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1 Trade-offs between cost of ingestion and rate of intake drive defensive toxin use

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35 Abstract

36 Animals that ingest toxins can become unpalatable and even toxic to predators and parasites
37 through toxin sequestration. Because most animals rapidly eliminate toxins to survive their
38 ingestion, it is unclear how populations transition from susceptibility and toxin elimination to
39 tolerance and accumulation as chemical defense emerges. Studies of chemical defense have
40 generally focused on species with active toxin sequestration and target-site insensitivity
41 mutations or toxin-binding proteins that permit survival without necessitating toxin elimination.
42 Here, we investigate whether animals that presumably rely on toxin elimination for survival can
43 utilize ingested toxins for defense. We use the A4 and A3 *Drosophila melanogaster* fly strains
44 from the Drosophila Synthetic Population Resource (DSPR), which respectively possess elevated
45 and reduced metabolic nicotine resistance amongst DSPR fly lines. We find that ingesting
46 nicotine increased A4 but not A3 fly survival against *Leptopilina heterotoma* wasp parasitism.
47 Further, we find that despite possessing genetic variants that enhance toxin elimination, A4 flies
48 accrued more nicotine than A3 individuals likely by consuming more media. Our results suggest
49 that enhanced toxin metabolism can allow for greater toxin intake by offsetting the cost of toxin
50 ingestion. Passive toxin accumulation that accompanies increased toxin intake may underlie the
51 early origins of chemical defense.

52

53 Introduction

54 Most animals survive toxin ingestion by eliminating toxins through metabolic
55 detoxification (1–3). Some chemically defended animals subvert this paradigm by sequestering
56 dietary toxins to deter predators or parasites (4). Because metabolic detoxification serves to
57 prevent toxin accumulation, toxin-sequestering taxa often employ resistance mechanisms that do
58 not degrade toxins (5). For example, target-site insensitivity (TSI), which results from mutations
59 in a protein that prevent toxins from binding, is common in toxin-sequestering insects (6, 7). TSI
60 sometimes co-occurs with toxin-binding proteins that scavenge toxins and prevent them from
61 binding to targets (8–11). Such non-metabolic resistance mechanisms may facilitate the
62 transition from toxin elimination to sequestration by decreasing reliance on toxin breakdown for
63 survival (12).

64 Although metabolic detoxification degrades toxins, it is unclear whether reliance on this
65 mechanism constrains chemical defense evolution. Metabolic detoxification permits toxin
66 consumption and may ultimately lead to toxin sequestration so long as consumption outpaces
67 degradation. To test this idea, we obtained two isofemale, homozygous strains of *Drosophila*
68 *melanogaster* from the Drosophila Synthetic Population Resource (DSPR (13)) that possess high
69 and low nicotine resistance (A3 and A4, Bloomington stocks 3852 and 3844), and exposed them
70 to nicotine, a plant allelochemical that targets acetylcholine receptors (14). Although some
71 drosophilids do feed on toxic food sources (15, 16) and the A4 fly strain may have experienced
72 incidental nicotine exposure on tobacco farms that were prevalent at its collection site (17),
73 drosophilids are not known to select nicotine-producing plants as hosts. Nevertheless, the genetic
74 basis of nicotine resistance in *D. melanogaster* is extensively characterized, making this toxin
75 well-suited to modelling the evolutionary origins of chemical defense (18). Compared to A3, A4

76 flies possess duplicate copies of cytochrome p450s *Cyp28d1* and *Cyp28d2* that are constitutively
77 expressed at higher levels. A4 flies also overexpress the UDP-glucuronosyltransferase *Ugt86Dd*,
78 while A3 harbors a mutation in this gene that significantly reduces nicotine resistance (19).
79 *Ugt86Dd* is located in a Quantitative Trait Locus (QTL) that contributes 50.3% of the broad-
80 sense heritability in nicotine resistance of DSPR lines, while a QTL containing *Cyp28d1* and
81 *Cyp28d2* accounts for 5% (18, 20). The contributions of these three genes to nicotine resistance
82 have been confirmed using gene knockout (21). Previous QTL and expression-QTL studies did
83 not report evidence for TSI or toxin-binding proteins in A3 or A4 lines. While these mechanisms
84 could exist, variation in metabolic enzymes appears to underlie the major difference between A3
85 and A4 nicotine resistance.

86

87 **Results and Discussion**

88 We first quantified A3 and A4 nicotine resistance by estimating the median lethal
89 concentration (LC50) of nicotine (Fig. 1). Because A4 flies had low viability in general, to
90 compare LC50 between strains for this assay we normalized percent survival by the maximum
91 survival of each line on control food (see supporting data for non-normalized values). The A4
92 LC50 was nearly twice that of A3 (LC50_{A4} = 1.9 ± 0.3 mM [mean ± SD], LC50_{A3} = 1.1 ± 0.2
93 mM; Fig. 1). While A3 survival decreased significantly at 0.5 mM nicotine, A4 survival was not
94 significantly impacted until 1.75 mM. We proceeded to use an intermediate level of 1.25-mM
95 nicotine for subsequent experiments.

96 We next assessed whether ingesting 1.25-mM nicotine after parasitism by the figitid
97 wasp *Leptopilina heterotoma* increased *D. melanogaster* survival. *Leptopilina heterotoma*
98 oviposits into the hemocoel of developing fly larvae, and actively suppresses the drosophilid
99 defensive immune response against endoparasites (22). Thus, developing parasites are exposed
100 to host hemolymph and, presumably, to circulating toxins consumed by fly larvae. In the control-
101 fed, unparasitized treatment, 2.8% ± 2.7% of A4 larvae survived to adulthood, while in the
102 nicotine-fed, parasitized treatment, A4 survival increased significantly to 6.8 ± 4.4% (p = 0.03, Z
103 = -2.2; Fig. 2A). Correspondingly, *L. heterotoma* developmental success decreased five-fold
104 from 37% ± 20% to 6.4% ± 6.8% (p < 0.0001, Z = 7.0; Fig. 2B). Thus, nicotine consumption
105 increased A4 fly survival against parasitism.

106 In contrast, the survival of parasitized, nicotine-fed A3 larvae (15 ± 4.4%) was the same
107 as parasitized, control-fed A3 larvae (19 ± 10%; p = 0.36, Z = 0.92; Fig. 2A). However, wasp
108 developmental success on A3 flies halved from 41 ± 15% to 21 ± 9.3% when A3 flies consumed
109 nicotine (p = 0.0001, Z = 4; Fig. 2B). This suggests nicotine consumption partially alleviated A3
110 parasitism-induced mortality. Nicotine consumption decreased unparasitized A3 fly survival by
111 44% (p < 0.0001, Z = 7.6), while nicotine consumption decreased parasitized A3 survival by
112 only a tenth as much: 3.5%. The comparatively insignificant effect of nicotine consumption on
113 parasitized A3 flies paired with a ~50% decrease in wasp success suggests that nicotine may
114 have offset parasitism-induced mortality for A3 flies, although to a lesser degree compared to A4
115 flies.

116 Next, we quantified nicotine accumulation in whole bodies of nicotine-fed larvae and
117 adult flies. After $24\text{hr} \pm 2.5\text{hr}$ on nicotine media, third-instar A4 larvae contained twice as much
118 nicotine as A3 larvae (9.3 ± 4.6 vs. 4.3 ± 1.0 ng nicotine, $p = 0.016$, $W = 1$; Fig. 2D). Nicotine
119 continued to accumulate until pupation and persisted through metamorphosis in both strains (Fig.
120 2D; also observed with ouabain [6]), suggesting that nicotine remained after the meconium was
121 shed and may provide a defensive advantage into adulthood. The greater amount of nicotine in
122 A4 could underlie the stronger effect of nicotine on parasite success in A4 versus A3 individuals
123 (Fig. 2B). Although nicotine-fed A3 adults are $\sim 20\%$ smaller than nicotine-fed A4 adults (Fig.
124 2C), this difference cannot explain the two-fold difference observed in nicotine accumulation
125 between strains. The developmental rate of nicotine-fed A3 and A4 flies did not differ
126 significantly at 1.25 mM nicotine and is also unlikely to underlie differences in nicotine
127 accumulation (Fig. S1).

128 Our finding that A4 larvae accumulated more nicotine than A3 defies genotypic
129 expectations, as A4 flies have genetic variants that are expected to increase nicotine breakdown
130 (19, 21). To better understand this pattern, we compared relative amounts of cotinine, a
131 metabolic by-product of nicotine (Fig 2D) between strains. A4 larvae contained significantly
132 higher levels of cotinine compared to A3 individuals (Fig. 2D). Intriguingly, one-day-old and
133 three-day-old A3 flies had significantly higher cotinine to nicotine ratios than A4, suggesting that
134 A4 larvae have a distinct metabolic detoxification pathway compared to A3 ($p_{\text{one-day-old}} = 0.031$,
135 $W_{\text{one-day-old}} = 23$, $p_{\text{three-day-old}} = 0.008$, $W_{\text{three-day-old}} = 25$ (13)). This result matches expectations
136 based on genotype, as the largest QTL underlying resistance in A4 contains several UGTs, which
137 convert nicotine to glucuronides instead of cotinine (18).

138 The higher nicotine levels in A4 flies suggested that A3 flies are unable to survive high
139 toxin loads, and thus might consume less to avoid nicotine accumulation. To quantify differences
140 in feeding, we compared A3 and A4 adult body mass when reared on control versus nicotine
141 food. While nicotine consumption significantly reduced A3 adult body mass, A4 mass remained
142 unaffected (Fig. 2C), indicating that nicotine sensitivity constrained A3 food intake. The tobacco
143 hornworm *Manduca sexta* employs a more extreme version of this pattern: nicotine exposure
144 activates xenobiotic enzymes, which further stimulates feeding (23). Thus, perhaps
145 unexpectedly, increased metabolic detoxification may promote rather than preclude toxin
146 accumulation via increased feeding.

147 Intriguingly, while nicotine consumption increased A4 fly survival against parasitism, A4
148 flies under all but the nicotine-fed, unparasitized condition had lower viability than A3 flies (Fig.
149 2A). Thus, in a hypothetical population made only of A3 and A4 flies and exposed to *L.*
150 *heterotoma* and nicotine, natural selection may be unlikely to favor A4 individuals. In this
151 scenario, the evolutionary outcome would depend partly on whether antagonistic pleiotropy
152 exists among loci determining metabolic resistance and viability. One general viability QTL has
153 been identified in DSPR strains, but this QTL does not contain detoxification genes. Moreover,
154 A4 and A3 flies seem to share the same allele at this QTL (15). Furthermore, while A4 survival
155 was generally lower than A3, A3 (and not A4) female body mass was reduced by nicotine
156 consumption. Body mass is correlated with fecundity in *D. melanogaster*, and thus nicotine-fed

157 A4 flies may have greater reproductive success than A3 (24), which would potentially offset the
158 cost of lower survival.

159 To our knowledge, *D. melanogaster* does not possess active nicotine sequestration
160 mechanisms. Some drosophilids, such as *D. sechellia*, are known to acquire chemical defenses
161 from toxic food sources (25), and *D. melanogaster* self-medicates against parasitoids using
162 ethanol (26). However, other drosophilids that consume toxins have not been evaluated for
163 chemical defenses (15, 16). Our finding that flies can utilize nicotine for defense without active
164 sequestration mechanisms suggests that other organisms that tolerate toxin consumption could
165 receive a transient defensive advantage, too. The biochemical properties and metabolic context
166 of each toxin should affect their propensity to bioaccumulate. For example, non-toxic
167 glucosinolates (GLS) rapidly breakdown into toxic mustard oils; thus, GLS-sequestration
168 requires adaptations that interrupt this process (16). Many organisms sequester toxic steroids or
169 alkaloids (4, 27, 28), perhaps because these more readily diffuse or are transported across tissues.
170 Here we find that in addition to having increased nicotine metabolism, A4 *D. melanogaster* flies
171 also likely consume much higher quantities of nicotine than A3 flies (Fig. 2C). We hypothesize
172 that higher intake may allow relatively more nicotine to escape metabolism and permeate into the
173 hemolymph of A4 flies, affecting *L. heterotoma* development to a greater degree than in A3 flies.
174 This pattern could be verified with future studies that compare nicotine abundance in different
175 tissues of A4 and A3 flies.

176 In conclusion, we find that elevated resistance increases passive toxin accumulation.
177 Further, this accumulation produces a toxin-mediated fitness advantage against natural enemies,
178 in animals without identified sequestration mechanisms. Reliance on metabolic detoxification is
179 likely the ancestral character state for organisms with acquired chemical defenses, and variation
180 in toxin metabolism is common (29). We therefore propose that one of the first steps in the
181 evolution of chemical defense may paradoxically be natural selection for increased toxin
182 metabolism.

183

184 **Methods**

185 **Fly and wasp stocks**

186 Flies were maintained at room temperature on molasses media from the Fly Food Facility at
187 UCB; survival and parasitism experiments used Ward's Instant Drosophila media to facilitate
188 toxin dosing.

189 Wasps were maintained at room temperature on W118 *D. melanogaster* and 70%-honey water.
190 Experiments used wasps within two weeks of eclosion.

191 **Generation of fly larvae**

192 Approximately one-thousand flies were allowed to lay eggs for three days in three replicate
193 resealable plastic containers with a layer of molasses-agar smeared with yeast paste. Larvae were

194 then pooled from each container, and second-instar larvae (L2) were selected based on
195 morphology under a dissection microscope. Flies were not sorted by sex.

196 **Nicotine-resistance experiment**

197 Twenty A4 and A3 L2 larvae were transferred one-by-one from egg-laying chambers into 5
198 replicate vials containing the following nicotine concentrations: 0 mM, 0.5 mM, 1.25 mM, 1.75
199 mM, 2.25 mM, 2.50 mM, 3.00 mM, 4.00 mM, 5.00 mM nicotine-treated media. Vials were
200 checked daily for new pupae and eclosed flies, and daily counts were used to calculate
201 developmental rate across nicotine doses (Fig. S1).

202 **Parasitism experiment**

203 For each fly strain, 400 L2 were transferred into six replicate plastic containers containing
204 molasses agar. Forty female and twenty male wasps were added to three containers ("wasp"
205 treatment) while the other three were left unmanipulated ("no-wasp" treatment); all containers
206 were left for 24hr. One "no-wasp" container contained only 80 L2s. The L2s were then counted
207 individually (to avoid batch bias) into forty vials containing either control or 1.25-mM nicotine
208 media. We pooled data on A4 flies from two separate runs of this experiment (average survival
209 was not significantly different between runs). In run 1 (A4 only), we added 20 larvae to each
210 vial. In run 2 (A4 and A3), we add 16 larvae to each vial. Vials were checked every 1-2 days for
211 pupation and emergence. Parasitism was performed prior to nicotine treatment to avoid exposing
212 *L. heterotoma* adults to nicotine. Therefore, changes in fly and wasp survival reflect the effects
213 of nicotine consumption by *D. melanogaster* larvae and not any behavioral change by *L.*
214 *heterotoma*.

215 **Nicotine accumulation experiment**

216 One-thousand A4/A3 L2 were distributed one-by-one from egg-laying chambers into five 1.25-
217 mM nicotine-treated vials. At five developmental stages (3rd-instar larvae, day-1 pupa, day-3
218 pupae [A4 only], day-1 adult, day-3 adult), we collected five individuals and washed them
219 individually in glass dissection wells with DI H₂O. Pupae were removed from vials prior to
220 eclosion to avoid contamination of the adult exoskeleton with nicotine. Individuals from each
221 stage for each vial were pooled and frozen at -20°C.

222 Frozen flies were thawed and soaked with methanol (50 µL) at room temperature for 2-3 days to
223 reach equilibrium. Crude methanolic extracts were transferred to limited volume autosampler
224 vials and injected directly. Gas chromatographic-mass spectrometric conditions were as
225 previously described (30); full details are given in the Supplementary Material.

226 **Body Mass Measurement**

227 300 A3/A4 L2 were placed one-by-one from egg-laying chambers into twenty vials containing
228 either control or 1.25-mM nicotine media. Upon pupation, individuals were removed and placed
229 onto food-free vials. Adults were starved for 48 hours and then weighed.

230

231 **Statistical Analysis**

232 Statistical analyses were conducted using Rv3.6.1 (31). LC50s were calculated using adapted
233 version of the ‘dose.p’ function from the ‘MASS’ package (32) to a binomial regression model of
234 normalized percent survival versus nicotine dose generated by the ‘glmer’ function from lme4.
235 Fly survival and wasp success were assessed by applying a least-squared-means test to a
236 binomial regression model of survival as a function of nicotine and (for flies) parasite treatments
237 using the ‘glm’ function from lme4 (33). Adult fly mass was compared by applying the least-
238 squared-means method described above to a model of average mass per vial as a function of
239 nicotine and sex. Developmental rate and mean nicotine content of flies was compared across
240 strains using Wilcoxon signed-rank tests in base R.

241 **Data accessibility**

242 Raw data files, R script, and detailed metadata are available for download from the Dryad Digital
243 Repository: <https://doi.org/10.5061/dryad.w3r2280sc> (34).

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250 **Figure 1. A)** Nicotine concentration-survival curve for DSPR A3 and A4 *Drosophila*
251 *melanogaster*. Data are normalized by maximum survival of each strain on control food. Vertical
252 dashed lines represent LC50 of each strain.

253 **Figure 2. A)** Nicotine consumption significantly decreases survival in unparasitized A3 and A4
254 *Drosophila melanogaster* flies. Nicotine consumption increases survival of parasitized A4 but
255 not A3 flies. **B)** Nicotine consumption by A4 and A3 flies significantly decreases *Leptopilina*
256 *heterotoma* developmental success. **C)** Nicotine consumption reduced A3 but not A4 adult body
257 mass. **D)** Nicotine-fed A3 and A4 flies accumulate nicotine and its metabolic byproduct cotinine
258 across developmental stages. Asterisks indicate significant differences.

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