

Production of 3-hydroxypropionic acid from glycerol by acid tolerant *Escherichia coli*

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Received: 11 February 2014 / Accepted: 18 April 2014
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Abstract The biological production of 3-hydroxypropionic acid (3-HP) has attracted significant attention because of its industrial importance. The low titer, yield and productivity, all of which are related directly or indirectly to the toxicity of 3-HP, have limited the commercial production of 3-HP. The aim of this study was to identify and select a 3-HP tolerant *Escherichia coli* strain among nine strains reported to produce various organic acids efficiently at high titer. When transformed with heterologous glycerol dehydratase, reactivase and aldehyde dehydrogenase, all nine *E. coli* strains produced 3-HP from glycerol but the level of 3-HP production, protein expression and activities of the important enzymes differed significantly according to the strain. Two *E. coli* strains, W3110 and W, showed higher levels of growth than the others in the presence of 25 g/L 3-HP. In the glycerol fed-batch bioreactor experiments, the recombinant *E. coli* W produced a high level of 3-HP at 460 ± 10 mM (41.5 ± 1.1 g/L) in 48 h with a yield of 31 % and a productivity of 0.86 ± 0.05 g/L h. In contrast, the recombinant *E. coli* W3110 produced only 180 ± 8.5 mM 3-HP (15.3 ± 0.8 g/L) in 48 h with a yield and productivity of 26 % and 0.36 ± 0.02 g/L h, respectively. This shows that the tolerance to and the production of 3-HP differ significantly among the well-known, similar strains of *E. coli*. The titer and productivity obtained with *E. coli* W were the highest reported thus far for the biological production of 3-HP from glycerol by *E. coli*.

Keywords *Escherichia coli* · 3-Hydroxypropionic acid · Acid tolerance · Glycerol metabolism

Introduction

3-Hydroxypropionic acid (3-HP) is a non-chiral carboxylic acid containing a hydroxyl group on its third carbon atom. The compound is used in the synthesis of a range of industrially important chemicals, such as acrylic acid, 1,3-propanediol, methyl acrylate, propiolactone, malonic acid and acrylamide [6, 9]. 3-HP is also used as a cross-linking agent for polymer coatings, metal lubricants and antistatic agents. This important platform chemical can be produced either by chemical or biological processes, but the biological method is considered to be more feasible from technological and environmental aspects [10].

A range of microorganisms, such as *Escherichia coli*, *Klebsiella pneumoniae* and *Pseudomonas denitrificans*, have been studied for the biological production of 3-HP from glycerol [1–3, 12, 14] or glucose [22] as the carbon source. When glycerol is used as carbon source, two enzymes, glycerol dehydratase (DhaB) and aldehyde dehydrogenase (KGSADH), are required. DhaB converts glycerol to 3-hydroxypropionaldehyde (3-HPA) in the presence of coenzyme B₁₂ and KGSADH catalyzes the conversion of 3-HPA to 3-HP with NAD(P)⁺ as electron acceptor. During 3-HP production, DhaB often loses its activity due to the damage in coenzyme B₁₂ which is bound to DhaB. Then, the enzyme glycerol dehydratase reactivase (GdrAB) replaces the damaged coenzyme B₁₂ with a new coenzyme B₁₂ to reactivate DhaB (Fig. 1) [13]. Rathnasingh et al. [21] reported that the recombinant *E. coli* SHBGK (*E. coli* BL21 DE3) could produce 39 g/L 3-HP from 111 g/L glycerol with a productivity of 0.54 g/L h. Ashok et al. [3, 4]

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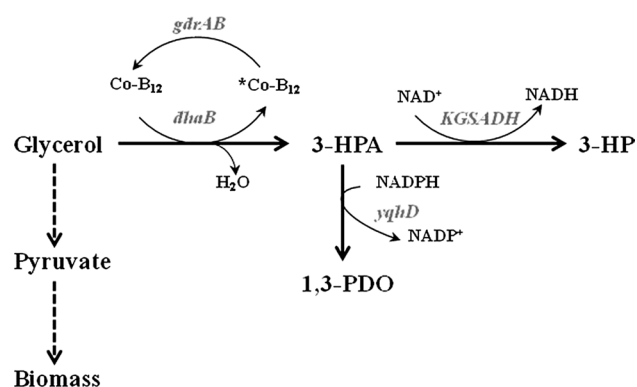


Fig. 1 3-Hydroxypropionic acid production Pathway from glycerol in recombinant *E. coli* overexpressing glycerol dehydratase (*dhaB*), glycerol dehydratase reactivation factors (*gdrAB*) and aldehyde dehydrogenase (*KGSADH*). *Co-B₁₂ represents the damaged coenzyme-B₁₂ due to the catalytic activity of DhaB. The *Co-B₁₂ is replaced with new undamaged Co-B₁₂ by the enzymes GdrAB

and Huang et al. [9] reported that recombinant *K. pneumoniae*, which overexpresses an aldehyde dehydrogenase, could produce 28 g/L and 48 g/L 3-HP, respectively, [3, 9]. Zhou et al. [34] reported that recombinant *P. denitrificans* can also produce 3-HP from glycerol, even though the 3-HP produced was degraded and re-assimilated for cell growth [34]. With glucose as the carbon source, several pathways have been suggested. However, only one pathway involving malonyl-CoA as an intermediate proved to be successful thus far [16, 22].

Despite the considerable progress, many problems in the biological production of 3-HP have been encountered [10]. When glycerol is used as substrate, the accumulation of the toxic intermediate, 3-hydroxypropionaldehyde (3-HPA), is a common problem. The requirement of expensive coenzyme B₁₂, which is needed for the catalytic activity of DhaB, has also been indicated as a serious problem, particularly when *E. coli* is used as a host. However, the most common and serious problem is considered the toxic effects of 3-HP on cell growth and 3-HP production. Generally, many organic acids including 3-HP exhibit toxic effects before their concentrations reach commercially important levels [32]. In the case of 3-HP, toxicity started at 200 mM, which is too low for commercial production [31, 33]. The level of tolerance of many organic acids is species- and/or strain-specific [25, 30]. For example, some *E. coli* strains, such as W3110, W, K12, and B, can produce larger amounts of lactate than other strains [8, 17, 28, 35]. In addition, *E. coli* DF40 and *E. coli* Mach1 were reported to have a higher tolerance to 3-HP [29, 33].

The aim of this study is to examine the tolerance of various *E. coli* strains to 3-HP and identify a suitable strain as a host for the production of 3-HP from glycerol. To this end, nine strains of *E. coli*, which have been reported to produce

large amounts of carboxylic acids, were evaluated for their growth in the presence of 25 g/L 3-HP. In addition, the *E. coli* strains were transformed with glycerol dehydratase, glycerol dehydratase reactivase and aldehyde dehydrogenase, and assessed for their capability to produce 3-HP from glycerol in the presence or absence of 3-HP. Finally, for the best two *E. coli* strains, W3110 and W, bioreactor fed-batch experiments were carried out to evaluate their potential for the high titer production of 3-HP from glycerol.

Materials and methods

Strains, plasmids, genetic methods and materials

Escherichia coli XL1 blue was purchased from the Korean Culture Center of Microorganisms (KCCM). *Escherichia coli* BL21 (DE3) was obtained from Novagen (Darmstadt, Germany). *Escherichia coli* Mach1 was supplied by Invitrogen (Carlsbad, CA, USA). *Escherichia coli* W, *E. coli* K12 MG1655 and *E. coli* LE392 were acquired from Korean Collection for Type Cultures (KCTC). Unless indicated otherwise, all other *E. coli* strains used in this study were procured from the American Type Culture Collection (ATCC). The genomic DNA isolation kit and pGEM-T vector were purchased from Promega (Madison, WI, USA). The high fidelity *pfx* polymerase was acquired from Invitrogen (Seoul, Korea). The restriction and DNA-modifying enzymes and the pUC19 plasmid were obtained from New England Bio-Labs (Beverly, MA, USA). Miniprep and DNA gel extraction kits were purchased from Qiagen (Mannheim, Germany). The primers were synthesized by Cosmotech Co. Ltd. (Seoul, Korea). 3-HP was purchased from Tokyo Kasei Kogyo Co. Ltd, Tokyo, Japan (TCI America). Because 3-HPA is unavailable commercially, it was synthesized chemically from acrolein using the method reported by Hall and Stern (1950). The yeast extract (Cat. 212750) was obtained from Difco (Becton–Dickinson; Franklin Lakes, NJ, USA). Unless stated otherwise, glycerol and all other chemicals and enzymes were purchased from Sigma-Aldrich (St. Louis, MO, USA).

Cloning of *dhaB*, *gdrAB* and *KGSADH*

Lysogen broth (LB) medium was used for routine genetic engineering, protein expression and culture maintenance. Kanamycin (Kmr) at 50 mg/L and chloramphenicol (Cm) at 25 mg/L were added to the culture medium where indicated. The standard recombinant DNA procedures were used for gene cloning, plasmid isolation and electroporation [18, 23]. The plasmid pDK7 (p15A)/*dhaB123*, *gdrAB* was developed to overexpress glycerol dehydratase (DhaB; Gene bank # YP_001337149.1, YP_001337150.1, YP_001337151.1)

Table 1 Bacterial strains and plasmids used in this study

Strains and plasmids	Description	Source/references
Strains		
<i>E. coli</i> XL-1 blue	Cloning host	KCCM, Korea
<i>E. coli</i> W3110*	D-lactic acid production (45 g/L)	ATCC27325/ [35]
<i>E. coli</i> W*	D-lactic acid (85 g/L)	KCTC1039/ [28]
<i>E. coli</i> K12*	D-lactic acid production (32 g/L)	KCTC1116/ [17]
<i>E. coli</i> BL21 (DE3)*	3-HP production (39 g/L)	Novagen/ [21]
<i>E. coli</i> B*	L-lactic acid production (63 g/L)	ATCC11303/ [8]
<i>E. coli</i> C*	Expression host	ATCC8739/This study
<i>E. coli</i> LE392*	Poly-3-hydroxy butyrate production (0.71 g/L)	KCTC1042/ [25]
<i>E. coli</i> Mach1*	3-HP MIC studies	Invitrogen/ [33]
<i>E. coli</i> DF40*	3-HP MIC studies	ATCC53918/ [29]
<i>E. coli</i> W3110 DUBGK	Recombinant <i>E. coli</i> W3110 harboring pUC19/ <i>KGSADH</i> and pDK7 (p15A)/ <i>dhaB123</i> , <i>gdrAB</i>	This study
<i>E. coli</i> W DUBGK	Recombinant <i>E. coli</i> W harboring pUC19/ <i>KGSADH</i> and pDK7 (p15A)/ <i>dhaB123</i> , <i>gdrAB</i>	This study
<i>E. coli</i> K12 DUBGK	Recombinant <i>E. coli</i> K12 harboring pUC19/ <i>KGSADH</i> and pDK7 (p15A)/ <i>dhaB123</i> , <i>gdrAB</i>	This study
<i>E. coli</i> BL21(DE3) DUBGK	Recombinant <i>E. coli</i> BL21(DE3) harboring pUC19/ <i>KGSADH</i> and pDK7 (p15A)/ <i>dhaB123</i> , <i>gdrAB</i>	This study
<i>E. coli</i> B DUBGK	Recombinant <i>E. coli</i> B harboring pUC19/ <i>KGSADH</i> and pDK7 (p15A)/ <i>dhaB123</i> , <i>gdrAB</i>	This study
<i>E. coli</i> C DUBGK	Recombinant <i>E. coli</i> C harboring pUC19/ <i>KGSADH</i> and pDK7 (p15A)/ <i>dhaB123</i> , <i>gdrAB</i>	This study
<i>E. coli</i> LE392 DUBGK	Recombinant <i>E. coli</i> LE392 harboring pUC19/ <i>KGSADH</i> and pDK7 (p15A)/ <i>dhaB123</i> , <i>gdrAB</i>	This study
<i>E. coli</i> Mach1 DUBGK	Recombinant <i>E. coli</i> Mach1 harboring pUC19/ <i>KGSADH</i> and pDK7 (p15A)/ <i>dhaB123</i> , <i>gdrAB</i>	This study
<i>E. coli</i> DF40 DUBGK	Recombinant <i>E. coli</i> DF40 harboring pUC19/ <i>KGSADH</i> and pDK7 (p15A)/ <i>dhaB123</i> , <i>gdrAB</i>	This study
Plasmids		
pDK7 (p15A)/ <i>dhaB123</i> , <i>gdrAB</i>	<i>dhaB123</i> , <i>gdrAB</i> in pDK7 plasmid with p15A; Cm ^r	[4]
pRKS1	<i>KGSADH</i> in pRSFDuet; Km ^r	[21]
pUC19/ <i>KGSADH</i>	<i>KGSADH</i> in pUC19; Km ^r	[11]

Final titre achieved in respective studies is mentioned in parenthesis

* Strains used as expression hosts in various acid productions

and glycerol dehydratase reactivase (GdrAB; Gene bank # YP_001337148.1) using the *tac* promoter [4]. For overexpression of aldehyde dehydrogenase, the *KGSADH* gene (Gene bank # AB241137) was amplified from the pRKS1 plasmid and cloned in the pUC19 plasmid under the *lacP* promoter by replacing the β -galactosidase (*lacZ α*) gene [11]. The expression plasmids, pDK7 (p15A)/*dhaB123*, *gdrAB* and pUC19/*KGSADH*, were introduced to various *E. coli* strains for 3-HP production from glycerol (Table 1).

Protein expression and gel electrophoresis

To confirm that the recombinant strains had been constructed properly, the recombinant *E. coli* strains (*E. coli*

W3110 DUBGK, *E. coli* W DUBGK, *E. coli* K12 DUBGK, *E. coli* BL21 (DE3)DUBGK, *E. coli* B DUBGK, *E. coli* C DUBGK, *E. coli* LE392 DUBGK, *E. coli* Mach1 DUBGK and *E. coli* DF40 DUBGK) were grown in modified M9 medium containing the following components (per liter of deionized water): MgSO₄ · 7H₂O, 0.25 g; NaCl, 1.0 g; NH₄Cl, 1.0 g; yeast extract, 0.2 g; and glycerol, 100 mmol. The medium was supplemented with 100 mM potassium phosphate buffer (pH 7.0). The cultures were induced with 0.1 mM IPTG at ~0.6 OD₆₀₀. The cells were harvested after induction, and centrifuged at 10,000 g at 4 °C for 15 min. The cell pellets were washed twice with 100 mM potassium phosphate buffer (pH 7.0) and resuspended in the same buffer. The cells were lysed using a French Pressure

Cell (FA-078A, Thermo Electron Co., Waltham, MA) at 1,250 psi. The cell lysate was centrifuged at 25,000 *g* for 30 min and the supernatants were used for SDS-PAGE analysis. Protein expression was examined on 12 % SDS-PAGE under denaturing conditions [15]. The proteins were stained with Coomassie Brilliant Blue R-250. The intensity of the protein bands in SDS-PAGE was quantified and compared using ImageJ software provided by the National Institute of Health (NIH) [24].

Determination of enzyme activities

The DhaB activity in the crude cell extract was measured using the method reported by Raj et al. [19]. The KGSADH activity was determined by measuring the level of NAD⁺ reduction to NADH at 340 nm using the method reported by Raj et al. [20]. Briefly, the reaction mixture containing 100 mM potassium phosphate buffer (pH 8.0), 1 mM DTT and the enzyme extract was incubated at 37 °C for 5 min, and the reaction was initiated by the addition of 2.0 mM 3-HPA and 2.0 mM NAD⁺. The amount of NADH formed was determined using a molar extinction coefficient ($\Delta\epsilon_{340}$) of $6.22 \times 10^3 \text{ M}^{-1} \text{ cm}^{-1}$. One unit of KGSADH activity was defined as the amount of enzyme required to reduce 1 μmol of NAD⁺ to NADH in 1 min. All enzyme activities were measured using the crude cell extracts.

Culture medium and cultivation conditions

Unless stated otherwise, shake flask cultivation was carried out with a working volume of 50 mL in a 250-mL non-baffled Erlenmeyer flask at 37 °C on an orbital incubator shaker at 250 rpm. The modified M9 medium was used, which contained (per liter of deionized water): $\text{MgSO}_4 \cdot 7\text{H}_2\text{O}$, 0.5 g; NaCl, 2.0 g; NH_4Cl , 2.0 g; yeast extract, 1 g; glycerol, 100 mmol; 50 mg kanamycin and 25 mg chloramphenicol. The medium was supplemented with 100 mM potassium phosphate buffer (pH 7.0). The flasks were plugged with oxygen-permeable cotton plugs. The cultures were induced at $0.6 \pm 0.05 \text{ OD}_{600}$ with 0.1 mM IPTG and supplemented with coenzyme B₁₂ (final concentration of 2 μM) at 3, 6, 9, and 12 h of cultivation. When examining the 3-HP tolerance of the various strains, the modified M9 medium was supplemented with 25 g/L of 3-HP after neutralization with NaOH. The samples were withdrawn periodically to determine the cell mass, residual substrate and metabolites. All shake flask experiments were carried out in triplicate; the standard deviations of the measurements of biomass and metabolites were <10 %.

Bioreactor experiments were carried out at 37 °C and pH 7.0 in a 1.5-L capacity Biotron-LiFlus GM bioreactor (Biotron, Seoul, Korea) with a 1-L initial working volume. The same modified M9 medium as in the flask experiments was

employed except that glycerol concentration was increased to 200 mM. IPTG at 0.1 mM was added to induce 3-HP production when the cell OD_{600} reached 1.5 ± 0.1 . Coenzyme B₁₂ (2 μM) was added at 3-h intervals until 48 h of cultivation. Air flow rate was 0.5 vvm and agitation speed was 650 rpm. Initially, the reactor was run as a batch mode, and then switched to a fed-batch mode when glycerol concentration was lowered to 25 mM. Concentrated glycerol solution (10 M) was added continuously at 3.5 mL/h. Samples were withdrawn periodically to determine the cell mass, residual substrate concentration and metabolite concentration. The reported measurements of the biomass and metabolites are the means of technical replicates (multiple samples) from a single experiment, and the standard deviation was <10 %.

Analytical methods

The cell concentration was measured in a 10-mm-path-length cuvette using a double-beam spectrophotometer (Lambda 20, Perkin Elmer; Norwalk, CT, USA). One unit of absorbance at 600 nm (OD_{600}) corresponded to 0.3 g dried cell mass per liter. The protein concentrations in the cell-free extract were determined on a microtiter plate reader (1420, Wallac Victor 2; Perkin Elmer) using the Bradford method [5] with bovine serum albumin as the standard. The concentrations of glycerol, 3-HP and other metabolites were determined by HPLC using a slight modification of the method reported by Raj et al. [19]. Briefly, the supernatants, which were obtained by centrifugation of the culture samples at $10,000 \times g$ for 10 min, were filtered through a Tuffryn membrane (Acrodisc, Pall Life Sciences) and eluted through a $300 \times 7.8 \text{ mm}$ Aminex HPX-87H (Bio-Rad, USA) column at 65 °C using 2.5 mM H_2SO_4 as the mobile phase.

Results

Effect of 3-hydroxypropionic acid on the growth and glycerol metabolism of different *E. coli* strains

The effects of 3-HP on the cell growth and glycerol assimilation of nine *E. coli* strains were examined. The specific cell growth rate (μ_{max}) and glycerol consumption rate of all the nine strains decreased when 3-HP (25 g/L) was added to the culture medium. Typically, μ_{max} decreased by 50 % in the presence of ~25 g/L 3-HP. The decrease in μ_{max} and the glycerol consumption rate varied substantially depending on the strain, indicating a different sensitivity of the strains to 3-HP. In the presence of 3-HP, *E. coli* C, K12 and W showed a higher μ_{max} of 0.58, 0.56 and 0.51 h^{-1} , respectively, than the other strains. *E. coli* DF40 showed the

Table 2 Maximum specific growth rate and final cell densities of various *E. coli* strains cultivated with and without 3-HP

Strains	$\mu_{\max}$ (h ⁻¹)		Final cell density (g cdw/L)	
	Without 3-HP	With 3-HP*	Without 3-HP	With 3-HP*
<i>E. coli</i> W3110	0.51	0.31	0.89	0.95
<i>E. coli</i> W	0.77	0.51	0.85	1.19
<i>E. coli</i> K12	0.82	0.56	0.95	1.17
<i>E. coli</i> BL21(DE3)	0.72	0.47	0.94	0.94
<i>E. coli</i> B	0.71	0.42	0.77	0.83
<i>E. coli</i> C	0.76	0.58	0.98	1.38
<i>E. coli</i> LE392	0.77	0.24	0.88	0.56
<i>E. coli</i> Mach1	0.65	0.44	0.91	0.85
<i>E. coli</i> DF40	0.53	0.16	0.93	0.69

The standard deviation of the measurements was <10 %

* 25 g/L 3-HP

lowest $\mu_{\max}$ of 0.16 h⁻¹ (Table 2). Interestingly, three fast-growing *E. coli* strains, C, K12 and W, showed ~1.4 times higher final cell densities at 24 h in the presence of 3-HP (Table 2). The concentrations of 3-HP were also determined before and after cultivation. At 24 h, >97 % of 3-HP was retained in the samples of all *E. coli* strains, indicating that they do not degrade or assimilate 3-HP.

Expression of DhaB, GdrAB and KGSADH in various *E. coli* strains

To establish the ability to produce 3-HP from glycerol, three enzymes, DhaB, GdrAB and KGSADH, were introduced to the nine *E. coli* strains using two compatible plasmids: pUC19* (ColE1; P_{lac}) and pDK7 (P15A; P_{tac}). The expression of these enzymes in the cells grown in the modified M9 medium was examined by SDS-PAGE (Fig. 2) and enzyme activity measurements (Table 3). All recombinant *E. coli* strains showed prominent protein bands at 62 kDa (corresponding to DhaB1 and/or GdrA), 53 kDa (KGSADH) and 21 kDa (DhaB2) in the cell-free soluble fraction. The protein bands for DhaB3 (16 kDa) and GdrB (12 kDa) were not visible, possibly because of their small sizes. Although the same plasmids were used,

the expression levels of these proteins when estimated by the band intensity varied significantly in these *E. coli* strains (Table 3). For example, *E. coli* W3110 DUBGK and W DUBGK showed similar 62 and 53 kDa protein expression: ~7.2 and ~3.1 %, respectively, of the total soluble proteins. The recombinant *E. coli* K12 showed a low level of 62 kDa protein expression (~2.3 %), whereas the level of KGSADH (53 kDa) expression was ~11 % of the total soluble protein. *E. coli* BL21(DE3), B, C, and Mach1 showed relatively high levels of 62 kDa protein expression: 7.5, 4.7, 2.7, and 8.2 %, compared to that of KGSADH. In particular, the BL21(DE3) and B strains, used for 3-HP production previously [19, 21], showed high levels of 62 kDa protein expression (7.5 and 4.7 %) but very low levels of 53 kDa protein expression (~0.8 and 0.4 %).

The enzyme activities of DhaB and KGSADH were determined using the crude cell extracts (Table 3). Generally, the enzyme activities correlated well with the level of expression of the corresponding proteins estimated from SDS-PAGE (Table 3). The recombinant *E. coli* W3110 and W showed similar activities for DhaB and KGSADH at 1.6 ± 0.1 U/mg protein and 1.8 ± 0.2 U/mg protein, respectively. Recombinant *E. coli* K12, which showed the highest level of KGSADH expression but very low

Fig. 2 SDS-PAGE analysis of the cell-free soluble extract of various recombinant *E. coli* strains overexpressing DhaB, GdrAB and KGSADH. Correspondingly, cell-free soluble extract of various *E. coli* wild-type strains was used as the reference samples. The upper arrow indicates DhaB and GdrA (~62 kDa) and the lower arrow represents KGSADH (~53 kDa)

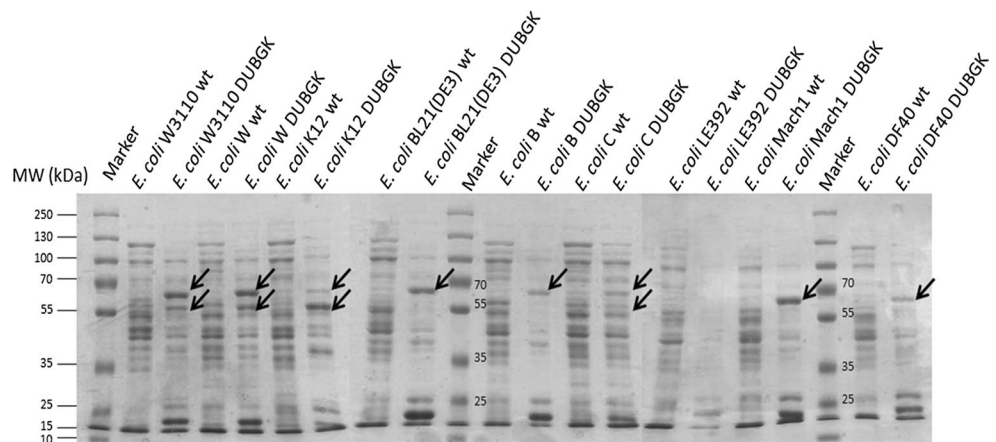


Table 3 Quantity and activities of the DhaB and KGSADH protein in crude cell extracts of various recombinant *E. coli* strains

Strain	Amount of soluble protein (%) [*]		Activity (U/mg protein)	
	DhaB	KGSADH	DhaB	KGSADH
<i>E. coli</i> W3110 DUBGK	7.1	3.1	1.60	2.00
<i>E. coli</i> W DUBGK	7.3	3.2	1.58	1.66
<i>E. coli</i> K12 DUBGK	2.3	10.9	0.06	3.40
<i>E. coli</i> BL21(DE3) DUBGK	7.5	0.8	1.28	0.08
<i>E. coli</i> B DUBGK	4.7	0.4	0.06	0.04
<i>E. coli</i> C DUBGK	2.7	1.1	0.26	0.08
<i>E. coli</i> Mach1 DUBGK	8.2	0.9	1.74	0.13
<i>E. coli</i> DF40 DUBGK	2.8	1.6	0.08	0.90

The standard deviation of the measurements was <10 %

Amount of soluble protein on SDS-PAGE was calculated using imageJ (NIH) software

^{*} The relative expression of target protein in comparison to the amount of total protein

levels of 62 kDa protein(s) expression, exhibited the highest KGSADH activity of 3.4 ± 0.3 U/mg protein but a very low DhaB activity of 0.06 U/mg protein. *E. coli* Mach1 DUBGK showed the highest DhaB activity (1.7 ± 0.1 U/mg protein) and the lowest KGSADH activity (0.13 ± 0.01 U/mg protein), which are similar to the expression levels of the corresponding proteins. Both enzyme activities were low in recombinant *E. coli* B although this strain produced the highest amount of 3-HP in the shake flask (see the “[Production of 3-HP from glycerol by the recombinant *E. coli* strains on a flask scale](#)”). In the case of recombinant *E. coli* LE392 DUBGK, cell growth was too low and the enzyme activity could not be measured.

Production of 3-HP from glycerol by the recombinant *E. coli* strains on a flask scale

The recombinant *E. coli* strains overexpressing DhaB, GdrAB and KGSADH were evaluated for their ability to produce 3-HP from glycerol in M9 media (Fig. 3). In most cultures, a small amount of 3-HPA accumulated immediately after adding coenzyme B₁₂ at 3 h. In particular, *E. coli* Mach1 DUBGK accumulated relatively large amounts of 3-HPA at ~1 mM and cell growth stopped completely after the accumulation of 3-HPA (data not shown). 3-HPA is toxic to cell growth and 3-HP production, even though it is the immediate precursor of 3-HP [21]. The $\mu_{\max}$ of all recombinant *E. coli* strains decreased by approximately 50 % compared to their corresponding hosts (Table 4). Nevertheless, among the nine recombinants, two recombinants, *E. coli* W3110 DUBGK and W DUBGK, exhibited a higher $\mu_{\max}$ than the others. For 3-HP production, five

recombinant strains, W3110, W, K12, B, and DF40, showed better results than the others (Table 4). *Escherichia coli* B DUBGK produced the highest 3-HP at 35.6 ± 2.5 mM, followed by W DUBGK and W3110 DUBGK at 29.2 ± 2.5 and 28.7 ± 2.3 mM, respectively. 3-HP production in these three strains was initiated earlier than the others (Fig. 3).

In the next study, the flask experiments were performed using the culture medium supplemented with 25 g/L of 3-HP to determine the toxic effects of 3-HP on its production. The experiment was conducted for five recombinants only (*E. coli* W3110, W, K12, B and DF40), which produced higher levels of 3-HP in the previous experiment (Fig. 3). The recombinants of the K12, B and DF40 strains did not show any growth. Therefore, only the results for W3110 and W are shown (Fig. 4). In the presence of 25 g/L 3-HP, both W3110 DUBGK and W DUBGK exhibited a significant decrease in $\mu_{\max}$, glycerol consumption and 3-HP production. Glycerol consumption decreased by ~40 % for both strains, and 3-HP production also decreased by 68 and 52 % for W3110 and W, respectively (Table 4). Between the two strains, *E. coli* W DUBGK (14.1 ± 1.1 mM 3-HP) produced much higher 3-HP levels than W3110 DUBGK (9.3 ± 0.8 mM 3-HP). These results, along with previous experiments, indicate that the ability to grow and produce 3-HP varies considerably among the nine *E. coli* strains tested. Moreover, the two strains, *E. coli* W3110 and W, have greater potential to produce 3-HP than the others at a higher 3-HP titer.

Bioreactor cultivation of recombinant *E. coli* W3110 and *E. coli* W overexpressing DhaB, GdrAB and KGSADH

Fed-batch bioreactor experiments were carried out with the two best *E. coli* recombinants, W3110 DUBGK and W DUBGK (Fig. 5). *Escherichia coli* W3110 DUBGK showed a $\mu_{\max}$ of 0.53 h^{-1} and a final cell density of $5.52 \pm 0.32 \text{ g cdw/L}$, respectively (Fig. 5a; Table 5). Up to the initial 30 h, rapid glycerol consumption ($431 \pm 10 \text{ mM}$) and 3-HP production ($155 \pm 10 \text{ mM}$) were observed. In the next 18 h between 30 and 48 h, however, the amount of 3-HP production and glycerol consumption decreased to 25 ± 2 and $241 \pm 10 \text{ mM}$, respectively. After culturing for 48 h, the estimated 3-HP molar yield, titer and productivity of recombinant *E. coli* W3110 DUBGK were 0.26 ± 0.02 , $16.2 \pm 0.5 \text{ g/L}$ and $0.36 \pm 0.03 \text{ g/L h}$, respectively (Table 5). The enzyme activities of DhaB and KGSADH were determined. The DhaB activity was the highest at 12 h ($6.63 \pm 0.33 \text{ U/mg protein}$) and decreased continuously with time, reaching less than $0.65 \pm 0.05 \text{ U/mg protein}$ at 36 h (Fig. 5c). KGSADH also showed the highest activity at 12 h ($2.57 \pm 0.22 \text{ U/mg protein}$), which then decreased to $0.61 \pm 0.06 \text{ U/mg protein}$ at 48 h.

Using the *E. coli* W strain as the host, a higher $\mu_{\max}$ of 0.74 h^{-1} and higher final cell density of $9.76 \pm 0.88 \text{ g}$

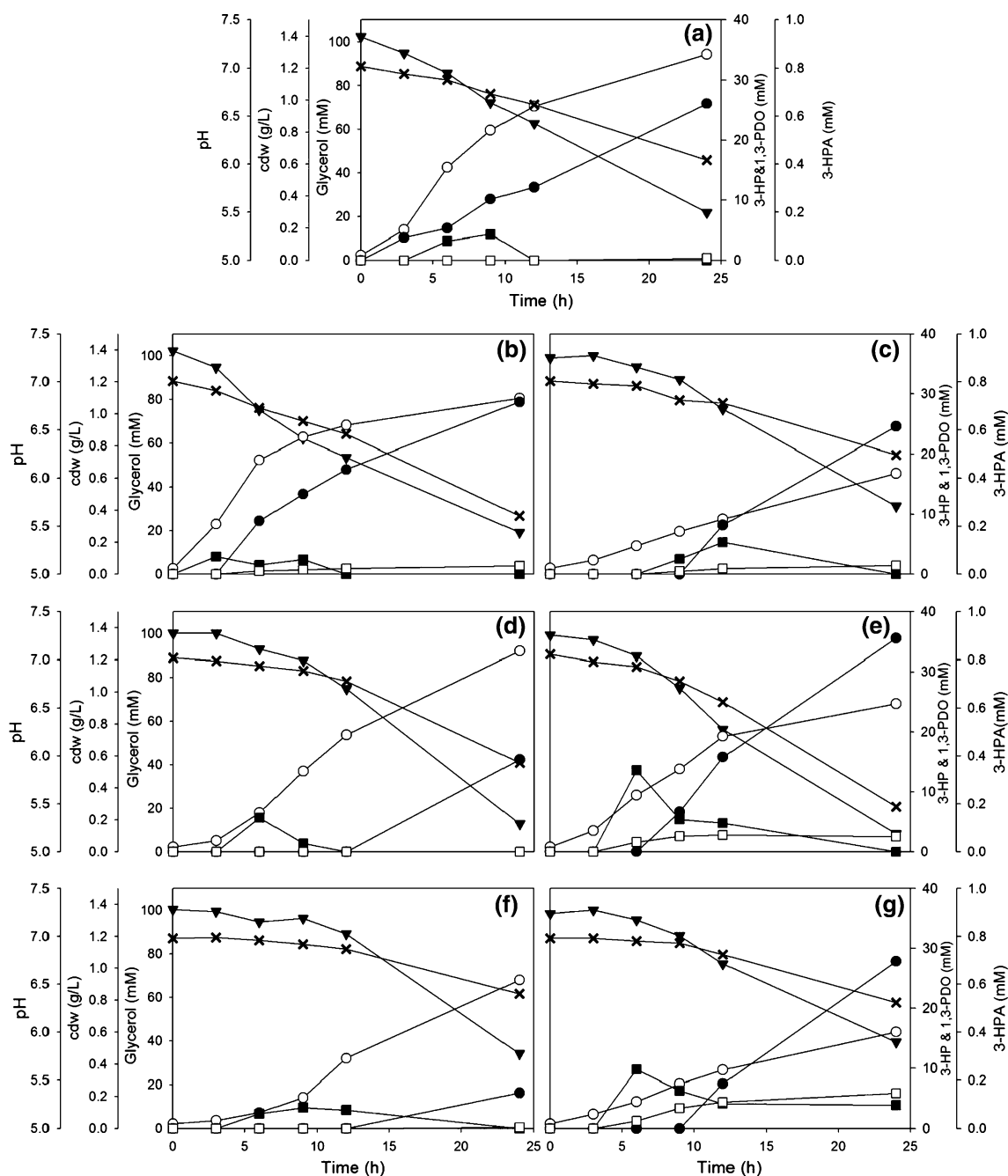


Fig. 3 Time-course profile of cell growth, glycerol consumption, 3-HPA, 3-HP and 1,3-PDO production from glycerol by various recombinant *E. coli* strains overexpressing DhaB, GdrAB and KGSADH. All the flasks were cultivated at 37 °C and 250 rpm by supplementing 2 μ M coenzyme B₁₂ at 3, 6, 9 and 12 h of cultivation. The standard deviations of the biomass and metabolite measurements

were <10 %. **a** *E. coli* W3110, **b** *E. coli* W, **c** *E. coli* K12, **d** *E. coli* BL21(DE3), **e** *E. coli* B, **f** *E. coli* C and **g** *E. coli* DF40. Symbols: closed circle (3-HP), closed triangle (Glycerol), open square (1,3-PDO), closed square (3-HPA), open circle (Biomass) and cross mark (pH)

cdw/L were obtained. 3-HP production was rapid in the initial 15 h but the rate decreased afterward. Compared to W3110, the initial 3-HP production rate and final titer at 48 h were much higher. At 48 h, the 3-HP molar yield, titer and productivity were estimated to be 0.31 ± 0.02 ,

41.5 ± 1 g/L and 0.86 g/L h, respectively (Table 5). On the other hand, *E. coli* W DUBGK diverted large amounts of carbon towards two major byproducts, acetate (97.9 ± 5.7 mM) and 1,3-PDO (76.7 ± 5.2 mM) during 3-HP production. The enzyme activities of DhaB and

Table 4 Cell growth and metabolites profile of the recombinant *E. coli* strains cultivated in the shake flask

Strains and conditions	Specific growth rate (h ⁻¹)	Final biomass (g/L)	Glycerol consumed (mM)	1,3-PDO (mM)	3-HP (mM)	Acetate (mM)	Lactate (mM)	Ethanol (mM)	Carbon recovery ^a (%)
<i>E. coli</i> W3110 DUBGK	0.48	1.28	80.90	0.34	28.71	13.72	ND	7.12	57.71
<i>E. coli</i> W DUBGK	0.49	1.09	93.24	1.25	29.27	20.93	ND	4.77	62.32
<i>E. coli</i> K12 DUBGK	0.21	0.63	68.80	1.48	24.59	3.05	ND	7.34	52.24
<i>E. coli</i> BL21(DE3) DUBGK	0.32	1.26	87.30	ND	15.44	8.47	ND	6.83	44.01
<i>E. coli</i> B DUBGK	0.24	0.93	95.72	2.92	35.63	10.61	ND	6.13	59.76
<i>E. coli</i> C DUBGK	0.30	0.93	65.83	0.21	5.94	6.33	ND	6.76	33.33
<i>E. coli</i> DF40 DUBGK	0.22	0.60	58.90	5.92	27.83	3.60	7.18	6.40	86.23
With 25 g/L 3-HP									
<i>E. coli</i> W3110 DUBGK	0.27	0.81	47.10	2.10	9.31	11.09	ND	7.40	53.14
<i>E. coli</i> W DUBGK	0.33	0.78	57.30	2.29	14.08	12.58	ND	5.73	61.52

Results were calculated after 24 h of cell cultivation in shake flask. The standard deviation of the measurements was <10 %

ND Not detected

^a Glycerol carbon recovered in the form of metabolites and biomass. Carbon dioxide was not included in the calculations

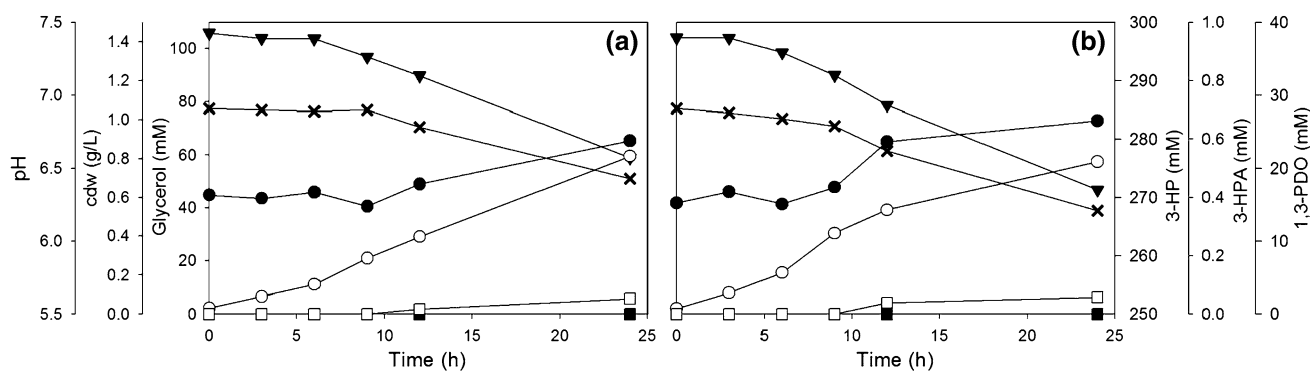


Fig. 4 Time-course profile of cell growth, glycerol consumption, production of 3-HP and 1,3-PDO from glycerol by two recombinant *E. coli* (*E. coli* W3110 and *E. coli* W) strains overexpressing DhaB, GdrAB and KGSADH in the presence of 25 g/L of 3-HP supplemented in the culture medium. 2 μ M coenzyme B₁₂ was added at 3, 6,

9, and 12 h of cultivation. The standard deviations of the biomass and metabolite measurements were <10 %. **a** *E. coli* W3110 and **b** *E. coli* W. Symbols: closed circle (3-HP), closed triangle (Glycerol), open square (1,3-PDO), closed square (3-HPA), open circle (Biomass) and cross mark (pH)

KGSADH were also measured for *E. coli* W (Fig. 5f). The DhaB activity was the highest at 12 h (11.62 ± 0.74 U/mg protein) and decreased continuously with time, reaching less than 0.8 U/mg protein at 37 h. KGSADH showed the highest activity at 6 h (1.4 U/mg protein), remained stable at above 0.8 U/mg protein for up to 28 h, and decreased rapidly to 0.2 U/mg protein in the next 9 h. Unlike the flask

studies, W DUBGK exhibited significantly different DhaB and KGSADH activities than W3110 DUBGK. The reason for this is unclear, but the different activities might have affected the performance of both strains in the bioreactor experiments. Overall, these results suggest that among the nine *E. coli* strains tested, *E. coli* W is the most suitable strain for 3-HP production from glycerol.

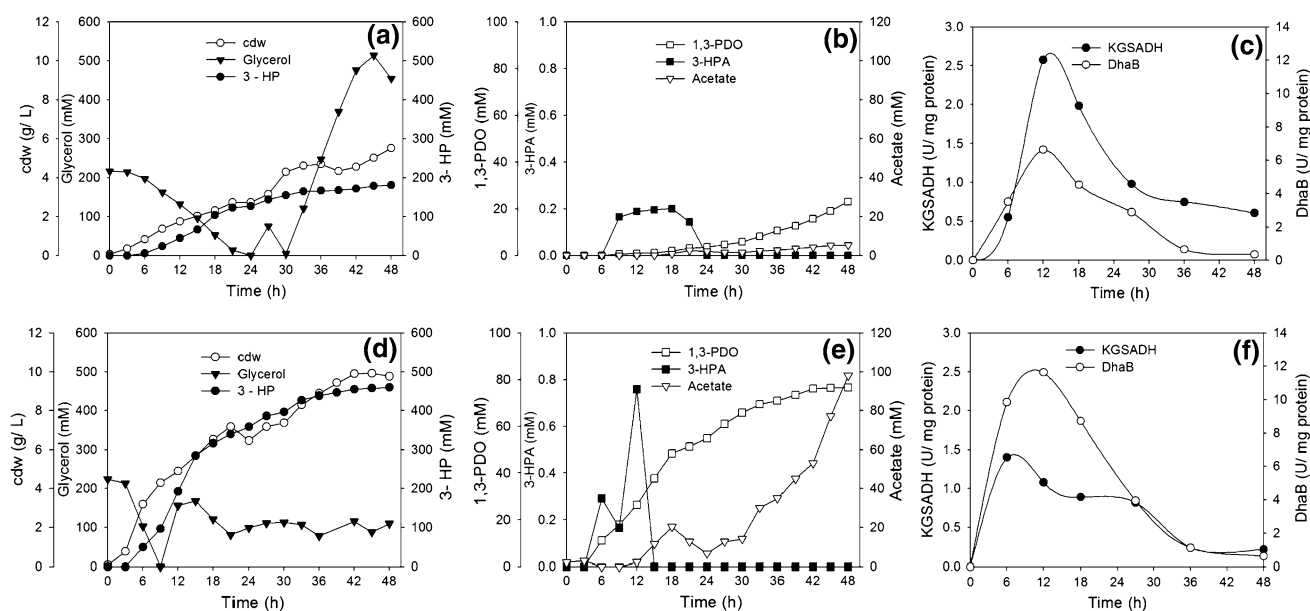


Fig. 5 Glycerol fed-batch bioreactor experiments with recombinant *E. coli* W3110 and *E. coli* W overexpressing DhaB, GdrAB and KGSADH and the time course profile of enzyme activities from its cell free extract. **a** Time course profile of cell growth, glycerol consumption and 3-HP production of *E. coli* W3110 under aerobic conditions. **b** Time course profile of 1,3-PDO, 3-HPA and acetate production of *E. coli* W3110. **c** Enzyme activity analysis of DhaB and

KGSADH of *E. coli* W3110. **d** Time course profile of cell growth, glycerol consumption and 3-HP production of *E. coli* W under aerobic conditions. **e** Time course profile of 1,3-PDO, 3-HPA and acetate production of *E. coli* W. **f** Enzyme activity analysis of DhaB and KGSADH of *E. coli* W. The standard deviations of the measurements of the biomass, metabolites and enzyme activities were <10 %

Table 5 Glycerol consumption, cell growth, 3-HP and metabolite production by recombinant *E. coli* W3110 DUBGK and *E. coli* W DUBGK in the bioreactor

	<i>E. coli</i> W3110 DUBGK	<i>E. coli</i> W DUBGK
X_{final} (g cdw/L)	5.52	9.76
μ_{max} (h^{-1})	0.53	0.74
Glycerol consumed (mM)	672	1,465
3-HP (mM)	180.15	459.30
1,3-PDO (mM)	23.00	76.75
Acetate (mM)	5.31	97.90
3-HP molar yield	0.26	0.31
3-HP productivity (g/L h)	0.36	0.86

Results were calculated after 48 h of cell cultivation in bioreactor
The standard deviation of the measurements was <10 %

Discussion

The aim of this study was to identify a suitable 3-HP tolerant *E. coli* host that can produce high levels of 3-HP from glycerol. Nine *E. coli* strains, which have been reported to produce organic acids efficiently, were examined for cell growth, glycerol consumption, enzyme activities of DhaB and KGSADH, and 3-HP production on the

flask and bioreactor scales (Table 6). When glycerol dehydratase (DhaB) and aldehyde dehydrogenase (KGSADH) were introduced, all nine strains produced 3-HP from glycerol but the level differed significantly according to the strain. When the strains were challenged with toxic 3-HP by adding 3-HP (25 g/L) in the culture medium, only two recombinant strains, *E. coli* W3110 DUBGK and *E. coli* W DUBGK, showed cell growth and 3-HP production. As summarized in Table 6, the evaluation and screening of *E. coli* strains in the present study, which was conducted on a flask scale, were quite efficient. An examination of the growth of the host strains in the presence of 3-HP did not eliminate many strains, but an assessment by the enzyme activities and 3-HP production, particularly in the presence of 25 g/L 3-HP, could eliminate the least promising strains. On the other hand, the difference between the two best strains, *E. coli* W and W3110, could be revealed partially by flask culture experiments in the presence of 25 g/L 3-HP and be fully appreciated only by a bioreactor experiment. In addition, this study suggests that the characteristics of the *E. coli* strains are significantly different, and the tolerance of each strain to organic acids varies considerably. Therefore, careful selection of the appropriate host strain is essential for the development of a recombinant strain in the production of organic acids, such as 3-HP.

Table 6 Summary of screening of *E. coli* strains for 3-HP production

	Growth (with 3-HP) ^a	Enzyme activity ^b	3-HP Production ^c		
			Flask culture (without 3-HP)	Flask culture (with 3-HP)	Bioreactor
<i>E. coli</i> W3110	○	○	○	○	x
<i>E. coli</i> W	○	○	○	○	○
<i>E. coli</i> K12	○	x	○	ND	ND
<i>E. coli</i> BL21 (DE3)	○	x	x	ND	ND
<i>E. coli</i> B	○	x	○	ND	ND
<i>E. coli</i> C	○	x	x	ND	ND
<i>E. coli</i> LE392	x	x	ND	ND	ND
<i>E. coli</i> Mach1	○	x	ND	ND	ND
<i>E. coli</i> DF40	x	x	○	ND	ND

Flask cultures (second and fifth columns) were conducted in the medium supplemented with 25 g/L 3-HP

ND Not determined

^a (○) represents a good growth (growth rate in the presence of 3-HP is >60 % that in the absence of 3-HP), while (x) a poor growth (growth rate in the presence of 3-HP was <35 % that in the absence of 3-HP)

^b (○) represents high and balanced activities between DhaB and KGSADH, while (x) low and imbalanced activities between the two enzymes

^c (○) represents a high 3-HP production, while (x) a poor 3-HP production (<40 % the highest 3-HP production)

Upon exposure to high concentrations of acids, bacteria turn on the acid resistance metabolisms, which are often related to the decarboxylation of amino acids, expression of the stress-related proteins or proton pumps, etc. [30]. For different *E. coli* strains, comprehensive studies on the expression or efficiency of diverse acid tolerance responses have not been conducted. However, it has been reported that *E. coli* K12 and W3110 enhance the gene expression and/or metabolisms for ATP production, glutamate decarboxylation to γ -aminobutyric acid (GABA) and proton pump when challenged with high acid concentrations or low medium pH [26]. Similarly, the *E. coli* W and B strains were reported to overexpress the acid and stress tolerance proteins at high acid concentrations or low medium pH. It will be interesting if the better performance of *E. coli* W and W3110 can be explained based on the differential expression and/or efficiency of these acid tolerance metabolisms.

In addition to the high acid tolerance, the better performance of the recombinant *E. coli* W and W3110 in 3-HP production appears to result from the high and balanced expression of glycerol dehydratase (DhaB) and 3-HPA dehydrogenase (KGSADH) (Table 3). A lower KGSADH activity than the DhaB activity can result in the accumulation of the highly toxic aldehyde, 3-HPA, which is detrimental to cell growth and 3-HP production [21]. The unsuccessful 3-HP production in the recombinants, *E. coli* BL21(DE3), Mach1 and C, which exhibit a serious imbalance between the DhaB and KGSADH activities (Table 3), confirmed the importance of the balance of these enzyme activities. The decrease in the 3-HP production rate and

glycerol consumption rate in bioreactor experiments also appears to be related to the activity of these enzymes (Fig. 5). Stable maintenance of the 3-HP pathway enzymes at the late stages should extend the period of the active production of 3-HP and improve its titer. Interestingly, acetate and 1,3-PDO are the only byproducts in a bioreactor culture with *E. coli* W, which is unlike the recombinant *E. coli* BL21(DE3) studied previously [21]. Acetate is as toxic to *E. coli* (unpublished data) as 3-HP and a decrease in acetate production should alleviate the toxic effects of the acids to some extent. On the other hand, acetate production under aerobic conditions is indicative of an overflow metabolism, which is caused by the improper regeneration of NAD⁺ [7, 27]. Therefore, the continuous regeneration of NAD⁺ in recombinant *E. coli* W DUBGK should be examined.

In conclusion, carboxylic acids, such as 3-HP, seriously impede the performance of the host strains as they accumulate in the culture broth. In the present study, various *E. coli* strains were evaluated and screened based on cell growth, glycerol consumption, enzyme activities of DhaB and KGSADH, and 3-HP production. Among the nine strains tested, *E. coli* W DUBGK showed the highest 3-HP production. In the glycerol fed-batch bioreactor experiment, *E. coli* W DUBGK produced a high titer (41.5 ± 1.1 g/L), molar yield (0.31 ± 0.02) and productivity (0.86 ± 0.05 g/L h). Further studies to enhance the 3-HP tolerance of the *E. coli* W strain and improve its titer and productivity are currently under way.

Acknowledgement This study was supported financially by the Korean Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology through the

Advanced Biomass R&D Center (ABC; Grant No. 2010-0029799), KAIST, Korea. The authors are grateful for the financial assistance provided by the BK21 Plus Program for Advanced Chemical Technology at Pusan National University. In addition, Dr. Ashok Somasundar is grateful for the financial support provided by “2014 Post-Doc. Development Program of Pusan National University”.

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