dUTPase and Uracil-DNA Glycosylase Are Central Modulators of Antifolate Toxicity in Saccharomyces cerevisiae

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ABSTRACT

The thymidylate synthase reaction remains an important target for widely used anticancer agents; however, the clinical utility of these drugs is limited by the occurrence of cellular resistance. Despite the considerable amount of information available regarding mechanisms of drug action, the relative significance of downstream events that result in lethality remains unclear. In this study, we have developed a model system using the budding yeast Saccharomyces cerevisiae to dissect the influence of dUMP misincorporation into DNA as a contributing mechanism of cytotoxicity induced by antifolate agents. The activities of dUTPase and uracil-DNA glycosylase, key enzymes in uracil-DNA metabolism, were diminished or augmented, and the manipulated strains were analyzed for biochemical endpoints of toxicity. Cells overexpressing dUTPase were protected from cytotoxicity by their ability to prevent dUTP pool expansion and were able to recover from an early S-phase checkpoint arrest. In contrast, depletion of dUTPase activity leads to the accumulation of dUTP pools and enhanced sensitivity to antifolates. These cells were also arrested in early S-phase and were unable to complete DNA replication after drug withdrawal, resulting in lethality. Inactivation of uracil base excision repair induced partial resistance to early cytotoxicity (within 10 h); however, lethality ultimately resulted at later time points (12–24 h), presumably because of the detrimental effects of stable uracil misincorporation. Although these cells were able to complete replication with uracil-substituted DNA, they arrested at the G2-M phase. This finding may represent the TS3 reaction that catalyzes the reductive methylation of dUMP to dTMP. Inhibition of this reaction can have downstream consequences that result in lethality, and that other mechanisms, such as dTTP pool depletion, may play a minor role. Our findings indicate that the relative expression levels of both dUTPase and uracil-DNA glycosylase can have great influence over the efficacy of thymidylate synthase-directed chemotherapy, thereby enhancing the candidacy of these proteins as prognostic markers and alternative targets for therapeutic development.

INTRODUCTION

Thymidylate metabolism is an important target of widely used anticancer agents that are used to combat a variety of neoplastic diseases including head and neck, breast, and gastrointestinal cancers (1). Chemotherapeutic agents that target this pathway act by inhibiting the TS1 reaction that catalyzes the reductive methylation of dUMP to dTMP. Inhibitors of this reaction include the fluoropyrimidine class of anticancer agents (FdUMP being the active metabolite) and TS-specific quinazoline antifolates [i.e., ZD1694 (Tomudex) and ZD9331] that directly inhibit the TS enzyme. Antifolate inhibitors of dihydrofolate reductase, such as aminopterin and methotrexate, can indirectly block dTMP production by depleting tetrahydrofolate pools required for the TS reaction. Inhibition of TS leads to a series of complex biochemical events that ultimately result in DNA damage and cytotoxicity, often referred to as thymineless death (2).

Analysis of the downstream biochemical consequences of TS inhibition demonstrates that depletion of dUTP pools triggers feedback mechanisms that induce the accumulation of dUMP and imbalance in deoxynucleotide triphosphate pools (3). Although the exact biochemical basis for toxicity in TS-inhibited cells remains unclear, it is likely to result from the profound effects of nucleotide precursor imbalance (4). Several mechanisms involving imbalance in particular nucleotides have been proposed including dTTP pool deprivation (4), elevation in dATP pools (5, 6), lower dGTP pools (7), and dUTP pool accumulation, resulting in aberrant uracil misincorporation into DNA (8). Although many researchers have accepted uracil misincorporation as a component of TS inhibitor-based lethality, the relative significance of this pathway in mediating cell death has not been fully established.

During TS inhibition, dTTP pools are depleted, and dUMP pools accumulate behind the metabolic blockade. dUMP is subsequently phosphorylated by the action of mono- and dinucleotide kinases to form dUTP. If the build-up of dUTP overwhelms cellular dUTPase activity, the enzyme responsible for eliminating dUTP from the cell, dUMP pools will accumulate and can be used in place of dTTP by DNA polymerase during replication and repair (9). Under these conditions, the cell experiences detrimental cycles of uracil misincorporation and uracil-DNA glycosylase-mediated repair, resulting in catastrophic DNA damage and cell death (8, 10–12).

Studies aimed at determining the significance of uracil misincorporation have shown that exogenously expressed Escherichia coli dUTPase partially protects HT29 colon cancer cells from 5-fluorodeoxyuridine-induced DNA damage and toxicity (13). However, dUTPase overexpression did not protect HuTu80 cells from 5-fluorodeoxyuridine treatment, suggesting that this is not a consistent finding. Additionally, investigation in other cell culture models demonstrates that dUTP pools do not accumulate in all cell lines that are sensitive to TS inhibition (8). These data suggest that uracil misincorporation may not be the critical event resulting in lethality, and that other mechanisms, such as dTTP pool depletion itself, may play a more dominant role (8, 14). Thus, despite considerable effort to elucidate the underlying mechanisms responsible for toxicity in TS inhibited cells, the precise mechanisms remain controversial.

The budding yeast Saccharomyces cerevisiae offers a powerful model to examine the action of anticancer agents and clarify the contribution of a specific gene or metabolic pathway in regulating sensitivity or resistance. Studies performed in budding yeast have suggested the role of uracil misincorporation as the mechanistic basis of antifolate toxicity; however, direct biochemical evidence demonstrating its involvement has not been shown (15). The purpose of this study was to use yeast as a model to determine the significance of aberrant uracil-DNA metabolism as a mechanism of cytotoxicity after TS inhibition by antifolate agents. To address this issue, we sought to...
diminish and augment the cellular activities of dUTPase and uracil-DNA glycosylase to understand their influence on antifolate-mediated lethality. The TS reaction represents the sole source of tTMP in these organisms, allowing for the unambiguous analysis of the consequences of TS inhibition. Through a series of genetic and biochemical-based analyses, we demonstrate that aberrant uracil misincorporation and excision plays a dominant role in antifolate toxicity, and that dTTP pool depletion alone does not mediate extreme lethality in yeast. Our data suggest that the relative cellular expression of dUTPase and uracil-DNA glycosylase can have profound effects on the ability of cells to respond to antifolates.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Yeast Growth Conditions. Yeast cells were grown at 30°C. SC medium was formulated according to Burke et al. (16). Carbon sources (glucose, raffinose, and galactose; 2%) are indicated in the individual experiments. Raffinose was used as a noninducing/nonpressuring carbon source of the GAL1 promoter. Galactose was used to induce expression from the GAL1 promoter. Where indicated, 5-FOA was used at 0.1%, and nocardazole was used at 10 μg/ml.

Antifolate Killing Assays. For antifolate killing, cells were grown to log phase in SC –Ura –Leu GAL (containing galactose), whereupon the cell density was adjusted to 5 × 10⁶ cells/ml, and the medium was replaced with SC –Ura –Leu GAL + A + S, unless otherwise indicated. Aliquots were withdrawn and washed, and a determined number of cells was plated onto SC –Ura –Leu GAL agar at timed intervals and allowed to grow for several days at 30°C. Statistical analysis of results was performed by one-way ANOVA using GraphPad Prism software.

Synchronization of Cells in G1. Strains were grown to log phase in SC –Ura –Leu GAL and treated with 1.5 μg/ml a-factor (Sigma) for 4 h. Cells were then harvested, washed, and resuspended in SC –Ura –Leu GAL + A + S as indicated in the individual experiments.

Nucleotide Pool Assays. Deoxyxynucleotide triphosphate pool sizes were determined by an enzymatic method first described by Sherman and Fye (17). dTTP and dUTP pools were determined independently by preincubating cellular extracts with or without recombinant dUTPase (18). Yeast cells (5 × 10⁶) were harvested at timed intervals, washed, resuspended in 100 μl of 10% trichloroacetic acid, and processed as described.

PFGE-based Determination of Replication Intermediates and Detection of Uracil in DNA. At timed intervals, 1.2 × 10⁸ cells were harvested by centrifugation, washed, resuspended in 500 μl of 10 mM Tris (pH 7.2), 20 mM NaCl, 50 mM EDTA plus 6 μl of Zymolyase (10 mg/ml), and incubated for 60 s at 37°C. The cell suspension was then mixed with 500 μl of 2% pulsed field certified agarose (Bio-Rad) premelted and equilibrated to 50°C, and transferred into plug molds. After solidification, the plugs were incubated in 0.5 M EDTA, 10 mM Tris (pH 7.5) for 8 h at 37°C. After incubation, plugs were processed for PFGE as per the manufacturer’s recommendations (Bio-Rad). Separation of chromosomal DNA was carried out over 11 h at 120 V with a switch time of 1–6 s, and chromosomes were visualized with ethidium bromide. To detect uracil in DNA, plugs were first incubated in 1 M phenylmethylsulfonyl fluoride for 1 h at room temp and then equilibrated in Ung1 digestion buffer [50 mM Tris (pH 7.6) and 0.2 mM NaCl]. Plugs were digested overnight with recombinant uracil-DNA glycosylase (Ung1; 200 ng/ml) and AP endonuclease (Apn1; 200 ng/ml) in 300 μl of Ung1 digestion buffer and then separated according to parameters described above. Recombinant Ung1 expression and purification have been described previously (19). The ORF of the major class II AP endonuclease from yeast (Apn1) was PCR amplified from total genomic DNA, and the resulting fragment was cloned into the expression vector pProEx Htb (Life Technologies, Inc.). Recombinant Apn1 protein was overexpressed in DH5α cells and affinity purified by use of a Ni-NTA Agarose (Qiagen) as per the manufacturer’s recommendations.

FACS Analysis. At timed intervals, 5 × 10⁶ cells were harvested and resuspended in 250 μl of 0.25 M Tris (pH 7.5). Cells were then processed for FACS as described (20). Samples were analyzed for fluorescence content on a FACSscan flow cytometer (Becton Dickinson).

Strain and Plasmid Construction. Refer to Table 1 for details on all plasmids and yeast strains generated in this study. To construct a yeast strain suitable for generating Ts mutants of the DUT1 gene by PCR mutagenesis and plasmid shuffling, a Δuut1::HIS3/DUT1 diploid (BY100) was made from MHY340 by standard gene disruption procedures (21). To suppress lethality from dUTPase deficiency, BMY100 was transformed with the URA3 CEN plasmid pBAM11, which contains the human dUTPase ORF (dUT-N) under the control of the DUT1 promoter (see below). The resulting strain was sporulated, tetrads were dissected, and haploids harboring the pBAM10 plasmid were selected on SC –Ura medium. Strains containing the DUT1 knockout were identified by the inability to grow on replica plates of SC –Ura supplemented with 5-FOA. To construct BMY102, BMY101 was transformed with pBAM11 (CEN6 LEU2-hDUT-N), and cells were plated on SC –Leu + 5-FOA to ensure the loss of the pBAM10 plasmid.

The hDUT-N-DUT1 promoter expression cassettes were generated by flanking the hDUT-N ORF between DUT-1 gene sequences 0.9 kb upstream and 0.7 kb downstream of the coding region. The human DUT-N ORF was PCR amplified from the gene cloned previously (22), and DUT-1 flanking sequences were PCR amplified from yeast genomic DNA. Each PCR fragment was sequentially cloned into pBluescript (pBS-), and the entire hDUT-N-DUT1 promoter expression cassette was subcloned using SstI and XhoI sites into either pRS316 (URA3) or pRS315 (LEU2) generating pBAM10 and pBAM11, respectively.

The ORFs of the yeast genes encoding dUTPase (DUT1) and uracil-DNA glycosylase (UNG1) were PCR amplified from total genomic DNA. The ORF of the Bacillus subtilis bacteriophage PBS2-encoded uracil-DNA glycosylase inhibitor protein (Ugi) was PCR amplified from the gene cloned previously (19). The resulting PCR products were cloned into pGEM-3Z (Promega) and sequenced to verify lack of mutation. The individual ORFs were then subcloned into the galactose-inducible expression vector pPSP293 (2 μA3 GAL1 Ugi promoter), generating pBAM12–14 (see Table 1). Each plasmid construct and empty pPSP293 was then transformed into BMY102 and selected on SC –Leu –Ura, generating BMY106–109. Knockout of the UNG1 gene was performed in BMY106 using the TRP1 gene as a selectable marker (21), generating BMY114 (Δung1). Gene disruption of UNG1 and Ung1 inhibition by Ugi expression was confirmed by Southern blot and an in vitro uracil-DNA glycosylase cleavage assay (23). Overexpression of DUT1 and UNG1 was measured by in vitro enzymatic assays as described (19, 22). Enzymatic activity in soluble whole-cell extracts was calculated as fold increase over endogenous levels of dUTPase and uracil-DNA glycosylase. Endogenous levels of DUT1 activity in BMY107 were determined to be 1.3 pmol of dUTP cleaved/min/μg of protein. Endogenous levels of Ung1 activity in BMY108 were determined to be 0.4 pmol of uracil cleaved/min/μg of protein.

RESULTS

A Yeast Model for Uracil-DNA Metabolism. To investigate the significance of aberrant uracil misincorporation as a mechanism of
thymineless death, we set out to determine the influence of dUTP metabolism and uracil-DNA repair on antifolate treatment in S. cerevisiae. Our goal was to generate a series of strains possessing depleted or elevated levels of dUTPase and uracil-DNA glycosylase and to analyze their effect on the biochemical events after treatment with A + S.

Because dUTPase is an essential gene, it is not possible to analyze the effects of a dUTPase-deficient strain. Therefore, we sought to generate Ts mutants of DUT-I to assess the influence of a compromised dUTPase function on toxicity. To generate Ts alleles of DUT-1, we attempted PCR-based mutagenesis and plasmid shuffling. To perform this experiment, we constructed a 

\[ \text{GAL-DUT1} \]

strain corresponding to BMY107 (pPS293), generating BMY109 (pGAL-UNG1), exhibits a similar loss of viability as pGAL-empty throughout the 24-h time course. However, when UNG1 is deleted, BMY114 (ΔuNG1), or inactivated by Ugi, BMY109 (pGAL-Ugi) cells experience a significant protection from lethality 4–10 h after A + S addition when compared with the drug-treated isogenic control strain, pGAL-empty (P < 0.004 for each time point). Survival in these strains deteriorates after 12 h of A + S treatment, where it becomes nearly indistinguishable from pGAL-empty. These data suggest that the uracil-DNA repair system plays an important role in mediating cell killing, particularly at early time points. Lethality at later time points in the uNG- background
dUTP levels accumulate to 3.3 pmol/100 μg cells, determined for BMY108, BMY109, and BMY114 (Fig. 2). These data demonstrate that dUTPase overexpression effectively suppresses dUTP pool expansion and confirm that severe antifolate toxicity correlates with dUTP status in the cell. Nucleotide pools determined for BMY108, BMY109, and BMY114 were essentially identical to the results obtained from the control strain, BMY106 (data not shown).

The paper discusses the role of dUTPase and uracil-DNA glycosylase activities in antifolate toxicity. To investigate cell cycle responses to the modulation of nucleotide pools and uracil-DNA repair status in antifolate-treated cells, the authors monitored progression through the cell cycle using FACS. Analysis was performed over a 6-h time course of antifolate treatment, and results of these experiments are presented in Fig. 3. Following drug treatment, the pGAL-empty, pGAL-DUT1, and pGAL-UNG1 strains exhibit an early S-phase arrest, as indicated by a near 1C content of DNA. This early S-phase checkpoint in pGAL-empty and pGAL-UNG1 is likely induced by DNA strand breaks, resulting from iterative cycles of uracil-base excision repair. Consistent with this hypothesis, yeast cells undergoing thymineless death demonstrate a decrease in the molecular weight of nuclear DNA, indicating the accumulation of DNA strand breaks (25). The early S-phase checkpoint initiated in the pGAL-DUT1 strain may be attributed to stalled replication complexes caused by a lack of thymidine equivalent (dTTP or dUTP) available for DNA replication (see Fig. 2D). In contrast, the pGAL-Ugi and Δung1 strains treated with antifolates both progress through S-phase and arrest in G2-M as indicated by a 2C content of DNA. These data suggest that inactivation of Ung1 activity eliminates the antifolate-induced DNA damage that signals the early S-phase checkpoint, allowing cells to stably incorporate uracil into their DNA and complete replication. The unexpected G2-M arrest observed in these cells may represent a novel signaling mechanism whereby the checkpoint is initiated by the occurrence of stably substituted uracil in DNA.

When dUTPase is overexpressed in the Δung1 background (Δung1/pGAL-DUT1), cells arrest in early S-phase, identical to the pGAL-DUT1 strain that contains wild-type levels of Ung1 (Fig. 3F). This result demonstrates that the early S-phase arrest is not attributable to low-level dUTP incorporation and Ung1-mediated misrepair and likely results from the combined effects of dTTP and dUTP pool depletion. Also of note is the observation that all of these strains...
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Fig. 4. Detection of replication intermediates and uracil misincorporation into DNA by PFGE. Cells in mid-log phase were treated with A+ S, and 1.2 x 10^6 cells/ml plug were withdrawn at 0, 2, 4, and 6 h. Samples were processed for PFGE, and plugs were left untreated or subsequently digested with excess recombinant uracil-DNA glycosylase (Ung1) and apurinic/apyrimidinic endonuclease (Apn1). Treatment with Ung1/Apn1 results in the specific cleavage of DNA at apurinic residues. DNA containing significant amounts of uracil is degraded, as indicated by a loss of chromosomal DNA on the gel. -/+ , DNA-agarose plugs were either untreated or treated with Ung1 and Apn1. The pulsed field switch times during the electrophoresis process were altered so that all of the yeast chromosomes run together and appear as a single band on ethidium bromide stained agarose gels. A, BMY106 (∆dut1::HIS3 + pBAM11 + pPS293), B, BMY107 (∆dut1::HIS3 + pBAM11 + pGAL-DUT1), C, BMY108 (∆dut1::HIS3 + pBAM11 + pGAL-UNG1), D, BMY109 (∆dut1::HIS3 + pBAM11 + pGAL-Ugi), E, BMY114 (∆dut1::HIS3 Ugi1::TRP1 + pPS293).

Antifolate Treatment Induces Uracil Misincorporation and the Formation of Replication Intermediates.

Because FACS analysis only measures bulk DNA content, we wanted to examine chromosome structure and uracil content in antifolate-treated strains. We used PFGE as an experimental approach to examine the accumulation of persistent replication intermediates that may result from antifolate treatment. Using PFGE, replication intermediates (stalled or abandoned replication forks) can be detected by the migration patterns of chromosomal DNA on an agarose gel. Incompletely replicated chromosomes containing persistent replication intermediates fail to enter a pulsed-field gel because of the presence of open forks and replication bubbles that impede migration (26). We have modified this technique to detect the presence of uracil in DNA, where DNA plugs are predigested with recombinant Ung1 and apurinic/apyrimidinic endonuclease (Apn1) and then run on pulsed field gels. Uracil-containing DNA is differentiated from normal DNA by its sensitivity to degradation upon digestion with these enzymes. Results of these experiments are shown in Fig. 4.

Antifolate treatment results in a time-dependent decrease in migratin DNA in the pGAL-empty, pGAL-DUT1, and pGAL-UNG1 strains, indicating the formation of abnormal chromosomal structures or replication intermediates. All of these strains exhibit no detectable uracil in their residual migrating DNA, as evidenced by a lack of DNA degradation upon Ung1/Apn1 treatment. It is important to note, however, that this analysis does not rule out the possibility that the nonmigrating DNA may contain some uracil residues that are not detectable by this assay. Together, these data suggest that both uracil misincorporation followed by Ung1-mediated repair and the lack of a thymidine equivalent for replication (dTTP and dUTP) attributable to dUTPase overexpression lead to the formation of replication intermediates. These two mechanisms of generating abnormal DNA structure both induce an early S-phase checkpoint arrest; however, they have profoundly different outcomes in terms of survival.

In contrast, the pGAL-Ugi and ∆ung1 strains appear to retain DNA of normal structure, as evidenced by the migration pattern of chromosomal DNA into the gel throughout the time course (Fig. 4, D and E). Additionally, these strains undergo a time-dependent, stable misincorporation of uracil into their DNA as demonstrated by the degradation induced by Ung1/Apn1 treatment. These data establish that, in the absence of Ung1 activity, uracil replaces thymidine during DNA synthesis in antifolate-treated cells. Uracil substitution allows for the completion of DNA replication, as shown by FACS, generating DNA of normal structure.

dUTPase-induced Resistance to Antifolates Results from Increased Recovery from Replicational Stress.

Recovery from antifolate-induced checkpoint arrest varied greatly between the yeast strains tested in this study, as evidenced by dramatically different survival curves (Fig. 1). To determine whether lethality resulting from antifolate treatment is related to the ability to recover from persistent replication intermediates, we analyzed chromosomal structure by PFGE after drug was withdrawn. For these experiments, cells were treated with α-factor to synchronize cells in G1 for a more uniform response to drug. Cells were then released from α-factor into medium containing A+S for 2 h and transferred into fresh medium lacking antifolates for recovery. We also added nocodazole to the recovery medium to block cells in G2, thereby limiting our analysis of DNA recovery to a single round of replication. Cells were collected at timed intervals throughout the experiment and were analyzed for the presence of replication intermediates. Results of these experiments are presented in Fig. 5. Upon drug treatment, a time-dependent increase in replication intermediates was observed in the pGAL-empty, pGAL-DUT1, and pGAL-UNG1 strains (Fig. 5A). When released from drug, the pGAL-DUT1 strain is able to complete synthesis of DNA with normal structure, as indicated by the reappearance of intact, migrating DNA. However, the pGAL-empty and pGAL-UNG1 strains fail to complete synthesis of DNA with normal structure after drug withdraw. These data suggest that aberrant uracil-DNA repair induced by antifolates leads to defective chromosomal structures (resulting from single- and double-strand breaks) that are nonrecoverable and result in lethality. Inhibition of uracil-DNA repair (pGAL-Ugi) allows cells to traverse through replication with uracil-substituted DNA of normal structure. Results obtained from the ∆ung1 strain are identical to pGAL-Ugi and are not shown. Fig. 5B shows the quantitation of chromosomal DNA from Fig. 5A.

DISCUSSION

dUTP Pool Accumulation Is Required for Extreme Toxicity during Thymineless Conditions.

Evidence supporting dUTP accumulation and uracil misincorporation as a mechanism of thymineless toxicity has been reported in a number of model systems; however, it is still unclear to what extent this pathway contributes to lethality (3). Elevated dUTP levels have been detected in human cell lines treated with inhibitors of thymidylate metabolism; however, some cell lines tested were not able to accumulate dUTP, yet were still sensitive to TS inhibition. It has been proposed that imbalance of other nucleotides (i.e., elevated levels of dATP) may contribute to cell killing by these drugs (8).

Our experiments in S. cerevisiae demonstrate that although all strains examined experience dTTP pool depletion during antifolate
treatment, only those that accumulate dUTP undergo severe cytotoxicity. In addition, the ability to accumulate dUTP pools is directly related to dUTPase activity levels within the cell. Cells with diminished dUTPase activity are highly sensitive to antifolate treatment, whereas overexpression of dUTPase greatly reduces sensitivity to antifolate treatment. Despite the involvement of uracil misincorporation in thymidine metabolism, which is an important target for widely used chemotherapeutic agents, the mechanisms of drug action resulting in toxicity are still unclear. Studies implicating uracil misincorporation in cancer cell lines subsequent to TS inhibition suggest that this mechanism may have an important role in early

Cellular Responses to Uracil Misincorporation. Previous investigations have noted perturbations in the cell cycle in response to inhibition of thymidylate biosynthesis (27). Our experiments show that antifolate treatment can elicit three distinct cellular responses that are directly related to dUTP status and a functional uracil-DNA repair system. When dTTP pools are depleted and dUTP pools accumulate, leading to uracil misincorporation into DNA, yeast cells are most sensitive to antifolate treatment. The immediate consequences of uracil misincorporation and detrimental repair are early S-phase arrest and formation of persistent replication intermediates. The early S-phase arrest and lethality in this case are associated with DNA damage induced by uracil-DNA repair. ung1 deletion mutants bypass this checkpoint and complete replication with stably misincorporated uracil, providing both genetic and biochemical evidence supporting a repair-dependent mechanism. Our experiments suggest that, despite checkpoint arrest to allow for repair of damaged DNA, lethality coincides with the inability to recover from Ung1-initiated catastrophic damage.

Cells that do not accumulate dUTP pools during antifolate exposure demonstrate remarkable resistance to cytotoxicity. This suggests that accumulation of dUTP is the central determinant of lethality, and although required, dTTP depletion is not sufficient to mediate extreme toxicity. The accumulation of dUTP pools is dependent on several factors; however, the central regulator is likely to be dUTPase. Indeed, lowering dUTPase activity 5-fold below endogenous levels in BM266 greatly sensitized this strain to antifolate-induced cytotoxicity. It is also likely that enzymes contributing to dUMP pool expansion or efflux during the dTTP-depleted state also determine the ultimate capacity of cells to expand dUTP pools. Despite the mechanisms involved, if dUTPase levels are sufficient to combat dUTP pool expansion during antifolate exposure, the cell is starved for a thymidine equivalent (dTTP and dUTP) for replication and responds by arresting in early S-phase. Our experiments suggest that cell cycle arrest under these conditions is likely attributable to nucleotide depletion or imbalance. ung1 deletion mutants also arrest in early S-phase when dUTP pools are suppressed by dUTPase overexpression, suggesting a uracil repair-independent mechanism of checkpoint activation (Fig. 3F). In sharp contrast to cells that experience detrimental uracil misincorporation/repair, those that do not accumulate dUTP are able to recover from the early S-phase arrest when drug is withdrawn. These cells demonstrate the ability to complete DNA synthesis, producing chromosomes of normal structure. This suggests that enhanced survival observed in cells that do not accumulate dUTP is related to the ability to effectively recover from replicational stress.

The effect of inactivating uracil-DNA repair during antifolate treatment was dramatic, not only in terms of lethality, but also in a distinct checkpoint response. Deletion or inhibition of the Ung1 gene product led to short-term enhancement of viability after antifolate exposure. These cells were able to complete DNA replication using uracil in place of thymidine. Upon the completion of replication, these cells arrested in G2-M and exhibited toxicity at later time points. The mechanism that leads to checkpoint arrest is unclear. It is possible that stably incorporated uracil residues in DNA may be signaling the checkpoint. Uracil-containing DNA has an inherently different stacking structure than normal DNA (28), and it has been also reported that transcription factors are unable to bind to their target sequences if uracil is present (29). Alternatively, it is possible that other promiscuous repair activities acting on uracil residues could be initiating low-level DNA damage that induces the G2-M arrest. Further clarification of this issue awaits future studies using both DNA repair and cell cycle checkpoint mutants.

The Role of Uracil-DNA Metabolism in Therapeutics. Thymidylate metabolism is an important target for widely used chemotherapeutic agents used to treat many types of cancer in addition to some forms of arthritis and bacterial and fungal infections. Although this pathway has been targeted for many years, the mechanisms of drug action resulting in toxicity are still unclear. Studies implicating uracil misincorporation in cancer cell lines subsequent to TS inhibition suggest that this mechanism may have an important role in early
toxicity (within 24 h; Ref. 8). When dUTP accumulation is suppressed in HT29 human colon cancer cells by overexpression of dUTPase activity, toxicity is delayed (13). This observation may have important implications in the clinical setting, where it is often more difficult to maintain high concentrations of antimitabolite within the tumor over extended periods of time. If this is the case, early toxicity elicited by uracil misincorporation may be the ultimate determinant of clinical efficacy. We demonstrate that lowering dUTPase activity in budding yeast greatly sensitizes cells to the effects of TS inhibition, providing a basis for further validation studies for dUTPase as a target for drug development. Furthermore, our studies strongly suggest that efficacy to TS-directed therapeutics can be greatly influenced by the expression of dUTPase and uracil-DNA glycosylase. Indeed, dUTPase expression in the nucleus of colon cancer cells has been implicated as a prognostic marker for resistance to 5-fluorouracil in metastatic colon cancer (30).

In conclusion, we provide definitive biochemical evidence implicating aberrant uracil-DNA metabolism as the central mediator of thymineless death in yeast. Our data further establish a link between the levels of dUTPase and uracil-DNA glycosylase and lethality elicited by antifolates. Although these data clearly define an association between toxicity and mechanism, the significance of uracil misincorporation in mediating response to chemotherapy in human cancers remains to be resolved.

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