

Cloning, sequencing and expression of L-Asparaginase II gene from *Citrobacter freundii* 1101

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Abstract

L-Asparaginase II from bacteria has been used in treatment of acute lymphoblastic leukemia. In this study, ASNase II gene from *Citrobacter freundii*1101 was sequenced and cloned in *E.coli* DH5 α . For this purpose, three pairs of primers were designed to amplify different fragments of the gene. After sequencing ansB by DNAMAN software, the full length of the gene was amplified by PCR. ASNase II gene was cloned into the pET22b plasmid and transformed into *E. coli* BL21pLysS (DE3)-competent cells by the heat shock method. The expression of periplasmic recombinant ASNase II was induced via IPTG (1mM) in transformed *E.coli* cells. Periplasmic ASNase II was extracted using an alkaline lysis method. The extracted protein was purified by one-step DEAE-Sepharose fast-flow chromatography. ASNase II activity was considered as an index for the protein expression. Bioinformatics analysis of *Citrobacter freundii*1101- ASNase II gene showed some similarity with the therapeutic enzyme from *E.coli* K12 and *Erwinia*. BLAST analysis showed more than 91% and 99% similarity in nucleotide and amino acid sequences, respectively, with other strains of *Citrobacters*; and also a similarity of 82.52% and 92.82% in nucleotide sequence and amino acid sequences, respectively, with *E.coli* K12. The antigenicity of the protein was predicted and compared with the therapeutic enzyme using semi-empirical method. These results indicated other potent bacteria source of ASNase II as a candidate for anticancer consideration.

Keywords: L-Asparaginase II, acute lymphoblastic leukemia, *Citrobacter freundii* 1101, pET22b, gene expression, heat shock method, *E.coli* BL21

Introduction

L-Asparaginase II (ASNase II: EC 3.5.1.1) catalyzes the hydrolysis of L-asparagine to L-aspartate and ammonia (Pasut *et al.*, 2008) [1]. It is one of the most biotechnologically and biomedically important group of therapeutic enzymes and is on the World Health Organization's List of Essential Medicines, a list of the most important medication needed in a basic health system. Although, ASNase II has been found in number of organisms like serum of guinea pig and rodents, chicken liver, yeast, molds, plants and number of bacteria, not all of these enzymes are clinically active (Pasut *et al.*, 2008; Narta *et al.*, 2007; Verma *et al.*, 2007; Geckil *et al.*, 2004) [1-4]. Only ASNase II obtained from *E.coli* and *Erwinia chrysanthemi* have been used in human.

Most malignant lymphoblastic cells and some other suspected tumor cells are unable to synthesize the non-essential amino acid asparagine, whereas normal cells are able to make their own asparagines. Thus these tumor cells require high amount of asparagines and depend on circulating asparagine. The conversion of blood asparagine to aspartic acid by ASNase II deprives the leukemic cell from circulating asparagine, which leads to cell death (Narta *et al.*, 2007; Deokar *et al.*, 2010) [2, 5].

In addition to treatment, the most common use of ASNase II is as a processing aid in the manufacture of food. Marketed under the brand names Acrylaway and PreventASe, ASNase II can effectively reduce the level of acrylamide up to 90% in a range of starchy foods without changing the taste and appearance of the end product (Pedreschi *et al.*, 2008;

Ros'en *et al.*, 2002) [6, 7]. Acrylamide is often formed in the cooking of starchy foods. During heating the amino acid asparagine, naturally present in starchy foods, undergoes a process called the Maillard reaction, which is responsible for giving baked or fried foods their brown color, crust and toasted flavor. Suspected carcinogens such as acrylamide and some heterocyclic amines are also generated in the Maillard reaction. By adding ASNase II before baking or frying the food, asparagine is converted into another common amino acid, aspartic acid, and ammonium. As a result, asparagine cannot take part in the Maillard reaction, and therefore the formation of acrylamide is significantly reduced (Pedreschi *et al.*, 2008; Ros'en *et al.* 2002; Taeymans *et al.*, 2005; Dhanam *et al.*, 2013; Tareke *et al.*, 2002) [6-10].

The therapeutic effect of ASNase II from *Escherichia coli* and *Erwinia chrysanthemi* is accompanied by side effects. The main side effect is an allergic or hypersensitivity reaction; anaphylaxis is a possibility. Additionally, it can also be associated with a coagulopathy as it decreases protein synthesis, including synthesis of coagulation factors (e.g. progressive isolated decrease of fibrinogen) and anticoagulant factor (generally antithrombin III; sometimes protein C&S as well), leading to bleeding or thrombotic events such as stroke. Bone marrow suppression is common but only mild to moderate, rarely reaches clinical significance and therapeutic consequences are rarely required (Pieters *et al.*, 2011; Rizzari *et al.*, 2013; Truelove *et al.*, 2013) [11-13]. Therefore, it is desirable to search for other ASNase II producing sources with novel properties that can produce an enzyme with less adverse effects. In the present study,

ASNase II gene from *Citrobacter freundii* 1101 (*C. freundii* 1101) was amplified and sequenced; then it was used to produce recombinant protein in *E. coli* expression host.

Materials and Methods

Reagents

Purchased reagents included restriction enzymes, NdeI and HindIII (New England Biolab), calf intestinal alkaline phosphatase, T4 DNA ligase (Roche), protein and DNA molecular weight markers (Fermentas), Pfu Turbo DNA polymerase (Stratagene). Unless otherwise specified, all other chemicals were from Merck.

Microorganism media and growth conditions

The lyophilized *C. freundii* 1101 was inoculated in TSB medium (Tryptic soy broth) enriched with horse serum. After 8 hour of incubation, the TSB medium was cultured on MacConkey agar, blood agar and TSA to obtain single colonies.

Genomic DNA extraction

Single colony was inoculated in TSB medium and incubated till logarithmic growth cell density of 0.6. TSB medium was centrifuged (1200×g) and bacteria pellet was obtained. The pellet was washed two times by PBS buffer. The genomic DNA was isolated and purified by phenol-chloroform method (Sambrook *et al.*, 1989) [14].

Separating of ansB from C. freundii

Before the present study, there were no reports of *C. freundii* 1101-ASNase II gene (*ansB*) in GenBank. Thus, the *ansB* was amplified from genomic DNA using primers designed based on other ASNase II gene sequences from GenBank. The sequence alignments of the considered *ansB* were performed by DNAMAN software (version 4.13) sequence alignment program and three pair primers were designed by Oligo software (version 5.0): First pair primers: *Ans-com-U576* (GGG CGC TTT TTG CGG GTT), *Ans-com-L1138* (GAT GGT CGG CGC RAT GCG); Second pair primers: *Ans-com-L1558* (GCG TTC ACR TAA CTG GAG), *Ans-com-U576* (GGG CGC TTT TTG CGG GTT); Third pair primers: *Ans-com-L1138* (GAT GGT CGG CGC RAT GCG), *Ans-com-U197* (GGT GAC CAG GTG GCC TGA). The primers were custom synthesized by MWG Biotech. PCR was performed in a final volume of 25µL containing PCR amplification buffer (1X), Hot-Start Taq polymerase (1U/µl), dNTPs mixture (2.5mM), MgCl₂ (2.5mM) primers (5µM) and template DNA (1ng/µl). Amplification conditions were, initial denaturation at 95°C for 5 min followed by 30 cycles at 95°C for 1 min, 52°C by first and third pair primers and 42°C by second pair primers for 1 min, extension at 72°C for 2 min and with a final extension of 72°C for 10 min. The resulting PCR product was purified using gel extraction kit (Roche).

Vector cloning and bacteria transformation

Purified primer-extended PCR products were ligated into pTZ57 R/T vector using InsTAclone™ PCR Cloning Kit (Fermentas). A cloning reaction containing 7 µL of PCR product, 3 µL of 10x ligation buffer, 3 µL of pTZ57R/T, 3 µL PEG solution, 0.75µL BSA, and 5u T4 DNA Ligase was mixed gently and incubated for overnight in 37°C.

The resulting recombinant plasmid was transformed into competent cells of *E. coli* DH5α (Invitrogen, Carlsbad, CA) by heat shock method (Bahreini *et al.*, 2014) [15]. Screening of transformed bacteria was carried out by blue-white colonies on LB agar containing ampicillin 50µg/ml (Sambrook *et al.*, 1989) [14] and treated with IPTG and X-Gal. White colonies selected as recombinant bacteria and used for amplifying recombinant plasmids. Amplified plasmids were purified using High Pure Plasmid Isolation Kit (Roche).

C. freundii 1101-ansB sequencing by software analysis

The fragments cloned in pTZ57 R/T vector were sequenced by MWG German Company. Determined sequences were analyzed by DNAMAN software. Considering the overlap sequences, single sequence was determined for *C. freundii* 1101-*ansB*.

Construction of expression plasmid

The expression vector of pET 22b (Cat. No. 69744-3) was used for *C. freundii* 1101-*ansB* expression. The pET 22b vector carries an N-terminal *pelB* signal sequence for potential periplasmic localization; thus, signal peptide sequence of *C. freundii* 1101-*ansB* was ignored as 58 nucleotide fragment at 5' end which was determined by comparing *C. freundii* 1101-*ansB* sequence with known *C. koseri ansB* sequence in GenBank. Considering the restriction sites for NdeI and Hind III at 5' ends of forward and reverse primers, respectively, the expression primers were designed as Nde I-Cit-*ans* (GGA ATT CCA TAT GGA GTT TTT CAA GAG AAC), Hind III-Cit-*ans* (CCC AAG CTT AAT ACT GAT TAA ACA TCG). PCR was performed by Pfu DNA polymerase. Purified *ansB* containing restriction sites of NdeI and Hind III was ligated into pET22b vector digested with same restriction enzymes. An insert to pET22b vector ratio of 2:1 was subjected to 2 µL of reaction buffer, and 1µL of T4 DNA ligase (Invitrogen, Carlsbad, CA) was brought to a total volume of 20 µL with dH₂O. The reaction was carried out overnight at a temperature of 16°C.

Recombinant gene expression in E. coli BL21 (DE3)

Construction expression plasmid, pET22b-*ansB*, was transformed into competent cells of *E. coli* BL21 (DE3) by heat shock method (Bahreini *et al.*, 2014) [15]. Transformed *E. coli* BL21 (DE3) was inoculated into 100µl LB broth and then, it was cultured on LB agar containing ampicillin (50µg/ml). Bacteria colonies were inspected for pET22b-*ansB* by PCR using the forward and reverse expression primers.

A single colony of bacteria containing pET22b-*ansB* was inoculated into 5ml LB broth (ampicillin 50µg/ml) and incubated overnight at 37°C with shaking at 200 rpm. On the next day, the overnight culture was transferred into 100 mL of LB broth (ampicillin 50µg/ml) and incubated at the same conditions until the optical density at 600 nm reached 0.6. At this point isopropyl-1-thio-β-galacto-pyranoside (IPTG) was added to a final concentration 1 mM to induce *ansB* gene expression. Sampling was carried out before and hourly after induction (up to 24 hr) for future analysis (i.e. enzyme activity assay, SDS-PAGE, Western Blot).

Extraction of ASNase II from E. coli BL21 (DE3)

The periplasmic ASNase II was extracted from the bacteria

pellet using alkaline lysis. In this method, the bacteria pellet was resuspended in 4 volume double-distilled water. Under gentle stirring, 0.1M NaOH was slowly added until pH of the solution reached about 11.5. Stirring continued for 5 min and then pH of the solution was returned to 7.0 by slowly adding 0.1M phosphoric acid. The solution was centrifuged at 35000×g for 30 min at 4°C. The supernatant was filtered through a 0.45µm sterile filter and prepared for anion-exchange chromatography. Before applying to the column, the enzyme activity and protein content of the filtrate were determined.

Purification of ASNase II

The resulting filtrate was applied to the DEAE-Sepharose fast flow column (1cm×7cm) pre-equilibrated with phosphate buffer (0.01mM, pH 7.0). The unbound proteins were removed from the column by passing phosphate buffer. The bound proteins were eluted from the column using stepwise increases in NaCl (50–200mM NaCl in phosphate buffer) at a flow rate of 2ml/min. The collected fractions were analyzed for enzyme activity (U/ml) and protein content (mg/ml). ASNase II purity was judged using SDS-PAGE (15%) stained with Coomassie Brilliant Blue. The fractions with the higher ASNase II activity were pooled together.

The purified solution from the previous step was desalted using a Sephadex G-75 column (1.0×30 cm) pre-equilibrated with 0.01M phosphate buffer (pH 7.0), at a flow rate of 2.5 ml/min. Using mannitol (0.1mg/ml) as a protein stabilizer, the most active fractions were pooled and concentrated by lyophilization (-50°C) and stored at 4°C.

Estimation of ASNase II Activity

ASNase II activity was assayed using the Nessler method (Imada *et al.*, 1973) [17]. The reaction mixture contained 0.5ml Tris-HCl buffer (0.1 M, pH 8.5), 0.25 ml L-asparagine (10mM in Tris-HCl buffer) and 25 ml of the enzymatic solution. After 15 min of incubation at 37°C, the reaction was terminated by addition of 0.25 ml of 15% trichloro acetic acid (TCA). The liberated ammonia was determined by adding 0.25mL Nessler’s reagent. The absorbance was recorded at 425nm after 10 min. Absorbance values were converted to micromoles ammonia from the standard curve prepared with ammonium sulfate. One unit of enzyme activity (IU) was defined as the amount of enzyme required to release 1mM ammonia per minute under standard assay conditions.

Bioinformatics analysis

The protein sequences were multiple aligned and homology analysis was done using BioEdit software. Secondary structure of the protein was predicted through SOPMA program which determined the role of individual amino acids in the building of the secondary confirmation of protein. The 3D protein structure was predicted by homology modeling using Swiss model workspace. The molecular weight and isoelectric point (pI) was predicted using ExPasy tool. The antigenicity of the protein was analysed and compared by semi-empirical method (Kolaskar and Prasad, 1990) [16].

Results and Discussion

The unknown *C. freundii* 1101-ansB sequence was amplified by three pairs of primer. The amplicon DNA fragments were gel checked on agarose gel and three bands were visualized (Figure 1) in the regions of about 980bp, 940bp and 600bp. Sequencing of the fragments was carried out by MWG German Company in triplicates. Considering the overlap parts, the full length of *C. freundii* 1101-ansB was successfully determined by DNAMAN software as a 1047 bp fragment that codes the monomer of ASNase II which is 348 amino acids long (Figure 2).

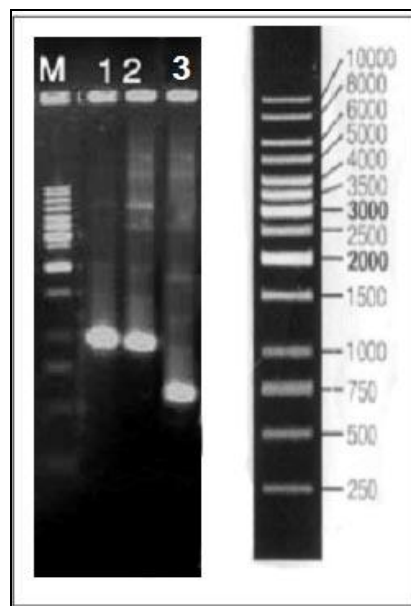


Fig 1: Electrophoresis pattern of PCR product by pair primers on 1% agarose gel. A: lane 1: PCR product of ~980bp, lane 2: PCR product of ~940bp, lane 3: PCR product of ~600bp. M: 1-kb DNA ladder; B: 1-kb DNA ladder with defined bands.



Fig 2: The full length of *Citrobacter freundii* 1101 ansB determined by DNAMAN software as a 1047 bp fragment

Approvement of ansB gene

In order to use of pET22b signal peptide, the first 57 nucleotide fragment from 3’ OH end of *C. freundii* 1101 ansB was ignored by designed expression primers and PCR reaction. The agarose gel electrophoresis of the amplicon revealed an approximately 990 bp fragment that reinforced the results obtained from gene sequencing (Figure 3). The purified *ansB-pET22b* vector was used for gene expression in *E.coli* BL21 (DE3). Screening of bacteria colonies containing transformed *E.coli* BL21 (DE3) with *ansB-pET22b* was carried out by PCR and expression

primers. Electrophoresis of PCR products detected some colonies containing pET22b-*asnB* through 990bp fragment which is expected to code the monomer of ASNase II with 330 amino acids long.

ASNase II expression

Transformed *E.coli* BL21 (DE3) by *asnB-pET22b* was induced by IPTG and sampling was done hourly. Enzyme activity was considered as an index for active protein expression. All known types of ASNase II are active as homotetramers with molecular mass of about 140 kD (Swain *et al.*, 1993; Michalska and Jaskolski, 2006) [18, 19]. The closest interactions between the A and C subunits (as well as between the B and D) lead to the formation of two intimate dimers within which the four non-allosteric catalytic centers are created. Such formations of tetramers, for reasons that are not completely clear, appear to be essential for the catalytic ability of ASNase II (Michalska and Jaskolski, 2006; Mezentsev *et al.*, 2012) [19, 20]. Figure 4 illustrates ASNase II activity/expression level during 4 hr. High activity levels was observed after 2 hours. SDS-PAGE analysis (Figure 5) revealed deep color bands equal to 36.5KD. Because ASNase II is a homotetramer protein, its molecular weight would be 146 KD. The estimated molecular weight is matched with data obtained from ExPasy software.

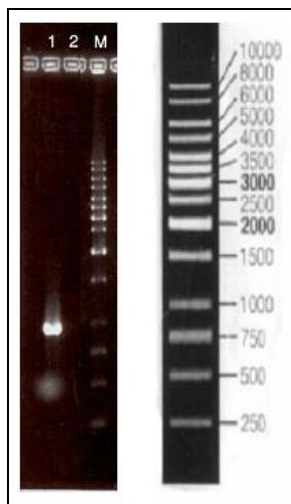


Fig 3: *asnB* gene amplified from *C. freundii* 1101. M:1kb DNA ladder (Fermentas), Lane1: *asnB* gene (~ 990bp)

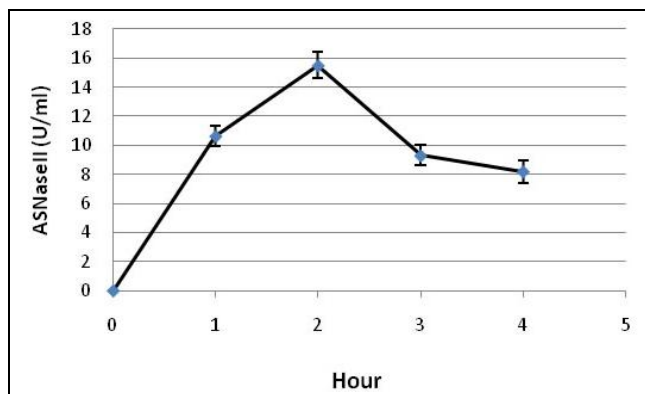


Fig 4: ASNase II activity-expression levels (as an index for protein expression) during 4 hr.

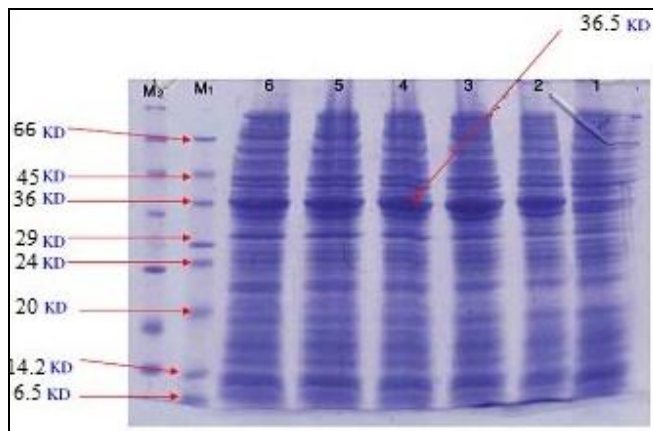


Fig 5: Gene expression assessment in *E.coli* BL21 by SDS-PAGE and Coomassie staining. Lane1: negative control (before induction); Lane2-6: asparaginase production in bacteria from second to sixth hour after induction; M1: protein marker.

Purification of ASNase II

Extraction and purification of periplasmic ASNase II were carried out from the bacteria pellet obtained from the protein expression step. The purification was carried out through one step of DEAE-Sepharose fast flow column chromatography. The bound recombinant protein was eluted from the column by NaCl 100mM. The purification was examined with SDS-PAGE following Coomassie Brilliant Blue staining. It revealed only a single distinctive protein band for the pure preparation of ASNase II with an apparent molecular mass of 36.5 kD (Figure 6) and as a homotetramer, a molecular mass of 140 kD. This homotetrameric structure is necessary for enzyme activity.

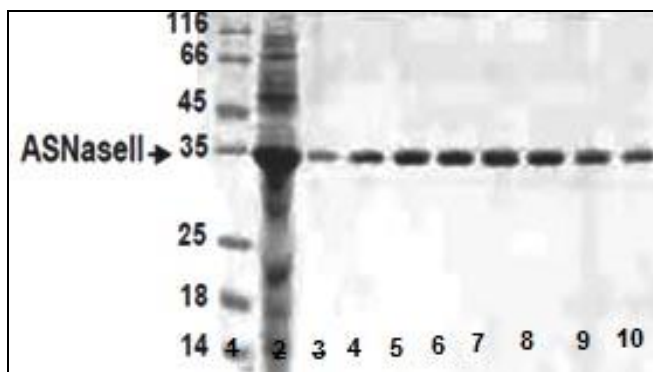


Fig 6: SDS-PAGE (15%) analysis of ASNase II purification using DEAE-sepharose. Lane 1: protein marker. Lane 2: Crude extract of *E. coli* by alkaline lysis. Lane 3-10: purified ASNase II eluted from the DEAE-Sepharose column in selected fractions.

Protein structure and bioinformatics prediction

Three therapeutic ASNase II preparations are available; the native ASNase II derived from *E.coli* K12 (*E.coli*-asparaginase), a pegylated form of this enzyme (PEG-asparaginase) and a product isolated from *Erwinia chrysanthemi*, i.e. *Erwinia* ASNase II. Clinical hypersensitivity reactions and silent inactivation due to antibodies against *E.coli*-ASNase II, lead to inactivation of *E.Coli* ASNase II in up to 60% of cases. Current treatment protocols include *E.coli*-ASNase II or PEG-ASNase II for first-line treatment of ALL. Typically, patients exhibiting

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