



# Nitrate reductase enzyme in *Escherichia coli* and its relationship with the synthesis of silver nanoparticles

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## ABSTRACT

Nanostructure materials have attracted a great deal of attention because of their potential for achieving specific processes and selectivity, especially in biological and pharmaceutical applications. Of all kinds of metal nanoparticles, synthesis of silver nanoparticles is of considerable interest due to their wide range of applications in different fields. Chemical, physical and biological methods have been introduced for the synthesis of these nanoparticles. Offering reliable and eco-friendly processes for biological synthesis of metallic nanoparticles (using microorganisms) is an important step in nanobiotechnology. So far, different kinds of bacteria have been reported to be used for synthesis of silver nanoparticles. *Escherichia coli* bacteria is one of the earliest bacteria for this purpose. Studies showed that generally the presence of nitrate reductase enzyme is essential for the biosynthesis of silver nanoparticles using bacteria. Therefore, this enzyme and its relationship with the synthesis of silver nanoparticles have been studied in the present research work.

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## 1.Introduction

Nanotechnology is predicted to significantly affect science, economics and daily life of the 21st century and become one of the driving forces in the next industrial revolution. In the last century the use of nanoparticles was highly regarded due to their chemical and mechanical characteristics [1,2]. Among various nanoparticles, metallic nanoparticles are the most promising ones, due to their antibacterial properties. Nanoparticles have received much attention because of the high resistance to microbial growth against metallic ions, antibiotics and resistant strains[3]. Today, silver nanoparticles are highly regarded due to their anti-bacterial properties and also their wide range of applications in different fields by having their electronical, optical and catalytic properties[4, 5]. Generally, silver nanoparticles are synthesized by physical, chemical and biological methods[6]. Among these methods, biological methods are preferred due to environmental sustainability and cost-effectiveness [7]. Living organisms, such as bacteria, fungus and plants have a great potential in the synthesis of metallic nanoparticles. In fact, the reduction of silver ions ( $Ag^+$ ) is performed by: proteins / enzymes, amino acids, polysaccharides and vitamins found in biomolecules. However, the general mechanism, usually accepted for biosynthesis of silver nanoparticles is the presence of Nitrate reductase enzyme [8]. According to the definitions, enzymes are protein molecules which can increase the rate of chemical reactions to 10<sup>7</sup> X. Reduction of Nitrate to nitrite is an important step of nitrogen cycle in nature and happens with three objectives: 1) utilization of  $NO_3^-$  as a source of nitrogen, 2) production of metabolic energy

during  $NO_3^-$  utilization as the terminal acceptor of electrons and 3) dissipation of excess of reducing energy to maintain oxidation–reduction balance [9,10,11]. Since nitrate is the most significant source of nitrogen in crop plants, understanding the role of Nitrate Reductase enzyme in higher plants, especially in the economic field, is very important. Nitrate reductases, which catalyze the reduction of nitrate to nitrite, can be produced by various species of eukaryotes (including fungi, algae and protozoa), Prokaryotes (including bacteria and blue-green algae) and plants[12]. Eukaryotic Nitrate Reductase could be found in three different forms: 1. NADH-specific, 2. NADPH-specific and 3. NAD(P)H-bispecific [13]. Also, there are three kinds of bacterial nitrate reductases: Assimilatory Nitrate Reductase (Nas), Respiratory Membrane-Bound Nitrate Reductase (Nar) and Dissimilatory Periplasmic Nitrate Reductase (Nap) [14]. Functional characteristics and physical properties of the enzyme are different according to the organisms. The results of studies clearly show that stress factors in culture medium have a substantial effect on structural and functional characteristics of NRases [12]. In the present article the NR enzyme in *Escherichia coli*, its relationship with the synthesis of silver nanoparticles, and optimization of the medium culture are investigated to achieve the highest yield.

## 2. Nitrate reductase of *Escherichia coli*

*Escherichia coli* is a gram-negative bacterium from Enterobacteriaceae, discovered in 1855. These bacteria are anaerobic, without spores and usually movable [15]. *Escherichia coli* is a preferable bacterium in studies of various fields. NR of *Escherichia coli* is now one of the best-characterized and best-understood membrane proteins.

Nitrate reductase in *Escherichia coli* is a membrane-bound enzyme which can be induced in large amounts by growing the organism anaerobically in presence of nitrate. This enzyme is the last enzyme in an electron-transport chain enabling *E. coli* to utilize nitrate instead of oxygen as the terminal electron acceptor. The carried out process was called Anaerobic respiration [13].

*E. coli* has become a particular bacterium because: It is the only organism for which two membrane-bound dissimilatory NR have been described. While the synthesis of the major one (98% of the total activity), as all the others membrane bound respiratory NR, requires anaerobiosis and the presence of nitrate, the second enzyme appears to be constitutively expressed, a property reminiscent of the periplasmic nitrate reductase [16]. Apparently the enzyme was first discovered by Taniguchi and Itagaki. They have expressed that the nitrate reductase is a large molecule that consists of molybdenum and heme-free iron. Electron micrographs, showed that the enzyme had a spherical shape. Also, micrographs showed no holes in the enzyme and the subunits were tightly packed. This structure is very stable [17]. In 1956, Taniguchi, Egami and Sato have found a particulate system in cell-free extracts of *E. coli*, grown in a peptone broth-agar medium containing nitrate, which reduces nitrate to nitrite under anaerobic conditions [18]. *E. coli* bacteria consists of 3 kinds of Nitrate Reductases, two of them are membrane bound and biochemically similar: nitrate reductase A (NRA) and nitrate reductase Z (NRZ) [19]. The third kind of nitrate reductase (Nap) is located in the periplasm [20]. Studies demonstrate that the nitrate reductase A enzyme is expressed at the high concentrations of nitrate while the Nap nitrate reductase is expressed at low concentrations of nitrate and expression of the nitrate reductase Z is not related to the amount of nitrate or anaerobic conditions [21]. Nitrate reductase A is a heterotrimer and consists of three subunits, which are, respectively: 1)  $\alpha$  subunit = NarG, that is the actual site of Nitrate reduction and Contains molybdenum cofactor [22], 2)  $\beta$  subunit = NarH, is the electron transfer subunit containing the iron-sulfur clusters, one [3Fe-4S] cluster and three [4Fe-4S] clusters [22,23] and 3)  $\gamma$  subunit = NarI, which transfers electrons from the quinone pool to the  $\beta$  subunit [23,24], and NarJ, which is not part of the final nitrate reductase A enzyme, but is essential for nitrate reductase activity [24,25,22,26]. Generally the formation of active membrane-bound nitrate reductase A in *Escherichia coli* requires the presence of NarG, NarH and NarI subunits, as well as NarJ protein, which is not a part of the active nitrate reductase [26]. Nitrate reductase Z is a heterotrimer like Nitrate reductase A and consists of three subunits: 1)  $\beta$  subunit = NarY is the electron transfer subunit containing the iron-sulfur clusters [22], 2)  $\alpha$  subunit = NarZ is the actual site of nitrate reduction and also contains the molybdenum cofactor [22] and 3)  $\gamma$  subunit = NarV, which transfers electrons from the quinone pool to the  $\beta$  subunit [16].  $\gamma$  subunit is a membrane-embedded heme-iron subunit resembling cytochrome b, which transfers electrons from the quinone pool to the  $\beta$  subunit [16]. Periplasmic nitrate reductase (Nap) is the third kind of Nitrate Reductase in *E. coli*. The physiological role of Nap is acting as a mediated enzyme in anaerobic respiration at the low

concentrations of nitrate. Also, its affinity for nitrate is much more than NRA [27]. This enzyme has been divided in to 7 subunits, as shown in Fig.1.

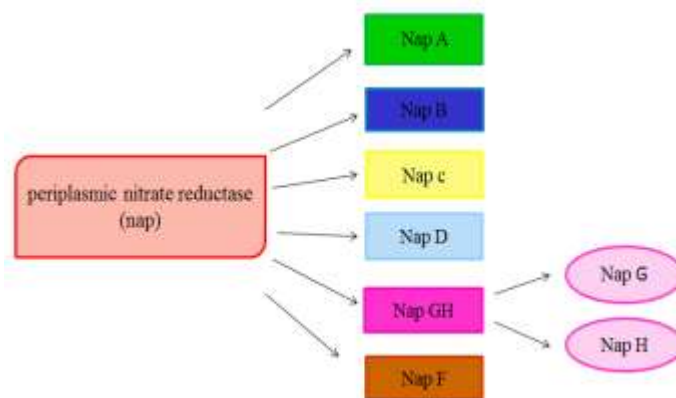


Fig.1 Subunits of Nap nitrate reductase

Periplasmic nitrate reductase (Nap) contains four basic components in many bacteria: napB, napA, napD and napC, while the *E. coli* bacteria contains three additional genes: napF, napG and napH which are not required for Nap activity and their function is not known yet [28,29,30]. Cyanide and azide can be mentioned as strong inhibitors of this enzyme and Cyanide's inhibition is competitive. It should be noted that storing the enzyme at 0-1°C in 60% saturated ammonium sulfate as a precipitate helps it to be more stable [31]. The size of this enzyme varies from 498,000 to 1,000,000 Daltons in different studies [32,17].



Fig.2 structure of nitrate reductase A from *E. coli* [33]

### 3. Using bacteria for the synthesis of silver nanoparticles

Generally green synthesis of Ag nanoparticles involves three main steps, which must be evaluated based on green chemistry perspectives, including: 1) selection of solvent medium, 2) selection of environmentally benign reducing agent, and 3) selection of nontoxic substances for the Ag NPs stability [34,35]. Joerger et al (2000) reported the first synthesis of Ag nanoparticles using *P. stutzeri* AG259

bacteria [36]. Also, various species like : *B.licheniformis* and *Escherichia coli* were used for the same purpose [8,37]. The results showed that the culture supernatants of *Klebsiella pneumonia*, *Escherichia coli* [38,39], and *Enterobacter cloacae* have the ability of producing silver nanoparticles in a short time (5 minutes) [37]. Anil Kumar et al , used  $\alpha$ -NADPH-dependent nitrate reductase for the first time using and synthesized stable silver nanoparticles with 10-25 nm diameter [40].

#### 4. Synthesis of Silver Nanoparticles by E.coli

Shahverdi et al (2007) reported the rapid synthesis of silver nanoparticles using the culture supernatant of *Escherichia coli*. The size of synthesized nanoparticles were in the range of 28.2–122 nm [37]. Gurunathan et al (2009) could synthesize silver nanoparticles by the culture supernatant of *Escherichia coli*. They characterized the produced nanoparticles after their purification by using sucrose density gradient centrifugation. The average size of nanoparticles was 50 nm [53]. Safekordi et al (2011) could synthesize silver nanoparticles by *E.coli* bacterium (DH5 $\alpha$ ). They also investigated the effect of silver nitrate concentration , mixing ratio of filtrate of bacterium culture to silver nitrate, temperature and pH on size and production efficiency [54]. El-Shanshoury et al (2011) synthesized silver nanoparticles by using culture supernatants of *E. coli* ATCC 8739. Transmission electron microscopy (TEM) images showed that the particle size ranges between 5–25 nm [55]. Muthukkumarasamy et al (2012) could synthesize polygonal silver nanoparticles in the range of 10–50nm using extract of *Escherichia Coli* ATCC 25922 [56]. Ghorbani (2012) reviewed the synthesis of silver nanoparticles using the cell extract of *E. coli* [57]. Ghorbani (2013) investigated the synthesis of silver nanoparticles by reduction of aqueous  $Ag^+$  ions with the culture supernatant of *Escherichia coli* (DH5a). The synthesized silver nanoparticles were in the range of 10-100 nm [58].

#### 5. The relationship between NR enzyme in E.coli with the synthesis of silver nanoparticles

Studies have shown that in all the organisms that can synthesize silver nanoparticles, nitrate reductase might be an integral part [59] and presence of this enzyme in bacterial supernatant is one of the reasons that makes synthesis of silver nanoparticles using *E.coli* specific . Nitrate can be used as the main source of nitrogen or as an alternative electron acceptor in energy generation [17,60]. For example, in *Bacillus licheniformis* bacteria Nitrate Reductase is found at the membrane [61]. The probable mechanism for the formation of silver nanoparticles involves the NADH-dependent nitrate reductase enzyme that may convert  $Ag^+$  to  $Ag^0$  through electron shuttle enzymatic metal reduction process, shown in Fig.3 [8].

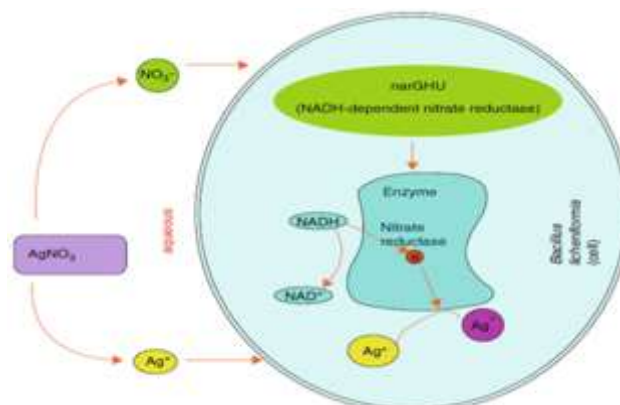


Fig .3 Possible mechanism for silver nanoparticles synthesis in *B. licheniformis* [8]

Generally, the reduction of silver ions ( $Ag^+$ ) in aqueous solution yields the formation of silver nanoparticles [36]. At first, the formation of silver atoms ( $Ag^0$ ) happens by reduction of various complexes with  $Ag^+$  ions, which is followed by agglomeration into oligomeric clusters and finally, the colloidal silver particles are formed by these clusters [59]. As mentioned before, the Nitrate Reductase enzyme, released by microorganisms, is a major factor in the synthesis of silver nanoparticles. Studies have shown that NADH and NADH-dependent enzymes, especially nitrate reductase, are important factors in the biosynthesis of metal nanoparticles [8,62]. One of the advantages of using this enzyme in the in vitro synthesis of silver nanoparticles is that the presence of ( $\alpha$ -nicotinamide adenin dinucleotide) in bacteria, would do away with the downstream processing required for the use of these nanoparticles in homogeneous catalysis and other applications. During the reduction process , nitrate is converted to nitrite and an electron will be shuttled to the silver ions. As a result, silver ions are converted to silver [10,41].

#### 5. Enhanced silver nanoparticle synthesis by optimization of the medium components:

In order to achieve the highest yield of silver nanoparticles synthesis , methods for providing the best conditions for the growth of *E.coli* bacteria and maximal expression of the nitrate reductase enzyme as the important factors were investigated.

##### 5-1. Affecting Factors on the activity of Nitrate reductase enzyme in E.coli :

*E.coli* cells may grow on a solid or in a liquid growth medium under a laboratory condition. Solid and liquid media may have exactly the same composition except that the solid medium contains an extra 1.5% agar .LB media (Luria broth, Luria-Bertani medium, or lysogeny broth) are the most common medium used for *E.coli* cultures [63,64,65] .The two main components of LB media are Tryptone and Yeast Extract. Other medium cultures like : SOB (Super Optimal Broth or Hanahan's broth), SOC (Super Optimal broth with Catabolic repressor) , TB (Terrific Broth) and SB (Super Broth) [66] can be used too. Studies showed that Peptone, Yeast extract, Glucose (as carbon source) and  $KNO_3$  are essential Nutrients that are

commonly used in growth media of Nitrate reductase [67,68,69]. Wainwright in 1995 found that the activity of Nitrate reductase enzyme in *E.coli* increased in anaerobiosis by vitamin K3 [70]. Heredia et al (1960), claimed that, the activity of Nitrate reductase enzyme in *E.coli* was not affected by nitrate, while it increased remarkably by vitamin K3, which confirmed the results of Wainwright & Nason (1954). This group also studied the effect of PH on the activity of the nitrate reductase enzyme and the results showed the maximum activity in the range of 6-7 [71].

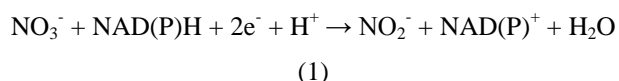
## 6. Enzymatic Assay of Nitrate Reductase

Determination of the best medium, in which the enzyme nitrate reductase has the maximum activity, requires measuring the enzyme activity in each medium. Various researchers have introduced different methods for this purpose [72, 73]. Enzymatic Assay of Nitrate Reductase (EC 1.6.6.1) by spectrophotometric Stop Rate Determination from sigmaaldrich that is based on Redinbaugh [74] and Smarrelli [75] papers and another method for Enzymatic Assay of NR (Cytochrome EC 1.9.6.1) by Colorimetric are methods for measuring NR activity that has been discussed by Worthington [76] and Low [72]. Vaidyanathan et al (2010) optimized nitrate reductase activity in order to increase produced silver nanoparticles. They showed that the optimized medium contained: 1.5% Glucose, 1 % Peptone, 0.35% Yeast extract and 0.35 % KNO<sub>3</sub>[59].

## 7. Conclusion

In this paper, NR enzyme in *E.coli*, its relationship with the synthesis of silver nanoparticles and also optimization of the medium components were studied to reach the maximum activity of the enzyme and thereby increase the production efficiency of silver nanoparticles.

It is known that, NR in *E.coli*, catalyzes the reaction in which Nitrate is converted into Nitrite. The reaction that takes place is as follows [77]:



On the other hand, when AgNO<sub>3</sub> dissolved in deionized water gets split into Ag<sup>+</sup> and NO<sub>3</sub><sup>-</sup>.



So, using the free electron of the first reaction (1), Ag<sup>+</sup> ions are reduced into Ag. As was expressed the presence of vitamin K<sub>3</sub> (KNO<sub>3</sub>), Glucose, Yeast extract and Peptone in culture media leads into the maximum expression of enzyme and results in a decrease in enzyme activity. Other factors to be considered are the enzyme's optimal temperature and PH. Also, it should be noted that, in addition to culture media, the enzyme's optimal temperature and PH, there are other factors such as: the concentration of the precursor [54,78], the temperature [50,79] and PH [50, 79,80,81,2] of the solution used for the synthesis of silver nanoparticles, a solution with a certain molarity that

includes a precursor (AgNO<sub>3</sub>) and NR enzyme, are the effective factors which influence the production of these particles. In order to reach the final culture media and to determine the exact substance ratios, for the synthesis of silver nanoparticles, doing further experiments are required.

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