH (16). The results affirm the importance of GSH as a defense against chlorine compounds (and, expectably, H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>). Interestingly, exogenous GSH—both reduced and oxidized appears as effective as intracellular GSH in protection of bacteria against chlorine compounds (but not  $H_2O_2$ ). These results suggest that GSH is an important but sacrificial defense against chlorine compounds but that the protective reactions do not require the collaboration of intracellular enzvmes.

# MATERIALS AND METHODS

**Preparation of solutions.** All solutions were prepared in phosphate-buffered saline (PBS) (1.06 mM KH<sub>2</sub>PO<sub>4</sub>, 0.6 mM Na<sub>2</sub>HPO<sub>4</sub>, 154 mM NaCl [pH 7.2]). Stock solutions of hypochlorous acid (HOCl) were prepared immediately before use by dilution of reagent sodium hypochlorite (stock concentration,  $\sim$ 680 mM) in PBS. Stock solutions of hydrogen peroxide (H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>) ( $\sim$ 8.8 M) were also diluted in PBS. For preparation of chloramine compounds, 9 parts of 11.1 mM taurine or 11.1 mM ammonium chloride (also in PBS) were admixed with 1 part of 100 mM sodium hypochlorite. Solutions of 6 mM ascorbic acid and 1 mM GSH were freshly prepared in deionized water. Concentrations of stock solutions of HOCl, NH<sub>2</sub>Cl, and taurine monochloramine were determined spectrophotometrically by using the known molar absorptivities of 350 M $^{-1}$  cm $^{-1}$  at 292 nm (14, 20), 424 M $^{-1}$  cm $^{-1}$  at 242 nm (27), and 398 M $^{-1}$  cm $^{-1}$  at 250 nm (23), respectively. In addition, concentrations of these chlorine compounds were independently determined by coupled oxidation of 5-thor-2-nitrobenzoic acid to 5,5'-dithiobis-(2-

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<sup>†</sup> Dedicated to Eugene Ogan on the occasion of his retirement.

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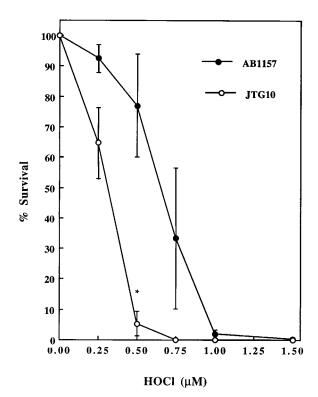


FIG. 1. HOCl toxicity to dilute suspensions of GSH-replete ( $\bullet$ ) and -deficient ( $\bigcirc$ ) *E. coli* cells resuspended to a concentration of  $10^6$  cells per ml. At time zero, HOCl was added to give the final concentration as indicated. Survival of bacteria after 20 min was assessed by removing aliquots and duplicate pour plating. CFU were enumerated after 36 h of growth at  $37^{\circ}$ C. n=3; \*, P<0.01.

nitrobenzoic acid) (DTNB) or ascorbic acid to dehydroascorbic acid as previously described (4, 7).

Bacterial stains and growth conditions.  $E.\ coli$  AB1157 and the GSH-deficient strain JTG10 (derived in Bruce Demple's laboratory, Harvard University, Boston, Mass) were provided by James Fuchs, University of Minnesota, St. Paul. JTG10 and AB1157 are isogenic strains, except that JTG10, as a result of transposon insertion in the gshA gene, is completely lacking in GSH (11). Both strains were grown to stationary phase for 18 h at 37°C in brain heart infusion broth (BHI) (Gibco Laboratories, Madison, Wis.). Before performance of the killing assays or analyses of GSH concentrations, the bacteria were washed twice, and resuspended, in cold PBS (4°C). We experimentally verified that these particular  $E.\ coli$  strains did not show diminished CFU after exposure to this temperature. Bacterial concentrations were estimated by measuring the  $A_{600}$  of bacterial suspensions.

Incubation of *E. coli* cells with oxidants. For killing assays on dilute *E. coli* suspensions,  $100~\mu l$  was added to  $1,930~\mu l$  of PBS ( $25^{\circ}\text{C}$ ), for a final concentration of  $10^{6}$  bacteria per ml. After removing  $50-\mu l$  aliquots for bacterial enumeration (see below),  $20~\mu l$  of either  $H_2O_2$ , HOCl, monochloramine, or taurine monochloramine was added. Further incubation was carried out at  $25^{\circ}\text{C}$  for  $20~\mu l$  of appropriately diluted *E. coli* suspensions was added to  $900~\mu l$  of PBS ( $25^{\circ}\text{C}$ ), for a final concentration of  $10^{10}~\text{bacteria}$  per ml. After removing  $50-\mu l$  aliquots for time zero control samples,  $10~\mu l$  of HOCl solution was added, and the incubation was carried out at  $25^{\circ}\text{C}$  for 20~min.

Assay of bacterial viability. After exposure of bacteria to oxidants, aliquots of the suspensions were appropriately diluted in PBS. A 50-µl aliquot of each sample was placed into a petri dish, and molten Luria-Bertani agar (Gibco Ltd., Paisley, Scotland) was poured over it. The petri dishes were rotated (70 rpm) as the agar solidified. Bacterial viability was measured as the number of colonies (Artek automatic plate counter) appearing after incubation at 37°C for 36 h.

Determination of GSH concentration. Bacterial GSH concentration was de-

**Determination of GSH concentration.** Bacterial GSH concentration was determined colorimetrically on the basis of the absorbance of the reaction product of GSH and DTNB (7). Although this technique is unable to differentiate between GSH and other low-molecular-weight thiol-containing compounds, GSH constitutes the overwhelming fraction of acid-soluble thiols in *E. coli*. Bacterial suspensions (1 ml) at a concentration of  $5 \times 10^{10}$  were exposed to various concentrations of HOCl for 15 min. Precipitation of bacteria was accomplished by the addition of 4 ml of  $0.08 \text{ N H}_2\text{SO}_4$  with vigorous vortexing and

incubation for 10 min at 25°C. An aliquot of 0.3 M tungstate (0.5 ml) was added, and the solution was vortexed and left at 25°C for 10 min. Following centrifugation (1,000 × relative centrifugal force for 10 min), the concentration of GSH was determined by measuring the reduction of DTNB (a molar absorptivity coefficient of 13,600  $\times$  10 $^{5}$   $M^{-1}$  cm $^{-1}$  at 412 nm was used).

MPO-mediated killing of AB1157 and JTG10 cells. Partially purified human MPO was generously provided by Beulah Gray, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis. MPO (final activity of 7 mU/ml, determined by guiaicol reduction) was added to suspensions of  $10^6$  *E. coli* cells per ml in PBS. Hydrogen peroxide (0 to 3.0  $\mu$ M) was added, and bacterial survival was estimated following 30 min of incubation at 25°C.

**Statistics.** Differences between the two bacterial strains were analyzed by Student's t test. A P value of <0.05 was used as the minimum for statistical significance.

### RESULTS

We reaffirmed that strain JTG10 lacks detectable GSH, whereas AB1157 has roughly normal levels of GSH for E. coli cells (132  $\pm$  15 nmol/10 organisms or ~8  $\mu$ mol/g of bacterial protein) (8). In support of the idea that cellular GSH may protect against killing by chlorine compounds, dilute suspensions of GSH-deficient E. coli are much more susceptible to killing by HOCl than are the GSH-replete organisms (Fig. 1). The LD<sub>50</sub> for the GSH-deficient E. coli JTG10 ( $\sim$ 0.31  $\mu$ M HOCl) is more than two times lower than the  $LD_{50}$  for the wild type (~0.66 μM HOCl). Because these two strains are otherwise isogenic, the variation is almost certainly due to different GSH statuses. In fact, generation of HOCl via the MPO-H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>chloride system also revealed even greater differential susceptibility between AB1157 and JTG10 (Fig. 2). These results further demonstrate that enzymatically generated HOCl is nearly as effective at killing E. coli cells as reagent HOCl (assuming stoichiometric conversion of H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> by MPO).

Bacterial GSH content also powerfully affects susceptibility to killing by monochloramine (NH<sub>2</sub>Cl; LD<sub>50</sub>s are  $\sim$ 2.1 and  $\sim$ 4.9  $\mu$ M for GSH-deficient and wild-type bacteria, respec-

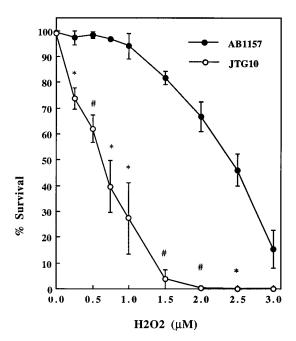


FIG. 2. MPO-H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>-chloride-dependent killing of AB1157 and JTG10 cells. Both strains of bacteria ( $10^6$  cells per ml) were incubated with 7 mU of MPO per ml with increasing concentrations of hydrogen peroxide in Hanks' buffer at pH 7.2 for 20 min. Following the incubation, enumeration of the surviving bacteria was performed by pour plating in nutrient agar. The number of colonies was determined after 36 h of incubation at  $37^{\circ}$ C. n=3; \*, P<0.05; P<0.01.

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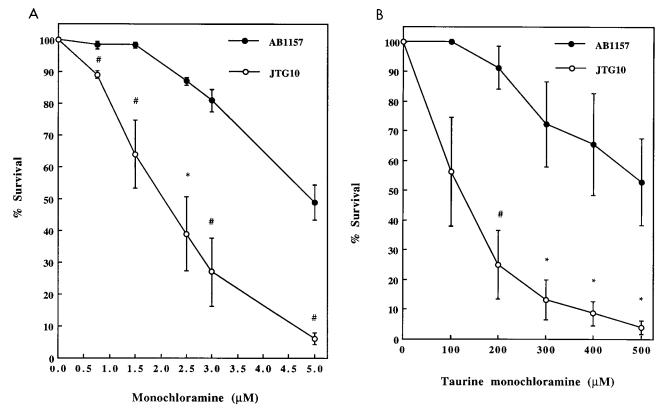


FIG. 3. (A) Monochloramine killing of GSH-replete ( $\bullet$ ) and -deficient ( $\bigcirc$ ) *E. coli* cells. Cells were grown overnight in BHI, washed twice in Hanks' buffer, and resuspended to a concentration of  $10^6$  cells per ml. At time zero, monochloramine was added to give the final concentration as indicated. Survival of bacteria after a 20-min exposure was assessed by removing an aliquot and pour plating. CFU were enumerated after 36 h of growth at  $37^{\circ}$ C. n = 3; \*, P < 0.05; #, P < 0.01. (B) Taurine chloramine killing of GSH-replete ( $\bullet$ ) and -deficient ( $\bigcirc$ ) *E. coli* cells. Cells were grown overnight in BHI, washed twice in Hanks' buffer, and resuspended to a concentration of  $10^6$  cells per ml. At time zero, taurine monochloramine was added to give the final concentration as indicated. Survival of bacteria after a 4-h exposure was assessed by removing an aliquot and pour plating. CFU were enumerated after 36 h of growth at  $37^{\circ}$ C. n = 3; \*, P < 0.05; #, P < 0.01.

tively [Fig. 3A]) and taurine monochloramine (LD $_{50}$ s are  $\sim$ 120 and  $\sim$ 500  $\mu$ M for GSH-deficient and wild-type bacteria, respectively [Fig. 3B]). As might be expected, GSH-deficient *E. coli* cells are also more readily killed by  $\mathrm{H_2O_2}$ . As shown in Fig. 4, there is a roughly twofold difference in the LD $_{50}$  of  $\mathrm{H_2O_2}$  for wild-type organisms compared with that for GSH-deficient organisms. Interestingly, and as previously reported (11), there is no difference in susceptibility to  $\mathrm{H_2O_2}$  in wild-type and GSH-deficient bacteria when killing is assessed in organisms in logphase growth (data not shown). It should be noted that GSH levels are significantly higher in stationary-phase cultures of *E. coli* cells (8).

The relative resistance of GSH-replete E. coli cells to killing by chlorine compounds might be due to the -SH group of bacterial GSH acting as a sink for reactive chlorine. If so, a more or less stoichiometric HOCl-mediated loss of bacterial GSH might be expected. However, in intact wild-type E. coli cells, GSH is oxidized in a ratio of 1 GSH to 4 HOCl, suggesting that HOCl reacts with other targets within the bacteria or that bacterial GSH is oxidized to a higher sulfur oxidation state than the disulfide (22). Nonetheless, intracellular GSH still provides E. coli cells with substantial protection against HOCl challenge. Even when 70% of the GSH in concentrated ( $10^{10}$ cells per ml) wild-type E. coli cells has been oxidized (by 34 nmol of HOCl), ~95% of the organisms in the incubation still survive (Fig. 5). Additional experiments indicate that the intracellular GSH is acting to directly (i.e., nonenzymatically) detoxify chlorine compounds. A concentration of exogenous

GSH similar to that found in the wild-type *E. coli* cells (132 nmol of GSH per 10<sup>10</sup> organisms) was added to a suspension of GSH-deficient *E. coli* cells. This exogenous GSH is as protective of the GSH-deficient *E. coli* cells as the intracellular GSH of the wild-type organisms. Because external GSH is not able to penetrate the outer membrane of *E. coli* cells (10a), it is unlikely that the increased tolerance of the GSH-deficient organisms to HOCl upon the addition of exogenous GSH is explained by intracellular GSH-dependent reactions. Indeed, added GSH fails to correct the enhanced sensitivity of these GSH-deficient *E. coli* cells to H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub> (i.e., the LD<sub>50</sub> remains at ~4). This implies that, in defense against H<sub>2</sub>O<sub>2</sub>, GSH is part of an enzymatically driven redox system [hydroperoxidase-GSH reductase-NAD(P)H]), whereas such cycling of GSH is evidently not involved in protection against chlorine compounds.

# DISCUSSION

Since most bacteria do not possess GSH, other thiol-containing compounds such as thioredoxin, glutaredoxin, and cysteine must be able to substitute for a variety of reactions requiring sulfhydryls. Indeed, there are no major apparent differences in the GSH-deficient bacteria with respect to growth and replication in nutrient medium (data not shown). One recognized physiologic difference in the GSH-deficient *E. coli* cells is an altered glutathione-gated potassium efflux (9). It should also be emphasized that the exact mechanisms by which

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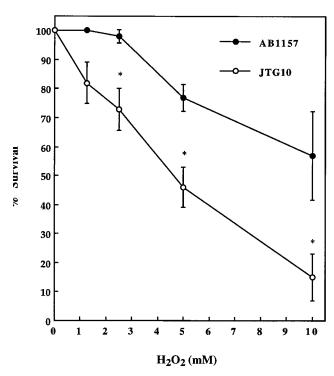


FIG. 4. Hydrogen peroxide killing of GSH-replete ( $\bullet$ ) and -deficient ( $\bigcirc$ ) *E. coli* cells. Cells were grown overnight in BHI, washed twice in Hanks' buffer, and resuspended to a concentration of  $10^6$  cells per ml. At time zero,  $H_2O_2$  was added to give the final concentration as indicated. Survival of bacteria after a 20-min exposure was assessed by removing an aliquot and pour plating. CFU were enumerated after 36 h of growth at  $37^{\circ}$ C. n=3; \*, P<0.05.

GSH provides protection against oxidative stress are as yet incompletely understood.

Because aerobic microorganisms are subject to relentless oxidant stress, a number of enzymatic defenses against oxidation have evolved. The majority of the earlier work on cellular oxidant defenses has focused on systems which might protect against partially reduced forms of oxygen such as  $O_2^-$  and  $H_2O_2$ . Little is known of mechanisms whereby cells and unicellular organisms might prevent damage from halogens such as chlorine compounds. In an effort to clarify this issue, we have compared the sensitivities of two otherwise isogenic E. coli strains to reagent HOCl and chloramines.

Overall, our results indicate that intracellular GSH provides quantitatively important protection of  $E.\ coli$  cells against chlorine compounds. Indeed, earlier investigations of the etiology of hemolytic disease in patients hemodialyzed against chlorinated tap water revealed that HOCl exposure of erythrocytes did cause oxidation of intracellular GSH (6). However, the extent to which the GSH might be protecting the target cells was not investigated. As can be seen by comparing Fig. 1 and 4, HOCl is much more toxic (500 to 1,000 times) to  $E.\ coli$  cells than is  $H_2O_2$ . Nonetheless, in the case of both HOCl and  $H_2O_2$ , the GSH-deficient  $E.\ coli$  cells are roughly twice as sensitive to oxidant killing.

It is thought that a significant fraction of the HOCl produced by the MPO system of activated neutrophils may react with endogenous amines (e.g., ammonia, taurine, and other amino acids) to yield derivatives containing nitrogen-chlorine bonds (12, 19). In contrast to an earlier study (21), we find that the bactericidal potency of NH<sub>2</sub>Cl is slightly less, rather than more, when compared with that of HOCl. As might be expected, GSH-replete  $E.\ coli$  cells also were significantly more resistant to killing when exposed to NH<sub>2</sub>Cl (Fig. 3A). The reaction between taurine and HOCl forms taurine monochloramine, a higher-molecular-weight, polar molecule which does not readily penetrate the cell membrane. Since, at pH 7.2, taurine monochloramine slowly dissociates to reactive HOCl, intracellular GSH should still be vulnerable to oxidation. As expected, the GSH-deficient bacteria are also more susceptible to taurine chloramine toxicity (approximately fourfold difference in LD<sub>50</sub>; Fig. 3). It should be noted that the concentrations of taurine monochloramine required to effect bacterial killing are far greater than those required for HOCl.

The difference in viability between the strains after taurine monochloramine exposure is substantially larger than that seen with the other reagent oxidants (Fig. 1, 2, 3A, and 4). Because bacterial killing by taurine monochloramine is markedly slower (4-h compared with 20-min incubation), GSH reductase may have the necessary time to catalyze the reduction of oxidized GSH by NADPH as GSH is being oxidized. Interestingly, almost all bacterial GSH can be oxidized by HOCl without affecting bacterial viability, suggesting that HOCl may be preferentially oxidizing the GSH. If so, GSH may be acting as a trap for oxidants in order to protect more vital cellular constituents. Furthermore, GSH would appear to be a particularly efficient trap, in that the observed stoichiometry between HOCl added and bacterial GSH oxidized is ~4:1, suggesting that the GSH sulfur is being oxidized to a higher oxidation state than the disulfide.

In conclusion, GSH appears to play a significant role in the resistance of *E. coli* cells to chlorine oxidants. The protection afforded by GSH is due to a rapid reaction with HOCl oxidants

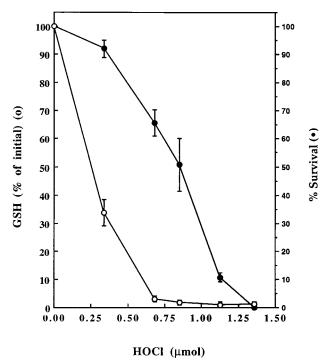


FIG. 5. Relationship between the extent of GSH oxidation and survival of HOCl-stressed wild-type  $E.\ coli$  cells. Cells were grown overnight in BHI, washed twice in PBS, and resuspended to a concentration of  $10^{10}$  cells per ml. At time zero, HOCl was added to each incubation to give the final concentration as indicated. After 20 min, a portion of each incubation was immediately extracted with sulfuric acid  $(\bigcirc)$  for GSH determination, and a separate portion was pour plated  $(\bigcirc)$  (n=3).

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and, in the case of less-reactive chlorine compounds, may also involve protection via intracellular recycling of oxidized GSH to GSH.

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