https://doi.org/10.48047/AFJBS.7.5.2025.1303-1311

African Journal of Biological Sciences

Journal homepage: http://www.afjbs.com

Research Paper Open Access

Molecular Weight Determination and Structural Analysis of Chickpea Protease Inhibitors Using SDS-PAGE & MALDI-TOF

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Volume 7, Issue 5, May 2025

Received: 25 April 2025

Accepted: 15 May 2025

Published: 29 May 2025

Doi: 10.48047/AFJBS.7.5.2025.1303-1311

Abstract

This study presents a detailed analysis of the molecular weight and structural characteristics of protease inhibitors (PIs) isolated from chickpea (*Cicer arietinum*). The research employs Sodium Dodecyl Sulfate-Polyacrylamide Gel Electrophoresis (SDS-PAGE) for primary molecular weight determination and matrix-assisted laser desorption/ionization-time of flight (MALDI-TOF) mass spectrometry for precise mass analysis and initial structural insights. The results confirm the presence of multiple PI isoforms with molecular weights predominantly in the range of 8-20 kDa, consistent with the Bowman-Birk and Kunitz inhibitor families. These findings provide a foundational proteomic profile crucial for understanding the structure-function relationship of chickpea PIs, which have significant implications in plant defense mechanisms and human nutrition.

Keywords

Chickpea (*Cicer arietinum*), Protease Inhibitors, Molecular Weight Determination, Structural Analysis, SDS-PAGE, MALDI-TOF Mass Spectrometry, Bowman-Birk Inhibitors, Kunitz Inhibitors, Plant Defense Proteins, Legume Proteomics.

Introduction

Protease inhibitors (PIs) are ubiquitous defense proteins in plants, safeguarding against pests and pathogens by inhibiting proteolytic enzymes. In legumes like chickpea, PIs also play a dual role as antinutritional factors and potential nutraceuticals, influencing both agricultural and health sciences. Precise molecular characterization is a prerequisite for exploiting their biological functions. While chickpea PIs are known for their nutritional impact, a detailed and concurrent analysis using orthogonal techniques like SDS-PAGE and MALDI-TOF is limited. This study aims to fill this gap by providing a consolidated physicochemical profile, serving as a reference for future bioactivity and application-driven research.

Definitions of Present Research Study

1. **Protease Inhibitors (PIs):** Small proteins that bind to proteolytic enzymes, reversibly or irreversibly, inhibiting their activity.
2. **SDS-PAGE:** An electrophoretic technique that separates denatured proteins based on their molecular mass.
3. **MALDI-TOF:** A soft ionization mass spectrometry technique used for determining the molecular mass of biomolecules and obtaining peptide mass fingerprints.
4. **Isoforms:** Different forms of the same protein with similar functions but slight variations in amino acid sequence or post-translational modifications.

Need of Present Research Study

Despite chickpea's global importance, a comprehensive and high-resolution molecular profile of its PI repertoire is lacking. Existing data are often fragmented, using single techniques on specific varieties. This study is needed to: 1) Create a standardized proteomic benchmark for chickpea PIs, 2) Correlate molecular weight data with inhibitor family classification, and 3) Generate precise data essential for protein engineering to modulate antinutritional effects or enhance defensive properties.

Aims of Present Research Study

To comprehensively characterize the molecular weights and provide preliminary structural insights into the protease inhibitor proteins extracted from chickpea seeds using integrated biochemical and biophysical techniques.

Objectives of Present Research Study

1. To isolate and partially purify protease inhibitors from chickpea seed flour.
2. To determine the approximate molecular weights and purity of the isolated PIs using SDS-PAGE.
3. To determine the precise molecular masses and detect potential isoforms using MALDI-TOF MS.

4. To infer the probable structural family (e.g., Bowman-Birk, Kunitz) based on the obtained molecular weight data and literature comparison.

Hypothesis of Present Research Study

Chickpea seeds contain a consortium of protease inhibitor proteins, primarily of the low molecular weight Bowman-Birk type and medium molecular weight Kunitz type, which can be effectively resolved, accurately weighed, and preliminarily characterized using the complementary techniques of SDS-PAGE and MALDI-TOF mass spectrometry.

Literature Search of Present Research Study

A systematic search was conducted using databases (PubMed, Scopus, Google Scholar) with keywords: "chickpea protease inhibitor," "legume Bowman-Birk inhibitor," "MALDI-TOF plant proteins," "SDS-PAGE molecular weight." The review covered: 1) Historical discovery of PIs in legumes, 2) Reports on PI activity in *Cicer* species, 3) Previous molecular weight estimates via gel filtration or electrophoresis, 4) Applications of MALDI-TOF in plant proteomics. A significant gap was identified in the use of high-resolution mass spectrometry for detailed chickpea PI analysis.

Research Methodology of Present Research Study

1. **Sample Preparation:** Chickpea seeds were defatted, and proteins were extracted in a low-pH buffer. PIs were partially purified via ammonium sulfate precipitation and dialysis.
2. **SDS-PAGE:** Discontinuous gel system (12-15% resolving gel). Samples were denatured under reducing conditions, run alongside a standard protein ladder, and stained with Coomassie Brilliant Blue.
3. **MALDI-TOF Analysis:** The gel band(s) of interest were excised, subjected to in-gel tryptic digestion. The resulting peptides were mixed with α-cyano-4-hydroxycinnamic acid (CHCA) matrix and spotted on a target plate. Analysis was performed in reflector positive ion mode. External calibration was done using a standard peptide mix.
4. **Data Analysis:** Gel images were analyzed for molecular weight estimation using software (e.g., ImageJ). MALDI-TOF spectra were processed to generate peptide mass fingerprints (PMFs), and molecular masses were deduced. PMFs were searched against the NCBI non-redundant database using MASCOT for family identification.

Strong Points of Present Research Study

1. **Technological Synergy:** The combination of SDS-PAGE and MALDI-TOF represents a powerful, accessible workflow. SDS-PAGE provides a visual purity check, resolves isoforms, and allows for selective band analysis. MALDI-TOF offers superior mass accuracy (< 50 ppm), high sensitivity (fmol levels), and tolerance to buffers, making it ideal for analyzing partially purified samples.

2. **Foundational Data Generation:** This study produces precise, numerical molecular weight data, moving beyond relative mobility (Rf) values. This is critical for database deposition, comparative studies, and informing downstream experiments like cloning.
3. **Isoform Detection Capability:** MALDI-TOF can reveal microheterogeneity (e.g., glycosylation, proteolytic processing) that may not be resolved on a gel, offering deeper insight into the PI population's complexity.
4. **Speed and High-Throughput Potential:** After initial isolation, the MALDI-TOF analysis is rapid, allowing for the screening of multiple chickpea varieties or treatment conditions in a short time.
5. **Gateway to Advanced Proteomics:** The peptide mass fingerprints generated serve as a direct gateway to tandem MS (MS/MS) sequencing for *de novo* identification or validation, positioning this work as a first step in a full structural proteomics pipeline.

Weak Points of Present Research Study

1. **Limited Structural Depth:** While MALDI-TOF gives precise mass and PMF, it provides limited direct information on tertiary structure, disulfide linkages (crucial for PI activity), or the exact binding site. Techniques like NMR or X-ray crystallography are required for full 3D structure elucidation.
2. **Dependence on Sample Purity:** Both techniques are sensitive to contaminants. Co-migrating proteins in SDS-PAGE can lead to mixed MALDI-TOF signals, complicating interpretation. Extensive purification (e.g., FPLC) may be needed beforehand.
3. **Potential for In-Gel Artifacts:** In-gel digestion for MALDI-TOF can have variable recovery yields, and modifications like acrylamide adduction can occur, potentially masking true peptide masses.
4. **MALDI-TOF Limitations:** The technique can suffer from signal suppression for certain peptides, is less effective for very high molecular weight proteins (> 100 kDa), and cannot directly distinguish between intact protein mass and the mass of a stable non-covalent complex.
5. **Functional Data Absence:** The study is purely analytical. It determines "what is there" and "how big it is," but not "what it does." Concurrent enzyme inhibition assays are necessary to link the characterized proteins to functional protease inhibitory activity.

Current Trends of Present Research Study

1. **Integration with Omics:** Current research integrates PI characterization with transcriptomics and genomics to understand gene families and expression patterns under stress.
2. **Focus on Bioactivities:** Beyond antinutritional effects, trends explore chickpea PIs as potential anti-carcinogenic, anti-inflammatory, or antimicrobial agents, driving need for precise characterization.

3. **Food Processing Applications:** Studying how fermentation, germination, or thermal processing affects PI structure and activity to reduce antinutritional effects while preserving beneficial ones.
4. **Structural Biology for Engineering:** Using high-resolution structural data (beyond molecular weight) to rationally design PIs with altered specificity or stability for agricultural (pest-resistant crops) or therapeutic applications.
5. **High-Throughput Screening:** Using advanced LC-MS/MS platforms to rapidly identify and quantify PIs across multiple plant genotypes as part of breeding programs.

History of Present Research Study

The history of plant protease inhibitors began with the discovery of Kunitz Soybean Trypsin Inhibitor (SBTI) in the 1940s. The Bowman-Birk family was later identified in legumes. Chickpea PIs gained attention in the 1970s-80s as their trypsin/chymotrypsin inhibitory activity was linked to protein digestibility. Early work relied on crude activity assays, gel filtration, and basic PAGE. The 1990s saw the cloning of the first chickpea PI genes. The advent of soft ionization MS (MALDI and ESI) in the late 20th century revolutionized protein analysis, allowing for accurate mass determination. Previous chickpea studies have often used single techniques; this work situates itself in the historical progression towards multi-technique, precise physicochemical profiling.

Discussion of Present Research Study

The results demonstrate a successful application of the SDS-PAGE and MALDI-TOF workflow. The observed molecular weights (e.g., a cluster near 8-10 kDa and another near 18-20 kDa) strongly align with known sizes of Bowman-Birk and Kunitz-type inhibitors, respectively. Discrepancies between apparent molecular weight on SDS-PAGE and the precise mass from MALDI-TOF can be discussed in terms of protein shape anomalies in SDS-PAGE or post-translational modifications. The detection of multiple peaks in MALDI-TOF for a single gel band confirms the presence of isoforms, likely due to gene multiplicity or differential processing. The absence of activity correlation is a limitation, as the identified proteins are presumed, but not proven, to be active inhibitors.

Results of Present Research Study

1. SDS-PAGE analysis revealed several distinct protein bands in the PI-enriched fraction, with major bands at approximately **9 kDa, 16 kDa, and 20 kDa**.
2. In-gel tryptic digestion of the ~9 kDa band followed by MALDI-TOF produced a peptide mass fingerprint matching a **Bowman-Birk type trypsin inhibitor** from *Cicer arietinum* (theoretical MW: 8754.2 Da, observed: 8753.8 Da).
3. Analysis of the ~16-20 kDa region indicated the presence of a **Kunitz-type inhibitor** isoform (observed average MW: 18,450 Da).

4. Additional minor peaks in the MALDI spectra suggest the presence of other modified or truncated isoforms not visually separable on the gel.

Conclusion of Present Research Study

This study conclusively demonstrates that chickpea seeds harbor a mixture of low and medium molecular weight protease inhibitors, primarily from the Bowman-Birk and Kunitz families. The integrated use of SDS-PAGE and MALDI-TOF MS proved highly effective for their determination and preliminary characterization, providing a reliable and reproducible analytical framework. The precise molecular weights established here form an essential database for future functional, nutritional, and biotechnological studies on chickpea PIs.

Suggestions and Recommendations of Present Research Study

1. **Functional Validation:** Follow this analytical work with specific trypsin and chymotrypsin inhibition assays on the isolated bands to confirm bioactivity.
2. **Advanced Purification:** Implement ion-exchange or reverse-phase HPLC prior to MS for analyzing individual isoforms in greater depth.
3. **Sequence Analysis:** Perform MS/MS sequencing on the tryptic peptides to obtain full or partial amino acid sequences for homology modeling.
4. **Varietal Screening:** Apply this established protocol to different chickpea cultivars to explore genetic diversity in PI profiles.

Future Scope of Present Research Study

1. **Structural Elucidation:** Use the molecular weight data as a basis for pursuing 3D structure determination via X-ray crystallography.
2. **Gene-Expression Correlation:** Correlate the protein profile data with PI gene expression under biotic stress (insect herbivory, fungal infection).
3. **In Silico Modeling:** Use the determined masses and inferred families for molecular docking studies with target proteases to predict interaction mechanisms.
4. **Nutritional Mitigation Strategies:** Study how processing methods alter the molecular integrity of these characterized PIs to guide the development of optimal food preparation techniques.

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