Effects of Lithium on Stomatal Regulation

T. Brogårdh and A. Johnsson
Department of Electrical Measurements, Lund Institute of Technology, Lund

(Z. Naturforsch. 29 c, 298–300 [1974] ; received February 11, 1974)

Lithium, Stomata, Plant Rhythm, Cell Permeability

Recent findings indicate that lithium belongs to the group of rather exclusive agents which affect the period of circadian clocks: The period of the circadian petal movements of Kalanchoë is increased by about 2 hours in 5 mM LiCl, 1, 2. In the present paper we will report an action of lithium on a much more rapid oscillation, which under certain circumstances occurs in stomatal regulation. These oscillations are found to be remarkably slowed down by lithium, in analogy to the circadian oscillations of Kalanchoë.

Material and Methods

Cultivation of seedlings, Avena sativa (c. v. Blenda), followed a program described elsewhere. In the experiments the transpiration rate of a single eight days old plant kept in a cuvette was measured. Stabilized carrier gas (air; 20% RH, 26 °C) passed the leaf (1.5 cm/s) and the relative humidity of the carrier gas leaving the cuvette was calibrated to the transpiration rate of the plant (mg water per hour). An oscillatory stomatal regulation appears under suitable circumstances which causes transpiratory oscillations as shown in Fig. 1  A 3–6. The recordings were made in constant light intensity (white light, LUMA 250 W P8; 2000 lx) and temperature (26 °C), and the period of the oscillations was about 25 min.

Lithium was given to both oscillatory intact plants and oscillatory excised plants (without root system). Sustained stomatal oscillations can be maintained in excised plants if the xylem resistance to water flow is increased by an external physical pressure on the leaf base 4. Lithium in the medium around the plant stem will then enter the xylem vessels at the site of the excision and the transpiration stream will bring the lithium ions to the stomatal regions. Lithium solutions were used as a medium either for a short time (“Li⁺-pulse”) or continuously (“Li⁺-step”).

Results

Fig. 1  A shows the normal oscillatory transpiration of an excised plant exposed to xylem deformation. The transpiratory water stream originates from a vessel containing distilled water. Figure 1  B shows results from an experiment in which the distilled water was substituted by 80 mM LiCl-solution for 1 hour (Li⁺-pulse). This caused an immediate and very pronounced period lengthening; r₀ as defined in the Figure is roughly 40 min, r₂ 36 min and r₀ 25 min.

Data on the effects of Li⁺-steps are compiled in the Table. r₁ and r₂ denote the period length of the first and second cycle after the Li⁺-step. All Li⁺-steps are administered starting when the transpiratory oscillation is at a minimum.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Treatment</th>
<th>Excised plant</th>
<th>Control</th>
<th>Intact plant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>τ₀</td>
<td>τ₁</td>
<td>τ₁</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80 mM LiCl</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40 mM LiCl</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1.4</td>
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<td>—</td>
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<tr>
<td>Control</td>
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</tbody>
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Requests for reprints should be sent to Dozent Dr. A. Johnsson, Lund Institute of Technology, P.O. Box 725, S-220 070 Lund, Sweden.

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Li⁺-steps given to excised plants

LiCl gives a concentration dependent increase of the period length. The weaker the solution is, the longer time is required to cause a certain lengthening of the period time. This lengthening can be interpreted as caused by an accumulation of lithium in the stomatal regions during the Li⁺-steps.

The action on the amplitude of the oscillations is negligible during the cycles tabulated (i.e. the change in the period length is not due to a coupling between frequency and amplitude in the non-linear stomatal control system, cf. discussion in ref. 7). However, after a certain time — dependent on the strength of the lithium solution — the oscillations are mostly damped out.

The lengthening of the period is due to the lithium ions and not to the chloride ions. LiNO₃ gives the same effects as LiCl. KCl and NaCl do not cause period changes even at high concentrations.

Li⁺-steps given to intact plants

Lithium does not affect the period length or the amplitude of the transpiratory oscillations if given in the root medium to an intact plant, see Table. (The same is valid for KCl and NaCl.)

Li⁺-pulses given to excised plants

Pulses of lithium ions were given to oscillatory, excised, plants. The experiments showed that the lithium effects at lower concentrations are reversible: The period returned to its value previous to the pulse. In an experiment with a 25 min pulse of 40 mM LiCl subsequent period lengths were typically as follows: 26, 25, 27, 38, 31, 27, 28, 28 min. (The Li⁺-pulse was applied during the 3rd cycle.)

Discussion

The method of xylem deformation, used to maintain oscillations of the stomata of excised plants, was a prerequisite for the present experiments. Lithium ions can not (or only very slowly) penetrate the root barrier system of intact plants and, therefore, it is difficult to study lithium effects on stomatal dynamics of intact plants.

Lithium ions change the curve shape of the stomatal oscillations in a characteristic way: The phase between two transpiratory peaks is prolonged while the transpiratory peaks themselves do not change their shape (see Fig. 1 B). This means that the stomata need a longer time to start the opening when lithium is present but once opening has begun, the opening and the subsequent closing movements are fairly independent of the lithium concentration (at least when concentrations are not too high).

Lithium is known to act on bioelectric potentials in plants and animals, on enzyme reactions, on respiration etc 8. It causes irreversible changes when added for longer periods to muscles but it does not decrease the excitability in shorter experiments 8. Often lithium and sodium ions are reported to show similar effects: They are both inhibitors of certain potassium activated enzyme reactions (e.g. 9,10), they give rise to an appreciable membrane potential across isolated frog skins 11-13 etc.

In analogy with the evidence mentioned above it would be natural to expect the lithium ions to interfere with membrane processes in the guard cells. Simulations, based on a model for stomatal regulation proposed by Cowan 6, were made to see if a change in the membrane permeability of the guard cells could account for the phenomena reported here. A decrease of the guard cell permeability in the model gave a period lengthening and a change in the curve shape as in the lithium experiments, but it was not possible to maintain a constant amplitude simultaneously. Probably Cowan’s model needs further non-linearities in the stomatal parameters to account for the lithium effects.

During the stomatal regulation potassium is transported across the guard cell membranes, e.g. 14, and it has been proposed that water passively follows this ion 15. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to suggest that a potassium activated reaction is responsible for the rate limiting processes of the present oscillatory system. Lithium might then act as an inhibitor and slow down the oscillations.

Finally we would like to mention that the oscillatory stomatal movements discussed here, are modulated in a circadian fashion in some species 16. Since lithium strongly influences the short-term stomatal movements it is possible that it also interferes with the circadian stomatal regulation.

The work was supported by the Swedish Natural Science Research Council.