



Construction of a novel far-red fluorescence light-up probe for visualizing intracellular peroxynitrite

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ABSTRACT

Peroxynitrite (ONOO⁻) is an important reactive oxygen species (ROS), which can react with a variety of biologically active species and cause many diseases, such as cancer, neurodegenerative disorders. Herein, we develop a novel far-red fluorescent probe DCM-KA, which is equipped with α -ketoamide moiety caged DCM-NH₂. The probe exhibits fluorescence off-on response to ONOO⁻ over other biological interfering analytes by ONOO⁻-induced α -ketoamide deprotection reaction. More importantly, the probe is biocompatible and has been successfully utilized to visualize endogenous ONOO⁻ production in macrophage cell line J774A.1.

1. Introduction

Peroxynitrite (ONOO⁻), a kind of extremely reactive oxygen species (ROS) produced through in vivo coupling reaction of nitric oxide (\cdot NO) and superoxide radicals (O₂⁻) with an average reaction rate constant of 10¹⁰ M⁻¹ s⁻¹, is included in the pathogenesis of various diseases [1–3]. Recent reports demonstrate that ONOO⁻ can react with a wide array of biologically active species, such as enzymes, proteins, nucleic acids and lipids, thereby affecting cellular processes and even causing cell necrosis and apoptosis [4–7]. For example, ONOO⁻ can nitrate biomolecules to alter cell signal transduction pathways, realizing modulation of the physiological processes of cells [8–10]. Imbalance of ONOO⁻ has also been reported to be linked to an increasing list of diseases, including neurodegenerative disorders like Alzheimer's disease, cancer, circulatory shock and reperfusion injury [11–14]. Therefore, development of detection method for ONOO⁻ is of great significance for deeper understanding its functions in complicated biological systems.

However, it is a huge challenge to detect ONOO⁻ in physiological conditions in virtue of its short half-life (< 10 ms), low concentration and high reactivity [15]. Though a number of methods have been used for ONOO⁻ detection, fluorescence imaging technology with fluorescent

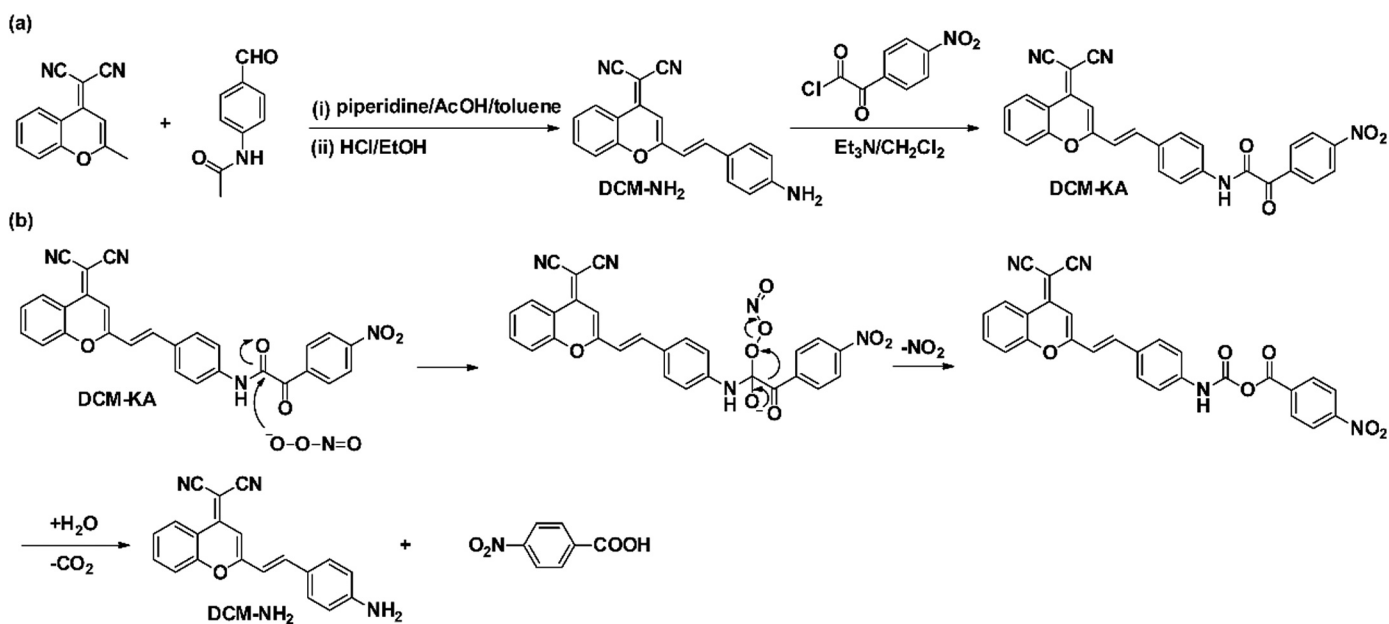
probes receive increasing attention due to easy operation, high sensitivity and selectivity and in-situ detection [16–19]. Of note, long-wavelength fluorophores with emission in far-red or near-infrared (NIR) region ($\lambda_{em} > 600$ nm) are commonly used for designing probes for bioimaging with rare autofluorescence interference, low photodamage and deeper tissue penetration [20].

So far, a variety of fluorescent probes have been reported for ONOO⁻ detection based on different responsive sites, such as methyl(4-hydroxyphenyl)amino [21–25], boronic acid/boronates [26], hydrazide [27–30], organo-selenium/tellurium [31,32], trifluoromethyl ketone [33], α -ketoamide [34–36], double carbon bond [37–39] and others [40–42]. But fluorescent probes for ONOO⁻ that can emit in far-red or NIR region with excellent performance are still rare. Herein, we described a simple far-red fluorescent probe DCM-KA for specific detection of ONOO⁻ with a large Stokes Shift (up to 160 nm). This probe was constructed by mounting an α -ketoamide as a recognizing moiety onto the DCM-NH₂ core (Scheme 1a). As expected, the probe displayed very weak fluorescence because the electron-withdrawing α -ketoamide moiety attenuated intramolecular charge transfer (ICT) and photo-induced electron transfer (PET) effects. When ONOO⁻ was present, α -ketoamide moiety was removed and released the fluorophore DCM-

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Scheme 1. (a) Synthetic route of DCM-KA. (b) Proposed sensing mechanism of DCM-KA toward ONOO⁻.

NH₂, which resulted in restoring fluorescence. The probe also showed a rapid off-on response to ONOO⁻ in 90 s with high selectivity and sensitivity. Furthermore, the probe was capable of imaging endogenous ONOO⁻ in living macrophage cells.

2. Experimental section

2.1. Reagents and apparatus

Unless stated otherwise, all reagents and solvents for the experiments were purchased from commercial suppliers and used without further purification. ¹H NMR and ¹³C NMR were performed on a BRUKER 400 MHz spectrometer. ESI mass spectra were conducted on a Bruker ESI-TOF. All solutions used in this work were prepared by Ultrapure water (18.2 M cm⁻¹). UV–vis absorption spectra were measured with an Agilent Technologies Cary 60. Fluorescence spectra were obtained on an Agilent Cary Eclipse fluorescence spectrophotometer. Confocal images of ONOO⁻ in J774A.1 cells were carried out on Olympus FV1000 laser scanning confocal microscope.

2.2. General procedure for the spectra measurement

The stock solution of DCM-KA (10.0 mM) was prepared in DMSO. Stock solutions of various analytes were prepared in ultrapure water. The resulting solution was kept at room temperature and then the absorption or fluorescence spectra were measured. All of fluorescence spectra were performed at the excitation wavelength 480 nm with excitation slits of 5 nm and emission slits of 10 nm.

2.3. Cell culture and fluorescence imaging

J774A.1 cells were grown in DMEM supplemented with 10% (v/v) FBS, 100 U/ml of penicillin and 100 U/ml of streptomycin. The cells were incubated in a humidified incubator at 37 °C, 5% CO₂. The cytotoxicity of DCM-KA was evaluated by CCK-8 assay. J774A.1 cells were seeded on Petri dishes prior to CLSM imaging. For imaging endogenous production of ONOO⁻ in J774A.1 cells, three series of fluorescence imaging experiments were carried out. Firstly, the cells were incubated with only DCM-KA (10 μM); secondly, the cells were treated with lipopolysaccharides (LPS 1 μg/ml) and interferon-γ (IFN-γ 100 ng/ml) for 10 h, and then incubated with phorbol 12-myristate 13-acetate (PMA

10 nM) for 0.5 h and DCM-KA (10 μM) for another 0.5 h; thirdly, as a control experiment, the cells incubated with LPS (1 μg/ml), IFN-γ (100 ng/ml), aminoguanidine (AG, an inhibitor of nitric oxide synthase, 1 mM) followed by the incubation with PMA for 0.5 h and DCM-KA (10 μM) for another 0.5 h. The cells were washed with PBS buffer for three times before subjecting to fluorescence imaging measurements with laser scanning confocal microscope. Emission was collected at red channel (600–700 nm) with 488 nm excitation.

2.4. Synthesis of DCM-NH₂

N-(4-formylphenyl)acetamide (163 mg, 1.0 mmol) was added to a solution of 2-(2-methyl-4H-chromen-4-ylidene) malononitrile (229 mg, 1.1 mmol), piperidine (0.15 ml) and acetic acid (0.15 ml) in toluene (10 ml). The resulting mixture was refluxed under argon for 5 h. For work up, the mixture was cooled to room temperature and filtered to give an orange solid, followed by addition of conc. HCl and EtOH (v/v 2/1, 30 ml). Then the mixture was refluxed for another 5 h. After the reaction was completed, the mixture was quenched with saturated NaHCO₃ (aq) and extracted with ethyl acetate. The organic layer was dried over Na₂SO₄ and concentrated in vacuo. Purification by flash column chromatography (eluent: DCM) to give the desired product DCM-NH₂ (124 mg, 40%). ¹H NMR (400 MHz, d₆-DMSO): δ 8.68 (d, *J* = 8.3 Hz, 1H), 7.86 (t, *J* = 7.8 Hz, 1H), 7.72 (d, *J* = 8.4 Hz, 1H), 7.60 (d, *J* = 15.8 Hz, 1H), 7.55 (t, *J* = 8.3 Hz, 1H), 7.46 (d, *J* = 8.6 Hz, 2H), 7.04 (d, *J* = 15.7 Hz, 1H), 6.82 (s, 1H), 6.60 (d, *J* = 8.6 Hz, 2H), 6.02 (s, 2H); ¹³C NMR (100 MHz, d₆-DMSO): δ 159.7, 152.5, 152.1, 152.0, 140.6, 135.0, 130.7, 125.9, 124.5, 122.3, 118.9, 117.8, 117.2, 116.4, 113.8, 112.4, 104.7, 57.4; ESI-MS: Calcd for C₂₀H₁₃N₃O [M+H]⁺ 311.1059 found 312.1137, [M + Na]⁺ 334.0956 found 334.0962.

2.5. Synthesis of DCM-KA

Oxalyl chloride (225 μl, 2.64 mmol) was dropwise added to a solution of 2-(4-nitrophenyl)-2-oxoacetic acid (172 mg, 0.88 mmol) in dichloromethane (5 ml) at 0 °C. Then two drops of N, N-dimethylformamide was added and the resulting mixture was refluxed for 1 h. After evaporation of the solvent, a solution of DCM-NH₂ (70 mg, 0.22 mmol), triethylamine (123 μl, 0.88 mmol) in dichloromethane (5 ml) were added and the mixture was stirred for another 1 h. After evaporation of the solvent, the obtained mixture was purified by flash column

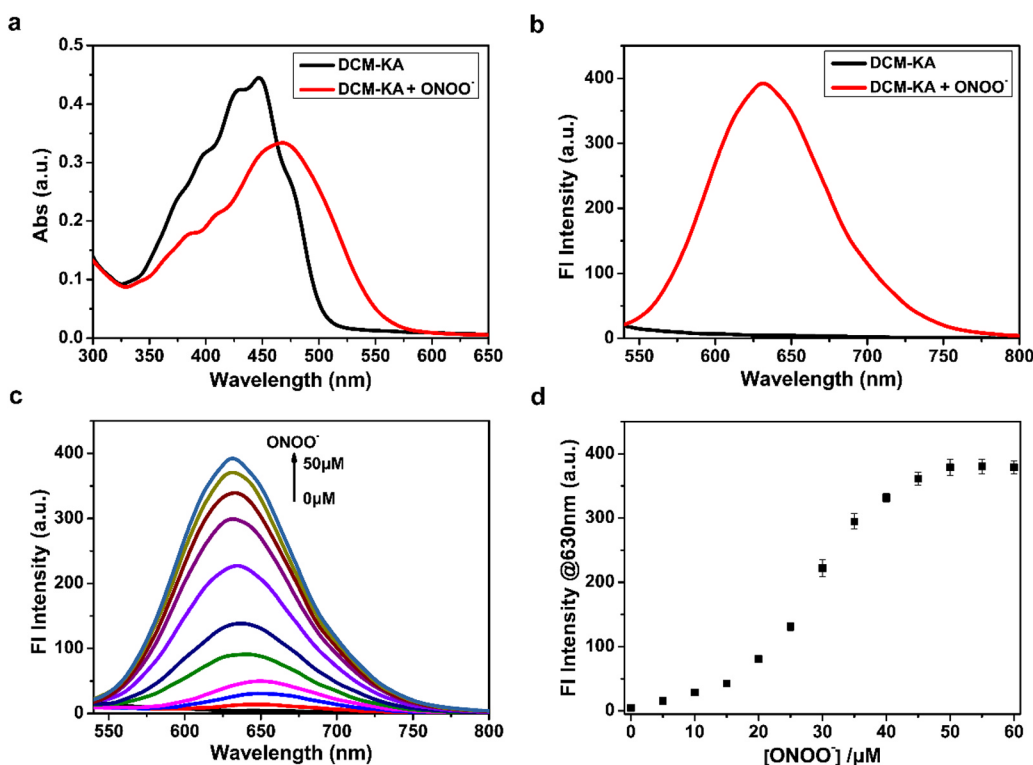


Fig. 1. (a) UV-vis absorption spectra of DCM-KA (10 μM) before and after addition of ONOO^- (50 μM). (b) Fluorescence spectra of DCM-KA (10 μM) before and after addition of ONOO^- (50 μM). (c) Fluorescence response of DCM-KA (10 μM) to ONOO^- in the presence of various amounts (0–50 μM). (d) The relationship between the fluorescence intensities at 630 nm of DCM-KA and ONOO^- concentrations (0–60 μM).

chromatography on silica gel (eluent: DCM) to give the desired product DCM-KA (46 mg, 42.8%). ^1H NMR (400 MHz, d_6 -DMSO): δ 11.21 (s, 1H), 8.70 (d, $J = 8.1$ Hz, 1H), 8.40–8.31 (m, 4H), 7.93–7.78 (m, 6H), 7.69 (d, $J = 15.9$ Hz, 1H), 7.59 (t, $J = 7.6$ Hz, 1H), 7.42 (d, $J = 16.0$ Hz, 1H), 6.98 (s, 1H); ^{13}C NMR (100 MHz, d_6 -DMSO): δ 187.2, 162.5, 158.2, 152.9, 152.0, 150.5, 139.4, 138.0, 137.6, 135.4, 131.7, 131.3, 129.1, 126.2, 124.6, 123.8, 120.5, 119.1, 118.9, 117.2, 117.1, 115.9, 106.6, 60.2; ESI-MS: Calcd for $\text{C}_{28}\text{H}_{16}\text{N}_4\text{O}_5$ [M-H] $^-$ 488.1121, found 487.1051.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Spectra response of DCM-KA to ONOO^-

Photophysical properties of DCM-KA were carried out in 10 mM PBS buffer-THF solution (1:1, v/v, pH 7.4) at 25 $^\circ\text{C}$. As can be seen from Fig. 1a, DCM-KA had two major absorption peaks at around 429 nm and 447 nm. Upon the addition of ONOO^- to the solution, the absorption wavelength red-shifted to 470 nm (Fig. S7). DCM-KA itself showed almost no fluorescence in the absence of ONOO^- ; however, reaction with ONOO^- triggered a noticeable fluorescence enhancement along with emission blue-shift from 650 nm to 630 nm (Fig. 1b). Surprisingly, the probe exhibited a large Stokes Shift (up to 160 nm), which was beneficial for eliminating self-quenching and produced a strong fluorescence signal in bioimaging. The dramatic changes in the absorption and fluorescence spectra might be attributed to structural variations of DCM-KA. To prove this assumption, ESI-MS analysis was conducted (Fig. S10). The mixture of DCM-KA and excess ONOO^- showed the presence of peaks at m/z 310.0982 and 166.0142, which were ascribed to the releasing fluorophore DCM-NH $_2$ ([M-H] $^-$) and 4-nitrobenzoic acid ([M-H] $^-$). The results further confirmed the proposed sensing mechanism as shown in Scheme 1b.

Fig. 1c and Fig. 1d illustrated that a large fluorescence increase at 630 nm was obtained with the increasing amounts of ONOO^- upon excitation with 480 nm, where the fluorescence intensities were linear with ONOO^- concentrations in the range of 0–15 μM (linear equation: $y = 2.5047 \times + 4.5572$, $R^2 = 0.9983$) and 15–45 μM (linear equation:

$y = 11.2358 \times - 129.9348$, $R^2 = 0.9853$) (Fig. S8, S9). The limit of detection for DCM-KA toward ONOO^- was determined to be 0.38 μM and 78 nM (S/N = 3), respectively. The results revealed that DCM-KA was a highly sensitive off-on fluorescent probe for sensing of ONOO^- .

Subsequently, the reaction kinetics of DCM-KA toward ONOO^- was investigated (Fig. 2a). Almost no fluorescence changes of DCM-KA were observed in presence of ONOO^- , which suggested that the probe's photostability was very excellent. When 50 μM of ONOO^- was added to the solution, the intensity of the emitted fluorescence at 630 nm showed a mutation and reached a plateau during 90 s with 85-fold fluorescence enhancement. The rapid response to ONOO^- further confirmed that DCM-KA was suitable for bioimaging ONOO^- . The effect of pH on the response of DCM-KA was also explored under different pH values. As demonstrated in Fig. 2b, the background fluorescence of DCM-KA was very low over a wide pH range of 3.0–11.0. After treating with ONOO^- , a significant increase in fluorescence intensity was observed within the pH 3.0–11.0 range, which indicated the probe could work well in biological system.

The response of DCM-KA for ONOO^- over other biological potential interfering analytes was then evaluated. Treatment with common ions (K^+ , Na^+ , Fe^{2+} , AcO^- , CO_3^{2-}) and amino acids (Leu, Thr, Gly, Ser, Arg) caused negligible fluorescence changes in the fluorescence intensity at 630 nm (Fig. 2c). Only when ONOO^- was added produced remarkable fluorescence signals. Most importantly, ROS (H_2O_2 , ClO^- , $\cdot\text{OH}$, BrO^- , $^1\text{O}_2$), RNS (NO_2^- , NO_3^-) and RSS (HS^- , GSH, Cys, Hcy), which might interfere with detecting ONOO^- , also failed to trigger a fluorescence response (Fig. 2d). Additionally, addition of ONOO^- induced an apparent color changes from light yellow to orange (Fig. 2e). Under the condition of irradiation using 365 nm UV lamp, only adding of ONOO^- showed red fluorescence while other interfering species were almost no fluorescence (Fig. 2f).

3.2. Cell imaging

To expand the application of probe DCM-KA for bioimaging, we then utilized DCM-KA for imaging endogenous ONOO^- production in macrophage cell line J774A.1. Prior to live cell imaging, the

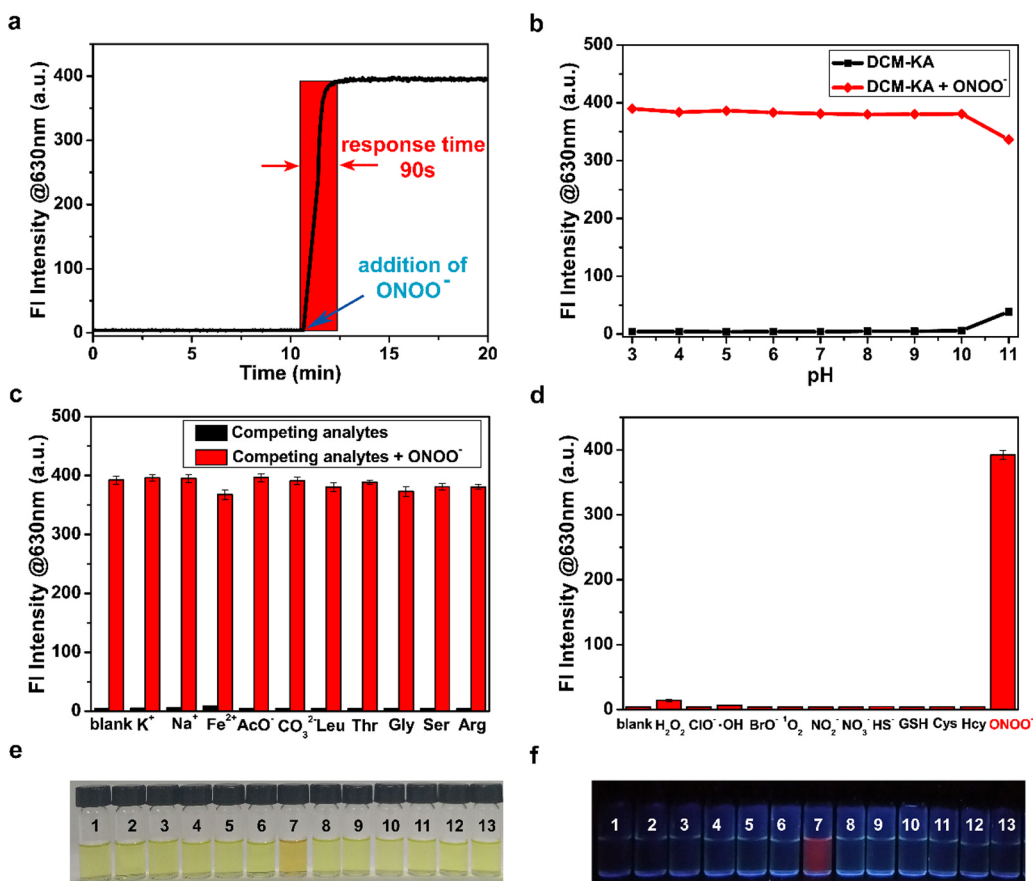


Fig. 2. (a) Time scan fluorometry of DCM-KA (10 μ M) before and after treatment with of ONOO⁻ (50 μ M). (b) Fluorescence intensities at 630 nm of DCM-KA (10 μ M) at different pH values in the absence and presence of ONOO⁻ (50 μ M). (c) Selectivity of DCM-KA (10 μ M) toward various analytes. 300 μ M for K⁺, Na⁺, Fe²⁺, AcO⁻, CO₃²⁻, Leu, Thr, Gly, Ser and Arg. (d) Fluorescence responses of DCM-KA (10 μ M) toward ROS, RNS and RSS species. 300 μ M for H₂O₂, ClO⁻, ·OH, BrO⁻, ¹O₂, NO₂⁻, NO₃⁻, HS⁻, 3 mM of GSH, 500 μ M for Cys, Hcy. (e) Photographs of DCM-KA after the addition of various analytes under visible. (f) Photographs of DCM-KA after the addition of various analytes under UV irradiation of 365 nm. The photo of analytes: 1, blank; 2, H₂O₂; 3, ClO⁻; 4, ·OH; 5, BrO⁻; 6, ¹O₂; 7, ONOO⁻; 8, NO₂⁻; 9, NO₃⁻; 10, HS⁻; 11, GSH; 12, Cys; 13, Hcy.

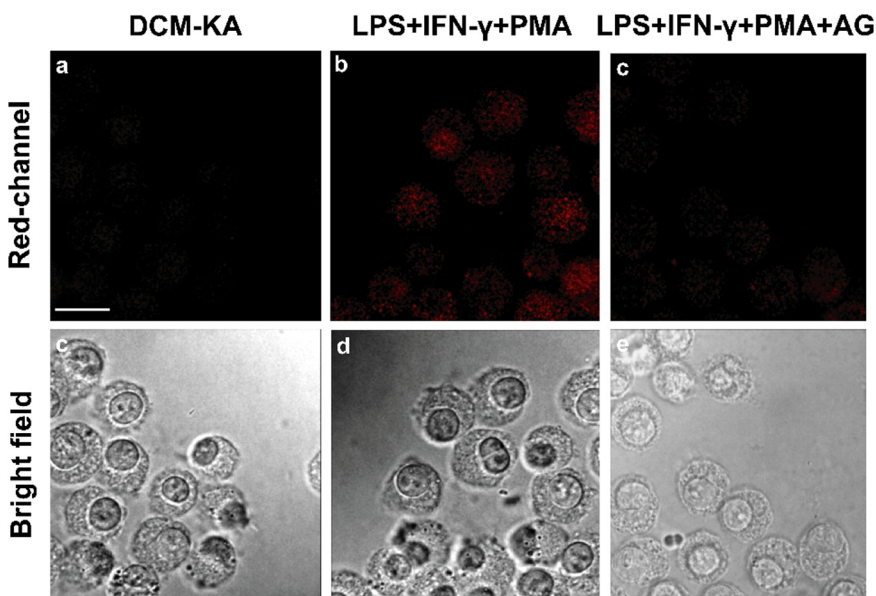


Fig. 3. Red channel (top row), bright field (down row) images of J774A.1 cells under different conditions. (a,c) Cells incubated with DCM-KA; (b, d) Cells were stimulated with LPS (1 μ g/ml) and IFN- γ (100 ng/ml) for 10 h, and then incubated with PMA (10 nM) for 0.5 h and DCM-KA for another 0.5 h; (c, e) Cells were stimulated with LPS (1 μ g/ml), IFN- γ (100 ng/ml) and AG (1 mM) for 10 h, and then incubated with PMA (10 nM) for 0.5 h and DCM-KA for another 0.5 h. Scale bar: 20 μ m.

cytotoxicity of DCM-KA was first evaluated by CCK-8 assay and the results showed low cytotoxicity in the presence of different amounts of DCM-KA (Fig. S11), suggesting that DCM-KA was biocompatible and suitable for bioimaging. As demonstrated in Fig. 3, the cells only incubated with DCM-KA were almost non-fluorescent. When the cells were stimulated with lipopolysaccharides (LPS) and interferon- γ (IFN- γ), and then incubated with phorbol 12-myristate 13-acetate (PMA) and DCM-KA, strong fluorescence increases were observed. To confirm

whether fluorescence signal changes of cells were due to the production of endogenous ONOO⁻, the control experiment was carried out. The cells treated with LPS, IFN- γ , aminoguanidine (AG, an inhibitor of nitric oxide synthase) followed by the incubation with PMA and DCM-KA, much weak fluorescence signal was detected. These results demonstrated the great potential of probe DCM-KA for visualizing endogenous ONOO⁻.

4. Conclusion

In summary, we reported a new type of far-red fluorescent probe DCM-KA, which selectively responded to ONOO⁻ with a fluorescence off-on signal output. The probe not only showed a short response time (90 s), but also detected ONOO⁻ in a wide pH range (3.0–11.0). In addition, treating with ONOO⁻ would trigger color of the solution changed from light yellow to orange, enabling the probe to have the capacity to detect ONOO⁻ by naked-eyes. Particularly, the probe could visualize endogenous ONOO⁻ production in macrophage J774A.1 cells. This study provided a useful tool for understanding the effects of ONOO⁻ in complex physiological systems.

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Appendix A. Supporting information

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found in the online version at [doi:10.1016/j.talanta.2019.01.065](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.talanta.2019.01.065).

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