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Hydroxyl radical is a significant player in oxidative DNA damage *in vivo*

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Recent publications have suggested that oxidative DNA damage mediated by hydroxyl radical ($\bullet\text{OH}$) is unimportant *in vivo*, and that carbonate anion radical ($\text{CO}_3^{\bullet-}$) plays the key role. We examine these claims and summarize the evidence that $\bullet\text{OH}$ does play a key role as an important member of the reactive oxygen species (ROS) *in vivo*.

1. Introduction to reactive oxygen species and DNA damage

A wide range of reactive oxygen species (ROS) is formed *in vivo* in the human body and in other living organisms

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(reviewed in ref. 1). The term “reactive” covers a broad spectrum: some ROS, such as superoxide anion radical ($\text{O}_2^{\bullet-}$), nitric oxide (NO^{\bullet}) and hydrogen peroxide (H_2O_2) are very selective in their reactions. Others, such as hypochlorous acid (HOCl), carbonate anion radical ($\text{CO}_3^{\bullet-}$) and the two singlet states of oxygen (${}^1\text{O}_2$), are fiercer and can attack several biomolecules. By contrast, the hydroxyl radical ($\bullet\text{OH}$) reacts at or near a diffusion-controlled rate with almost every organic biomolecule found in living organisms.^{1,2} Several ROS, generally the ones of lower reactivity such as H_2O_2 and NO^{\bullet} , play important physiological roles *in vivo*, but the ones of higher reactivity can cause oxidative damage to biomolecules, resulting in impairment of cellular functions (reviewed in ref. 1 and 3). In particular, oxidative damage to DNA plays an important role in the origin



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is regarded globally as an authoritative text (~30 000 citations). His research explores the role of free radicals/antioxidants in neurodegenerative and other diseases. His research on novel antioxidants has critical bearing on treating/preventing diseases.



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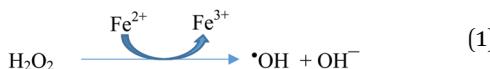
and progression of a number of human diseases, most prominently cancer but also others, such as neurodegenerative diseases and atherosclerosis.^{1,4–6} The ability of several ROS to attack DNA and generate mutagenic end-products plays a key role in cancer development in humans. Much attention has been paid to the mutagenic lesion 8-hydroxy-2'-deoxyguanosine (8OHdG) in this context,^{1,7} but many other mutagenic and/or cytotoxic lesions are formed when $\cdot\text{OH}$ attacks DNA.^{1,5,8–15} However, recent articles^{16–18} have suggested that $\cdot\text{OH}$ is not involved in DNA damage caused by oxidative stress and argue a key role instead for $\text{CO}_3^{\cdot-}$, which attacks guanine residues in DNA to form 8OHdG. We would like to bring two matters to the attention of the journal readership,

- (1) That there is much more to biologically-significant oxidative DNA damage than only 8OHdG formation, and.
- (2) That $\cdot\text{OH}$ does play a significant role in causing oxidative DNA damage *in vivo*.

2. How does hydroxyl radical arise *in vivo*?

Hydroxyl radical is generated *in vivo* by several mechanisms, including:

- (a) Through the reaction of certain transition metal ions (especially Fe^{2+} and Cu^+ (reaction (1), Fenton reaction) with H_2O_2 (reviewed in ref. 1 and 3).



The question of the availability, catalytic activity and chemical nature of transition metal ions *in vivo* has been repeatedly discussed,^{1,3,19–21} but there is no clear consensus as yet, although the recent discovery of ferroptosis, a form of



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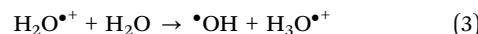
and matter, especially biologically relevant materials like liquid water, DNA and proteins; Monte Carlo simulations, including detailed charged particle track-structure simulations, radiation transport models, low-energy electron emission and transport, DNA damage and applications of nanoparticles in biology and medicine.

iron ion-induced cell death, has rekindled interest in this topic.^{3,22} For example, Fe^{2+} ions bound to phosphate, polyphosphate, citrate, ATP, etc. have shown variable activities in $\cdot\text{OH}$ generation *in vitro*,^{1,21–30} but these simple studies in solution rarely reflect the complex cellular and extracellular environment *in vivo* (which is enormously rich in proteins, lipids, nucleic acids and hundreds of different metabolites). We return to this question in Section 4 below.

(b) In certain circumstances, by homolysis of H_2O_2 (reaction (2), reviewed in ref. 1).



(c) The fission of H_2O upon exposure to ionizing radiation (to which we have a constant background exposure^{1,9,31}). Water cation radical ($\text{H}_2\text{O}^{\cdot+}$) is the primary species formed in the physical stage ($\sim 10^{-15}$ s) due to the interaction of ionizing radiation with water (reviewed in ref. 31). Subsequently, there is ultrafast proton transfer from $\text{H}_2\text{O}^{\cdot+}$ in the physicochemical stage (10^{-15} – 10^{-12} s) to a surrounding water molecule (reaction (3)).



In addition, $\cdot\text{OH}$ is formed by homolysis (reaction (4)) of the excited water molecule ($(\text{H}_2\text{O})^*$).^{1,9,31}



Indeed, the damage that $\cdot\text{OH}$ causes to DNA helps to explain why exposure to ionizing radiation can lead to cancer development.^{1,4,5,9}

That $\cdot\text{OH}$ is generated *in vivo* (including by Fenton chemistry) has been demonstrated by a multiplicity of methods, including aromatic hydroxylation and ESR spin trapping.^{1,32–42} Owing to its high electrophilicity and high reactivity,^{1,2,9} $\cdot\text{OH}$ reacts at or near a diffusion-controlled rate (rate constant $> 10^9 \text{ M}^{-1} \text{ s}^{-1}$)



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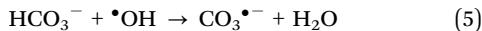
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with almost all organic biomolecules. As a result, when $\cdot\text{OH}$ is generated *in vivo*, it will attack whichever of these organic molecules are adjacent to it.^{1,2,9}

3. The role of bicarbonate *in vivo*

As mentioned, recent articles^{16–18} have argued that $\text{CO}_3^{\bullet-}$ and not $\cdot\text{OH}$ plays the major role in causing oxidative DNA damage *in vivo*. It is well known that bicarbonate anion (HCO_3^-) is important in maintaining physiological pH and is indeed present intracellularly at high mM (10–40 mM) concentration [ref. 16–18 and references therein]. *In vitro* studies have suggested that in the presence of HCO_3^- the reaction of Fe^{2+} and H_2O_2 does not generate $\cdot\text{OH}$ but instead $\text{CO}_3^{\bullet-}$.^{16–18,43} An alternative explanation is that $\cdot\text{OH}$ is generated but immediately reacts with HCO_3^- to give $\text{CO}_3^{\bullet-}$. However, the rate constant for the formation of $\text{CO}_3^{\bullet-}$ via H-atom abstraction from HCO_3^- by $\cdot\text{OH}$ [reaction (5)] under physiological conditions has been measured by pulse radiolysis and is found to be quite low, $8.5 \times 10^6 \text{ M}^{-1} \text{ s}^{-1}$.⁴⁴



Molecules such as 2'-deoxyribose phosphate, the purine and pyrimidine bases of DNA and RNA, reduced glutathione (GSH) and proteins, present *in vivo* also at substantial concentrations, react much faster with $\cdot\text{OH}$, at diffusion-controlled rates ($>10^9 \text{ M}^{-1} \text{ s}^{-1}$) and so may be preferred targets, depending on the location and environment in which the $\cdot\text{OH}$ is generated,^{1,2,6,8,9} as we discuss in Section 4. However, $\text{CO}_3^{\bullet-}$ (and possibly some $\cdot\text{OH}$) can also be generated in pathways involving NO^\bullet , CO_2 and peroxy nitrite (reviewed in ref. 1,45 and 46). The rate constant of the reaction of CO_2 with peroxy nitrite involved in this process, ranges from $3 \times 10^4 \text{ M}^{-1} \text{ s}^{-1}$ to $5.8 \times 10^4 \text{ M}^{-1} \text{ s}^{-1}$.^{1,45,46}

4. The relative reactivities of $\cdot\text{OH}$ and $\text{CO}_3^{\bullet-}$ with DNA

Two approaches can throw light on this question, an examination of thermodynamic parameters and direct experimental studies. The absolute reduction potentials (E°) and midpoint potentials (E_7) of $\cdot\text{OH}$, $\text{CO}_3^{\bullet-}$, and the DNA components are presented in Table 1 below.^{8,47–50}

From Table 1 and assuming the E_7 of $\cdot\text{CH}_2\text{CH}_3$ ⁴⁸ and of dR ⁴⁹ as a guide for that of the sugar moiety in DNA, we conclude that $\text{CO}_3^{\bullet-}$ is very unlikely to cause oxidative damage to dR and pyrimidines and should be capable of oxidizing only guanine, and perhaps adenine to a much lesser extent. Following the ionization potentials of the bases and according to Table 1 above, guanine should be the major or only site of oxidative damage by $\text{CO}_3^{\bullet-}$ in DNA. Indeed, a combination of laser flash photolysis and product analysis studies has confirmed that $\text{CO}_3^{\bullet-}$ oxidizes guanine in DNA, to form 8OHdG.^{45,51} We can find no literature evidence of adenine oxidation by $\text{CO}_3^{\bullet-}$. Also, if $\text{CO}_3^{\bullet-}$ were the main player in oxidative DNA damage, as

Table 1 The absolute reduction potentials (E°) and the midpoint potential (E_7) of $\cdot\text{OH}$, $\text{CO}_3^{\bullet-}$ and of base cation radicals. The E_7 value of 2'-deoxyribose (dR) is also listed

Bases and radical	<i>E</i> vs. SHE (V)			E_7 by pulse radiolysis in water
	Couple (E [°])	<i>E</i> [°] in DMF	Couple (E_7)	
G (guanine base)	(G ^{•+} /G)	1.49	(G(N1-H) [•])/H ⁺ , G)	1.29
A (adenine base)	(A ^{•+} /A)	1.96	(A(N6-H) [•])/H ⁺ , A)	1.42
C (cytosine base)	(C ^{•+} /C)	2.14	(C(N4-H) [•])/H ⁺ , C)	1.6
T (thymine base)	(T ^{•+} /T)	2.11	(T(N3-H) [•])/H ⁺ , T)	1.7
$\cdot\text{OH}$			$\cdot\text{OH}$, H ⁺ /H ₂ O	2.3
$\text{CO}_3^{\bullet-}$			$\text{CO}_3^{\bullet-}/\text{CO}_3^{2-}$	1.59
$\cdot\text{CH}_2\text{CH}_3$			$\cdot\text{CH}_2\text{CH}_3$, H ⁺ /CH ₃ CH ₃	1.9
dR^\bullet			dR [•] /H ⁺ , dR	>1.8

argued in ref. 16–18 and due to the repulsive forces of the highly negative charged polymer (DNA) and $\text{CO}_3^{\bullet-}$, we should not expect $\text{CO}_3^{\bullet-}$ mediated sugar-phosphate damage leading to strand break formation and indeed this is scarcely observed.^{51,52}

In agreement with the E° values in Table 1, direct experimental results show that when $\cdot\text{OH}$ reacts with DNA it forms a multiplicity of damage products (Fig. 1) from all four purine and pyrimidine bases and from the dR moiety.^{1,8–14,53,54} No other known ROS forms such a wide range of products: some (such as H_2O_2 and $\text{O}_2^{\bullet-}$) do not react directly with DNA at all whereas others (e.g. $\text{CO}_3^{\bullet-}$, $\text{O}_2^{\bullet-}$) target guanine selectively.^{1,8,16} Hence, the demonstration that this wide range of products (shown in Fig. 1) is formed *in vivo* is excellent evidence that $\cdot\text{OH}$ has been generated and has attacked DNA, whatever studies on simplified systems *in vitro* that do not reflect the complex cellular environment *in vivo* may suggest. To take one example, when human respiratory tract epithelial cells were exposed to 100 μM H_2O_2 , there was rapid induction of DNA strand breakage and chemical modifications to all 4 DNA bases, diagnostic of attack by $\cdot\text{OH}$.⁵³ How can this diagnostic damage pattern of $\cdot\text{OH}$ attack be explained, since H_2O_2 does not react with DNA? We have already mentioned our poor knowledge of the availability and distribution of transition metal ions *in vivo*, but evidence suggests that DNA *in vivo* has transition metal ions such as Fe^{2+} and Cu^+ bound to it, given its very strong negative charge due to the phosphate groups (reviewed in ref. 1). Indeed, Fe^{2+} bound to phosphate is generally agreed (even by Prof. Burrows¹⁷) to generate $\cdot\text{OH}$ from H_2O_2 , and the reasons for this have been recently elucidated.⁵⁵ The phosphate levels in the nucleus are very high due to the phosphate residues in DNA and so $\cdot\text{OH}$ formation will be favoured. H_2O_2 crosses plasma and intracellular membranes reasonably freely¹ and, if it reaches the nucleus, H_2O_2 can react with such metal ions to generate $\cdot\text{OH}$ directly upon the DNA, causing immediate oxidative damage, often called “site-specific” damage.^{1,2} This “site-specific” damage by localized $\cdot\text{OH}$ generation also occurs with biomolecules other than DNA, such as proteins, again generating multiple products diagnostic of $\cdot\text{OH}$ attack.^{1,56,57} It cannot be prevented by external molecules that scavenge $\cdot\text{OH}$, such as HCO_3^- , glucose or GSH.¹ Furthermore, the

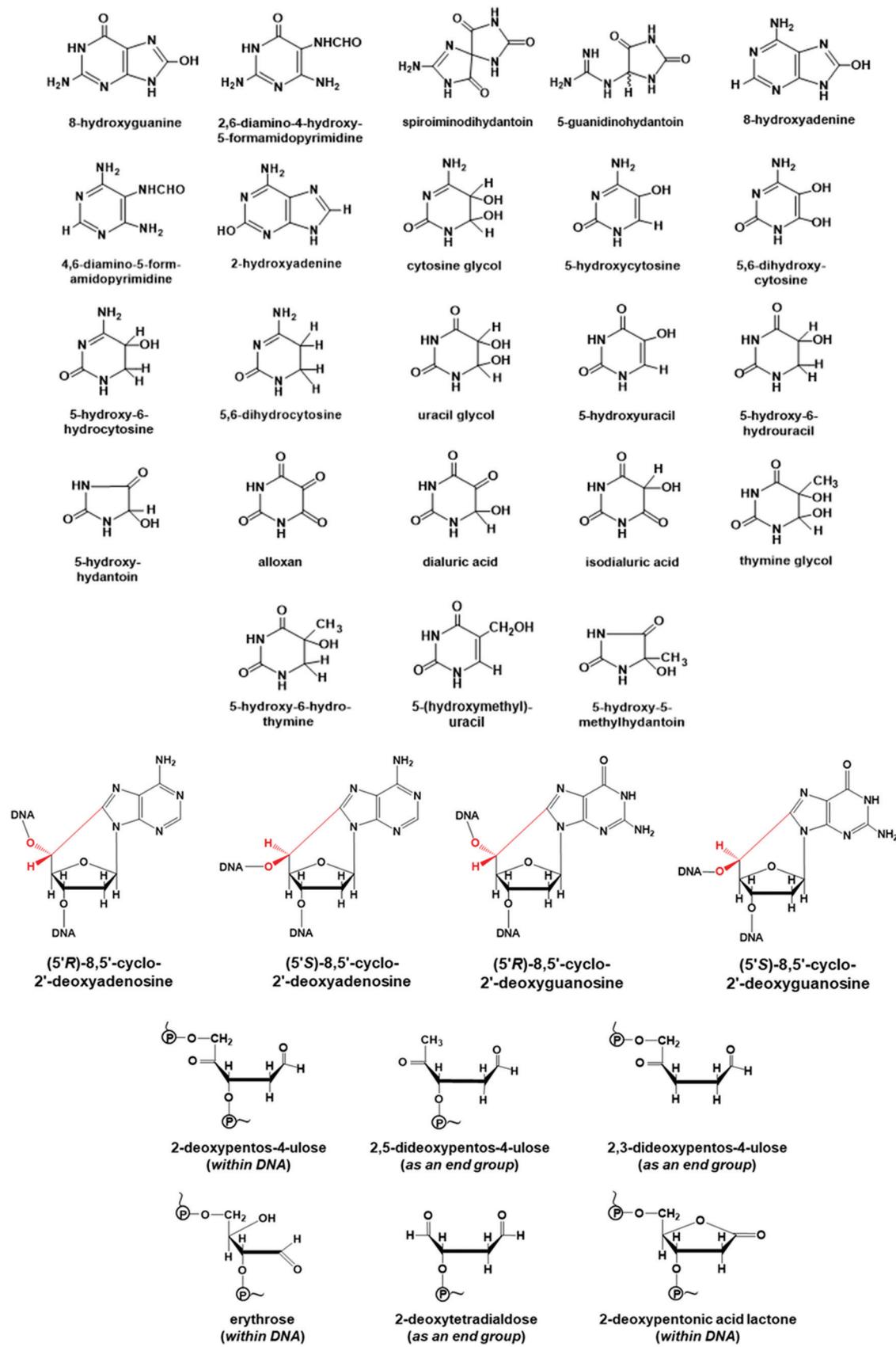


Fig. 1 Products resulting from attack of hydroxyl radicals on DNA. By contrast, carbonate anion radical modifies only guanine residues.

formation of a thymine-tyrosine crosslink has been observed upon treatment of mammalian cells with Fe(II), and involvement of $\cdot\text{OH}$ has been suggested in this crosslink formation.⁵⁸ The free radical mechanistic pathways of $\cdot\text{OH}$ – mediated formation of multiple guanine and other DNA base damage products that are produced *via* oxidative damage, have been well documented in the literature.^{1,6,8,12,59}

The exact molecular ratios of different DNA base and sugar damage products generated by site-specific $\cdot\text{OH}$ formation or other modes of $\cdot\text{OH}$ attack upon DNA depend on several factors, including where upon the DNA the metal ions are bound.^{9–12} This pattern of multiple DNA base damage products is indeed observed *in vivo*: low levels of multiple base DNA damage products are present in DNA from all human and other animal tissues examined and the levels increase when oxidative stress is imposed by a variety of mechanisms,^{1,6,8–14,59–64} e.g. in diabetes.⁶⁵ For example, 8,5'-cyclopurine-2'-deoxynucleosides in DNA are generated exclusively by $\cdot\text{OH}$ attack upon 2'-deoxyribose units generating C5' radicals, followed by cyclization with the C8 position of the purine base.^{59,66,67} This vast literature unequivocally demonstrates the formation of $\cdot\text{OH}$ -induced DNA base and 2'-deoxyribose products *in vivo*. In addition, oxidative stress can liberate catalytically-active transition metal ions (especially iron ions) from a range of cellular proteins (such as iron-sulphur proteins, and ferritin),^{1,19,29,68,69} and some of these may bind to DNA, making it a further *in vivo* target of oxidative damage by site-specific $\cdot\text{OH}$ generation.¹

5. There is much more to biologically-significant oxidative DNA damage than 8OHdG formation

Apart from 8OHdG, the importance of many other DNA lesions, some of which are shown in Fig. 1, in cancer development *in vivo* has been highlighted, and the existence of DNA repair enzymes needed for their removal and whose genetic deletions increase cancer development in animals is further evidence that these mutagenic and/or cytotoxic lesions are formed *in vivo* and are important in the development of cancer and other diseases.^{1,8,70,71}

6. Conclusion

There is unequivocal evidence of the $\cdot\text{OH}$ -specific pattern of oxidative DNA damage *in vivo* and in isolated cells subjected to oxidative stress. This, combined with the ability to trap $\cdot\text{OH}$ by specific methods in living systems, provides substantial evidence that $\cdot\text{OH}$ plays an important role in oxidative DNA damage, and other aspects of oxidative damage, including protein and lipid damage, *in vivo*.¹ This is in part due to formation of 8OHdG, which can also be generated by attack of ${}^1\text{O}_2$ and of $\text{CO}_3^{\cdot-}$ on DNA, but also due to many other mutagenic and/or cytotoxic lesions, formed from purines, pyrimidines and 2'-deoxyribose by $\cdot\text{OH}$ attack (Fig. 1). Carbonate anion radical might also play an important role

in vivo.^{16–18} Certain other ROS, such as HOCl, can also attack DNA. Hypochlorous acid forms chlorinated base products, which have indeed been detected *in vivo*.^{72,73}

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

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