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Osmotic stress tolerance in semi-terrestrial tardigrades

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Little is known about ionic and osmotic stress tolerance in tardigrades. Here, we examine salt stress tolerance in *Ramazzottius oberhaeuseri* and *Echiniscus testudo* from Nivå (Denmark) and address whether limno-terrestrial tardigrades can enter a state of quiescence (osmobiosis) in the face of high external osmolyte concentrations. Direct transfers into NaCl solutions showed an upper tolerance level of around 600 mOsm kg\(^{-1}\) in *R. oberhaeuseri* and 200 mOsm kg\(^{-1}\) in *E. testudo*. During salt exposures, *R. oberhaeuseri* contracted into a ‘tun’, whereas *E. testudo* remained active leaving it more susceptible to acute effects of the ions. Further experiments focused on the more resilient *R. oberhaeuseri*, which entered a tun and readily regained activity when directly exposed to polyethylene glycol and sucrose of up to 872 mOsm kg\(^{-1}\) and 813 mOsm kg\(^{-1}\), respectively, revealing a higher tolerance towards non-ionic osmolytes as compared to NaCl. *Ramazzottius oberhaeuseri* furthermore readily regained activity following gradual increases in non-ionic osmolytes and NaCl of up to 2434 ± 28 and 1905 ± 3 mOsm kg\(^{-1}\), respectively, showing that short-term acclimation promoted salt stress tolerance. Our results suggest that the limno-terrestrial *R. oberhaeuseri* enters a state of quiescence in the face of high external osmotic pressure and that it, in this state, is highly tolerant of ionic and osmotic stress.

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**ADDITIONAL KEYWORDS:** cryptobiosis – Ecdysozoa – extreme environments – ionic stress – osmobiosis.

**INTRODUCTION**

Tardigrades are renowned for their abilities to survive in extreme environments and many recent investigations address the limits of their tolerance, for example in relation to dehydration, freezing, heating and radiation (e.g. Jönsson & Bertolani, 2001; Horikawa *et al.*, 2006; Jonsson *et al.*, 2008; Møbjerg *et al.*, 2011; Persson *et al.*, 2011; Wehnicz *et al.*, 2011). These microscopic metazoans survive extremes by entering dormant states, such as cryptobiosis, a state of latent life characterized by a reversible shutdown of metabolism (Sømme, 1996; Clegg, 2001; Wharton, 2015). Keilin (1959) originally defined four versions of cryptobiosis: anhydrobiosis (induced by dehydration), cryobiosis (induced by cooling), anoxybiosis (induced by lack of oxygen) and osmobiosis (induced by high salt concentration). Salts dissociate into ions that build osmotic pressures and osmobiosis would thus allow tardigrades to enter a state of quiescence (metabolic shut-down) in the face of extreme perturbations in external ionic strength and osmotic pressure. However, little is known of osmobiosis and it has been
argued that this form of cryptobiosis may not exist in
tardigrades (Guidetti, Altiero & Becchi, 2011).

The phylum Tardigrada is divided into two main
evolutionary lineages, separated by distinct molecular
and morphological traits: Heterotardigrada and Eutardigrada (Sands et al., 2008; Jørgensen et al.,
2010). Members of both lineages thrive in marine, limnic and terrestrial environments, yet all species need
a film of water to be in their active state. A significant
difference between marine and limnic/semi-terrestrial
habitats is the amount of salts present in the sur-
rounding water. Thus, ionic and osmotic stress
tolerance may represent a key driver in the evolution
of tardigrades (Møbjerg, Kristensen & Jørgensen,
2016). Regardless of this possible significance, only
limited number of studies have been performed on salt
and osmotic stress tolerance in tardigrades, mainly
including marine species (Halberg et al., 2009;
Jørgensen & Møbjerg, 2015; Hygum et al., 2016).
During a rise in external ionic strength and osmotic
pressure, some marine heterotardigrades contract
into a so-called ‘tun’, characterized by a longitudinal
contraction of the body and a withdrawal of limbs
(Jørgensen & Møbjerg, 2015; Hygum et al., 2016). The
tun-state is best known from limno-terrestrial species
that rely on this compact body shape for anhydrobiotic
survival (e.g. Sømme, 1996; Bertolani
et al.

2013a). However, tun formation has also been
observed in limno-terrestrial eutardigrades following
exposure to various salts (Collin & May, 1950). In the
current study, we investigate salt stress tolerance in
two limno-terrestrial species, namely the eutardigrade
Ramazzottius oberhaeuseri (Doyère, 1840) and the
heterotardigrade Echiniscus testudo (Doyère, 1840),
and address whether limno-terrestrial tardigrades
can enter a state of osmobiosis.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

TARDIGRADE COLLECTION AND HANDLING

Moss and sediment containing the tardigrades
Ramazzottius oberhaeuseri and Echiniscus testudo
were collected from a roof gutter and roof top in Niva,
Denmark (55°56′36.53″N, 12°30′00.90″E) during the
period August 2014 to July 2015. The samples were
kept refrigerated at approximately 5 °C in plastic or
glass containers with tap water for up to 2 weeks.
Tardigrades were sorted from this stock solution
using a dissection microscope (Stemi 2000; Carl Zeiss
International, Jena, Germany) and transferred into
watch glasses with ultrapure water (Barnstead
EASYpure UV/UF, Dubuque, IA, USA; and Millipore
Milli-Q® Reference, Merck, Darmstadt, Germany),
where they were kept for up to 1 week. Along with
the animals, small amounts of moss/sediment were
deliberately added, in order for the tardigrades to
have something to eat/hold on to and not spend too
much energy searching for food/substrate (Schill
et al., 2011). Immediately prior to experimentation
groups (N = 3–6) of approximately 20 animals were
cleared of substrate and transferred to a 12-well
Nunc plate. Tardigrade activity was monitored under
a microscope in purified water immediately prior to
osmolyte exposure (t = 0 h), after the 24-h exposure
to test solutions at 5 °C (t = 24 h), and three times
after retransfer to purified water (t = 26 h, t = 48 h
and t = 72 h). For each experimental series, control
groups (N = 3–6) were kept in purified water in Nunc
plates at 5 °C for the entire period. Tardigrades were
considered active when they showed clear movement
or were responsive to tactile stimuli.

PREPARATION OF EXPERIMENTAL SOLUTIONS

Nine NaCl test solutions were prepared from a
1 mol l⁻¹ stock solution and the osmolalities
(mOsm kg⁻¹) of the solutions were subsequently mea-
sured using freezing point depression (Advanced
Model 3320 Micro-Osmometer, Advanced Instru-
ments): 93 ± 0, 192 ± 1, 281 ± 0, 463 ± 1, 560 ± 1,
758 ± 1, 941 ± 1, 1447 ± 2 and 1905 ± 3 (mean ±
SEM; N = 3–6).

For a second set of experiments on R. oberhaeuseri,
nine sucrose and PEG-400 [poly(ethylene glycol), aver-
age Mn 400] solutions were prepared with calculated
molalities of (mmol kg⁻¹): 100, 200, 300, 500, 600, 800,
1000, 1500 and 2000. The osmotic activities of the 100
and 200 mmol kg⁻¹ solutions were measured directly
by freezing point depression, whereas measurements
for all other PEG-400 and sucrose solutions were
made on dilutions of the given solution to a theoretical
molality of 100 mmol kg⁻¹. The osmolarities of the
solutions were subsequently estimated based on
the assumption of a linear relation between molal concen-
tration and osmolality, which probably means that the
osmotic activities of the PEG-400 solutions are under-
estimated (e.g. Schiller et al., 1988; Money, 1989;
Kiyosawa, 2003). The nine PEG-400 solutions thus
had the following estimated osmotic activities
(mOsm kg⁻¹): 108 ± 3, 218 ± 1, 348 ± 0, 583 ± 9,
694 ± 2, 872 ± 0, 1060 ± 6, 1856 ± 10 and
2434 ± 28 (mean ± SEM; N = 3–7), and the nine
sucrose solutions (mOsm kg⁻¹): 94 ± 1, 197 ± 1,
307 ± 1, 497 ± 3, 604 ± 7, 813 ± 3, 1027 ± 3,
1630 ± 6 and 2060 ± 12 (mean ± SEM; N = 3).

DATA ANALYSIS AND PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

Data on tardigrade activity are represented as means
of activity percentages using means ± standard errors
of the mean (SEM). The activity (as a percentage) of each group was calculated based on the number of active specimens divided by the total number of specimens in the group (~20 animals in each group). A few statistical comparisons have been used to evaluate interpretations, where these are not immediately obvious. For these analyses, the software OriginPro 9 (OriginLab) was used to test for normality (Shapiro–Wilk) and variance (F-test) before computing either a t-test or a Mann–Whitney U-test. Light micrographs were taken with a Leica DM1000 microscope equipped with an Infinity X digital camera (DeltaPix, Smørum, Denmark). Figures were made in OriginPro 9 and CorelDRAW X7 (Corel Corporation, Ottawa, Canada).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The tardigrades Ramazzottius oberhaeuseri and Echiniscus testudo originate from an extreme environment, i.e. moss and sediment from a roof in Denmark. This habitat is subjected to frequent dehydration as well as subzero temperatures during winter. Both species must therefore be able to withstand dehydration as well as freezing. In the current study we investigate salt and osmotic stress tolerance in these limno-terrestrial species.

Our initial experiments showed that Ramazzottius oberhaeuseri (Fig. 1A, B) ceased to be active and contracted into a tun following acute NaCl exposure. Thus, the activity of R. oberhaeuseri dropped from 100 ± 0% to 2 ± 2% following exposure to 192 ± 1 mOsm kg⁻¹. However, 2 h after retransfer to purified water the activity (84 ± 2% at t = 26 h) increased to a level comparable to the control animals and it remained at a high level until the end of experimentation. Exposure to 463 ± 1 and 560 ± 1 mOsm kg⁻¹ resulted in a decrease in activity from 100 ± 0% to 2 ± 2% and 0 ± 0%, respectively. Following retransfer to purified water, activity increased to 40 ± 5% and 24 ± 5% at t = 72 h. Exposure to 758 ± 1 mOsm kg⁻¹ abolished activity, which was not regained following retransfer to purified water (0% activity at t = 72 h). Thus, the upper tolerance level of R. oberhaeuseri, when exposed directly to high concentration NaCl solutions, was around 600 mOsm kg⁻¹. This value is in the range of the upper lethal limit (around 500 mOsm kg⁻¹) for another limno-terrestrial eutardigrade, i.e. Richtersius coronifer (Richters, 1903) (Bjørn-Mortensen, 2006; Møbjerg et al., 2011). Interestingly, osmolyte experiments with NaCl vs. PEG showed that R. coronifer is more vulnerable to short-term fluctuations with NaCl as osmolyte than with the non-ionic PEG (Bjørn-Mortensen, 2006). This is consistent with the notion that NaCl has effects beyond the pure osmolytic activity.

Our experiments showed that Echiniscus testudo was more sensitive to NaCl-induced stress (Fig. 1C, D). The activity (mean ± SEM) of this heterotardigrade dropped from 100 ± 0% (at t = 0 h) to 66 ± 7% and 21 ± 9% following 24 h of exposure to 93 ± 0 and 192 ± 1 mOsm kg⁻¹ NaCl, respectively. Activity levels did not increase considerably following retransfer to purified water. No activity was observed following exposure to osmolarities of 281 ± 0 and 463 ± 1 mOsm kg⁻¹ and E. testudo did not regain activity following retransfer to purified water from these solutions. Thus, the upper NaCl tolerance level of E. testudo seemed to be around 200 mOsm kg⁻¹. Notably, E. testudo remained active during the salt exposures and did not contract into a tun, as evidenced by the activity levels at t = 24 (Fig. 1D), i.e. this species did not enter a state of metabolic shut-down under the current experimental conditions.

An overall decline in the activity of controls (N = 15), from 100 ± 0% at t = 0 to 81 ± 2% at t = 72 (P = 6 × 10⁻⁹, Mann–Whitney U-test), would indicate that E. testudo was sensitive either to our handling and/or exposure to purified water deprived of substrate. Thus, no further experimentation was performed on this species. It should be noted, however, that E. testudo is well known for its ability to enter the tun state and that it may stay quiescent in this state for many years (Jørgensen, Møbjerg & Kristensen, 2007).

We subsequently tested the effect on R. oberhaeuseri of direct transfers into non-ionic solutions of PEG-400 (218 ± 1 and 872 ± 0 mOsm kg⁻¹) and sucrose (197 ± 1 and 813 ± 3 mOsm kg⁻¹), as well as gradual transfers into high-osmolality solutions of these osmolytes (Fig. 2A, B). The latter transfers were performed with 2 h of acclimation in eight solutions of increasing osmolality (i.e. for PEG-400: 108 ± 3, 218 ± 1, 348 ± 0, 583 ± 9, 694 ± 2, 872 ± 0, 1060 ± 6, 1856 ± 10 mOsm kg⁻¹ and for sucrose: 94 ± 1, 197 ± 1, 307 ± 1, 497 ± 3, 604 ± 7, 813 ± 3, 1027 ± 3, 1630 ± 6 mOsm kg⁻¹) followed by 8 h in 2434 ± 28 mOsm kg⁻¹ PEG-400 and 2060 ± 12 mOsm kg⁻¹ sucrose, respectively. Ramazzottius oberhaeuseri contracted into a tun and became inactive within a few minutes after being transferred into the high osmolyte solutions. After 24 h of exposure to these non-ionic osmolytes, activity was 0% in all cases except the 197 ± 1 mOsm kg⁻¹ sucrose solution (3 ± 2% activity at t = 24 h). Following retransfer to purified water, activity (t = 26 h) was at an overall average of 97 ± 1%, and it stayed at this high level throughout experimentation. This implies that R. oberhaeuseri entered a state of quiescence during transfers into the non-ionic osmolytes and that it, upon return to purified water, regained full activity.

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To investigate whether short-term acclimation to NaCl would promote tolerance in *R. oberhaeuseri*, experiments were performed in which tardigrades were exposed to gradual increases in external NaCl solutions starting at 93 ± 0 mOsm kg⁻¹ followed by a change to higher osmolality every 2 h to final solutions of 758 ± 1, 941 ± 1 and 1230 ± 1 mOsm kg⁻¹ NaCl solutions. The top four graph lines (open symbols) express the activity in percentage (mean ± SEM) of the corresponding control groups (*N* = 3–6 in purified water). In B and D *t* = 0 h represents the activity in purified water immediately prior to osmolyte exposure, whereas *t* = 24 h indicates the activity after exposure to a given test solution for 24 h. The tardigrades were subsequently transferred to purified water and their activity was assessed at *t* = 26 h, *t* = 48 h and *t* = 72 h.


**Figure 1.** A, Light micrograph of *Ramazzottius oberhaeuseri*. Scale bar = 100 μm. B, Activity in percentage (mean ± SEM) of *R. oberhaeuseri* in experimental series (*N* = 3–6) with acute exposures to 192 ± 1, 463 ± 1, 560 ± 1 and 758 ± 1 mOsm kg⁻¹ NaCl solutions. The top four graph lines (open symbols) express the activity in percentage (mean ± SEM) of the corresponding control groups (*N* = 3–6) in purified water. C, Light micrograph of *Echiniscus testudo*. Scale bar = 100 μm. D, Activity in percentage (mean ± SEM) of *Echiniscus testudo* in experimental series (*N* = 3–6) with acute exposures to 93 ± 0, 192 ± 1, 281 ± 0 and 463 ± 1 mOsm kg⁻¹ NaCl solutions. The top four graph lines (open symbols) express the activity in percentage (mean ± SEM) of the corresponding control groups (*N* = 3–6) in purified water.
Figure 2. A, Activity in percentage (mean ± SEM; N = 3) of Ramazzottius oberhaeuseri exposed to PEG-400 solutions of 218 ± 1 and 872 ± 0 mOsm kg⁻¹, as well as to gradual transfers into a solution of 2434 ± 28 mOsm kg⁻¹. Top graph line (open symbol) expresses the activity in percentage (mean ± SEM) of the control groups (N = 3) kept in purified water. B, Activity in percentage (mean ± SEM; N = 3) of R. oberhaeuseri exposed to sucrose solutions of 197 ± 1 and 813 ± 3 mOsm kg⁻¹, as well as to gradual transfers into a solution of 2060 ± 12 mOsm kg⁻¹. Top graph line (open symbol) expresses the activity (mean ± SEM) of the control groups (N = 3) kept in purified water. C, Activity in percentage (mean ± SEM; N = 3) of R. oberhaeuseri exposed to a gradual increase in NaCl concentrations to a final osmolality of 758 ± 1, 941 ± 1 and 1905 ± 3 mOsm kg⁻¹, respectively. Top graph lines (open symbols) show the activity in percentage (mean ± SEM) of two sets of control groups (N = 3 in each set) kept in purified water. Inserted: R. oberhaeuseri contracted into a ‘tun’ during solute exposures. Scale bar = 100 μm. All pictures show a tun induced by a 463 ± 1 mOsm kg⁻¹ NaCl exposure. In all graphs t = 0 h represents the activity in purified water immediately prior to osmolyte exposure, whereas t = 24 h indicates the activity after exposure to the test solutions for 24 h. The animals were subsequently transferred to purified water and their activity was assessed at t = 26 h, t = 48 h and t = 72 h.

1905 ± 3 mOsm kg⁻¹, respectively. Our results showed that short-term acclimation promoted stress tolerance. Specifically, activity was 72 ± 4% (N = 3) at t = 72 h following exposure to 758 ± 1 mOsm kg⁻¹ (P = 0.002; one-tailed, one sample t-test, assuming a theoretical activity of 0% for non-acclimated animals). Activities following the gradual exposures to 941 ± 1 and 1905 ± 3 mOsm kg⁻¹ were 92 ± 1% and 86 ± 1%, respectively, at t = 72 h.

In comparison, a salinity tolerance test on Caenorhabditis elegans Maupas, 1900 by Khanna et al. (1997) revealed that this widely studied nematode tolerated up to 20% (20.5 g l⁻¹ NaCl) for 24 h without any significant increase in mortality. This salinity would correspond to around 650 mOsm kg⁻¹ (see e.g. Halberg et al., 2009). It should be noted that the protocols used in the current study and the one used by Khanna et al. (1997) were not directly comparable. Nevertheless, it would seem that C. elegans is notably less tolerant than R. oberhaeuseri. Much lower salt tolerance levels are found among, for example, daphnids with reported LC₅₀ values for NaCl, at the end of a three-brood test, of 4.2% for Daphnia magna Strauss, 1820 and 2.2% for Ceriodaphnia dubia Richard, 1894 (Cowgill & Milazzo, 1991).

Our results show that limno-terrestrial tardigrades are highly tolerant of ionic and osmotic stress. Both investigated tardigrades were sensitive to acute NaCl stress, confirming the assumption that exposure to Na⁺ and Cl⁻ ions has effects on tissues and organs apart from their pure osmolytic activity. The latter is confirmed by our results on R. oberhaeuseri, revealing an extreme tolerance towards high concentrations of non-ionic osmolites, i.e. PEG and sucrose. Notably, Na⁺ and Cl⁻ ions are major constituents of animal body fluids (e.g. Halberg et al., 2013b), and normal body function (e.g. muscle contraction and nerve impulses) relies on controlling the extracellular concentration of these ions. The latter is achieved through proteins embedded in the plasma membranes of specialized epithelial cells (e.g. Halberg & Mobjerg, 2012). Our experiments on R. oberhaeuseri revealed that acclimation to NaCl, i.e. a gradual exposure to increasing ion concentrations, promoted tolerance. Thus, this limno-terrestrial tardigrade can handle extreme external salt concentrations when given time to protect its tissues and organs from the associated perturbations in internal Na⁺ and Cl⁻ concentration. Importantly, during the exposures to hyperosmotic solutions the tardigrade contracted into the inactive tun state and in this state it was highly tolerant of osmotic as well as ionic stress (Fig. 2). The latter suggests that R. oberhaeuseri may enter osmobiology as a response to elevated external osmotic pressures.

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