Polyhydroxylated fullerene attenuates oxidative stress-induced apoptosis via a fortifying Nrf2-regulated cellular antioxidant defence system

Shefang Ye, Min Chen, Yuanqin Jiang, Mingliang Chen, Tong Zhou, Yang Wang, Zhengqin Hou, Lei Ren

Abstract: Polyhydroxylated derivatives of fullerene C_{60}, named fullerenols (C_{60}(OH)_{x}), have stimulated great interest because of their potent antioxidant properties in various chemical and biological systems, which enable them to be used as a new promising pharmaceutical for the future treatment of oxidative stress-related diseases, but the details remain unknown. Nuclear factor erythroid 2-related factor 2 (Nrf2) is a principal transcription factor that regulates expression of several antioxidant genes via binding to the antioxidant response element and plays a crucial role in cellular defence against oxidative stress. In this study we investigated whether activation of the Nrf2/antioxidant response element pathway contributes to the cytoprotective effects of C_{60}(OH)_{x}. Our results showed that C_{60}(OH)_{x} enhanced nuclear translocation of Nrf2 and upregulated expression of phase II antioxidant enzymes, including heme oxygenase-1 (HO-1), NAD(P)H: quinine oxidoreductase 1, and γ-glutamate cysteine ligase in A549 cells. Treatment with C_{60}(OH)_{x} resulted in phosphorylation of p38 mitogen-activated protein kinases (p38 MAPK), extracellular signal-regulated kinases, and c-Jun-N-terminal kinases. By using inhibitors of cellular kinases, we showed that pretreatment of A549 cells with SB203580, a specific inhibitor of p38 MAPK, abolished nuclear translocation of Nrf2 and induction of HO-1 protein induced by C_{60}(OH)_{x}, indicating an involvement of p38 MAPK in Nrf2/HO-1 activation by C_{60}(OH)_{x}. Furthermore, pretreatment with C_{60}(OH)_{x} attenuated hydrogen peroxide-induced apoptotic cell death in A549 cells, and knockdown of Nrf2 by small interfering ribonucleic acid diminished C_{60}(OH)_{x}-mediated cytoprotection. Taken together, these findings demonstrate that C_{60}(OH)_{x} may attenuate oxidative stress-induced apoptosis via augmentation of Nrf2-regulated cellular antioxidant capacity, thus providing insights into the mechanisms of the antioxidant properties of C_{60}(OH)_{x}.

Keywords: fullerenol, Nrf2, oxidative stress, cytoprotection, A549 cells

Introduction

Accumulating evidence suggests that oxidative stress is implicated in several disease states (ie, cancer, aging, and neurological and vascular disorders). It occurs when the redox balance is disrupted by excessive production of reactive oxygen species (ROS) and/or by the presence of inadequate antioxidant defences. Excess amounts of ROS, such as superoxide anion (O_2^−), hydrogen peroxide (H_2O_2), and hydroxyl radical (HO·), have been shown not only to damage cells by peroxidizing lipids and disrupting DNA and proteins but also to exert signaling functions and modulate gene transcription, thereby resulting in cellular dysfunction and apoptosis. Therefore, therapeutic strategies aimed at preventing ROS-induced oxidative damage might be promising for the treatment of oxidative stress-related diseases.
One such therapeutic approach is represented by the induction of phase II antioxidant or detoxifying enzymes using nutritional or pharmacological intervention, which promotes activation of a nuclear factor erythroid 2-related factor 2 (Nrf2)/antioxidant response element (ARE) signaling pathway.\(^6\) Nrf2 is an essential transcription factor that regulates ARE-mediated expression of phase II antioxidant enzymes. Under unstressed physiological conditions, Nrf2 is bound to the repressor Kelch-like ECH-associated protein 1 (Keap1) in the cytoplasm and easily degraded by ubiquitin–proteasome.\(^7\) Upon activation, the Nrf2/Keap1 complex is dissociated, and Nrf2 is released from Keap1 and translocates into the nucleus, where it forms a heterodimer with its obligatory partner Maf and binds to the ARE sequence to activate transcription of a battery of antioxidant and cytoprotective genes, including heme oxygenase-1 (HO-1), NAD(P)H: quinine oxidoreductase 1 (NQO1), and \(\gamma\)-glutamylcysteine ligase.\(^8\) Therefore, agents that modulate the Nrf2/ARE pathway would be expected to have beneficial effects in ameliorating oxidative stress-related diseases by upregulation of phase II antioxidant enzymes.\(^7,8\)

The use of nanoparticles in biomedical research is currently an active area of research because nanoparticles hold great promise as novel and effective antioxidants for oxidative stress-related diseases.\(^9,10\) The advantages of using nanoparticles as antioxidants over currently available antioxidants are due to the possibility that they have a versatile surface that can be decorated with active agents,\(^11\) can penetrate the cell membrane,\(^12\) can quench radicals without the need for assistance from other detoxifying molecules,\(^13\) and possess higher physical stability in biological media,\(^14\) thus extending their applications to the treatment of oxidative damage. In this context, there is a considerable number of reports describing that various fullerene (C\(_{60}\)) derivatives and surfactant-coated C\(_{60}\) derivatives modified through either covalent or noncovalent approaches had been reported to be biocompatible and to exhibit properties as powerful antioxidants to decompose ROS generated under oxidative stress in different model systems.\(^14-17\) Polyhydroxylated fullerenes, also known as fullerols (C\(_{60}(\text{OH})_n\)), belong to a group of antioxidant nanoparticles that exhibit strong antioxidant activity in both in vitro and in vivo biological systems.\(^13\) It has been demonstrated that the anti-inflammatory,\(^14\) antiapoptotic,\(^16,17\) radioprotective,\(^19,20\) and neuroprotective effects\(^21,22\) and the enzyme-inhibitory activity of fullerols\(^13\) have been attributed to their ability to scavenge free radicals, such as superoxide anion radical, hydroxyl radical, and nitrous oxide radical. It has since been well established that induction of Nrf2-regulated phase II antioxidant enzymes by nutritional or pharmacological intervention is an effective approach to combat the toxicities of ROS and to protect cells against oxidative stress.\(^8\) It is possible that the mechanisms of protective effects of fullerols may also involve upregulation of Nrf2-regulated phase II antioxidant enzymes, which putatively account in part for the antioxidant capacity of fullerols.

In the present study, we hypothesize that C\(_{60}(\text{OH})_{24}\) induces endogenous phase II antioxidant enzymes via Nrf2/ARE-dependent mechanisms and attenuates oxidative stress-mediated cell death, using the human alveolar epithelial A549 cells as a model. We found that C\(_{60}(\text{OH})_{24}\) activates Nrf2 via p38 mitogen-activated protein kinases (MAPKs) signal transduction pathways in A549 cells, which, in turn, upregulates phase II antioxidant enzymes, conferring protection against the cytotoxicity induced by H\(_2\)O\(_2\).

**Materials and methods**

**Materials**

Dulbecco’s Modified Eagle’s Medium (DMEM), penicillin, streptomycin, fetal bovine serum (FBS), and the small interfering ribonucleic acid (siRNA) reagents for Nrf2 were obtained from Life Technologies (Carlsbad, CA, USA). Nrf2 consensus oligonucleotides were purchased from Promega Corporation (Fitchburg, WI, USA). \(\gamma\)-[\(^{32}\)P]\(\beta\)-adenosine triphosphate was the product of NEN Life Science (Boston, MA, USA). Antibodies against Nrf2, HO-1, poly ADP-ribose polymerase (PARP), lamin A, \(\beta\)-actin, horseradish peroxidase- and fluorescein isothiocyanate-conjugated secondary antibodies, diamidino-2-phenylindole (DAPI), 3-(4,5-dimethylthiazol-2-yl)-2,5-diphenyltetrazolium bromide (MTT), and propidium iodide (PI) were purchased from Santa Cruz Biotechnology, Inc., (Santa Cruz, CA, USA). Antibodies against phospho-p38, phospho-Jun-N-terminal kinases (JNK), phospho-extracellular signal-related kinases (ERK1/2), cleaved caspase-3, and PARP were obtained from Cell Signaling Technology (Beverly, MA, USA). p38 inhibitor (SB203580), JNK inhibitor (SP600125), and ERK1/2 inhibitors (PD98059 and U0126) were purchased from Calbiochem (La Jolla, CA, USA). N-acetylcysteine (NAC) was from Sigma-Aldrich (St Louis, MO, USA). All other chemicals were of the highest commercial grade available.

**Characterization of fullero\(_{60}(\text{OH})_{24}\)**

C\(_{60}(\text{OH})_{24}\), with a purity of more than 99.5\%, was purchased from the MER Corporation (Tuscon, AZ, USA). A test solution of C\(_{60}(\text{OH})_{24}\) was prepared in the DMEM, and the
highest solubility of $C_{60} (OH)_{24}$ in culture medium was up to 10 mM. A series of working solutions was freshly made by diluting the stock solution with cell culture medium before use. To investigate the size and shape of the $C_{60} (OH)_{24}$ nanoparticles, 100 µM of $C_{60} (OH)_{24}$ solution prepared either in phosphate buffered saline (PBS) (pH 7.0) or in culture medium containing 10% FBS was evaporated on a 400-mesh carbon-coated copper grid and characterized by transmission electron microscopy (TEM; Hitachi H-7500, Tokyo, Japan). The size distribution and zeta potentials of $C_{60} (OH)_{24}$ nanoparticles were measured by dynamic light scattering (DLS) using a Zetasizer Nano ZS (Malvern Instruments, Malvern, UK).

Cell culture
The human type II alveolar epithelial A549 cell line was purchased from the cell bank of the Chinese Academy of Sciences (Shanghai, People’s Republic of China). Cells were maintained routinely in DMEM supplemented with 10% heat-inactivated FBS, L-glutamine (2 mM), penicillin (100 U/mL), and streptomycin (100 µg/mL) at 37°C in a humidified atmosphere of 5% CO₂ and 95% air. The medium was changed every other day, and the cells were plated at an appropriate density according to the scale of each experiment. For all experiments, the cells were grown to approximately 70%–80% confluence.

Cell viability assay
Cell viability was determined using MTT assay. Briefly, A549 cells were grown on 96-well plates at a density of $5 \times 10^4$ for 24 hours. After treatment with increasing doses of $C_{60} (OH)_{24}$ (10–200 µM) for 48 hours and 72 hours, cells were incubated with MTT solution (0.5 mg/mL, 1 × PBS) for 2 hours at 37°C. The reaction was then terminated by the addition of 100 µL dimethyl sulfoxide. The formazan crystals resulting from mitochondrial enzymatic activity on MTT substrate were solubilized with 200 µL of dimethyl sulfoxide, and absorbance at 570 nm was measured using a microplate reader (Model 680, Bio-Rad Laboratories, Hercules, CA, USA). For assessment of cell membrane integrity, lactate dehydrogenase (LDH) release in exposure medium was quantified by flow cytometry (Beckman-Coulter Epics XL, Miami, FL, USA).

Measurement of intracellular ROS
The intracellular ROS level was determined using a peroxide-sensitive fluorescent probe, 2,7-dichlorodihydro fluorescent diacetate (DCFH-DA; Molecular Probes, Eugene, OR, USA). DCFH-DA enters the cells via passive diffusion, where it reacts with ROS, resulting in the formation of the highly fluorescent compound dichlorofluorescein (DCF). Briefly, cells attached to plastic dishes were harvested by 0.25% trypsin, washed twice with cold PBS, and incubated with 50 µg/mL PI containing 10 µg/mL ribonuclease A in the dark at 37°C for 30 minutes. The DNA content of cells was quantified by flow cytometry (Beckman-Coulter Epics XL, Miami, FL, USA).

Western blot analysis
After treatment with $C_{60} (OH)_{24}$ nanoparticles, cells were harvested, washed twice with ice-cold PBS, and lysed in modified radioimmunoprecipitation buffer (10 mM Tris–HCl [pH 7.5], 1 mM ethylenediaminetetraacetic acid, 150 mM NaCl, 1% Nonidet P-40, 0.1% sodium dodecyl sulfate, 0.1% sodium deoxycholate) containing protease inhibitors. Cytoplasmic and nuclear cell lysates were separated by using the Active Motif nuclear extract kit (Active Motif, Carlsbad, CA, USA) following the manufacturer’s protocol. The protein concentration was determined using the protein assay reagent (Bio-Rad Laboratories). For Western blot analysis, an equal amount of protein (30 µg) were loaded on to 12% sodium polyacrylamide gel. Western blot analysis was performed to check the expression of pro-apoptotic proteins under all conditions.
dodecyl sulfate–polyacrylamide gels and electrophoretically transferred on to a polyvinylidene difluoride membrane (Millipore Corporation, Bedford, MA, USA). After blocking, the membranes were then incubated overnight at 4°C with specific primary antibodies. After washing three times with Tris Buffered Saline with Tween 20 (TBST), the membranes were incubated with horseradish peroxidase-conjugated secondary antibody for 1 hour. The blots were developed using enhanced chemiluminescence (Amersham Biosciences, Piscataway, NJ, USA) according to the manufacturer’s protocol. Densitometry data analysis was performed using ImageJ software (National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, MD, USA).

Reverse transcription-polymerase chain reaction
Total RNA was isolated from A549 cells using the Trizol reagent (Life Technologies). For cDNA preparation, DNase I-treated (25 Kunitz units) total RNA (2 µg) was incubated at 37°C for 90 minutes by the First-Strand cDNA Synthesis Kit according to the manufacturer’s instructions (Amersham Pharmacia Biotech, Piscataway, NJ, USA). Oligonucleotide primer sets used were as follows: HO-1, 5′-GGAACCTTCAGAAGGCCAG-3′ (sense), and 5′-GTCCCTTGGTCTAGGTTCA-3′ (antisense); NQO1, 5′-GTATCCTTGCGATCTGGTT-3′ (sense), and 5′-GATCCCTTGCAGAGAGTACA-3′ (antisense); γ-glutamate cysteine ligase catalytic subunit (GCSc), 5′-TCACCTCTATTGAAGATGG-3′ (sense); 5′-GGTTACTATTTGGTTTTACCTGT-3′ (antisense); glyceraldehyde-3-phosphate dehydrogenase (GAPDH): 5′-GCCAAGGTCTACCATGACAAC-3′ (sense) and 5′-AGTGTAGCCAGGTCCCTT-3′ (antisense). The amplified samples were run in a 1% agarose gel with ethidium bromide and the bands were visualized under ultraviolet illumination.

Immunofluorescence staining
A549 cells were fixed with paraformaldehyde, permeabilized with 0.5% Triton X-100 in PBS, and then incubated with blocking buffer (PBS, 5% goat serum, and 0.3% Triton X-100) for 30 minutes. The cells were then labeled with primary antibodies against Nrf2 in blocking buffer at 4°C overnight, followed by incubation with a fluorescein isothiocyanate-conjugated secondary antibody. Thereafter, cells were nuclear-stained via 15-minute incubation in a blocking solution containing 0.25 mg/mL DAPI. Fluorescent-labeled cells were imaged with a fluorescent microscope (Leica DMR, Solms, Germany).

Electrophoretic mobility shift assay
Nuclear extracts from cells incubated with C_{60}(OH)_{24} nanoparticles were prepared as described previously. Electrophoretic mobility shift assay was performed using a synthetic double-stranded oligonucleotide containing the Nrf2-binding domain (ARE), which was labeled with [γ-32P] adenosine triphosphate using the T4 polynucleotide kinase and purified using a ProbeQuant™ G-50 Micro Columns following the manufacturer’s protocol (Amersham Pharmacia Biotech Inc., Piscataway, NJ). The double-stranded sequence was 5′-TTTCTGCTGATCAAGGTTCG-3′ and 3′-AAAAGACGACTCAGTCCAGGC-5′. Prior to the addition of 32P-labeled oligonucleotide (50,000 cpm), 10 µg of the nuclear extract was incubated for 30 minutes on ice in the gel-shift assay binding buffer (20% glycerol, 5 mM MgCl₂, 2.5 mM ethylenediaminetetraacetic acid, 250 mM NaCl, 2.5 mM dithiothreitol, and 50 mM Tris–HCl, pH 7.5 with 0.25 µg/ml poly[di-dC]). DNA–protein complexes were resolved in 5% polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis and the bands were visualized by autoradiography.

siRNA transfection
A549 cells were grown to 50%–70% confluence in DMEM supplemented with 10% FBS. Cells were transfected with the Nrf2–siRNA or siRNA control with Lipofectamine RNAi Max (Life Technologies) according to the manufacturer’s protocol. The final concentration of the siRNA was 20 nmol/L. The knockdown efficiency was validated by Western blot analysis. The Nrf2–siRNA duplex with the following sense and antisense sequences was used: 5′-GUAAAGAACGAGUAUAdU-3′ (sense) and 3′-dUdUCUUCGUUCUCAAATT-5′ (antisense). To confirm the specificity of the inhibition, the nontargeting siRNA (siRNA control; 5′-UAGCGACUAAACACAUCAAUU-3′ (antisense) was used: 5′-UAGCGACUAAACACAUCAAUU-3′ was used as a negative control. After 48 hours of transfection, the transfection solution was removed and the cells were rinsed with PBS and treated with C_{60}(OH)_{24} nanoparticles in the presence or absence of H₂O₂. Cell samples were collected for cell viability.

Statistical analysis
Results are presented as the means ± standard deviation of the triplicate experiments. Comparisons between groups were evaluated by two-sided Student’s t-test or one-way analysis of variance. A difference was considered significant at P<0.05.

Results
Characterization of C_{60}(OH)_{24} nanoparticles
Prior to the in vitro study of the molecular mechanism of antioxidant effects, characterization of the C_{60}(OH)_{24} nanoparticles was performed using TEM and DLS methods. The C_{60}(OH)_{24} nanoparticles were found to be easily
dissolved and aggregated either in PBS buffer (pH 7.0) or in culture medium. The images obtained with TEM revealed that the diameter of C_{60}(OH)_{24} nanoparticles aggregated in PBS buffer (Figure 1A) was smaller than that in culture medium supplemented with 10% FBS (Figure 1B). The size distribution was further investigated using a DLS method (Figure 1C and D), showing that the average diameter distributed was about 96 nm in PBS buffer and 142 nm in culture medium, respectively, which approximately matched the average size obtained by TEM. The precipitation of C_{60}(OH)_{24} nanoparticles was not observed in the culture medium during the testing periods, and the clear aqueous solution remained stable for at least 1 week at room temperature (Figure 1E). The C_{60}(OH)_{24} nanoparticles exhibited a lower negative zeta potential in PBS buffer (~35 mV) than in cell culture medium (~27 mV), suggesting that serum protein adsorption may affect the surface charge of nanoparticles.

C_{60}(OH)_{24} induced HO-1 expression in A549 cells

To initially screen the sensitivity of A549 cells to C_{60}(OH)_{24} cultures were incubated with increasing doses of C_{60}(OH)_{24} (10 µM, 25 µM, 50 µM, 100 µM, and 200 µM) for 48 hours and 72 hours, and the cell viability was determined by MTT and LDH assays. As shown in Figure 2A and B, treatment of cells with C_{60}(OH)_{24} did not affect the survival of A549 cells within the tested concentration range, even as high as 200 µM, for up to 72 hours. Therefore, a concentration of less than 200 µM was considered cell-friendly and biocompatible under normal physiological conditions in principle. To compare the effects of C_{60}(OH)_{24} in previous in vitro studies, the cytotoxic effects toward A549 cells were further evaluated using 100 µM of C_{60}(OH)_{24} by TUNEL and DCFH-DA assays, and results clearly showed that C_{60}(OH)_{24} did not cause significant apoptotic cell death and ROS production for up to 72 hours (Figure 2C). To explore the potential ability of C_{60}(OH)_{24} to induce phase II antioxidant enzymes, we investigated the possibility that C_{60}(OH)_{24} nanoparticles might alter the expression of the antioxidant enzyme HO-1, an important component of the cellular defence against oxidative stress. A549 cells were treated with C_{60}(OH)_{24} nanoparticles at 10 µM, 50 µM, and 100 µM for up to 24 hours, and the results obtained from Western blot analysis demonstrated that treatment with C_{60}(OH)_{24} nanoparticles induced the protein expression of HO-1 in a concentration- and time-dependent manner (Figure 3A–D). The protein expression of HO-1 was elevated from 6 hours after treatment with 100 µM C_{60}(OH)_{24} nanoparticles and kept to be upregulated.

![Figure 1 Characterization of C_{60}(OH)_{24} nanoparticles. Representative transmission electron microscopy images of C_{60}(OH)_{24} aggregation in (A) phosphate buffered saline (pH 7.0) and (B) culture medium supplemented with 10% fetal bovine serum. The concentration of C_{60}(OH)_{24} was 100 µM. (C) The size distribution of C_{60}(OH)_{24} nanoparticles in (C) phosphate buffered saline and (D) culture medium by dynamic light scattering. (E) Photograph of C_{60}(OH)_{24} nanoparticles (100 µM) dispersed in culture medium for 1 week at room temperature.](https://www.dovepress.com/)

---

**Figure 1** Characterization of C_{60}(OH)_{24} nanoparticles. Representative transmission electron microscopy images of C_{60}(OH)_{24} aggregation in (A) phosphate buffered saline (pH 7.0) and (B) culture medium supplemented with 10% fetal bovine serum. The concentration of C_{60}(OH)_{24} was 100 µM. (C) The size distribution of C_{60}(OH)_{24} nanoparticles in (C) phosphate buffered saline and (D) culture medium by dynamic light scattering. (E) Photograph of C_{60}(OH)_{24} nanoparticles (100 µM) dispersed in culture medium for 1 week at room temperature.
until 24 hours. In accordance with Western blot analysis of
HO-1 expression, the mRNA expression of HO-1, γ-GCS,
and NQO-1 after treatment of C_{60}(OH)_{24} exhibited a similar
time-dependent manner (Figures 3E and 4F).

\[ \text{C}_{60}(\text{OH})_{24} \] upregulated cellular
antioxidant defence capacity via activation of Nrf2

To gain further insights into the molecular mechanisms
underlying the induction of phase II enzymes by C_{60}(OH)_{24}
in A549 cells, the possible involvement of transcription
factor Nrf2 was examined as an upstream regulator of
the cellular antioxidant enzymes. We first attempted to
examine the nuclear accumulation of Nrf2 protein in the
C_{60}(OH)_{24} stimulated A549 cells. The results obtained
from Western blot analysis showed that treatment with
100 µM C_{60}(OH)_{24} for 3 hours resulted in significant
nuclear Nrf2 accumulation, accompanied with a decrease
of cytosolic Nrf2, in a time-dependent manner (Figure
4A–C). The nuclear translocation of Nrf2 from cytosol

\[ \text{DCF fluorescence} \]
Polyhydroxylated fullerene attenuates oxidative stress-induced apoptosis

was confirmed by immunolocalization of anti-Nrf2 antibody using confocal microscopy (Figure 4D). To elucidate the role of Nrf2–ARE binding in the transcriptional activation of the HO-1 gene, electrophoretic mobility shift assay was further performed using the oligonucleotides that harbor the Nrf2-specific ARE sequence. Treatment of A549 cells with C$_{60}$(OH)$_{24}$ resulted in an increased Nrf2 DNA-binding activity, with significant effect occurring at 2 hours post-treatment with C$_{60}$(OH)$_{24}$ (Figure 4E). Since Keap1 modification by ROS and electrophiles could account for Nrf2 activation, we determined whether C$_{60}$(OH)$_{24}$ could activate Nrf2 through the generation of ROS. The intracellular ROS level was increased 1 hour after treatment with C$_{60}$(OH)$_{24}$, which remained elevated at 3 hours and then gradually decreased to the basal level at 6 hours. Pretreatment was for 1 hour with NAC at 2.5 mM, which eliminated Nrf2 induction by C$_{60}$(OH)$_{24}$ at 6 hours after treatment (Figure S2), suggesting that transient ROS production is involved in Nrf2 activation by C$_{60}$(OH)$_{24}$. 

**Figure 3** C$_{60}$(OH)$_{24}$ upregulated phase II antioxidant enzymes in A549 cells. A549 cells were treated either with 100 µM C$_{60}$(OH)$_{24}$ for (A) indicated time periods or (C) increasing doses of C$_{60}$(OH)$_{24}$ (10 µM, 50 µM, and 100 µM) for 24 hours, and protein expression of HO-1 was examined by Western blot analysis. The relative protein expression of HO-1 was performed by densitometric analysis (B and D). Representative data from three independent experiments are shown. *P<0.05 versus control. (E) A549 cells were treated with 100 µM C$_{60}$(OH)$_{24}$ for 6 hours, and mRNA levels of HO-1, NQO1, and γ-GCS were analyzed by reverse transcription-polymerase chain reaction. The relative mRNA expression of HO-1, NQO1, and γ-GCS was performed by densitometric analysis (F). Representative data from three independent experiments are shown. *P<0.05 versus control.

**Abbreviations:** GAPDH, glyceraldehyde 3-phosphate dehydrogenase; γ-GCS, γ-glutamylcysteine synthetase; HO-1, heme oxygenase-1; mRNA, messenger ribonucleic acid; NQO1, NAD(P)H: quinone oxidoreductase 1.
To elucidate the plausible signal transduction pathways involved in the C_{60}(OH)_{24} nanoparticles-induced Nrf2 activation and HO-1 expression, we examined the phosphorylation of several upstream kinases. Treatment with C_{60}(OH)_{24} resulted in an increased level of p38 MAPK and ERK1/2 phosphorylation at 15 minutes after treatment, which gradually increased to 2 hours (Figure 5A and B). The level of phosphorylated JNK was also seen at 60 minutes after C_{60}(OH)_{24} treatment (Figure 5A and B). In order to determine which signal transduction pathways could contribute to the C_{60}(OH)_{24}-mediated Nrf2 nuclear translocation.

**Figure 4** Effect of C_{60}(OH)_{24} on Nrf2 activation in A549 cells. Cells were treated with 100 µM C_{60}(OH)_{24} for indicated time periods, and the nuclear and cytoplasmic levels of Nrf2 were examined by Western blot analysis (A). The relative protein expression of Nrf2 was performed by densitometric analysis (B and C). Representative data from three independent experiments are shown. *P<0.05 versus control. (D) Immunolocalization of Nrf2 using confocal microscopy after 6 hours of treatment of A549 cells with 100 µM C_{60}(OH)_{24}. (E) A549 cells were treated with 100 µM C_{60}(OH)_{24} for indicated time periods, and electrophoretic mobility shift assay was performed to analyze DNA-binding activity of Nrf2. Representative images from three independent experiments are shown.

**Abbreviations:** DAPI, diamidino-2-phenylindole; Nrf2, nuclear factor erythroid 2-related factor 2.

**Activation of signal transduction by C_{60}(OH)_{24}**

To elucidate the plausible signal transduction pathways involved in the C_{60}(OH)_{24} nanoparticles-induced Nrf2 activation and HO-1 expression, we examined the phosphorylation of several upstream kinases. Treatment with C_{60}(OH)_{24} resulted in an increased level of p38 MAPK and ERK1/2 phosphorylation at 15 minutes after treatment, which gradually increased to 2 hours (Figure 5A and B). The level of phosphorylated JNK was also seen at 60 minutes after C_{60}(OH)_{24} treatment (Figure 5A and B). In order to determine which signal transduction pathways could contribute to the C_{60}(OH)_{24}-mediated Nrf2 nuclear translocation.
and HO-1 expression, we pretreated cells with their specific inhibitors of cellular kinases prior to C$_{60}$(OH)$_{24}$ treatment. As a result, pretreatment for 1 hour with a p38 inhibitor, SB203580 (10 µM), attenuated C$_{60}$(OH)$_{24}$-mediated Nrf2 nuclear translocation and HO-1 induction, whereas a JNK-specific inhibitor, SP600125, and ERK1/2 inhibitors, PD98059 and U0126, showed little or no effect on Nrf2 nuclear translocation and HO-1 induction (Figure 5C and D). It is worth noting that both Nrf2 nuclear translocation and HO-1 induction were not affected by pretreatment with the inhibitors of cellular kinases alone (Figure S1). These results indicated that the p38 MAPK signaling pathway is involved in C$_{60}$(OH)$_{24}$-stimulated Nrf2/HO-1 upregulation.

**C$_{60}$(OH)$_{24}$ protected A549 cells from H$_2$O$_2$-induced apoptosis**

As shown in Figure 6A, pretreatment of A549 cells with C$_{60}$(OH)$_{24}$ for 24 hours, prior to addition of H$_2$O$_2$, protected against the H$_2$O$_2$-induced cell death in a concentration-dependent manner as determined by the MTT assay, which was confirmed by examination of cell morphology using inverted phase-contrast microscopy (Figure 6B). The C$_{60}$(OH)$_{24}$ nanoparticles were also evaluated for their ability to protect against H$_2$O$_2$-induced apoptosis by performing PI staining followed by flow cytometry; apoptotic cells were identified by their sub-G1 DNA content. As shown in Figure 6C, addition of H$_2$O$_2$ to cell medium caused a significant increase in the sub-G1 population; however, pretreatment of cells with 100 µM C$_{60}$(OH)$_{24}$ nanoparticles resulted in approximately 80% of restoration of the sub-G1 population. The antiapoptotic effects by C$_{60}$(OH)$_{24}$ were further confirmed by Western blot analysis of the cleaved caspase-3 and PARP (Figure 6D). Of note, C$_{60}$(OH)$_{24}$ alone at the tested doses (50 µM and 100 µM) was found to be nontoxic to A549 cells. These results indicated that C$_{60}$(OH)$_{24}$ exerted the protective effect on A549 cells mainly by inhibiting H$_2$O$_2$-mediated apoptotic cell death.
The protective effect of C_{60}(OH)_{24} involves the Nrf2 antioxidant pathway

In order to provide direct evidence for the involvement of Nrf2 activation and HO-1 induction in C_{60}(OH)_{24}-mediated cytoprotection, we transfected A549 cells with either Nrf2-siRNA or siRNA control for 48 hours, followed by treatment with 100 µM C_{60}(OH)_{24} for an additional 24 hours. As shown in Figure 7A, cells did not show any remarkable morphological change at 48 hours postinfection. The efficiency of the Nrf2 siRNA in knocking down Nrf2 was verified by Western blot analysis. As shown in Figure 7B and C, the Nrf2–siRNA treatment significantly decreased the levels of Nrf2 in nuclear extracts from cells treated with C_{60}(OH)_{24}. After knockdown of Nrf2 expression, the induction of HO-1 protein expression by C_{60}(OH)_{24} was also apparently abolished (Figure 7B and C). We subsequently...
exposed Nrf2–siRNA-transfected A549 cells to C$_{60}$(OH)$_{24}$ and then challenged them with 100 µM H$_2$O$_2$. As expected, C$_{60}$(OH)$_{24}$ protected siRNA control-treated A549 cells against H$_2$O$_2$-induced cell death, but was significantly less effective in protecting Nrf2–siRNA-transfected A549 cells from cell death induced by H$_2$O$_2$ (Figure 7D). Taken together, these results suggested that C$_{60}$(OH)$_{24}$ protects against H$_2$O$_2$-induced cell death partly through Nrf2 activation.

Discussion

Recently, a variety of functionalized carbon-based nanomaterials such as carbon nanotubes, fullerenes, graphene, and/or their derivatives have been studied for the treatment of many diseases, including inflammation, cancer, arthritis, neurodegenerative diseases, and traumatic brain injury. Researchers therefore envisage a major breakthrough in disease treatment by using an emerging class of particle-based pharmaceutical, such as nanoparticles. C$_{60}$(OH)$_{24}$ belongs to a group of antioxidant nanoparticles and exhibits strong antioxidative activity in various chemical and biological systems. Although several previous studies have shown that activation of the Nrf2/ARE pathway can protect cells against oxidative stress-induced cell death in vitro and in vivo, it remains unclear whether C$_{60}$(OH)$_{24}$ could protect cells against oxidative stress-induced cell death by activating the Nrf2/ARE pathway. In the present study, we demonstrated that C$_{60}$(OH)$_{24}$ attenuates oxidative stress-induced cell death at least partially by activating Nrf2-mediated cellular antioxidant defence capacity through the p38 MAPK signaling pathway.

Induction of endogenous antioxidant enzymes provides a major mechanism by which cells combat the toxicities of ROS. The transcription factor Nrf2 is an essential mediator on the expression of antioxidant enzymes and stress-inducible proteins, and activation of Nrf2 in cells provides an indirect way to enhance antioxidant capacity, thereby preventing...
cell dysfunction from free radical production. Among the target genes whose expression is upregulated by Nrf2, HO-1 is the key enzyme that exerts a protective or adaptive effect under conditions of oxidative stress by converting the pro-oxidant heme to biologically active antioxidant by-products such as carbon monoxide and bilirubin. $^{36}$ C$_{60}$(OH)$_{24}$ has been well known for its possible antioxidant role and protective effects against oxidant damage. In the present study, we tested the ability of C$_{60}$(OH)$_{24}$ to activate Nrf2 signaling pathways in lung epithelial A549 cells. Our data showed that C$_{60}$(OH)$_{24}$ treatment resulted in increased expression of HO-1 mRNA and protein, which was preceded by nuclear translocation of Nrf2. Furthermore, C$_{60}$(OH)$_{24}$ induced expression of other phase II enzymes, including $\gamma$-GCS and NQO-1, whose genes are known to be upregulated by Nrf2 activation. $^{37}$ $\gamma$-GCSc associates with $\gamma$-GCS modifier subunit ($\gamma$-GCSm) to form $\gamma$-GCS, and NQO-1 catalyzes the two-electron reduction of quinone compounds. $^{38}$ These results collectively demonstrated that C$_{60}$(OH)$_{24}$ upregulates expression of phase II enzymes as a result of Nrf2/ARE activation. However, the molecular mechanisms of Nrf2 activation by C$_{60}$(OH)$_{24}$ still need to be elucidated. Previous studies suggested that C$_{60}$ derivatives could penetrate cell membrane and gain access to various intracellular compartments, including organelles, proteins, and DNA, which might result in regulation of a series of intracellular stress-sensitive kinases. $^{14}$ MAPK is one of the most common signaling pathways that serve to coordinate the cellular response to a variety of extracellular stimuli. The three major MAP kinase cascades are represented by p38 MAPK, ERK1/2, and JNK. All these kinases are likely to be involved in the upstream pathways leading to Nrf2 activation. $^{39}$ Therefore, we investigated the upstream signaling mechanisms responsible for C$_{60}$(OH)$_{24}$-mediated Nrf2/HO-1 induction. Our results demonstrated that C$_{60}$(OH)$_{24}$ increased phosphorylation of p38 MAP kinase, and pretreatment with a p38 inhibitor, SB203580,
diminished nuclear Nrf2 translocation and HO-1 induction caused by C_{60}(OH)_{24}. Since it has been reported that Nrf2 phosphorylation by protein kinases facilitates its nuclear translocation, these results suggest that Nrf2 phosphorylation by p38 MAPK may participate in Nrf2/ARE activation by C_{60}(OH)_{24}. Oxidative modification of cysteine sulphydryl groups of Keap1 by ROS has been shown to change its conformation, resulting in Nrf2 release. Our results showed that C_{60}(OH)_{24} treatment transiently increased the intracellular ROS level, whereas pretreatment with NAC markedly abolished C_{60}(OH)_{24}-induced Nrf2 activation and HO-1 expression (Figure S2). It is therefore likely that ROS transiently generated by C_{60}(OH)_{24} modify sulphydryl groups of Keap1, thereby activating Nrf2/ARE signaling.

Since the transcription factor Nrf2 is a master regulator for the expression of several antioxidant genes, there can be a hypothesis that the mechanism of the protective effect that is observed with C_{60}(OH)_{24} treatment is associated with a consequence of the activation of Nrf2. In the present study, pretreatment with C_{60}(OH)_{24} attenuated H_{2}O_{2}-induced apoptotic cell death in A549 cells in a dose-dependent manner. Furthermore, siRNA knockdown of Nrf2 diminished C_{60}(OH)_{24}-mediated cytoprotective effects, providing direct evidence for the involvement of HO-1 induction and Nrf2/ARE activation in C_{60}(OH)_{24}-mediated cytoprotection. Our results are similar to previous studies demonstrating that Nrf2 plays a critical role in protecting cells against oxidative stress. 

Previously, accumulating evidence has suggested that C_{60}(OH)_{24} is efficient in protecting various cell types from ROS-mediated damage in vitro and in vivo. In an animal irradiated model that is associated with oxidative stress, pretreatment with C_{60}(OH)_{24} showed radioprotective effects by scavenging ROS and increasing the antioxidant enzyme activities. It has also been reported that C_{60}(OH)_{24} shows hepatoprotective effects in doxorubicin-treated rats by acting as an antioxidant. Hence, it is possible to propose that C_{60}(OH)_{24} pretreatment prevented deleterious effects of ROS by direct ROS scavenging or increasing the antioxidant enzyme activities. Previous studies have shown that the radical-scavenging abilities of C_{60}(OH)_{24} have been attributed to the molecular properties of fullererenes, including large electron affinity and formation of electron-deficient areas on the C_{60}. These properties of C_{60}(OH)_{24} may lead to direct ROS scavenging similar to that catalyzed by superoxide dismutase. However, in the present study, our results have clearly indicated that C_{60}(OH)_{24} protects against H_{2}O_{2}-induced cell death through activation of Nrf2/ARE signaling and induction of phase II antioxidant enzymes such as HO-1, γ-GCS, and NQO-1, thus providing an insight into mechanisms by which C_{60} derivatives exert protective effects against cell death induced by oxidative stress.

**Conclusion**

Taken together, the results obtained from this study imply that enhancement of the cellular defence activities by induction of phase II detoxifying enzymes represents one of the important antioxidant mechanisms of C_{60}(OH)_{24}. C_{60}(OH)_{24} potentiates cellular defence capacity against oxidative stress via Nrf2-regulated antioxidant or phase II detoxifying enzymes, and it can also block oxidative stress-mediated cell damage and dysfunctions, as schematically represented in Figure 8. In addition to induction of phase II antioxidant enzymes, Nrf2 has been shown to influence directly or indirectly expression of genes that are implicated in cell growth, apoptosis, inflammation, and cell adhesion. Therefore, further studies using in vivo models are warranted to identify other molecules in relation to activation of the Nrf2 pathway and to clarify potential crosstalk with upstream and downstream signaling molecules.

**Acknowledgments**

This study was financially supported by grants from the National Natural Science Foundation of China (31271071, 31371012, 30901175, and 81171448) and the National Basic Research Program of China (2013CB933703).

**Disclosure**

The authors report no conflicts of interest in this work.

**References**


Supplementary materials

Figure S1 A549 cells were treated for 1 hour with SB203580 (10 µM), SP600125 (10 µM), U0126 (5 µM), or PD98059 (10 µM) alone. Cell lysates were prepared and subjected to Western blot analysis for phosphorylated and total p38, ERK1/2, and JNK proteins.

Abbreviations: ERK, extracellular signal-related kinases; HO-1, heme oxygenase-1; JNK, Jun-N-terminal kinases; Nrf2, nuclear factor erythroid 2-related factor 2.

Figure S2 Effects of C60(OH)24 on the intracellular ROS level in A549 cells. (A) At indicated times after treatment of A549 cells with C60(OH)24 (100 µM), intracellular ROS levels were detected by flow cytometry using a fluorescent probe DCFH-DA. (B) A549 cells were pretreated for 1 hour with or without NAC (2.5 mM) and then treated for 6 hours with C60(OH)24 (100 µM). Cell lysates were prepared and subjected to Western blot analysis for Nrf2.

Abbreviations: DCFH-DA, 2,7-dichlorodihydro fluorescent diacetate; NAC, N-acetylcysteine; Nrf2, nuclear factor erythroid 2-related factor 2; ROS, reactive oxygen species; DCF, dicholrofluorescein.