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Highlights

- Methylated β -cyclodextrin enhanced 100 times tetrahydrocurcumin water-solubility.
- Stoichiometry of THC/Me β CD complex is 1:1.
- DSC, ^1H - and 2D-NMR revealed THC complexation.
- No anti-fungal activity for Me β CD and THC/Me β CD.
- Polymerization of Me β CD allowed anti-fungal properties.

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Tetrahydrocurcumin encapsulation in cyclodextrins for water solubility improvement: synthesis, characterization and antifungal activity as a new biofungicide

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Abstract

The solubility of the scarcely water-soluble molecule tetrahydrocurcumin (THC), a promising curcumin derivative to be used as biopesticide, was enhanced through the formation of inclusion complexes with different cyclodextrins (CDs). Randomly methylated β -cyclodextrin (Me β CD) gave the best results among the different CDs whose size, substituent or structure was changing. Differential scanning calorimetry as well as ¹H- and 2D-Nuclear Magnetic Resonance (NMR) proved the inclusion of THC in Me β CD. Rotating-frame Overhauser effect spectroscopy NMR especially illustrated specific interactions of aromatic protons of THC and protons located inside the CD cavity. The complex formation between THC and Me β CD was studied using the Higuchi and Connor method, giving an association constant of 591 M⁻¹. THC-loaded Me β CD did not show any growth inhibition of the target fungus *Fusarium graminearum*. However, THC-loaded Me β CD polymers exhibited 25 % inhibition of the fungal growth, thus making them promising material for solvent-free, aqueous and bio-based fungicide formulations.

Keywords: Cyclodextrins, tetrahydrocurcumin encapsulation; methylated β -cyclodextrin; *F. graminearum*; antifungal activity

1. Introduction

Plants are subject to attacks by fungi, nematodes and insects, which generate yield losses and several species in the genus *Fusarium* are generally considered the most important in Europe as regards crop contamination. Among them, *Fusarium graminearum* can infect cereals such as maize, wheat or barley, leading to yield decreases up to 50 % (Shah et al., 2017) but also the potential production of mycotoxins, that can cause health problems to humans and animals. Nowadays, pest control strategies and particularly regarding *Fusarium* species mainly rely on synthetic fungicides, which could be harmful to human health and detrimental to the environment (Gupta, 2011; Smart, 2003). As mentioned by Kumar and Singh (2015), the entry of synthetic pesticides into the food chain coupled with their bioaccumulation triggers several unforeseen consequences. It has become important now to develop alternative strategies to overcome the drawbacks of synthetic pesticides. Therefore, scientific research has shifted towards the use of sustainable and renewable products, exhibiting significant efficacy while being less harmful to people and environment friendly.

Phenolic compounds belong to one of the most studied classes of natural active substances to be potentially used in biopesticide formulations. They are present in almost all plants and possess antioxidant properties (Dai, & Mumper, 2010). Essential oils (Avanço et al., 2017) or cereal extracts (Heidtmann-Bemvenuti, Tralamazza, Jorge Ferreira, & Corrêa, Badiale-Furlong, 2016) containing phenolic derivatives are already used to control fungal development. Pure phenolic compounds such as carvacrol, thymol and *o*-cresol have also shown ability to reduce the mycelium development (Teodoro, Ellepola, Seneviratne, & Koga-Ito, 2015; Wang et al., 2019). In this respect tetrahydrocurcumin (THC), obtained by hydrogenation of curcumin, one of the curcuminoids present in the rhizomes of *Curcuma longa* L. commonly called turmeric, has shown promising results for biopesticide formulations (Coma, Portes, Gardrat, Richard-Forget, & Castellan, 2011). THC consists of two guaiacyl subunits linked by a C7 aliphatic chain bearing a β -diketone group (THC, Fig. 1 A), and exhibits antioxidant, antifungal and antimycotoxinogenic properties. Unfortunately, its very low water-solubility strongly limits its potential applications in water-based formulations. Many dispersion techniques to increase the solubility of phenolic compounds are reported in the literature (Zhang, Xing, Zhao, & Ma, 2018.) and among others, encapsulation techniques such as spray-drying, solvent evaporation, freeze-drying, and liposome formation are attractive (Fang, & Bhandari, 2010; Munin, & Edwards-Lévy, 2011). Because of their natural origin and their GRAS status (Braga, 2019), cyclodextrins (CDs) are particularly suitable carrier materials for such hydrophobic active agents (Cheirsilp, & Rakmai, 2017; Del Valle, 2004; Nardello-Rataj, & Leclercq, 2014; Pinho, Grootveld, Soares, & Henriquez, 2014). Briefly, CDs are biopolymers commonly composed of 6,7 or 8 β -linked glucose units, with a funnel-shaped structure composed of an external hydrophilic shell and an internal hydrophobic cavity (Fig. 1 B). The hydrophilic part makes them water-soluble whereas the lipophilic inside confers them the ability to trap hydrophobic molecules. CDs have been scarcely used in agriculture (Morillo, 2006) and inclusion complex systems have been yet reported to increase the

solubility of poor water-soluble active agents (Singh et al., 2020) thus allowing a reduction of the applied dose (Morillo, 2006). For instance, CDs have been used to encapsulate synthetic and harmful fungicides like carbendazim (Wang et al., 2017) or chlorothalonil (Gao et al. 2019) and two plant extracts, carvacrol and linalool (Campos et al., 2018). All obtained inclusion complexes have been more efficient to control pest, leading to a reduction of the minimum active concentration.

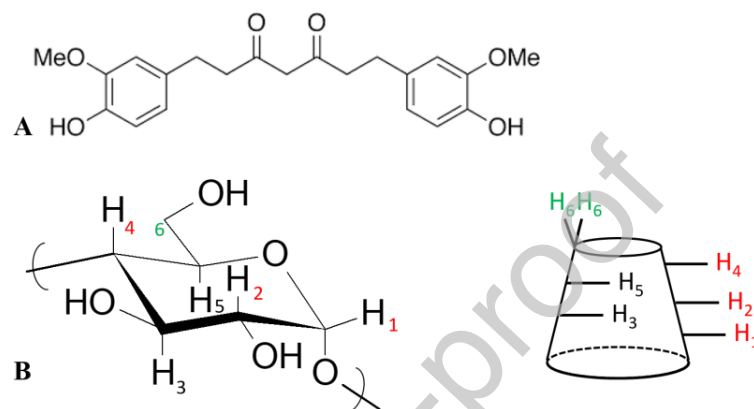


Fig. 1 Schematic representation of THC (A) and cyclodextrin with localization of their protons (B)

The aim of the current work was to investigate native and modified CDs to increase the apparent water solubility of THC in order to create new antifungal bio-based complexes potentially used for biopesticide applications.

The impact of some CD structures on the enhancement of the THC solubility was firstly investigated to select the most appropriate cyclodextrin. Described for the first time, THC-loaded Me β CD complexes were then deeply characterized in terms of physico-chemical properties by using differential scanning calorimetry, NMR spectroscopy and scanning electron microscopy. Finally, the bioactive properties of some THC-loaded cyclodextrins were compared to free THC against a model strain of *F. graminearum*.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Materials

When the abbreviation CD is used, it refers either to the word “cyclodextrin” or to any type of cyclodextrins in this study (β CD, γ CD, Me β CD, Poly- β CD and Poly-Me β CD).

β -Cyclodextrin Kleptose® (β CD) and Randomly-methylated- β -cyclodextrin Kleptose Crysmeb® (Me β CD) were provided by Roquette (Batch E0002, Lestrem, France). Citric acid

(CTR), sodium dihydrogen hypophosphite ($\text{NaH}_2\text{PO}_2 \cdot \text{H}_2\text{O}$) and sodium carbonate (Na_2CO_3) used in the synthesis of polymer of β CD (Poly- β CD) were supplied from Sigma Aldrich (Saint-Quentin Fallavier, France).

Me β CD degree of substitution was 0.5, leading to a molecular mass of 1184 g/mol. γ -Cyclodextrin (γ CD) was purchased from TCI Europe. FTIR and DSC spectra of CDs are available in supplementary information (Fig. S1 and Fig. S2).

Anionic water-soluble polymer of β CD (Poly- β CD) and Me β CD (Poly-Me β CD) were previously synthesized according to Junthip, Tabary, Leclercq, & Martel (2015) by using citric acid as crosslinking agent, sodium hypophosphite as catalyst and CD in molar ratio 59/40/1 and 61/40/1 for Poly- β CD and Poly-Me β CD, respectively. Briefly, after water removal, the solid mixture was cured at 140 °C during 30 min under vacuum. Water was then added, the resulting suspension filtered and the filtrate dialyzed during 72 h against water through 6–8 kDa membranes (SPECTRAPOR 1, Spectrumlabs). Finally, the water soluble anionic CD polymer was recovered after freeze drying. The number average molar mass (M_n) measured by aqueous size exclusion chromatography (SEC) were 11,800 g/mol and 15,600 g/mol, respectively for Poly- β CD and Poly-Me β CD (Polydispersity = 1.7), using a DIONEX Ultimate 3000 equipped with a DAWN HELEOS II multi-angle light scattering and an OPTILAB rEX differential refractometer (4 columns Shodex OH-Pak 30 cm, flow rate = 0.5 mL/min, concentration of polymer = 3 g/L, mobile phase = 0.1 M NaNO_3 and NaN_3 , $dn/dc = 0.139$). Based on the integrations values of H_1 (CD) and citrate methylene signals (CH_2 -CTR) by proton NMR studies, Poly- β CD and Poly-Me β CD were estimated to contain 72.0 wt% in β CD moieties and 63.4 wt% in Me β CD moieties respectively. This percentage was employed to calculate the concentration of CD cavities. FTIR spectra of polymers are available in supplementary information (Fig. S3) and DSC spectra in the work of Tabary et al. (2016).

Tetrahydrocurcumin Tetrapure (THC) was purchased from Sabinsa Corporation SabiWhite® (USA).

Potato Dextrose Agar (PDA) medium (potato starch 4g/L, dextrose 20g/L, agar 15g/L) was provided from Biokar. For the Carboxymethylcellulose medium (CMC medium, CMC low viscosity 15 g/L; Yeast extract 1 g/L; $\text{MgSO}_4 \cdot 7\text{H}_2\text{O}$ 0.5 g/L; NH_4NO_3 1 g/L; KH_2PO_4 1 g/L), products were provided by Aldrich (Saint-Quentin Fallavier, France) and all salts used in media were in analytical grade.

The strain CBS 185.32 of *F. graminearum* belonging to INRAe MycSA laboratory collection (Centre INRA de Nouvelle-Aquitaine Bordeaux UR1264 MycSA, INRAe, Villenave d'Ornon, France) was used as the targeted strain for antifungal studies.

2.2. Solubility study of THC

2.2.1. Impact of cyclodextrins on THC solubility

Preliminary studies of the maximum solubility of THC with β CD, γ CD, Me β CD and two cyclodextrin polymers (Poly- β CD and Poly-Me β CD) have been carried out. Two solutions of each cyclodextrin (15 mM) were prepared in distilled water at 20 °C. THC was added in excess to these solutions, which were stirred for 24 h at 180 rpm. After stirring, the solutions were centrifugated (Jouan CR 4-12) at 1200 g and the supernatant was collected. THC concentration in supernatant was determined with a calibration curve obtained by UV spectrophotometry ($\lambda_{\text{max}}=280$ nm; Portes, Gardrat, & Castellan, 2007)(Agilent Cary 100 UV-visible).

2.2.2. Solubility curve of THC with randomly methylated β -cyclodextrin

An excess amount of THC (approx. 11 mg) was added to 8 mL of an aqueous Me β CD solution in varying concentrations (0, 5, 10, 15, 20, 30, 40 mM) in amber vials. After 24 hours stirring, solutions were centrifuged for 5 minutes at 1200 g at room temperature (20 °C). The supernatant was analyzed at 280 nm. A 10-times dilution was necessary for samples with highest concentrations of Me β CD to obtain an absorbance lower than 1.5. The THC amount in each sample was determined using calibration curves, previously established with Me β CD solutions at various concentrations. Indeed, the absorption coefficient of THC in the complex depends on ligand concentration within the solution. Solubility diagrams were obtained by plotting THC concentration *versus* Me β CD concentration. The association constant K is given by the equation (1) of Higuchi and Connors (Higuchi & Connors, 1965). Assuming that the stoichiometry of the inclusion complex is 1:1, the solubility constant is given by the following equation:

$$K_{1:1} = \frac{\text{slope}}{[\text{THC}]_0 (1 - \text{slope})} \quad (1)$$

2.3. Preparation of THC-loaded cyclodextrins and THC-loaded (poly)cyclodextrins

THC was added to a solution of CD adjusted at 15 mM of CD cavities. The amount of THC was given by the previous solubility study for each CD. Solutions were stirred at room temperature for 24 hours and then freeze-dried. The resulted white powder was stored at room temperature in the dark.

2.4. Physicochemical characterization of THC-loaded cyclodextrin

2.4.1. Differential Scanning Calorimetry (DSC)

DSC was performed with TA Instrument Q100 RCS. Approximately 4 mg of compound was placed in an aluminum pan and heated from 20 °C to 110 °C with a heating rate of 10 °C/min under nitrogen (25 mL/min). A first cycle with a plateau at 90 °C was necessary to eliminate water.

2.4.2. $^1\text{H-NMR}$ investigations

NMR was performed using a Liquid-state 400 MHz NMR spectrometer (Bruker AVANCE I). ^1H -NMR was performed in deuterated water with 16 scans or in deuterated methanol and water (20:80). A rotational Overhauser enhancement experiment (ROESY) was used to detect intermolecular nuclear Overhauser effects between Me β CD and THC. The number of scans was fixed at 32, temperature at 300 K and dwell time at 120.00 μsec .

2.4.3. Scanning electron microscopy (SEM)

SEM observations were performed at the Bordeaux Imaging Center (BIC) with a ZEISS Gemini SEM 300 equipment. Stubs with double-face tape were used as support for a thin layer of powder. Samples were metallized (Platine) during 5 minutes and observed in high vacuum mode under a 2 keV electron beam.

2.5. Microbiological assays against *F.graminearum*

Growth inhibition tests were performed on Potato Dextrose Agar, supplemented with Me β CD or THC-loaded Me β CD at 15 mM. For polymers of CD (Poly- β CD and Poly-Me β CD) concentration was set at 15 mM of CD cavities. THC concentration was 10 μM for free-THC, 1 mM with Me β CD and 0.3 mM with Poly- β CD and Poly-Me β CD. The blank consisted of PDA medium without any addition of THC or CDs.

For the inoculation of PDA medium with the target strain, a spore suspension was first prepared by using agar cubes from 7 days old *F. graminearum* culture incorporated in the CMC liquid medium. After 3 days of incubation at 25 °C, the suspension was filtered through nylon filter (100 μm). One drop of 10 μL of the latter suspension containing approximately 100 spores was deposited on PDA before incubation at 25 °C and 70 % of relative humidity (RH) for 5 days. Two perpendicular diameters were measured every day. All conditions were performed in triplicate. Percentages of inhibition were expressed as following:

$$\%Inh = \frac{\text{Average diameter of blank} - \text{Average diameter of condition } i}{\text{Average diameter of blank}} * 100 \quad (2)$$

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Selection of the most suitable cyclodextrin

This preliminary study was devoted to the selection of the cyclodextrin able of incorporating the most THC in the fixed experimental conditions. The study was only conducted at 20°C because the system is made to be applied outside in fields. Depending on their size (7 or 8 glucose units) and their substitution groups (methylation), cyclodextrins may behave differently as regards to the solubilization of THC in water. CD polymers like Poly- β CD and Poly-Me β CD, can promote

solubilization of molecular species within CD cavities but also inside the 3D-network (Danel et al. 2013).

As shown in Table 1, excepted for β CD, all types of CDs improved the THC solubility in water with a proportional factor of 3 and 10 for γ CD and Me β CD, respectively. Regarding polymeric CDs, the THC solubility with Poly- β CD was three times higher than with β CD but less THC has been dissolved by using Poly-Me β CD than Me β CD.

Table 1

THC maximum water solubility in various cyclodextrins. Standard deviations were calculated from two repetitions

Cyclodextrins (concentration = 15 mM)	THC maximum solubility (mM)
No cyclodextrin	0.12 ± 0.02
β -cyclodextrin	0.10 ± 0.04
γ -cyclodextrin	0.32 ± 0.02
Randomly methylated β -cyclodextrin	1.10 ± 0.10
Poly- β CD	0.30 ± 0.05
Poly-Me β CD	0.28 ± 0.05

The different behavior of β - and γ CD was probably due to the different diameter of cavities (0.60–0.65 nm and 0.75–0.83 nm, respectively) and the significant improvement of THC solubility by using Me β CD is explained by the occurrence of the hydrophobic methyl groups leading to a higher hydrophobic character of such CDs compared to non-modified ones. Such methyl groups certainly play a role in the encapsulation process, either by helping to capture THC in the environment or by better retaining THC in the cavities. Tønnesen, Másson, & Loftsson (2002) and Çelik, Özyürek, Tufan, Güçlü, & Apak (2011) also found that modified cyclodextrins, with methyl or hydroxypropyl groups, present a better ability to trap hydrophobic compounds. With CD polymers, the THC solubility did not depend on the cyclodextrin structure, as the values are very close. One hypothesis might be that THC was mainly loaded into the network created by citric acid chains, which is the same for both polymers. Another hypothesis is that THC was still entrapped in the CD cavity, but thus suggesting that the complexation process is highly influenced by reticulation chains, which would act like substituents on CD. Regarding the huge solubility reduction with Poly-Me β CD compared to Me β CD, the high electronic density of phenolic rings of THC could lead to unfavorable interactions with carboxylate anions, thus preventing the molecule from entering the cavity. In addition, reticulation chains may hide methyl groups, which were thought to be of prime importance to enhance THC solubilization.

Finally, Me β CD gave the best results in terms of the amount of THC incorporated in CD and therefore was then selected for the rest of the study.

3.2. Physicochemical characterization of the THC-loaded Me β CD complex

Different techniques were used to fully characterize the host-guest interaction of THC with Me β CD. Solubility studies were undertaken to determine physicochemical parameters of the complex formation. The influence of temperature on THC interaction with Me β CD has been evaluated by DSC and NMR spectrometry was used to establish the geometry of the complex. Finally, SEM was performed to observe the potential impact of THC-loading on cyclodextrin external morphology.

3.2.1. Study of THC solubility

Solubility study by using the method of Higuchi and Connors (Higuchi & Connors, 1965) is a powerful tool to approximate the association constant and the stoichiometry of the complex (Kersani et al., 2020). The binding affinity between THC and hydroxypropyl β CD had already been studied by different authors (Goto et al., 2019; Thongyai, Kaewnopparat, & Songkro, 2016), whereas inclusion complexes with Me β CD were characterized by Çelik et al. (2011) or Duarte et al. (2015) but with other guest molecules.

As seen in Figure 1, the plot of the THC concentration *versus* Me β CD content gave a linear curve, indicating a host/guest ratio of 1/1 for this domain of concentration. The association constant $K_{\text{Me}\beta\text{CD}}$, following the equation (1), was calculated from the slope of the curve and gave $591 \pm 46 \text{ M}^{-1}$, which is consistent with literature data. Indeed, K_S values commonly found in literature are ranging from 10^1 to 10^5 M^{-1} , with most of the values ranging from 10^2 to 10^3 M^{-1} (Rekharsky & Inoue, 1998) especially from 100 to 1500 M^{-1} with, for example, curcumin-loaded β CD complexes (Jahed, Zarrabi, Bordbar, & Hafezi, 2014; Marcolino et al., 2011). Duarte et al. (2015) found an association constant of 1483 M^{-1} with a resveratrol-loaded Me β CD complex and Goto et al. (2019) obtained a value of 1200 M^{-1} with THC and hydroxypropyl β CD.

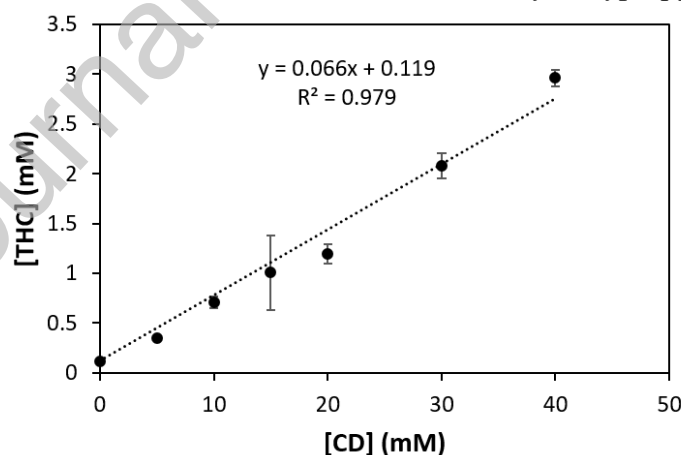


Fig. 2 THC concentration *versus* Me β CD concentration in water at 20 °C. Standard deviation were calculated from two repetitions

3.2.2. DSC analysis

To supplement the study, a complex of Me β CD and THC 2 % (w/w) and a simple mixture of THC and Me β CD in the same proportion were run on DSC. After a first cycle to eliminate water, the temperature was raised to a temperature above the THC melting point. In the mixture, a THC melting peak can be observed. No visible heat flow fluctuations could be seen (Fig. 2) with the complex whereas THC–Me β CD blend revealed a sharp melting peak. As a result, it could be assumed that THC was in an amorphous form, as was also concluded by Maharjan et al. (2019), or that THC in the complex was protected from melting within a cavity of Me β CD.

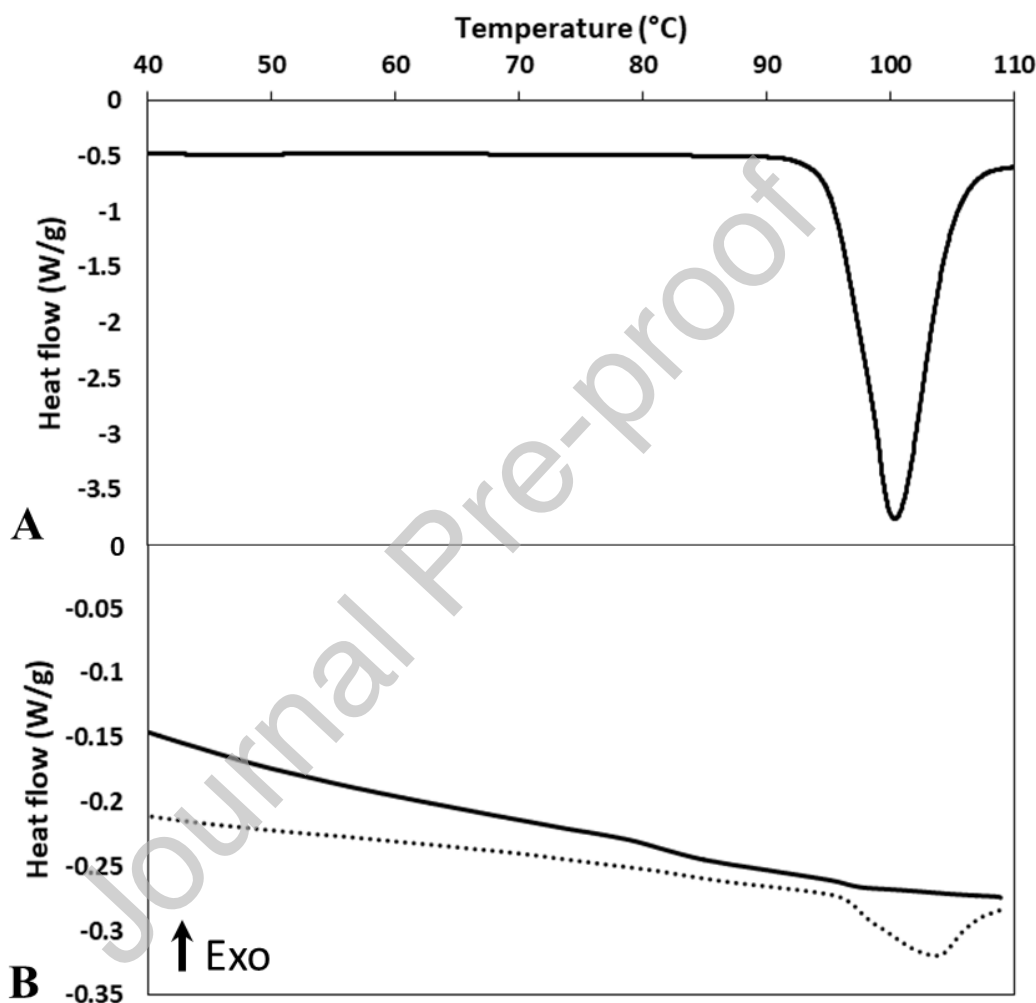


Fig. 3 Thermogram of DSC of (A) THC and (B) THC-loaded Me β CD complex (solid line), THC and Me β CD simple mixture (dash line).

3.2.3. $^1\text{H-NMR}$ investigations

To prove the inclusion of THC in Me β CD, ^1H and 2D NMR experiments were performed. A comparison of $^1\text{H-NMR}$ spectra of Me β CD in the presence or absence of THC was carried out

to highlight chemical shift variations on the H₃ and H₅ protons located inside the CD cavity (Fig. 1 and Fig. 4). H₁, H₂ and H₄ protons remained at the same chemical shifts, but changes could be observed for H₃ (0.01 ppm) and H₅ (no value given due to a large signal width). On the contrary to Jahed, Zarrabi, Bordbar, & Hafezi (2014) and Chao, Wang, Zhao, Zhang, & Zhang, (2012), these chemical shift variations have been estimated too small to conclude to the formation of an inclusion complex between Me β CD and THC).

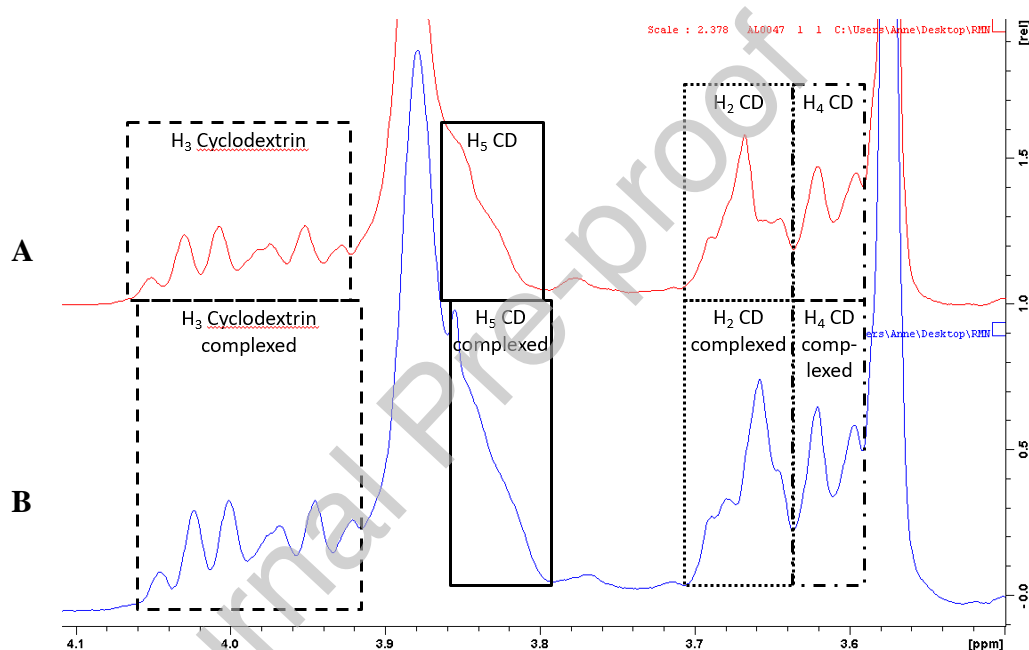


Fig. 4 NMR of Me β CD (**A**) and THC-loaded Me β CD complex (**B**) in D₂O

A better approach was based on shift variations of aromatic protons of THC. First, HSQC was needed to attribute aromatic protons of THC (Fig. 5 **A**). After the loading of THC in Me β CD, notable shifts of protons **a** and **c** occurred (Fig. 5 **B**). The signal of proton **c** varied of -0.03 ppm while the proton **a** shifted of +0.04 ppm, which was explained by to the formation of inclusion complexes.

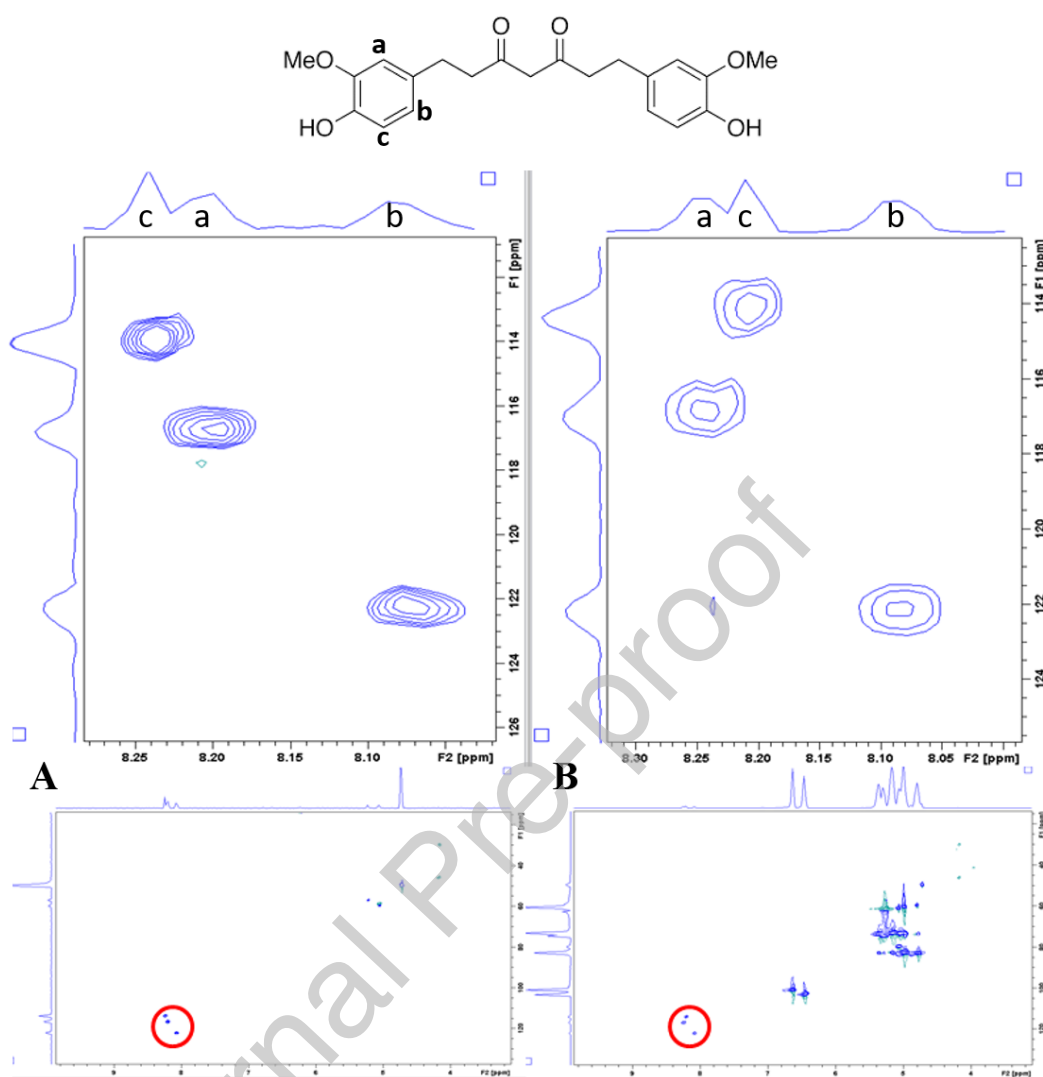


Fig. 5 HSQC of THC (A) and THC-loaded Me β CD complex (B) in MeOD/D₂O 1:4

Finally, non-covalent interactions have been easily highlighted through ROESY (Fig. 6). Aksamija, Polidori, Plasson, Dangles, & Tomao (2016) observed interactions between the protons of their guest molecule (rosmarinic acid) and both H₃ and H₅ of β CD, thus proving the inclusion of aromatic rings in CD cavities. In the present study, the significant signal at 3.76 ppm corresponds to interactions between aromatic protons and protons of methyl group, both from THC. Unfortunately, protons H₅ of CD are also located at 3.76 ppm. As a result, potential interactions with aromatic protons of THC could not be clearly evidenced. However, the second signal at 3.87 ppm proved unambiguously the presence of interactions between protons H₃ of the inner cavity of CD and aromatic protons of THC, thus demonstrating the presence of inclusion complexes.

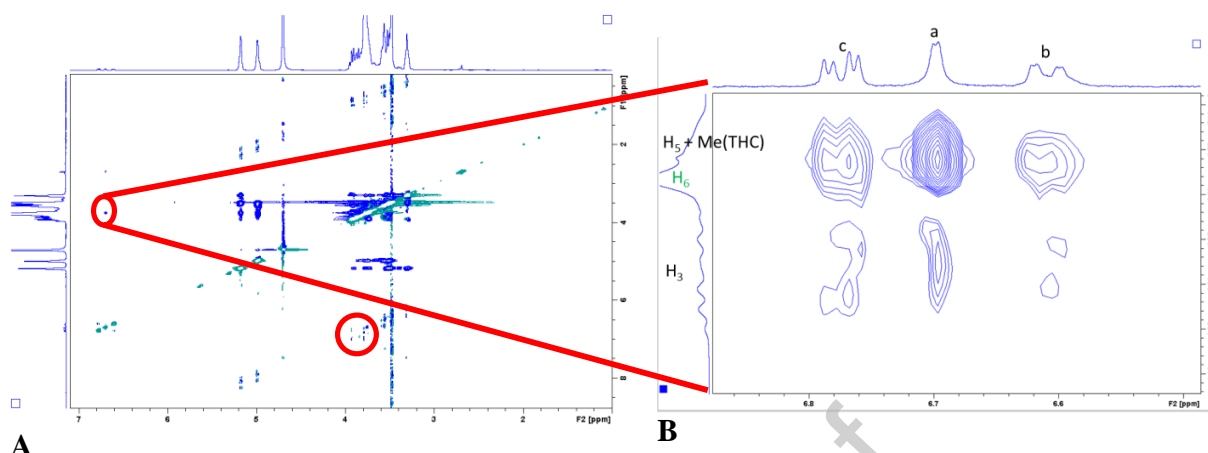


Fig. 6 ROESY of THC-loaded Me β CD complex in D₂O (**A**); Zoom of ROESY (**B**)

3.2.4. SEM observations

SEM was used to know if the powder of raw or complexed materials induced any changes in their own morphology. THC appears as coarse granules in raw powder and sharp needles in freeze-dried powder (Fig. 7 **A** and **D**). Strong differences between samples of Me β CDs were highlighted. In the raw powder, Me β CDs were round shaped, like golf ball or empty capsules, with a diameter from 3 to 30 μ m, whereas in freeze-dried Me β CDs, thin sponge-like structures have been observed (Fig. 7 **B** and **E**). The morphology of the freeze-dried complexes presented thin sheets that were often broken (Fig. 7 **C**). It can be concluded that THC was trapped within Me β CDs. THC's spiked structures would have been visible among sheet-like Me β CDs if THC would have not been in the cavity of Me β CD. Furthermore, it can be assumed that the morphology seemed mainly determined by the drying process. Both lyophilized Me β CDs and complexes presented a similar structure. However, the Me β CDs furnished by the supplier were round-shaped. In parallel, some authors synthesized CD complexes with a spray-drying technique and observed round shaped products (Shan-Yang & Yuh-Horng, 1989). Freeze-dried powders looked like expanded sheets and spray-dried powders were ball-like. This is in contradiction with Duarte et al. (2015) who suggested that the new structure in leaf form they have observed was due to the formation of inclusion complexes.

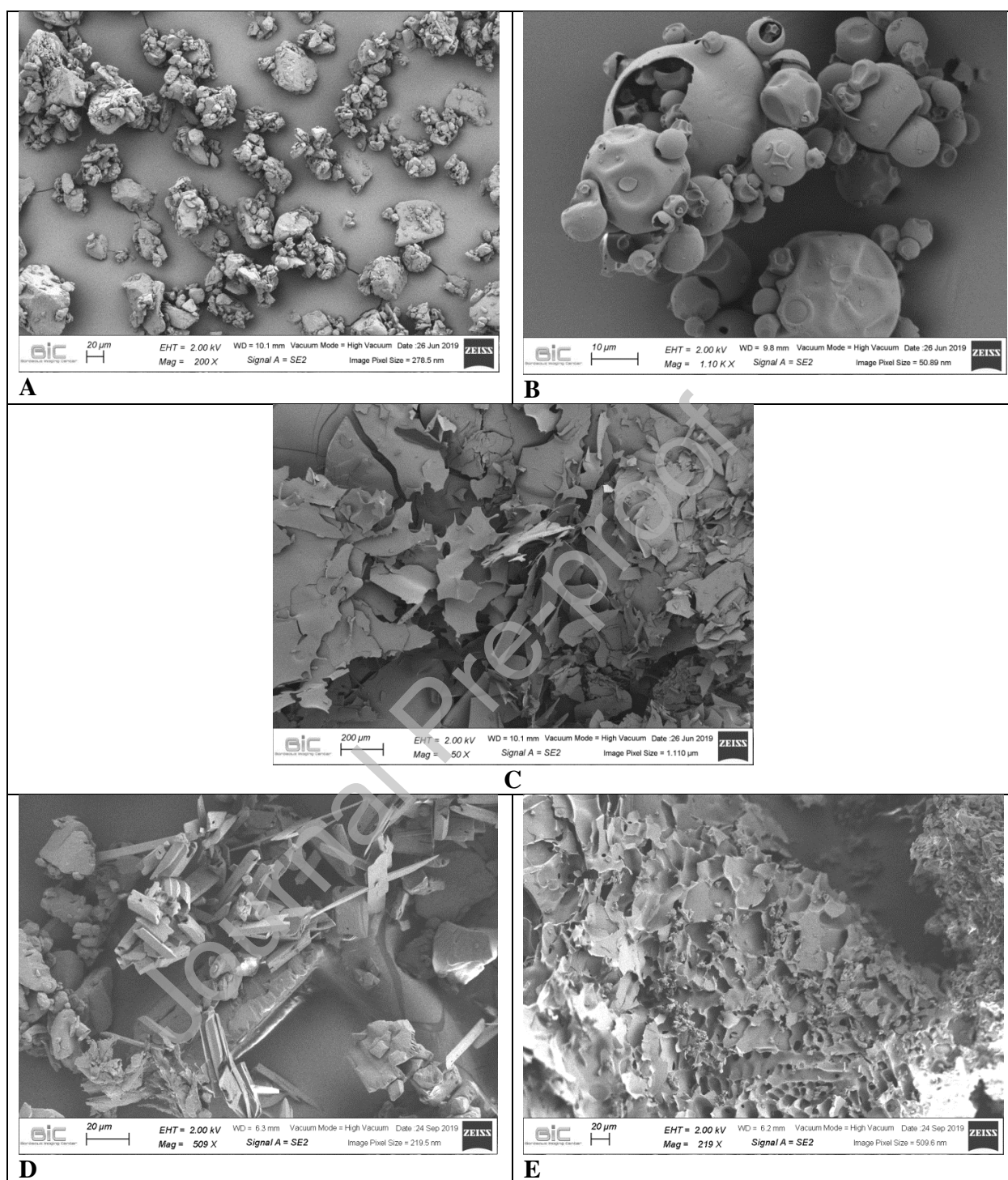


Fig. 7 SEM views of THC (A), Me β CD (B), THC/Me β CD complex (C), freeze-dried THC (D), freeze-dried Me β CD (E)

3.3. Antifungal activity of THC-loaded cyclodextrins

Preliminary tests with THC at 10 μM did not show any activity against the *F. graminearum* growth. A higher THC concentration was tested *via* encapsulation in Me β CDs. Results are presented in Table 2 and pictures of the plates are available in supplementary information (Fig. S4). Surprisingly, Me β CDs at 15 mM activated the fungal growth by 12 %, which could be due to their metabolization by *F. graminearum* as carbon sources. To limit this phenomenon, a combination with other molecules like acarbose, an amylase inhibitor, could be an interesting way to explore (Abril-Sánchez, Matencio, Navarro-Orcajada, García-Carmona, & López-Nicolás, 2019). However, after THC loading, the growth activation was reduced by only 2 %, indicating light antifungal properties of THC and the fact that a large part of the active agent was probably released from CD.

Table 2

Growth inhibition percentages of *F. graminearum* by CDs or CD complexes after 4 days of incubation at 25 °C and 70 % RH. Standard deviations were calculated from three repetitions. Values with different letters in superscript are significantly different.

Tested compound	Growth inhibition (%)
THC 10 μM	0 ^{d,e}
Me β CD 15mM	-12 \pm 1 ^f
Me β CD 15mM + THC 1.0 mM	-2 \pm 1 ^{e,f}
Poly- β CD 15 mM	13 \pm 1 ^{c,d}
Poly- β CD 15 mM + THC 0.3 mM	23 \pm 1 ^{b,c}
Poly-Me β CD 15 mM	16 \pm 1 ^{a,b}
Poly-Me β CD 15 mM + THC 0.3 mM	26 \pm 1 ^a

Because less sensitive to fungal degradation, and potentially intrinsically bioactive, the polymers of CDs have also been tested, although they have a lower ability to solubilize THC. As shown in Table 2, the activation of Me β CD due to its degradation by the fungal strain was prevented thanks to the polymerization of Me β CD. Results showed that CD polymers with and without THC inhibited the mycelium growth of *F. graminearum* by 13 % and 16 %, respectively. This could be due to the antifungal effect of free carboxylic acid functions of citric acid used in the synthesis of Poly-CD (Shokri, 2011). After THC-loading, an improvement of 10 % was obtained, leading to an inhibition percentage of about 23 % and 25 % for Poly- β CD and Poly-Me β CD, respectively. Encapsulation of 0.3 mM of THC improved the inhibition percentage, thus showing once again the THC's ability to reduce the fungal development. In the literature, antifungal properties of natural compounds are mainly attributed to lipophilic interactions. Indeed, hydrophobic moieties of such active molecules could interact with the phospholipid

bilayers of fungal membranes (Valette, Perrot, Sormani, Gelhaye, & Morel-Rouhier 2017) and membrane damages have often been reported (Hammer, 2004; Peng et al., 2012; Yutani et al., 2011), leading to the leakage of cellular content and thus to the cell death (Peng et al., 2012; Valette et al. 2017). In two different studies, phenolic compounds with one or more methoxy group(s) on their ring –which is also the case for THC– were more active than analogues bearing hydroxyl group(s) (Bastos et al., 2009; Fitzgerald, Stratford, Gasson, & Narbad, 2005). Moreover, a previous work on THC (Coma et al., 2011) has demonstrated that a *F. proliferatum* inhibition of 67 % was achievable using, a higher THC concentration (13.6 mM), nevertheless requiring tetrahydrofuran during the solubilization process. In comparison, a significant inhibition was achieved herein study without any organic solvent and by using a bio-based encapsulation system.

4. Conclusions

Among different studied CDs, Me β CDs enhanced the most the THC water-solubility. A detailed solubility study showed that a 1:1 complex was formed in our conditions and ¹H- and 2D-NMR investigations proved an inclusion of THC within CD cavity. Indeed, aromatic protons of THC underwent chemical shift variations when complexation occurred. Moreover, a SEM study finally revealed no free THC. Regarding the antimicrobial activity of such complexes, the mycelium growth of the model strain *F. graminearum* was, at the best, reduced by a quarter with THC-loaded Me β CD polymers. As a result, these solvent-free and bio-based inclusion complexes of THC with CD derivatives are promising for the development of new aqueous biofungicide.

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