Chemical Exchange Saturation Transfer (CEST)-MRI detects free choline in breast cancer cells

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Introduction: Altered phospholipid metabolism is a hallmark of cancer. High levels of total choline-containing metabolites (tCho), phosphocholine (PC), and phosphoethanolamine (PE) have consistently been detected in malignant cancer types [1]. Relatively low levels of glycerophosphocholine (GPC) were found in breast [2] and ovarian cancer [3]. In vivo assessment of these metabolite levels is important for cancer diagnosis, for development of anti-cancer treatments [4], and for treatment monitoring. 31P Magnetic Resonance Spectroscopy (MRS) can be used to study 31P-containing metabolites involved in phospholipid metabolism, such as PC, GPC, PE, and phosphoethanolamine (GPE). The Cho signal, which consists of the overlapping signals of free choline (Cho), PC, and PE, can be detected with 1H MRS. However, high-resolution MRS (HR-MRS) cannot completely resolve these choline resonances due to overlapping signals of other compounds [4]. Hence, there is a strong need for alternative methods to study these metabolite levels in vivo. In particular the free choline levels have not been extensively investigated in cancer. Chemical Exchange Saturation Transfer (CEST) is a molecular imaging approach that allows identification of specific groups of exchangeable protons [5]. Here, for the first time, we applied CEST to monitor exchangeable protons on metabolites, such as Cho, PC, GPC, and PE.

Purpose: In this study, we have explored the use of CEST-MRI for detecting phospholipid metabolites in breast cancer cells.

Methods: CEST imaging: All MR images were acquired at 310 K using an 11.7 T Bruker Avance system. CEST imaging was conducted through collection of two sets of saturation images, which were a water saturation shift referencing (WASSR) [6] set for B0 mapping and a CEST set for characterizing contrast. A modified rapid acquisition with relaxation enhancement (RARE) sequence including a saturation pulse was used to acquire saturation images [7]. For the WASSR images, the saturation parameters were: tsat=500 ms, B1 = 0.5 μT, TR=1.5 sec with saturation offsets incremented from -1 to +1 ppm with respect to water in 0.1 ppm steps, while for the CEST images they were: tsat=4 sec, B1 =3.6 μT, TR=6 sec, with offsets from -6 to +6.0 (0.2 ppm steps). The acquisition parameters were: TR=6.0 sec, effective TE=4.3 ms, RARE factor=16, slice thickness=1 mm. Sample preparation: Phantom solutions of Cho, ethanolamine (Etn), PC, GPC, and PE were prepared in phosphate buffered saline (PBS) at a concentration of 5 mg/ml. Cell extracts were freeze-dried after HR-MRS, re-dissolved in PBS, and their pH was adjusted to 7.4. Three differentially aggressive human breast epithelial breast cancer cells lines—nonmalignant MCF-12A breast epithelial cells, weakly malignant MCF-7 breast cancer cells, and highly malignant MDA-MB-231 breast cancer cells—were grown to 70% confluence. Dual phase extraction was performed to separate the water-soluble and lipid-soluble phases, while macromolecules such as denatured proteins, DNA, and RNA were removed [8]. The water-soluble phase contains small molecules such as amino acids, lactate, sugars, choline- and ethanolamine-containing metabolites, and short peptides, among others. MRS: Fully relaxed, quantitative 1H HR-MRS of the water-soluble phases was performed on a Bruker Avance 500 MHz MR spectrometer and analyzed using the MestReC 4.9.9.6 software as previously described [9]. Notice that while water is located at 4.75 ppm in the normal proton spectrum, CEST spectra are referenced with respect to water at 0.0 ppm.

Results and Discussion: CEST contrast of metabolites involved in phospholipid metabolism clearly showed that Cho had the highest contrast at an offset frequency of 1.2 ppm (Fig. 1a) from water. En displayed CEST contrast as well, but its peak was much broader than that of Cho. The phosphorylated metabolites PC, GPC, and PE did not show detectable CEST contrast. Since Cho displayed the strongest CEST contrast, we explored its sensitivity (Fig. 1b,c). The CEST approach had a good sensitivity in vitro at a choline concentration of 25 mM (Fig. 1b). Furthermore, the water line was narrower at lower Cho concentrations, which is favourable for in vitro and in vivo detection of biological specimens because the Cho levels will be lower in these situations. Based on this, we decided to look at tumor cell extracts. These showed a clear CEST contrast at a frequency of 1.2 ppm (Fig. 2a), which is characteristic of Cho. The Cho level was the highest in MCF-12A cells, and the lowest in MDA-MB-231 cells (Fig. 2c), which is in agreement with previous studies of HR-MRS of these cell lines [9]. The cellular Cho concentration inversely correlates with the degree of malignancy of the investigated breast epithelial and cancer cell lines. The CEST contrast at 1.2 ppm in the cell extracts (Fig. 2b) correlates well with the Cho levels measured by 1H HR-MRS, which means that the CEST signal intensity has potential to be used as a semi-quantitative measure for Cho and possibly other metabolite levels. This non-invasive approach of imaging the Cho level as an in vivo indicator of malignancy can potentially be useful in future clinical research studies because it allows for detecting an otherwise inaccessible metabolite, which is influenced by altered Cho transport and choline kinase alpha expression and activity in cancers [4].

Conclusion: Our data suggest that CEST-MRI allows the detection of Cho levels in cell extracts, which cannot easily be detected by any other MRS method. The CEST enhanced signal intensity is 1-3% of water, corresponding to 1-3 MHz sensitivity.

This opens up the possibility of imaging Cho levels in vivo, providing information about its concentration and its spatial distribution.

Future directions: We are investigating the possibility of using this approach for detecting other metabolites related to phospholipid metabolism, which could provide a novel molecular imaging approach for investigating breast cancers in vivo.

References: