



EUROSENSORS 2014, the XXVIII edition of the conference series

Multi-spot, label-free detection of biomarkers in complex media by reflectionless surfaces

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Abstract

The measurement of the intensity of light reflected by interfaces with extremely low reflectivity in water enables the label-free, multiplex quantification of the binding between immobilized probes (e.g. antibodies) and targets in solution using extremely simple instrumental set-up. Here we show that, despite its simplicity, the method enables label-free detection in complex samples characterized by high absorbance and turbidity. Diagnostic markers of Tomato spotted wilt virus are revealed in crude plant extracts of *Datura stramonium* leaves with early stage infections.

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Peer-review under responsibility of the scientific committee of Eurosenors 2014

Keywords: optical biosensor; label-free; immunoassay; reflective phantom interface; viral infection; tomato spotted wilt virus.

1. Introduction

Despite the continuous advances in bio-molecular detection and fluidic systems integration, the development of portable, high performance devices for rapid quantification of biomarkers in complex media still presents major difficulties, mostly because of the need to combine adequate sensitivity with low cost of production, operational

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simplicity and short time-to-result. In a previous work [1] we have introduced an extremely simple detection method, the Reflective Phantom Interface (RPI), which is based on the measurement of the light reflected by a functionalized surface having very low reflectivity. Various antibodies were immobilized in dozens of spots on the surface of an amorphous perfluoropolymer isorefractive with water by means of a multi-functional copolymer. The real-time, label-free quantification of molecular recognition processes was obtained from the analysis of the images of the light reflected by the sensing surface. The optical set-up is extremely simple, such that the flash LED and the CMOS camera of a smartphone can be employed to build a portable device based on the RPI method [2]. A limit of detection of a few pg/mm^2 was achieved targeting antigens widely used as markers for diagnoses of hepatitis B and HIV, corresponding to detectable concentrations in buffer solution or in serum as low as a few ng/ml .

Here we report the detection of a viral marker in a crude extract of leaves, a fluid sample characterized by high absorbance and turbidity. Tomato spotted wilt virus (TSWV) is an economically important pest able to cause severe crop losses in many crops worldwide, including many vegetables and ornamentals. TSWV is carried by insects and can infect different kinds of plants including the taxa of tomatoes and lettuce. In this study, the TSWV was inoculated to test plants of *Datura stramonium* and crude extracts obtained from the mechanical disruption of the leaves were analyzed and compared with extracts from uninfected plants. Despite the complexity and turbidity of the matrix, the RPI sensor provided enough sensitivity to detect in few minutes the virus from a single leaf with an early stage infection.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Sample preparation

Plants of *Datura stramonium* were infected by inoculation 9 days before the tests. The infected material was ground with chilled inoculation buffer (Paul buffer: 150 mM phosphate buffer at pH 7.5, 5 mM Dica, 1 mM EDTA, 5 mM sodium sulfite) and applied to the leaves of young plants with a small amount of carborundum. Then the plants were washed carefully in order to remove any residual abrasive powder. The test samples were obtained from leaves or a portion of leaves with apparent symptoms. The tissues were homogenized using an extraction bag (Bioreba) (Fig. 1A-B) and diluted 1:1 with Paul buffer.

2.2. Sensing surface

The RPI detection method enables the quantification of the amount of target molecules bound to probes immobilized on a surface providing extremely low reflectivity when in contact with an aqueous solution. In this study, the RPI substrate was made of a perfluorinated plastic with refractive index similar to that of water (Hyflon® AD, Solvay Specialty Polymer). The substrate was coated with a multifunctional copolymer of dimethylacrylamide (DMA) N-acryloyloxysuccinimide (NAS), and 3(trimethoxysilyl) propyl methacrylate (MAPS)—copoly(DMA-NAS-MAPS) [3] and spotted with different antibodies: two batches of polyclonal antibodies targeting TSWV (TSWV* and TSWV**) [4], a monoclonal antibody targeting hepatitis B antigen (HBS) and a polyclonal antibody targeting Pepino mosaic virus (PepMV). The antibodies were covalently immobilized in 200- μm spots by means of an automated noncontact dispensing system (sciFLEXARRAYER S5; Scienion AG).

2.3. Detection system

The theoretical and technical details of the RPI method are given elsewhere [1]. Briefly, the functionalized chip was placed into a cuvette containing a magnetic stir bar and the sensing surface was illuminated by the light of a LED at 455 nm. The image of the reflected light was acquired by a CCD camera (Fig. 1D). The acquisition started right after the addition of the sample into the empty cuvette, at room temperature. The brightness $u(t)$ of each spot as a function of time was converted into a parameter indicating the normalized surface density of target molecules $\Sigma(t) = (u(t)/u_0 - 1)^{1/2}$, where u_0 is the brightness of the bare chip surface.

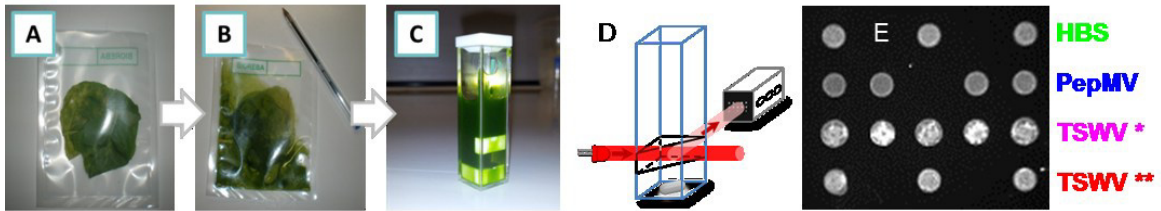


Fig. 1. (A-B) Liquid crude extract obtained from mechanical disruption of *Datura stramonium* leaves. (C) Measuring cuvette containing the RPI sensing prism (not visible). (D) Schematic of the measuring set-up. (E) Image of the light reflected by a portion of the sensing surface, showing the 200 μm spots of probe (TSWV* and TSWV**) and control (HBS and PepMV) antibodies.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Multi-spot detection of virus infections in crude plant extracts

The RPI sensing surface made of perfluorinated plastic was coated with the copoly(DMA-NAS-MAPS) and spotted with TSWV antibodies. Control signals were provided by HBS and PepMV antibodies. Fig. 2 shows the time behavior of the spot brightness immediately after the addition of the leaves extract into the cuvette. In the absence of TSWV infection (panel A) the intensity of light reflected by all the spots started increasing very slowly with time because of the non-specific adhesion of the sample components to the spotted surface, whereas the signal from the copolymer coating remained substantially unchanged. In particular, the brightness increase of the TSWV spots is similar to that of the control spots. Differently, the observed increase of reflectivity is faster when the infection is at an early stage (B), and even faster when it is at a late stage (C). Fig. 2 shows that the three infection conditions examined can be visually discriminated within few minutes from the sample addition.

3.2. Intra-chip variability

As described in previous works [1, 2], the surface reflectivity signal of any area of the sensing surface can be converted into the normalized surface density $\Delta(t)$ (see Materials and methods), which provides an absolute estimate of the amount of material adhering on the top of the functional coating during the measurement. Fig. 3A reports the behavior of different TSWV spots and of the copolymer background when an early infection sample was added into the cuvette. Fig. 3B shows the distribution of the initial slopes extracted from exponential fits of the binding curves, in the case of early infection (red) and negative sample (blue). The average values and the standard deviations of the

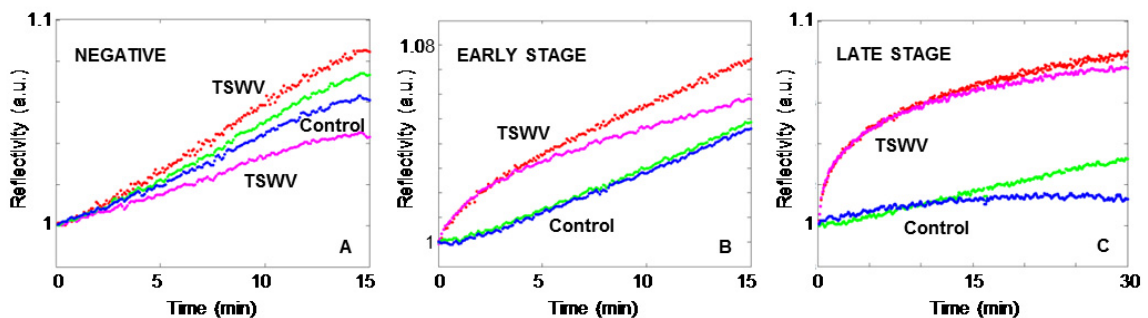


Fig. 2. Reflectivity of TSWV* (magenta), TSWV** (red), HBS (green) and PepMV (blue) antibody spots measured after the addition of leaves extract without infection (A) or with early stage (B) or late stage (C) infection. The curves are averaged over the signals of 10 spots.

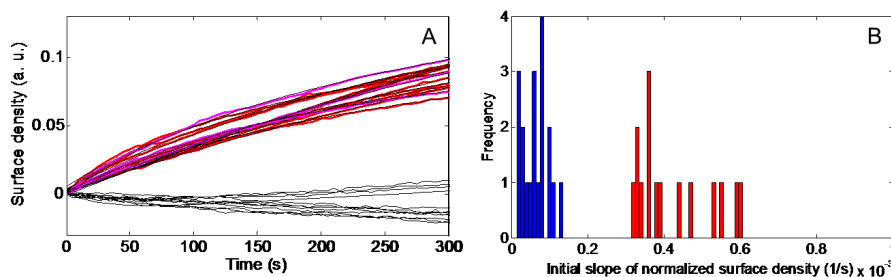


Fig. 3. (A) Normalized surface density measured on the top of the TSWV spots (red and magenta) and on the copolymer background (black). (B) Frequency distribution of the initial slope measured for early stage infection (red) and negative sample (blue)

measured initial slopes are 0.65×10^{-4} ($\pm 0.33 \times 10^{-4}$) s^{-1} and 4.24×10^{-4} ($\pm 0.99 \times 10^{-4}$) s^{-1} for negative and positive samples, respectively. Despite the rather pronounced variability, possibly due to the high heterogeneity of the matrix, the difference between the behaviors of the two samples enables to detect the presence of the infection even considering the signal from single spots.

4. Conclusion

Remarkably, despite the high complexity and heterogeneity of the matrix here investigated, the presence of the TSWV virus induces a detectable response in terms of rapidity of increase of the reflected light signal, which can be easily appreciated using control spots as a reference. Moreover, the reflectivity signal can be converted into the normalized surface density of material bound on the sensing surface, hence facilitating an estimate of the response in absolute terms, which can be exploited to discriminate between different degrees of infections. Given the sensitivity of the detection method to minute increases of reflected light intensity, in principle significant limitations could be expected in the case of particularly complex matrix, potentially providing a strong background of scattered light. On the contrary, the acquisition of a narrow angular range of light around the direction of specular reflection provides a rather effective suppression of scattered light. Moreover, the presence of absorbance to a certain extent also contributes to the limitation of stray light originating from the sample cuvette. The features of the proposed approach enable the realization of rugged handheld biosensing devices suitable for those applications where multiple targets have to be rapidly detected in highly complex media, possibly by untrained personnel.

Acknowledgements

We thank Solvay Specialty Polymers R&D Center (Bollate, Italy) for providing the perfluorinated material and Dia.Pro Diagnostic Bioprobes (Milan, Italy) for providing the antibodies and antigens. This work was supported by the Cariplo Foundation (Grant 20069869), Italy.

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