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**STRUCTURAL AND MOLECULAR DETERMINANTS AFFECTING THE
INTERACTION OF RETINOL WITH HUMAN CRBP1**

**Ilaria Menozzi^{a,b,§}, Francesca Vallese^{c,§}, Eugenia Polverini^b, Claudia Folli^d,
Rodolfo Berni^{a*} and Giuseppe Zanotti^{c*}**

^a Department of Life Sciences, University of Parma, Parco Area delle Scienze 23/A, 43124 Parma,
Italy

^b Department of Physics and Earth Sciences, University of Parma, Parco Area delle Scienze 23/A,
43124 Parma, Italy

^c Department of Biomedical Sciences, University of Padua, Via Ugo Bassi 58/B, 35131 Padua, Italy

^d Department of Food Sciences, University of Parma, Parco Area delle Scienze 23/A, 43124 Parma,
Italy

[§] Both authors contributed equally to this work

*To whom correspondence should be addressed:

Giuseppe Zanotti, Department of Biomedical Sciences, University of Padua, Via Ugo Bassi 58/B,
35131 Padova, Italy Tel.: +39 049 8276409, Fax + 39 049 8073310; email:
giuseppe.zanotti@unipd.it;

Rodolfo Berni, Department of Life Sciences, University of Parma, Parco Area delle Scienze 23/A,
43124 Parma, Italy. Tel: +39 0521 905645, Fax +39 0521 905151; email: rodolfo.berni@unipr.it

Running Title: Determinants for retinol-CRBP1 interactions

Abbreviations used: CRBP, cellular retinol-binding protein; iLBPs, intracellular lipid-binding
proteins; CRABPs, cellular retinoic acid-binding proteins; FABPs, fatty acid-binding proteins; HT,
His-Tag; PDB, Protein Data Bank; RMSD, root mean square deviation; RMSF, root mean square
fluctuation; MD, molecular dynamics; PCR, Polymerase Chain Reaction.

ABSTRACT

1
2 Four cellular retinol-binding protein (CRBP) types (CRBP1,2,3,4) are encoded in the human
3 genome. Here, we report on X-ray analyses of human apo- and holo-CRBP1, showing nearly
4 identical structures, at variance with the results of a recent study on the same proteins containing a
5 His-Tag, which appears to be responsible for a destabilizing effect on the apoprotein. The analysis
6 of crystallographic B-factors for our structures indicates that the putative portal region, in particular
7 α -helix-II, along with Arg58 and the E-F loop, is the most flexible part of both apo- and
8
9 holoprotein, consistent with its role in ligand uptake and release. Fluorometric titrations of wild type
10 and mutant forms of apo-CRBP1, coupled with X-ray analyses, provided insight into structural and
11 molecular determinants for the interaction of retinol with CRBP1. An approximately stoichiometric
12 binding of retinol to wild type apo-CRBP1 ($K_d \sim 4.5$ nM), significantly lower binding affinity for
13 both mutants Q108L ($K_d \sim 65$ nM) and K40L ($K_d \sim 70$ nM) and very low binding affinity for the
14 double mutant Q108L/K40L ($K_d \sim 250$ nM) were determined, respectively. Overall, our data
15 indicate that the extensive apolar interactions between the ligand and hydrophobic residues lining
16 the retinol binding cavity are sufficient to keep it in its position bound to CRBP1. However, polar
17 interactions of the retinol hydroxyl end group with Gln108 and Lys40 play a key role to induce a
18 high binding affinity and specificity for the interaction.
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30 **Keywords:** vitamin A, retinoid-binding proteins, intracellular lipid-binding proteins, mutational
31 analyses, molecular dynamics simulation
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INTRODUCTION

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3 Vitamin A fulfils essential roles in the physiology of vertebrates, being involved in cell
4 growth and differentiation, reproduction, embryonic development, and vision. Retinol, the alcoholic
5 form of vitamin A, one among several other forms of this vitamin, achieves a drastically higher
6 chemical stability when it is bound to serum retinol-binding protein (RBP 4) and intracellular
7 retinol-binding proteins (CRBPs). In addition to this chaperoning role, the interaction with retinol-
8 binding proteins permits the solubilization in the aqueous medium of the highly hydrophobic retinol
9 molecule. Four homologous CRBPs (CRBP1, 2, 3 and 4), encoded in the human genome and well
10 represented in other mammals, are believed to be the intracellular carriers for all-*trans* retinol (Folli
11 et al., 2001; 2002). CRBPs belong to a superfamily of small cytoplasmic proteins that interact
12 specifically with hydrophobic ligands, the intracellular lipid-binding proteins (iLBPs). Besides
13 CRBPs, well-characterized members of the iLBP superfamily are the cellular retinoic acid-binding
14 proteins (CRABPs) and the fatty acid-binding proteins (FABPs) (Schaap et al., 2002; Smathers
15 and Petersen, 2011). Although members of the different protein families may possess a low
16 sequence identity, a basic structural motif has been found for the different iLBPs characterized thus
17 far. In all these proteins, 10 β -strands (A-J) and two α -helices (I and II) fold to form a well-defined
18 barrel, whose internal cavity represents the binding site for hydrophobic ligands. It has been
19 suggested that the portal region for the ligand comprises α -helix II and CD- and EF-loops
20 (Hodsdon and Cistola, 1997; Lu et al., 2000) (Franzoni et al., 2002).
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37 X-ray analyses of holo-CRBP1 and holo-CRBP2 have previously shown that the two
38 conserved residues Gln108 and Lys40 are in close proximity with the retinol hydroxyl end group,
39 suggesting their critical role in the interaction with the ligand ((COWAN et al., 1993), (WINTER
40 et al., 1993)). With regard to its functional properties, CRBP1 possesses very high affinity for
41 retinol, with K_d values in the nanomolar or sub-nanomolar range (Malpeli et al., 1995; Ong et al.,
42 1994). The results of *in vitro* studies have indicated that the formation of the CRBP1-retinol
43 complex may be functional for several processes and reactions, such as retinol exchange through
44 cell membrane mediated by Stra6 (Kawaguchi et al., 2012), retinol esterification (HERR and
45 Ong, 1992; Ong et al., 1988; YOST et al., 1988), retinyl ester hydrolysis (BOERMAN and
46 NAPOLI, 1991; Ottonello et al., 1987), and oxidation of retinol to retinal, a key step of retinoic
47 acid biosynthesis (Ottonello et al., 1993) (Boerman and NAPOLI, 1996). Although a high
48 binding affinity for retinol, with K_d values in the nanomolar range, was also established for CRBP2
49 (Ong et al., 1994) (Nossoni et al., 2014), a study that allowed a direct competition of CRBP1
50 and 2 suggested that the affinity of CRBP1 for retinol may be 100 fold greater than that of CRBP2
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1 (Li et al., 1991). In addition to retinol, *in vitro* both CRBP1 and 2 can form complexes with all-
2 *trans* retinal, which might also be serving as substrates for certain enzymatic activities. Although
3 structural evidence has been presented to indicate that CRBP2 can establish better interactions with
4 retinal as compared to CRBP1 (Nossoni et al., 2014), significantly lower binding affinities for
5 retinal as compared to retinol have been found for both CRBP1 (Malpeli et al., 1995) and CRBP2
6 (Nossoni et al., 2014).
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12 Recently, the X-ray structures of His-tagged apo- and holo-CRBP1 have been determined,
13 indicating the occurrence of some conformational changes affecting the protein backbone in the
14 putative portal region (Silvaroli et al., 2016). Here, we present for the same proteins experimental
15 and structural evidence showing the key role played by residues Gln108 and Lys40 in the
16 interaction of CRBP1 with retinol and structural evidence for the flexibility of the putative portal
17 region, consistent with its role in ligand binding and release. In addition, the high resolution
18 structural characterization of WT human apo- and holo-CRBP1 does not reveal the significant
19 conformational differences previously observed for the His-tagged apo- and holoproteins, which are
20 likely to be due to a destabilizing effect of the tag on the protein structure.
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31 MATERIAL AND METHODS

32 Materials

33 all-*trans* retinol was purchased from Sigma. All other chemicals were of analytical grade.
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38 Methods

39 *Site-directed mutagenesis of human CRBP1*

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41 The expression vector PET28b (Novagen) containing the entire human CRBP1 coding sequence,
42 obtained previously in our laboratory (Folli et al., 2002), was used as a template for site-directed
43 mutagenesis. The three mutant forms K40L, Q108L, K40L/Q108L of human CRBP1 were prepared
44 by using the Quick-Change mutagenesis protocol, which employs a high-fidelity thermostable DNA
45 polymerase (PfuTurbo DNA polymerase; Stratagene). Mutagenic oligonucleotide primers were
46 designed and synthesized for each single mutation: upstream primer (5'-
47 CTTGCTGAAGCCAGACCTAGAGATCGTGCAGGAC-3') and downstream primer (5'-
48 GTCCTGCACGATCTCTAGGTCTGGCTTCAGCAAG-3') for the K40L mutation, and upstream
49 primer (5'-GTGGCTGGACCCTGTGGATCGAGGG-3') and downstream primer (5'-
50 CCCTCGATCCACAGGGTCCAGCCAC-3') for the Q108L mutation. The latter primers for the
51 Q108L mutation were also used on the K40L mutant plasmid to obtain the double K40L/Q108L
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1 mutation. To digest the parental DNA template, the PCR products were treated with DpnI
2 (Stratagene). Each digestion product was then used to transform E.coli XL1 Blue cells. Some
3 colonies were chosen and sequenced to verify the occurrence of the desired mutation. Finally, E.coli
4 BL21 (DE3) cells were transformed with mutant plasmids in order to proceed with the expression
5 and purification of mutant proteins.
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10 *Expression and purification of WT and mutant forms of human CRBP1*

11 The expression of WT human CRBP1 and its mutant forms was induced by adding 0.5 mM
12 isopropyl-1-thio- β -D-galactopyranoside to the culture of *E. coli* BL21 (DE3) cells. After incubation
13 for 16 hours at 4°C, cells were harvested by centrifugation (for 15 min, at 7000 rpm, at 4°C),
14 suspended in the lysis buffer (Na phosphate 50mM, NaCl 0.3 M, pH 8.0, 10% glycerol), and finally
15 lysed by sonication, with a yield of more than 60% of soluble protein for both WT and mutant
16 proteins. In order to obtain pure proteins, WT CRBP1 and its mutant forms were purified using a
17 two-step procedure, consisting of anion exchange (High Q Support, BIO-RAD) and size exclusion
18 (Ultrogel AcA54, PALL Life Sciences) chromatographies. The final yield was 7-10 mg/L of
19 bacterial culture for WT and mutant proteins. The ϵ_{280} (molar extinction coefficient at 280 nm) of
20 WT and mutant CRBP1 was estimated to be 26595 M⁻¹ cm⁻¹ on the basis of amino acid sequences.
21 To obtain an authentic apoprotein from purified recombinant WT CRBP1, the protein was
22 delipidated by treatment with the hydrophobic resin Hydroxyalkoxypropyl-Dextran Type IX (Sigma
23 Aldrich), equivalent to Lipidex 1000, essentially as described (Glatz and Veerkamp, 1983).
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38 *Binding of retinol to WT and mutant forms of CRBP1*

39 Absorption spectra of WT and mutant forms of CRBP1 in complex with retinol were obtained upon
40 addition of a slight molar excess of all-*trans* retinol (dissolved in ethanol) to 7.5 μ M recombinant
41 WT and mutant forms of CRBP1, in 50 mM Tris HCl, 0.15 M NaCl, pH 7.5. Fluorometric binding
42 assays for WT and mutant forms of CRBP1 (protein concentration 0.6-0.7 μ M) were carried out, by
43 means of a PerkinElmer LS-50B fluorimeter, by monitoring the quenching of the intrinsic protein
44 fluorescence (excitation and emission at 280 and 330 nm, respectively) upon addition of small
45 aliquots (0.2-0.4 μ L) of stock solutions of all-*trans*-retinol in ethanol ($\epsilon_{325\text{ nm}} = 46000\text{ M}^{-1}\text{ cm}^{-1}$)
46 directly into the fluorometer cuvette,. After each addition, the protein solution was stirred gently
47 and allowed to equilibrate at 20°C in the dark for a few minutes before measuring the fluorescence
48 intensity. Binding data, obtained in triplicate for each CRBP1 form, were analyzed by nonlinear
49 regression of experimental data as described previously (Malpeli et al., 1995), using Sigma Plot
50 software (Jandel, Corte Madera, CA).
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Crystallization and structure determination

Crystals of WT human apo and holo CRBP1 and of the mutant forms of human CRBP1 (apo- and holo CRBP1 K40L, holo CRBP1 Q108L and holo CRBP1 K40L/Q108L), were obtained at room temperature using the hanging-drop technique from a precipitant solution containing 0.2 M ammonium chloride, 0.1 M sodium acetate, pH 5.0, 20% PEG 6000 (PACT 1-8, Molecular Dimensions, UK), a condition that is similar, in regard to both pH and precipitant, to that adopted for the crystallization of HT human CRBP1 (Silvaroli et al., 2016). Crystals diffracted at high resolution, from 1.23 Å to 1.43 Å resolution, except for WT apo CRBP1, which diffracted to a relatively lower resolution, 1.70 Å. X-ray diffraction data were collected at the beamline PXIII (SLS synchrotron, Switzerland), ID29 (ESRF, Grenoble, France) or ID30B at 100°K, without any cryoprotectant. Data were processed by XDS (Kabsch, 2010) and scaled with Scala (Evans, 2006). All crystals belong to the $P2_12_12_1$ space group, with unit cell dimensions reported in Table I. The V_M value for all crystals is 2.00 - 2.08 Å³/Da, corresponding to a solvent content of about 38%-41% of the total volume, with one molecule in the asymmetric unit. The structure was solved by molecular replacement with software Molrep (Lebedev et al., 2007), using as template the solution structure 1KGL (Franzoni et al., 2002). The structures were refined using Refmac5 (Murshudov et al., 2011) or Phenix (Adams et al., 2010) and manually rebuilt and corrected by software Coot (Emsley and Cowtan, 2004). Towards the end of the refinement, the electron density for the retinol or a different ligand bound inside the cavity was clearly visible in all cases, except for the authentic apo CRBP1 and apo CRBP1 K40L (which were devoid of any ligand), and was included with restraints produced by server PRODRG (Schuttelkopf and van Aalten, 2004). Solvent molecules were added automatically using the Phenix automated procedure and checked manually. Hydrogen atoms were introduced in the last cycle of refinement. The statistics of data collection and refinement are reported in Table I. The geometry of the final model was checked by Molprobit (Lovell et al., 2003).

Molecular Dynamics simulations

Molecular dynamics (MD) simulations were performed by adding a His₆-Tag to the WT apo CRBP1 crystal structure by means of the Swiss-PDB Viewer program (Guex and Peitsch, 1997). To better reproduce the acidic crystallization conditions (pH 5.5) of HT human CRBP1 (Silvaroli et al., 2016), the pKa values of ionizable residues were calculated by means of the program PROPKA, embedded in the software package PDB2PQR (Dolinsky et al., 2004)). Based on PROPKA results, a first MD simulation was carried out on the His-tagged protein, keeping all His

1 residues in a protonated form. Subsequently, to discriminate the effects of the charges of protonated
2 His-residues, a second MD simulation was performed with all His residues in their neutral form.
3 Moreover, a control MD simulation on the WT apo-CRBP1 itself was carried out.
4
5 MD simulations were carried out using the GROMACS (4.5.5) software package (van der Spoel
6 et al., 2005) with the Gromos ffG53a6 force-field (Oostenbrink et al., 2004). In all the dynamics
7 simulations, the protein structure was embedded in a water box extending 10 Å around it and Na
8 and Cl counterions were added to assure the neutrality of the system and to reach the physiological
9 salt concentration of 150 mM. The whole system was subjected to an energy minimization and then
10 a position restrained MD, lasting 50 ps, was performed to relax the solvent around the protein.
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12 Finally a 100 ns full MD run was carried on, at 300 K and 1 atm. The analyses of the trajectories
13 were performed by means of the VMD software (Humphrey et al., 1996).
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22 **Databases.** Structural data factors are available in the Protein Data Bank under the accession
23 numbers: 5LJB (holo CRBP1), 5LJC (holo CRBP1/Q108L), 5LJD (holo CRBP1/K40L), 5LJE
24 (holo CRBP1/K40L,Q108L), 5LJG (fatty acid bound CRBP1), 5LJH (apo CRBP1/K40L mutant),
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26 5LJK (apo CRBP1).
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32 **RESULTS**

33 *Structures of human Wild Type (WT) apo and holo CRBP1*

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38 Our data on the structures of human WT CRBP1, as well as its mutant forms, were obtained
39 before the recent publication dealing with the structure of the same human protein, which,
40 differently from our protein, contained a His₆-Tag at its C-terminus (Silvaroli et al., 2016), and is
41 designated in this work as His-Tag (HT) CRBP1. Despite this difference, WT and mutant forms of
42 CRBP1 (see below) and HT CRBP1 crystallize in similar conditions (see Materials and Methods)
43 and crystals are essentially isomorphous (**Table I**), with the exception of HT apo CRBP1 (Silvaroli
44 et al., 2016).
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51 All residues present in the structures of WT CRBP1, from Pro1 to Gln134, have been
52 included in our structural models. They are clearly visible in the electron densities, except for Pro1,
53 which is partially flexible. The root mean square deviation (RMSD) for the superposition of
54 equivalent C α atoms of human WT holo CRBP1 and human HT holo CRBP1 (PDB ID [5H8T](#),
55 (Silvaroli et al., 2016)) is 0.55 Å. The main difference between the two proteins is at the C-
56 terminus, where the presence of the His-Tag influences the conformation of the last three amino
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1 acids. The RMSD is 0.793Å for the comparison of the structures of human WT holo CRBP1 and rat
2 WT holo CRBP1 (PDB ID 1CRB, [8]), but the latter difference must be essentially ascribed to the
3 lower resolution of the previous structure and possibly to different crystallization conditions. In WT
4 holo CRBP1, the protein structure and the mode of binding of retinol in the inner cavity is the same
5 as that found for HT holo CRBP1, with the retinol hydroxyl group pointing towards Gln108 and
6 Lys40 and forming H-bonds with both Oε1 atom of Gln108(OH – Oε1 distance, 2.92Å) and Nζ of
7 Lys40 and forming H-bonds with both Oε1 atom of Gln108(OH – Oε1 distance, 2.92Å) and Nζ of
8 Lys40 (OH – Nζ distance, 3.22 Å), respectively (the same distances are 2.81 Å and 2.95 Å,
9 respectively, for HT holo CRBP1 (Silvaroli et al., 2016)) (**Figs. 1A and 2A**)
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Unexpectedly, in a first structure of the putative WT apo CRBP1, crystallized in the same
conditions as the holo-protein and in the absence of any added ligand, a long linear electron density,
slightly bent, was visible inside the binding cavity (**Fig. 1B**), which indicates that upon its
expression the protein bound an as-yet-uncharacterized compound produced by *E. coli* metabolism
and possessing affinity for CRBP1. A saturated fatty acid was selected as a possible hydrophobic
ligand, since the flexibility of its chain would allow a better fitting in the density. A palmitate
molecule fitted quite well in the electron density, with an occupancy slightly lower than 1. The
RMSD for the superposition of the equivalent Cα atoms of WT holo CRBP1 and WT CRBP1 in
complex with the hypothetical ligand is 0.16 Å, with the positions of all the side chains pointing
inside the cavity perfectly conserved, in keeping with the rigidity of the protein scaffold. In our
model, one of the oxygen atoms of the carboxylate group of the hypothetical fatty acid interacts
with nitrogen of Lys40 (O2 – Nζ, 2.71Å) and with a water molecule (O2 – O, 2.72Å), the second
with the oxygen of Gln108 (O1 – Oε1, 2.86Å) (**Fig. 2D**). It is also very likely that an ionic
interaction takes place between the positively charged –NH₃⁺ group of Lys40 and the negatively
charged carboxylate of the hypothetical fatty acid.

The latter observations suggested to us that the mutation K40L would lead to a lack of
interaction between the ε-amino group of Lys40 and the carboxylate group of the aforementioned
hypothetical ligand, with the possibility of generating an authentic apo CRBP. Indeed, upon
crystallization the X-ray analysis of the K40L CRBP1 mutant form revealed that it was a real apo-
protein, in which the cavity was filled with 11 solvent molecules that do not mimic the position of
the hypothetical ligand. This result is consistent with our hypothesis that CRBP1 has the ability to
bind carboxylic acids, such as fatty acids, through the formation of an ionic bond with Lys40. The
latter ligand, however, does not possess high binding affinity for CRBP1, since it can be easily and
fully displaced by the retinol.

In order to determine the structure of an authentic WT apo CRBP1, the WT CRBP1
obtained upon expression in *E. coli* was delipidated by treatment with a hydrophobic resin (see

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Material and Methods) and crystallized. The structures of WT apo CRBP1 and apo CRBP1 K40L are nearly superimposable, the RMSD for the superposition of equivalent C α atoms being 0.29 Å (**Fig. 1 C**). The structures of WT apo CRBP1 is at lower resolution (1.7Å) as compared to the HT apo CRBP1. Despite that, most of the solvent molecules located inside the cavity are conserved in both structures, as well as in the case of the structure of apo CRBP1 K40L mutant form. The RMSD for equivalent C α atoms upon superposition of WT apo CRBP1 and HT apo CRBP1 is higher, 0.85Å. In particular, we do not observe for our WT apo-CRBP1 the movement of the E-F loop (residues 73-81), which by itself shows a RMSD of 3.05 Å in the comparison between WT and HT apo CRBP1, and of the nearby side chain of Tyr60, found for the HT apo-CRBP1. On the contrary, the latter region of WT apo-CRBP1 maintains essentially the conformation found for WT and HT holoproteins. In fact, WT holo and apo CRBP1 are very similar, the RMSD for the superposition of the equivalent C α atoms being 0.21Å (**Fig. 1 C**). The positions of all the side chains pointing inside the cavity are perfectly conserved, a clear indication of the rigidity of the protein scaffold. The C-terminus also points in the same way as the holoprotein.

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By means of a 100 ns molecular dynamics (MD) simulation, we have analyzed the effect of the presence of the His-Tag on the WT apo CRBP structure, possibly responsible for protein conformational changes. To this end, a His₆-Tag was added to the WT apo-CRBP structure. To better reproduce the acidic experimental conditions, the pKa values of the ionizable residues were calculated taking into account the local structural environment (see Materials and Methods). As a result, at the crystallization condition of pH 5.5, all the His residues are likely to be mostly protonated. Therefore, a MD simulation was performed on the His-tagged structure with all the His residues in a charged state. Nevertheless, to exclude that the charge of His-residues was the main cause of any enhanced mobility of the protein, a second MD simulation was carried out in the same conditions but with all the His residues in the unprotonated form. Finally, a simulation on the WT apo-CRBP structure without the His-Tag was also carried out as a control. From the plot of the root mean square fluctuation (RMSF) of C α atoms (calculated on the last 70 ns of simulation, during which the protein had already achieved a stable structure), we can clearly see that the His-Tagged structure in both cases shows a flexibility greater than that of the WT control, especially affecting the portal region (**Fig. 3**). The higher flexibility of the His-Tagged structure is confirmed by the analysis of B-factors: the HT apo CRBP1 structure (Silvaroli et al., 2016) shows clearly higher values for the whole portal region as compared to the WT apo CRBP1 (**Supplemental Data, Fig. 1**).

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Structures of mutant forms (K40L, Q108L and K40L/Q108L) of human holo CRBP1.

1 The structures of the holo mutant forms Q108L, K40L and K40L/Q108L of human CRBP1
2 are very similar to that of WT holo CRBP1 (**Fig. 1C**), indicating that the presence of a Leu at
3 position 40 and/or 108 does not minimally perturb the protein barrel that hosts the ligand. In fact,
4 the RMSD for the superposition of the equivalent C α atoms of WT holo CRBP1 with those of the
5 holo mutant forms Q108L, K40L and K40L/Q108L are 0.16 Å, 0.41Å and 0.29Å, respectively.
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9 As mentioned above, in WT holo CRBP1 the retinol hydroxyl end group is bound in the inner part
10 of the cavity and it forms two H-bonds, with Gln108 and Lys40. In the holo mutant forms the
11 retinol is positioned in the inner protein cavity, occupying the same position as in the case of WT
12 holo CRBP1. In the K40L mutant form, the retinol hydroxyl end group points towards Gln108, as in
13 the WT protein, forming a H bond with its oxygen atom (OH – O ϵ 1 distance 2.41Å, **Fig. 2B**). In the
14 Q108L mutant form, the hydroxyl group is less defined, but still visible, in the electron density,
15 since it is present in two alternate conformations: in one it points towards Met62 (O – S δ 62
16 distance, 2.77Å) and in the other it points towards Lys40 (O – N ζ 40 distance, 2.57Å) (**Fig. 2C**). In
17 the double mutant form K40L/Q108L, the density for the retinol moiety -CH₂-OH is not visible,
18 indicating that this end portion of the ligand is mobile, due to the lack of any anchor for the -OH
19 group.
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31 *Thermal motions*

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33 The analysis of B-factors for the various structures we have determined is significant, since
34 it clearly indicates that the α -helix-II, along with EF-loop and Arg58 (CD-loop), is the most flexible
35 part of the protein, even in WT holo CRBP1 (**Fig. 4**). This flexibility is increased in the presence of
36 the different mutations for the holo-proteins, and in some cases it also propagates to the first helix
37 and to some loops. The comparison of holo- and apo- WT CRBP1 (**Fig. 4 A and E**, respectively)
38 and of holo- and apo CRBP1 K40L (**Fig. 4 B and F**, respectively) indicates that the absence of the
39 ligand inside the cavity somehow further influences the flexibility of the protein, and in particular
40 increases the mobility of the α -helix-II.
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50 *Binding assays for the interaction of retinol with mutant forms of human WT apo CRBP1*

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52 The binding of retinol to WT and mutant forms of human apo CRBP1 was analyzed by
53 monitoring the formation of typical absorption spectra of the bound ligand, which in the case of the
54 WT protein (**Fig. 5 A**) is characterized by a peak at approx. 348 nm, with two shoulders at 333 and
55 365 nm, respectively. In the case of the holo Q108L CRBP1 (**Fig. 5 B**), a similar absorption
56 spectrum is obtained, while in the case of the holo K40L CRBP1 (**Fig. 5 C**) the absorption spectrum
57 shows three better defined peaks at 330, 345 and 363nm, respectively. When compared to the peaks
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1 of the holo K40L CRBP1, three similar absorption peaks, although with lower intensity, are also
2 visible for the double mutant holo K40L/Q108L (**Fig. 5 D**). The lower absorption intensities for the
3 latter mutant form are attributable to a relatively lower saturation by the chromophoric ligand, due
4 to the low binding affinity. The aforementioned results suggest that the presence of Lys40 and its
5 interaction with retinol are critical for determining the characteristic chromophoric properties of the
6 CRBP1-bound retinol, which are likely due to the proximity of the presumably protonated side
7 chain of Lys40 to the retinol isoprene tail (COWAN et al., 1993; Franzoni et al., 2002).
8 Spectrofluorometric titrations of WT and mutant forms of apo CRBPI with retinol were carried out
9 to determine the dissociation constant of the retinol-protein complexes, by exploiting the quenching
10 of the intrinsic protein fluorescence, which is associated with retinol binding to the apoprotein as a
11 result of an efficient energy transfer to the chromophoric protein-bound ligand (**Fig. 5**). Similar K_d
12 values could be estimated for the two single mutants Q108L (65 ± 5 nM) and K40L (70 ± 5 nM),
13 which are much higher than that determined for WT CRBP1 (4.5 ± 0.5 nM). In the case of the
14 double mutant K40L/Q108L CRBP1, the estimated K_d value is approx. 250 nM (250 ± 30 nM),
15 indicating that the substitution of both key residues results in a further strong decrease in binding
16 affinity.
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30 **DISCUSSION**

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33 The interactions of retinol bound inside the cavity of the various forms, WT and mutant, of CRBP1
34 are summarized in Table II. The retinol in all cases is bound in the same orientation, and its -OH
35 group interacts, when possible, with Lys40 and Gln108. When Lys40 is absent, the interaction is
36 limited to Gln108, whilst when the latter residue is absent the -OH is present in double
37 conformation and it interacts with both Lys40 and Met62. In the K40L/Q108L double mutant, the
38 retinol end moiety -CH₂-OH is mobile and its position is not visible in the electron density, while
39 the maintenance of the shape of the cavity appears to be sufficient to hold the ligand in its position.
40 At the same time, the Q108L and K40L mutant forms and the Q108L/K40L double mutant form
41 exhibit low and very low binding affinities, respectively, for the retinol molecule, as compared to
42 WT CRBP1. Taken together, the latter data indicate that the extensive hydrophobic interactions
43 between the ligand and hydrophobic residues lining the binding cavity are strong enough to retain
44 the ligand, and that polar interactions of the retinol hydroxyl end group with Lys40 and Gln08
45 residues play a crucial role to induce a high binding affinity and binding specificity.
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57 An apparent K_d value of about 4.5 nM has been determined here by spectrofluorometric
58 titration for the binding of retinol to human WT CRBP1, to be compared with higher (10-20 nM,
59 Ong et al. 1994; Silvaroli et al. 2016) and lower (2 nM, Malpeli et al., 1995) K_d values that were
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1 determined previously for CRBP1 by using the same technique. It should be pointed out, however,
2 that such values may represent overestimates of the K_d values, as suggested by Ong et al. (1994)
3 and evaluated experimentally by means of competitive binding assays by Malpeli et al. (1995). In
4 particular, the latter assays indicated that the K_d value for the binding of retinol to CRBP1 may be
5 as low as 0.1 nM.
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10 When the crystal structures of human WT apo and holo CRBP1 are compared, they are
11 essentially identical. When such structures are compared with those containing a His₆-Tag
12 (Silvaroli et al., 2016), the holo forms are highly similar, with the exception of the last residues at
13 the C-terminus, which are influenced by the presence of the His-Tag. Instead, a striking difference
14 between the E-F loops of the two apo forms is observed. In this respect, it should be noted that the
15 holo crystals of HT CRBP1 and the apo and holo crystals of WT CRBP1 are nearly isomorphous,
16 whilst the apo crystals of HT and WT CRBP1 are not, despite the fact that they belong to the same
17 space group P2₁2₁2₁. On the contrary, crystals of WT holo, apo, and mutant forms of CRBP1 are all
18 isomorphous. Notably, NMR studies have previously shown that the structures in solution of rat
19 WT apo and holo CRBP1 are also highly similar (Mittag et al., 2006), in agreement with our
20 results on the X-ray analyses of the crystal structures of human WT apo and holo CRBP1.
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30 Regarding the difference between HT and WT apoproteins, it should be pointed out that the
31 His-Tag tail in the crystal is close to the region 57-60, one of the two areas involved in
32 conformational differences between holo- and apo- proteins (the distance between the imidazole
33 ring of His140 and the closest atom of Asn59 is about 5 Å, and that between His139 and the closest
34 atom of Arg52 is less than 4 Å). In regard to this point, we could hypothesize that the
35 destabilization of this area in HT apo CRBP1 is transmitted to the nearby 75-79 loop. This
36 destabilization is likely to be possible due to the lack of a ligand bound inside the cavity, which by
37 itself is able to stabilize the 3D structure in the holoprotein. On the contrary, in the absence of the
38 ligand a less rigid protein scaffold could be destabilized by the interaction of the protein surface
39 with the His-Tag tail. His residues are likely to be mostly protonated at the acidic pH of the
40 crystallization medium (Silvaroli et al., 2016). However, the detection of a greater structural
41 mobility also in the simulation with unprotonated His-residues indicates that the presence of the His
42 positive charges is not responsible for the higher flexibility. The results of molecular dynamics
43 simulations also reveal interactions between the His-Tag with the protein surface that lead to a
44 destabilization of the portal region. Examples of other proteins indicating that the His-Tag may
45 have an impact on critical properties of proteins are present in the literature ((Randolph, 2012),
46 and references therein). Interestingly, in a previous study the high resolution crystal structures of
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1 WT apo and holo human cellular retinoic acid binding type II (CRABP II) were found to be very
2 similar, while the crystallization of the His₆-tagged protein resulted in poorly diffracting crystals
3 (Vaezeslami et al., 2006).
4

5 The retinol molecule is deeply buried inside its binding cavity in CRBP1. This feature
6 ensures the complete shield and protection of the ligand from the external environment. Since the
7 superimposition of apo- and holo-structures of WT CRBP1 reveals for both a closed conformation
8 and only minimal changes between them, as-yet-uncharacterized conformational changes affecting
9 the putative portal region are expected to occur upon retinol uptake and release. The analysis of
10 thermal motions, based on crystallographic B-factors, indicates for WT CRBP1 a high flexibility of
11 the region comprising α -helix-II and CD- and EF-loops, especially in the case of the apoprotein.
12 Such flexibility may account for the occurrence of transient conformational changes affecting the
13 portal region, necessary to allow the retinol to access the CRBP1 binding cavity as well as its
14 release from the cavity.
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26 **Acknowledgments**

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35 Figure Captions

36 **Fig. 1. Structures of different forms of CRBP1.** (A) Cartoon view of WT holo CRBP1 with the retinol
37 bound inside the inner cavity of the protein, showing the proximity of the retinol hydroxyl end group with
38 the side chains of Gln-108 and Lys-40. (B) Same as (A), for CRBP1 in complex with a hypothetical fatty
39 acid (palmitic acid). The electron density was calculated with coefficients $(2F_{\text{obs}} - F_{\text{calc}})$ and contoured at
40 1.5 σ level. (C) Superposition of C α chain traces of WT holo CRBP1 (chartreuse green), WT delipidated apo
41 CRBP1 (orange), holo Q108L/K40L CRBP1 (pale cyan) and WT CRBP1 in complex with palmitic acid
42 (raspberry). Figures 1, 2 and 3 were drawn using PyMOL (Pymol version 1.7.4, Schrödinger, LLC).

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49 **Fig. 2. Ligand-CRBP1 interactions.** Ligand-protein interactions are shown for different forms of CRBP1:
50 A) WT CRBP1-retinol complex; B) K40L CRBP1-retinol complex; C) Q108L CRBP1-retinol complex; D)
51 CRBP1 in complex with palmitic acid (pink). In panel C), the retinol is present in two different orientations
52 (yellow and orange), with the –OH group pointing towards either Lys40 or Met62.

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57 **Fig. 3. Molecular Dynamics simulations.** RMSF values are shown for C α atoms of WT apo CRBP1
58 without His-Tag (black line), with protonated His-Tag (blue line) and with unprotonated His-Tag (red line).
59 RMSF values were calculated on the last 70 ns of MD simulations.

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1 **Fig. 4. Analysis of crystallographic B-factors.** Cartoon panels showing some of the structures of CRBP1
2 determined here colored according to the temperature factors of the atoms, from blue (lowest) to red
3 (highest): A) WT holo CRBP1; B) holo K40L CRBP1; C) holo Q108L CRBP1; D) holo K40L-Q108L
4 CRBP1; E) delipidated apo CRBP1; F) apo K40L CRBP1. Secondary structure assignment was
5 automatically performed according to PyMOL definition (The PyMOL Molecular Graphics System, Version
6 1.5.0.4 Schrödinger, LLC).
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13 **Fig. 5. Retinol binding assays.** Representative titration curves for the interaction of retinol with WT CRBP1
14 (A), Q108L CRBP1 (B), K40L CRBP1 (C), and Q108L/K40L CRBP1 (D). The estimated K_d values are 4.5
15 nM for WT CRBP1, 64 nM for Q108L CRBP1, 71 nM for K40L CRBP1 and 255 nM for the double mutant
16 Q108L/K40L CRBP1. For each panel the absorption spectrum of the corresponding CRBP1 form in complex
17 with retinol is also shown. For experimental details see Materials and Methods.
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Figure 1
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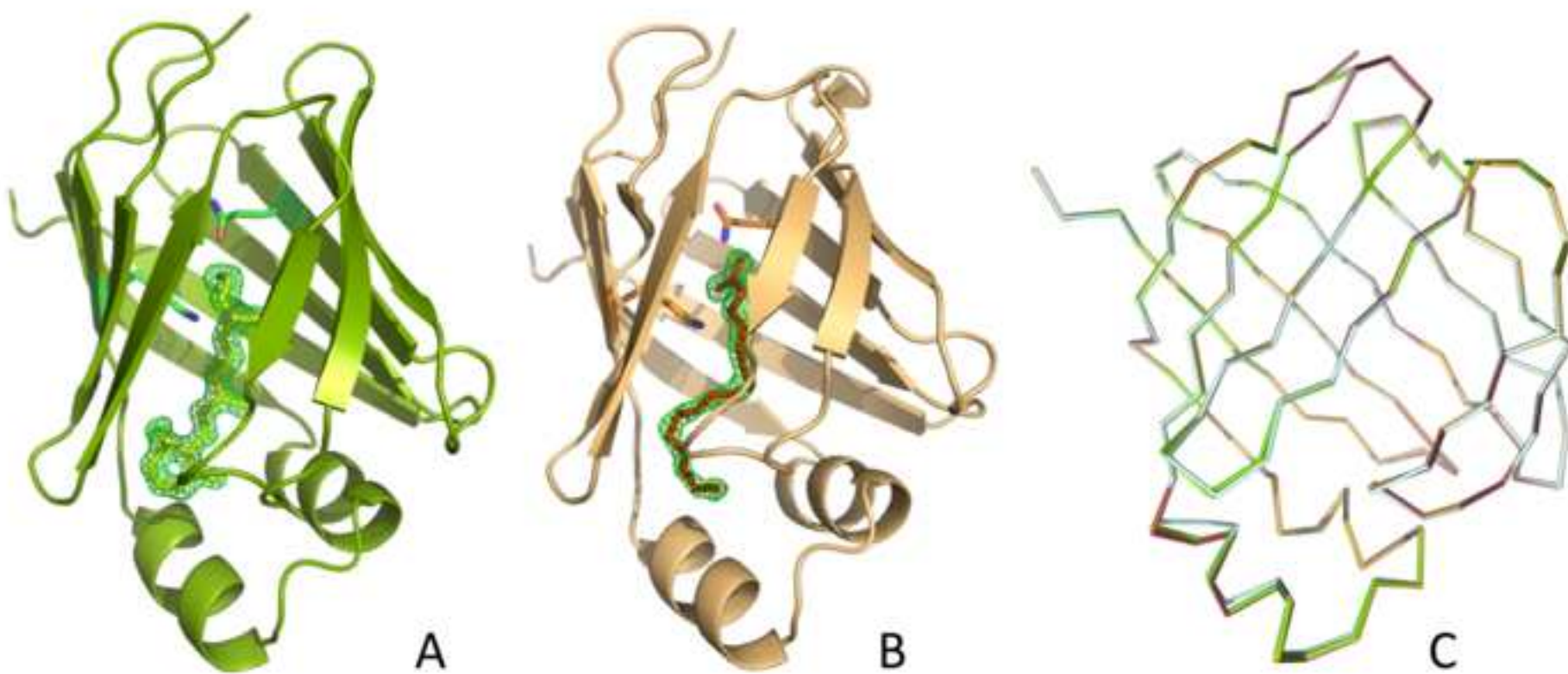


Figure 2
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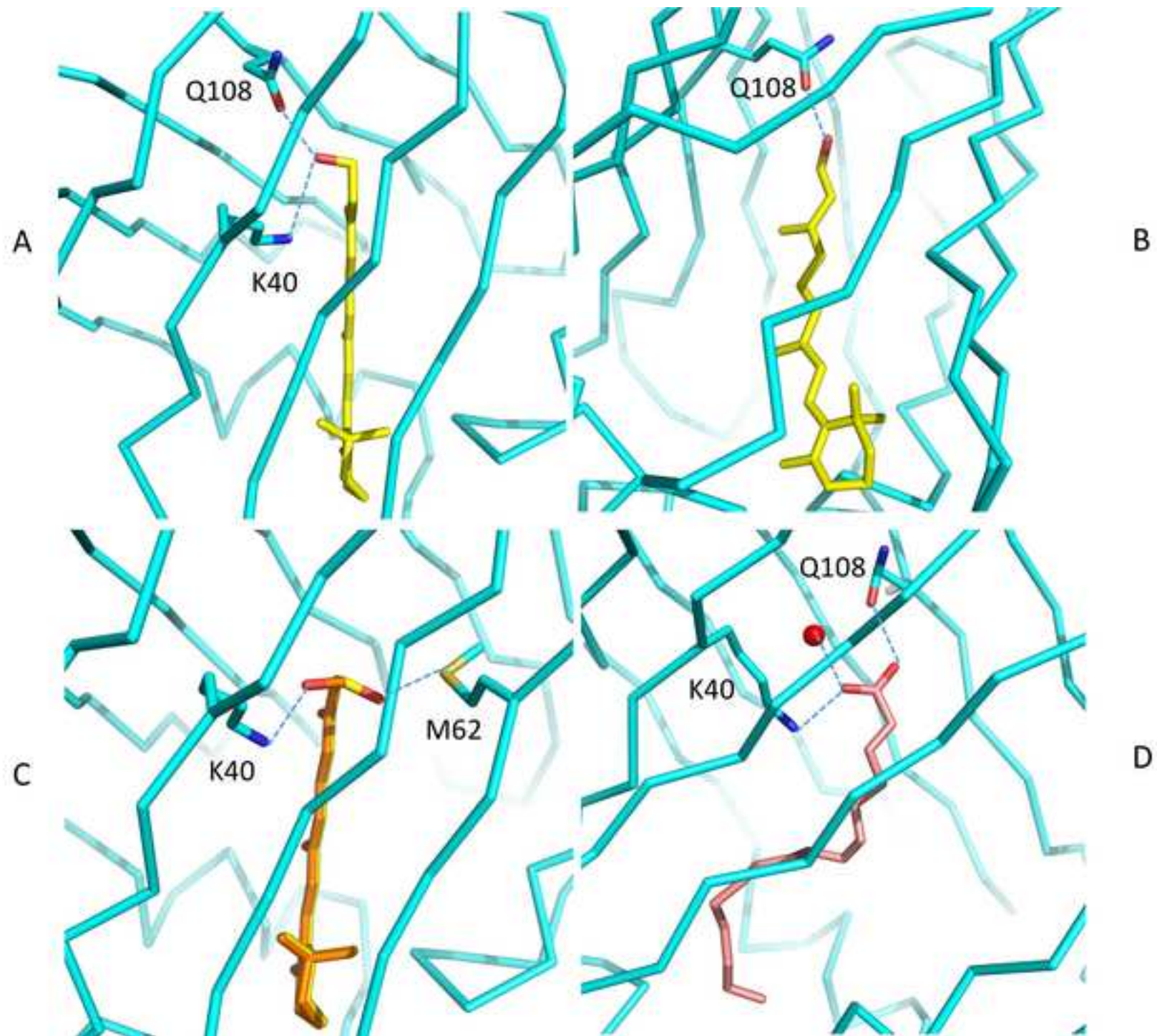


Figure 3
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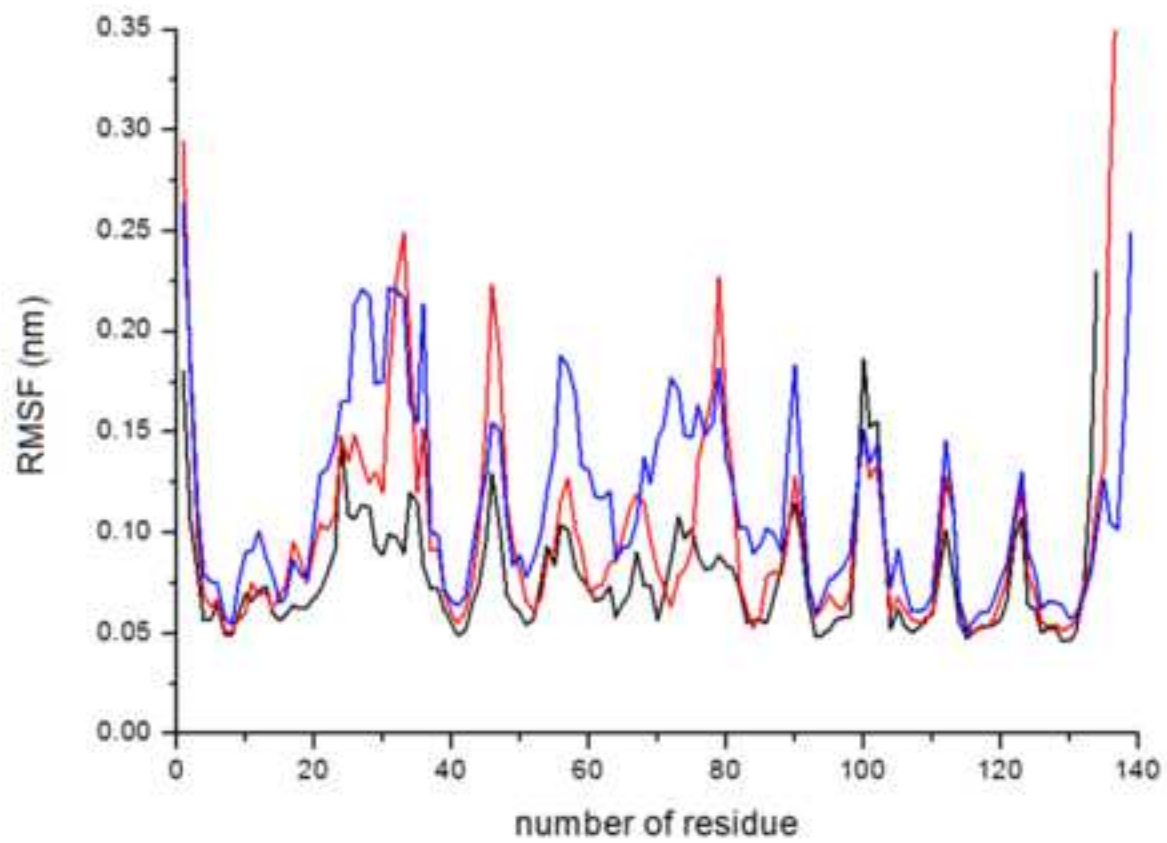


Figure 4
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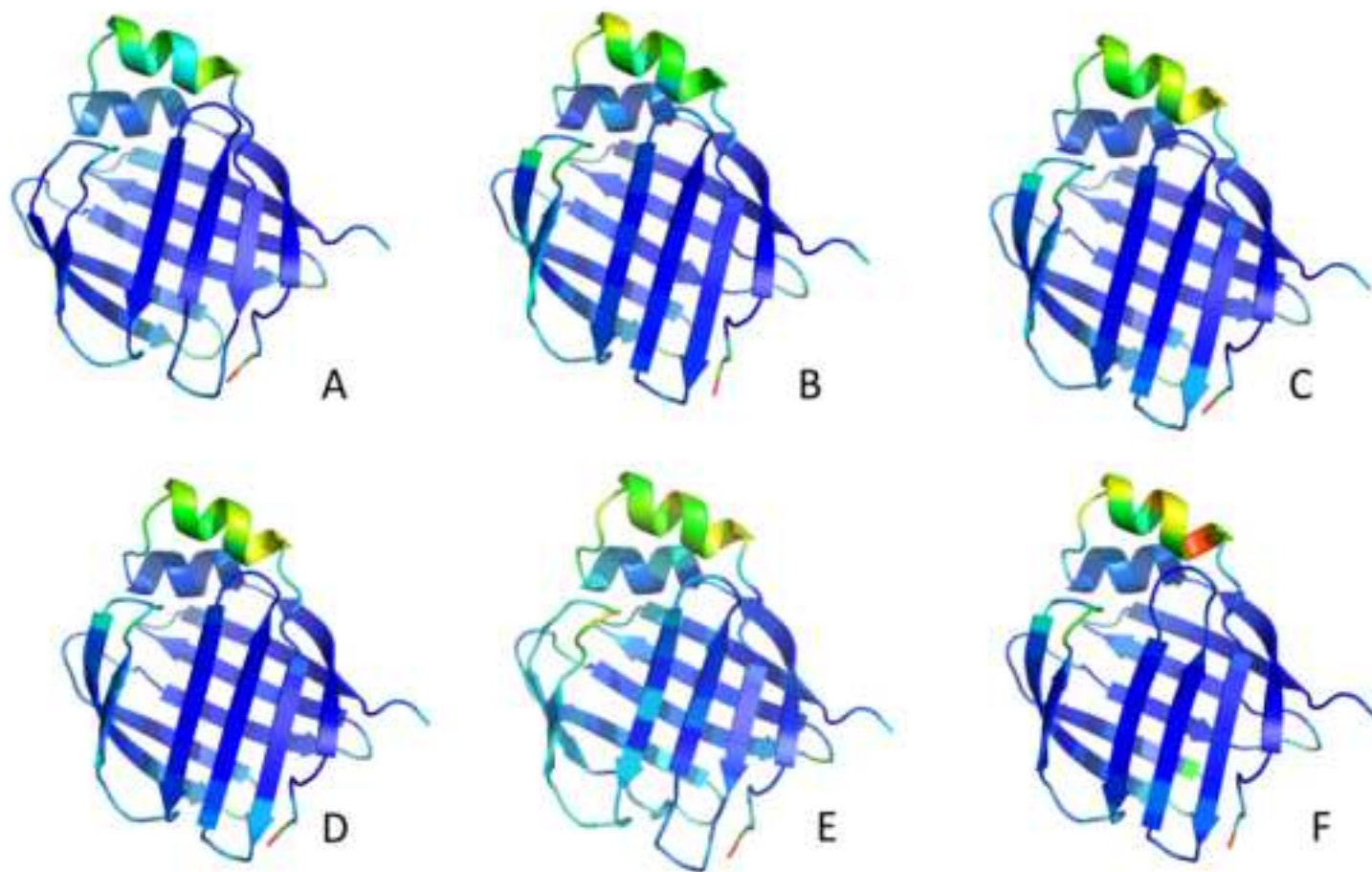
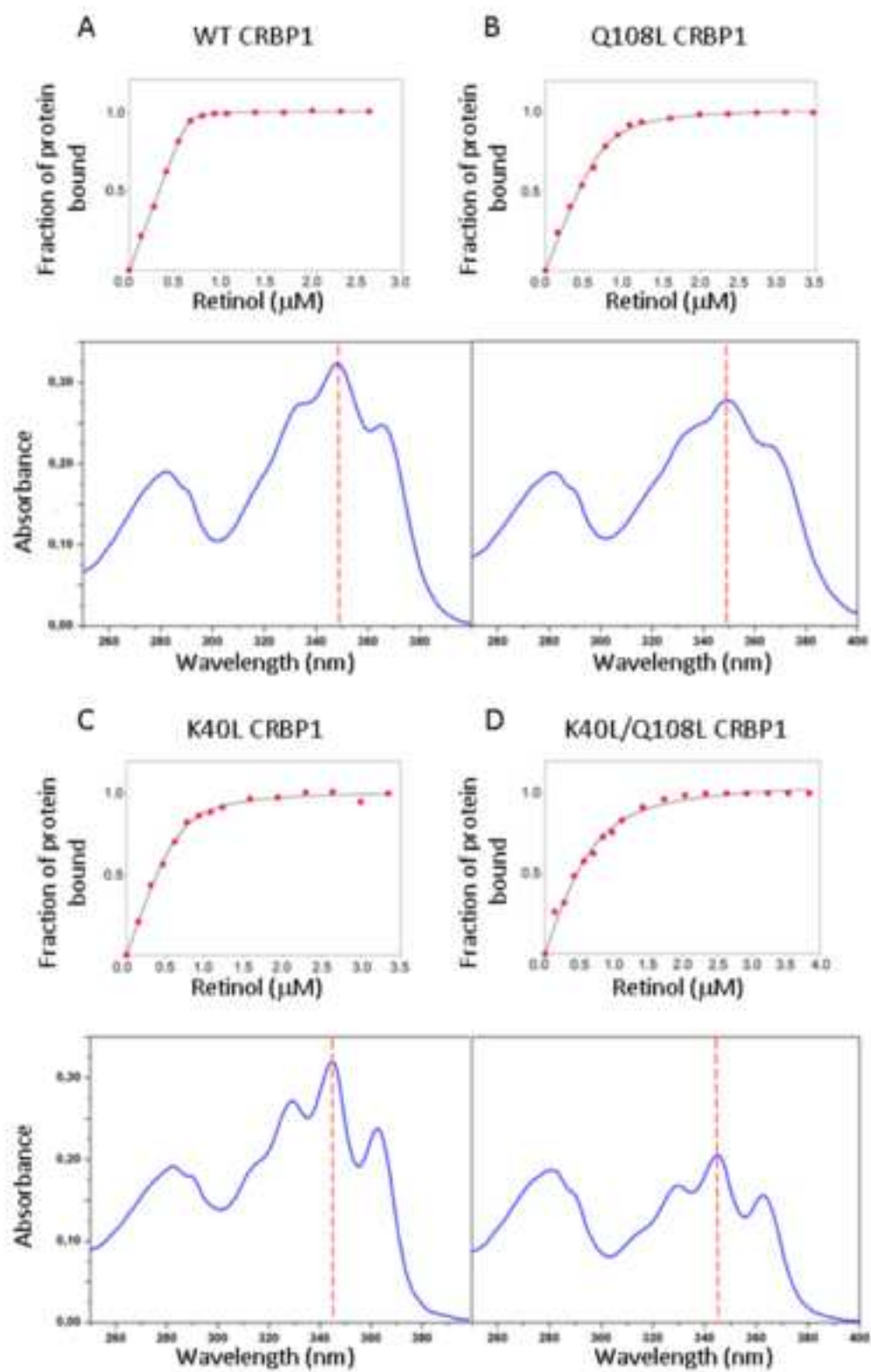


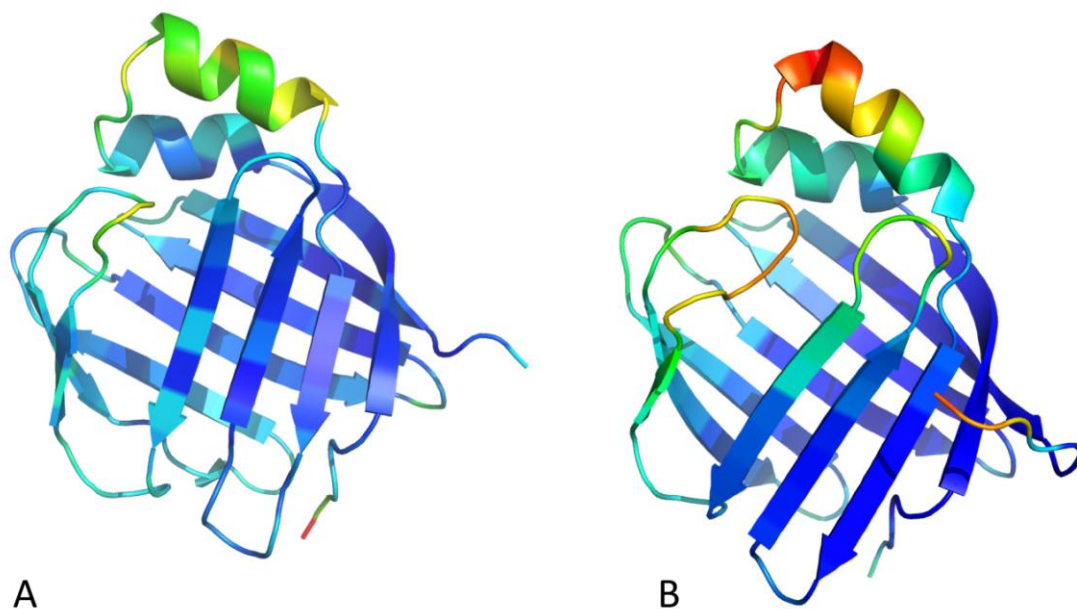
Figure 5

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Supplemental Data - Fig. 1

Thermal motions for apo-CRBP1 structures. Cartoon structural models of delipidated WT apo CRBP1 (A) and HT apo CRBP1 (PDB ID 5H9A) (B), colored according to the temperature factors of the atoms, from blue (lowest) to red (highest).



Supplemental Data - Fig. 1

Table I. Statistics on data collection and refinement. 1800 frames of 0.1° each were collected. Numbers in parentheses refer to the last resolution shell.

X-ray data	Holo CRBP1	Holo CRBP1/Q108L	Holo CRBP1/K40L	Holo CRBP1/Q108L-K40L
Wavelength (Å)	0.91881	0.91881	1.000	0.91881
Space group	P2 ₁ 2 ₁ 2 ₁	P2 ₁ 2 ₁ 2 ₁	P2 ₁ 2 ₁ 2 ₁	P2 ₁ 2 ₁ 2 ₁
Cell parameters [a,b,c, Å]	34.120, 49.142, 75.801	34.035, 48.563, 75.748	34.483, 47.187, 81.033	34.544, 47.414, 80.595
Resolution (Å)	41.23 – 1.26 (1.33-1.26)	40.88–1.43 (1.51–1.43)	47.19-1.61 (1.67-1.61)	47.41-1.40 (1.48-1.40)
Independent reflections	34,582 (4,718)	23,562 (2,724)	17,701 (1718)	26,769 (3,676)
Multiplicity	6.0 (5.4)	3.3 (3.0)	3.9 (4.0)	6.1 (5.7)
Completeness (%)	99.0 (94.5)	94.4 (82.5)	99.6 (99.8)	99.6 (98.1)
<I/σ(I)>	17.5 (2.9)	9.2 (2.2)	11.4 (1.6)	18.3 (2.7)
R _{merge}	0.038 (0.475)	0.063 (0.504)	0.058 (0.643)	0.043 (0.518)
R _{pim}	0.018 (0.241)	0.042 (0.293)	0.038 (0.421)	0.021 (0.255)
Refinement				
Protein atoms (no hydrogen) / solvent atoms /ligand /others	1136 / 179 / 21	1141 / 180 / 21	1107 / 195 / 21 / 1	1102 / 112 / 21
R _{cryst} / R _{free}	0.165 / 0.184	0.181 / 0.214	0.183 / .0234	0.194 / 0.223
Geometry				
Ramachandran favored /outliers (%)	97.0 / 0.0	97.0/0.0	97.0/ 0.0	97.0/0.0
Rotamer outliers	0.0%	0.8%		0.8%
Overall score	1.5	1.8		1.6
R.m.s.d. on bonds length [Å], angles (°)	0.011, 1.65	0.012, 1.71	0.012, 1.59	0.012, 1.57

* Completeness is low at the highest resolution, but data were left, since statistics are very good. The completeness is 99% at 1.37Å, which can be considered the actual resolution.

Table I. Continue

X-ray data	Delipidated apo CRBP1	Apo CRBP1/K40L	CRBP1-palmitic acid
Wavelength (Å)	0.973186	1.00003	0.91881
Space group	P2 ₁ 2 ₁ 2 ₁	P2 ₁ 2 ₁ 2 ₁	P2 ₁ 2 ₁ 2 ₁
Cell parameters [a,b,c, Å]	34.061, 47.888, 76.064	34.531, 47.603, 77.944	34.340, 48.133, 77.555
Resolution (Å)	47.89-1.70 (1.76-1.70)	47.60-1.52 (1.61-1.52)	48.13-1.15 (1.21-1.15)
Independent reflections	14,255 (1,327)	20,143 (2720)	37,927 (1,492)
Multiplicity	9.4 (6.7)	6.3 (5.8)	5.4 (2.0)
Completeness (%)	99.8 (98.5)	99.0 (93.8)	80.6 (22.4)*
<I/σ(I)>	7.4 (0.8)	27.2 (3.2)	24.9 (3.6)
R _{merge}	0.132 (0.89)	0.031 (0.468)	0.033 (0.227)
R _{pim}	0.068 (0.663)	0.016 (0.228)	0.016 (0.170)
Refinement			
Protein atoms (no hydrogen) / solvent atoms / ligand/others	1119 / 124	1108 / 138 / 0 / 1	1129 / 234/ 18
R _{cryst} / R _{free}	0.206 / 0.251	0.171 / 0.198	0.153 / 0.173
Geometry			
Ramachandran favored / outliers (%)	97.0 / 0.0	96.2/ 0.0	96.3/ 0.0
Rotamer outliers	0.8	2.5	0.0
Overall score	1.3		1.7

RMSD on bonds length [Å], angles (°)	0.012, 1.14	0.012, 1.42	0.008, 1.24
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Table II. Hydrogen bond interactions between the hydroxyl oxygen atom of retinol and protein atoms. The actual distance is reported in parentheses. In the Q108L/K40L mutant the electron density is not clear for the retinol -C₁₅-OH group, whilst the rest of the ligand is clearly visible.

CRBP1-retinol complexes	Interaction 1	Interaction 2	Electron density
WT*	Oε1 Q108 (2.92 Å)	NζK40 (3.22 Å)	Very clear for all retinol
K40L*	Oε1 Q108 (2.41 Å)	---	Very clear for all retinol
Q108L*	Sδ M62 (2.77 Å)	Nζ K40 (2.57 Å)	Reasonable density for the -OH group
Q108L/K40L**	---	---	No density for the -C ₁₅ -OH group

* In both WT and K40L mutant form the -OH group of retinol does not interact with any solvent molecule. In the Q108L mutant form it is present in double conformation and in each of them it interacts with a water molecule.

** In the deposited structure, although its electron density is not defined, the retinol -OH group is at 2.29 Å from Sδ of M62 and at 2.34 Å from a water molecule, well defined and held in place by three H-bonds with the carbonyl groups of Y60 and I51 and Oγ of T53.

Supplementary Material (Online Only)

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