Probing DNA/RNA Conformation: A Multi-Technique Approach

Frank Beierlein,[1,2] Janet Lovett,[3] Maria Papa,[3] Juan-Carlos Penedo,[3] Edward Anderson[4]

[1] *Erlangen National High Performance Computing Center (NHR@FAU), Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg (FAU), Martensstraße 1, 91058 Erlangen, Germany*

[2] *Computer-Chemistry-Center and Interdisciplinary Center for Molecular Materials, Department of Chemistry and Pharmacy, Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg, Nägelsbachstr. 25, 91052 Erlangen, Germany*

[3] *School of Physics and Astronomy, University of St Andrews, North Haugh, St Andrews, KY16 9SS, UK*

[4] *Chemistry Research Laboratory, Department of Chemistry, University of Oxford, 12 Mansfield Road, Oxford, OX1 3TA, UK*

The determination of distances between specific points in nucleic acids is essential to understanding their behaviour at the molecular level. The ability to measure distances of 2–10 nm is particularly important: deformations arising from protein binding commonly fall within this range, but the reliable measurement of such distances for a conformational ensemble remains a significant challenge. In addition to FRET-based techniques, EPR-(DEER) experiments are valuable tools to determine distances in biological macromolecules. We here show that MD simulations are a robust tool to interpret electron paramagnetic resonance (EPR) measurements of DNA oligonucleotides spin-labelled with triazole-appended nitroxides at the 2' position. For two nitroxide spin-labels attached to B-form DNA duplexes, we present results from EPR spectroscopy, MD simulations, X-ray crystallography, and NMR spectroscopy. These four methods are mutually supportive and pinpoint the locations of the spin labels on the duplexes. In doing so, this work establishes 2'-alkynyl nitroxide spin-labelling as a minimally perturbing method for probing DNA conformation. We further show how the spin labels established for DNA can be used to investigate DNA/RNA hybrid duplexes, and compare the experimental data with our MD results.

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