

Structure of the Bcr-Abl oncoprotein oligomerization domain

Xun Zhao¹, Saghi Ghaffari², Harvey Lodish², Vladimir N. Malashkevich¹ and Peter S. Kim^{1,3}

¹Howard Hughes Medical Institute, Whitehead Institute for Biomedical Research, Department of Biology, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Nine Cambridge Center, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02142-1401, USA. ²Whitehead Institute for Biomedical Research, Department of Biology, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Nine Cambridge Center, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02142-1401, USA. ³Present address: Merck Research Laboratories, 770 Sumneytown Pike, West Point, Pennsylvania 19486-0004, USA.

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The Bcr-Abl oncoprotein is responsible for a wide range of human leukemias, including most cases of Philadelphia chromosome-positive chronic myelogenous leukemia. Oligomerization of Bcr-Abl is essential for oncogenicity. We determined the crystal structure of the N-terminal oligomerization domain of Bcr-Abl (residues 1–72 or Bcr_{1–72}) and found a novel mode of oligomer formation. Two N-shaped monomers dimerize by swapping N-terminal helices and by forming an antiparallel coiled coil between C-terminal helices. Two dimers then stack onto each other to form a tetramer. The Bcr_{1–72} structure provides a basis for the design of inhibitors of Bcr-Abl transforming activity by disrupting Bcr-Abl oligomerization.

The *Bcr-Abl* oncogene is essential in the development of over 95% of chronic myelogenous leukemias (CML) and 20% of acute lymphoblastic leukemias (ALL)^{1,2}. *Bcr-Abl* is formed by the fusion of the *Bcr* gene on chromosome 22 with the protooncogene *c-Abl* on chromosome 9 in a reciprocal translocation event that results in the formation of the 'Philadelphia chromosome'². *c-Abl* encodes a nonreceptor tyrosine kinase, whose activity is tightly regulated in normal cells³. The fusion of *Bcr* sequences upstream

of *c-Abl* constitutively activates Abl tyrosine kinase and is essential for Bcr-Abl transformation^{4,5} (Fig. 1). The N-terminal oligomerization domain of Bcr is required for Abl kinase activation⁶. Therefore, disrupting Bcr oligomerization represents a potential therapeutic strategy for inhibiting Bcr-Abl oncogenicity.

To reveal the molecular details of Bcr-Abl oligomerization and to provide a structural basis for inhibitor design, we expressed, characterized and determined the X-ray crystal structure of the oligomerization domain of Bcr-Abl (residues 1–72 or Bcr_{1–72}) (Fig. 1). Initially, we characterized several variants of the oligomerization domain. Previous studies indicated a coiled-coil region for residues 28–68 (ref. 6); therefore, we tested whether this region was sufficient for oligomerization. The coiled-coil segment (residues 30–65 or Bcr_{30–65}) (Fig. 1), produced by standard peptide synthesis, formed a stable α -helical structure with a midpoint of thermal denaturation (T_m) of 60 °C. However, Bcr_{30–65} had poor solubility in physiological buffers. We found that residues beyond the coiled-coil segment provided additional structural stability and solubility. The recombinant Bcr_{1–72} formed a stable α -helical structure with a T_m of 84 °C.

Overall architecture of Bcr_{1–72}

Diffraction-quality crystals were obtained only when we mutated Cys 38 to Ala in Bcr_{1–72} (denoted Bcr_{1–72}C38A). Numerous studies indicated that the structural heterogeneity caused by random oxidation of sulfhydryl groups and subsequent protein misfolding often prevents crystallization. Bcr_{1–72}C38A demonstrates the same helicity and T_m as Bcr_{1–72}. We solved the X-ray crystal structure by using multiwavelength anomalous diffraction (MAD)⁷ data from a selenomethionine (SeMet)-substituted Bcr_{1–72} crystal and refined the structure to 2.2 Å resolution (Table 1). The asymmetric unit of the Bcr_{1–72} crystals contains eight equivalent protein chains that form two identical tetramers. This observation is consistent with previous biochemical studies, where tetramers were found for both the oligomerization domain and the full-length Bcr-Abl^{6,8}. Each monomer consists of a short N-terminal helix (residues 5–15, referred to as α_1), a flexible loop (residues 16–27) and a long C-terminal helix (residues 28–67, referred to as α_2) (Fig. 1). Together these form an N-shaped structure, with the loop allow-

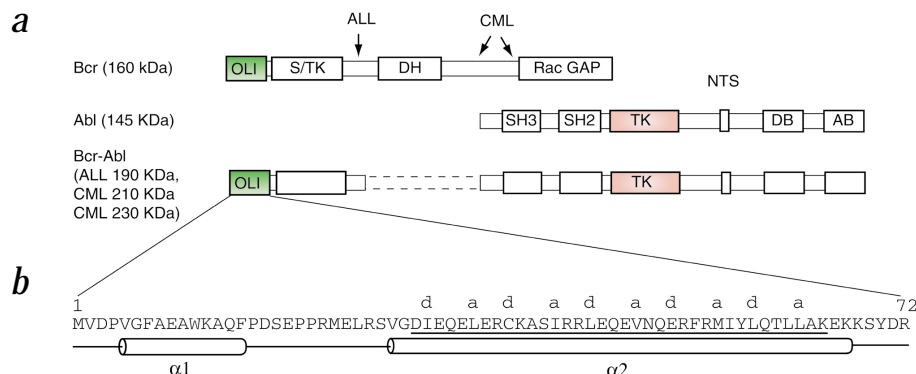


Fig. 1 Structural and functional domains of Bcr, Abl and Bcr-Abl³⁷. **a**, The human Bcr protein contains 1,271 amino acids and multiple domains, including the oligomerization domain (OLI), the serine/threonine kinase domain (S/TK), the domain homologous to the human Dbl and yeast Cdc24 proteins (DH) and the domain with GTPase-activating activity for Rac (RacGAP). The *c-Abl* protein contains 1,097 amino acids, which include the Src-homology domains 3/2 (SH3/SH2), tyrosine kinase domain (TK), nuclear translocation signal (NTS), DNA binding domain (DB) and actin-binding motif (AB). Two domains essential for transforming activity — OLI from Bcr and TK from Abl — are depicted in green and red, respectively. The other domains are not colored. Depending on the site of the breakpoint in the *Bcr* gene, the fusion protein can vary in size from 190 to 230 kDa. Each fusion protein contains the same portion of the *c-Abl* protein but differs in the length of the Bcr portion. The breakpoints in *Bcr* that occur in CML and ALL are indicated by arrowheads. **b**, The sequence of Bcr_{1–72} is indicated, with the sequence of the coiled-coil region (Bcr_{30–65}) underlined. Letters immediately above the sequence indicate the heptad repeat 'a' and 'd' positions. Heptad repeats — a repeated seven-amino acid pattern, denoted (a-g)_n, with hydrophobic residues at the first (a) and fourth (d) positions — are a key feature of coiled-coil sequences^{38–40}. Cylinders below the sequence indicate the α_1 helix (residues 5–15) and the α_2 helix (residues 28–67) observed in the crystal structure.

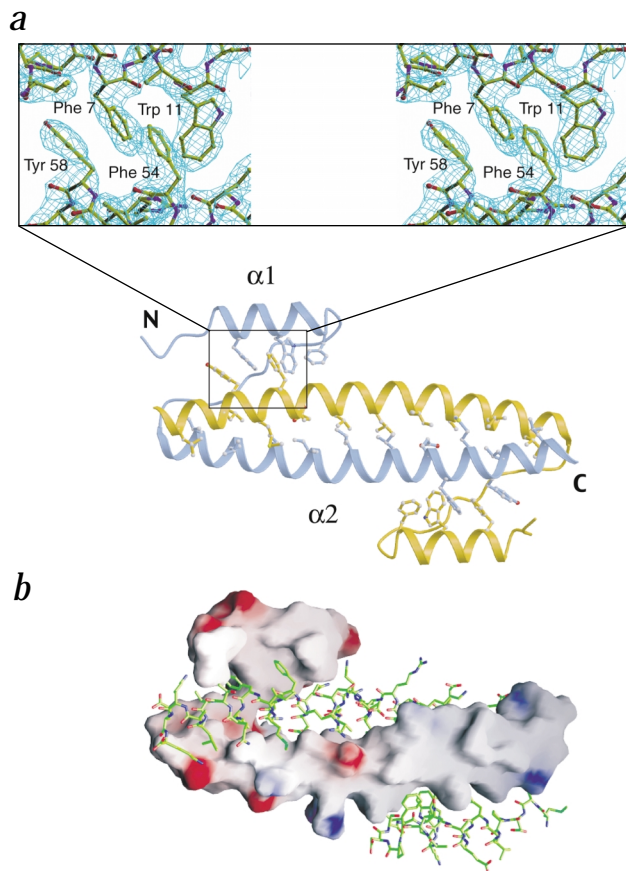


Fig. 2 Extensive interactions in the dimer interface. **a**, In the dimer, the $\alpha 2$ helix of one monomer (blue) is sandwiched between the $\alpha 1$ and $\alpha 2$ helices of a second monomer (yellow), and *vice versa*. The side chains of 'a' and 'd' residues in the coiled coil and the residues in the aromatic core are displayed. The residues in the coiled-coil region and the aromatic core are well defined in electron density maps (average main chain B-factor $\sim 30 \text{ \AA}^2$), whereas residues beyond the interface area and those from the loop are quite flexible (average main chain B-factor $\sim 53 \text{ \AA}^2$). The aromatic core is boxed. Inset shows an expanded stereo view of the MAD-phased electron density contoured at 1.2σ in the area of the aromatic core. For a clearer view, Phe 15 is not shown. **b**, Surface electrostatic potential of one monomer, with its dimeric partner shown in green. Basic regions are blue, and acidic regions are red. Nearly $4,200 \text{ \AA}^2$ of the solvent-accessible surface is buried upon dimer formation. Figure prepared using MOLSCRIPT⁴¹ and GRASP⁴².

ing the two helices of one monomer to assume a parallel orientation (Fig. 2a).

Dimer interface

The monomers associate into a dimer through the formation of an antiparallel coiled coil between the $\alpha 2$ helices and domain swapping⁹ (an exchange of secondary structural elements between constituent monomers) of two $\alpha 1$ helices, where one $\alpha 1$ helix swings back and packs against the $\alpha 2$ helix from the second monomer (Fig. 2a,b). The four helices in the dimer lie approximately in one plane. The intertwined packing arrangement gives rise to an extensive dimer interface, with a total of 217 van der Waals contacts (radius cutoff = 4 \AA), seven salt bridges and three hydrogen bonds.

More than half of the dimer interface lies within the hydrophobic core in the antiparallel coiled coil. Most of the residues at 'a' and 'd' positions of the heptad repeat (Fig. 1) — including Ile 31, Leu 35, Ile 42, Leu 45, Val 49, Met 56, Leu 59 and Leu 63 — are hydrophobic and pack in a typical 'knobs-in-

holes' mode^{10,11}. The exception is Glu 52 at position 'd'; this charged residue is stabilized by forming an intrachain salt bridge with Arg 55 at position 'g'. Apart from the hydrophobic core in the coiled-coil interface, there is a predominantly aromatic core between the $\alpha 1$ helix of one chain (including Phe 7, Trp 11 and Phe 15) and the $\alpha 2$ helix of the other chain (including Phe 54 and Tyr 58) (Fig. 2a, inset). This exchange of $\alpha 1$ helices buries a hydrophobic patch on the outer surface of the coiled coil and provides additional structural stability. Our structure reveals an efficient way of assembling dimers and providing improved stability by using a hybrid of two distinct oligomerization modes — antiparallel coiled-coil packing and domain swapping — that are both recognized as important mechanisms for forming oligomeric proteins^{9,12}.

Tetramer versus dimer in kinase activation

Two dimers associate into a tetramer with an $\sim 130^\circ$ crossing angle between the dimer coiled-coil axes (Fig. 3); notably, the dimer-dimer interface is significantly less polar than the solvent-exposed surface (Fig. 4). However, the physiological significance of tetramer formation remains to be determined. Previous studies have shown that substitution of the Bcr oligomerization domain with the GCN4 dimeric, parallel coiled coil also activated kinase activity¹³. In addition, different dimerization motifs, such as the helix-loop-helix domain in Tel oncprotein, can activate Abl and lead to a different type of leukemia¹⁴. These results support the notion that the mere clustering of kinase domains, mediated by dimerization, is sufficient to induce activation in a way similar to the activation of receptor tyrosine kinases by ligands¹⁵. However, our crystal structure suggests that a tetramer might be more efficient than a dimer in bringing downstream domains together. The distance between the two C-termini in the dimer is $\sim 60 \text{ \AA}$, whereas tetramer formation brings opposite C-termini across the dimer-dimer interface into a closer proximity of $\sim 24 \text{ \AA}$. An interesting test of whether tetramerization further potentiates the Abl tyrosine kinase activity induced by a dimer alone would be to disrupt the dimer-dimer interface.

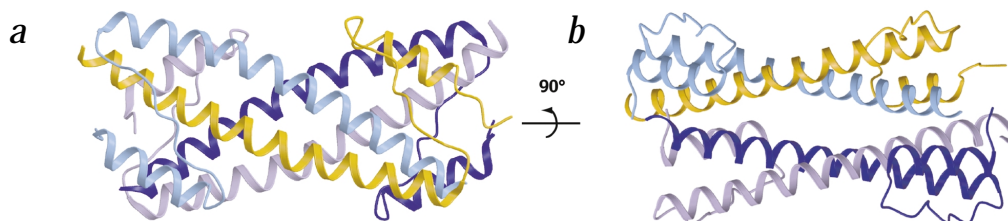


Fig. 3 Packing of Bcr₁₋₇₂ tetramers with two orthogonal views. The tetramer has an approximate 222-point symmetry, with three two-fold rotation axes intersecting near Leu 45. The four monomers are colored in yellow, blue, dark purple and light purple. **a**, Top view looking down the flat surface of helix bundles in dimers. **b**, Side view showing dimer-dimer stacking.

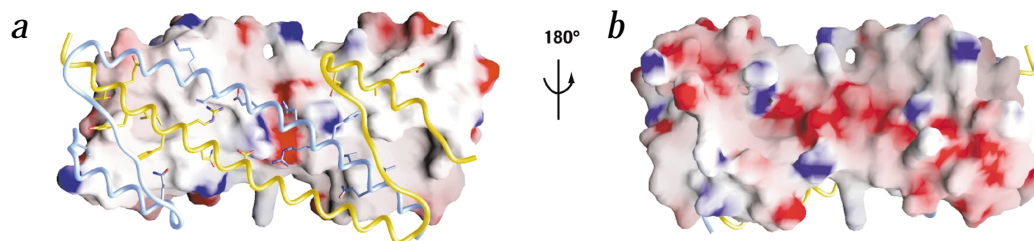


Fig. 4 Dimer–dimer interface. Upon the association of two dimers, $\sim 3,400 \text{ \AA}^2$ of the solvent-accessible surface is buried. There are two views of the surface electrostatic potential of one dimer, with the other dimer displayed as a ribbon. Basic regions on the surface are blue, and acidic regions are red. The side chains of the residues involved in dimer–dimer interactions are shown. **a**, Front view of the highly hydrophobic surface involved in the association with another dimer. **b**, Back view showing the highly hydrophilic surface that is solvent exposed.

Oligomerization domain as a drug target

The Bcr–Abl oligomerization domain has been shown to inhibit full-length Bcr–Abl oligomerization in a dominant-negative manner. The N-terminal 160 amino acids of Bcr, which contain the oligomerization domain as well as the full-length Bcr, inhibit Bcr–Abl transformation^{16,17}. Because both the kinase and oligomerization domains are essential for Bcr–Abl oncogenicity, they may independently serve as drug targets. A specific kinase inhibitor has been shown to target the Abl kinase domain¹⁸ and has been clinically effective in the treatment of CML¹⁹. However, drug-resistant leukemic cells have been observed in CML patients following drug treatment²⁰. Targeting the BCR oligomerization domain may provide a complementary therapeutic approach to specifically disrupting Bcr–Abl transformation potential. Our crystal structure provides a template for the rational design of inhibitors disrupting Bcr–Abl oligomerization. There are several examples in the literature of identification of small molecules²¹ or peptides that inhibit protein–protein interactions (including oligomerization). Inhibition of HIV-1 gp41 fusion protein with various peptides provides a clear proof-of-concept^{22,23}. Our structure reveals that regular coiled-coil packing is key to dimerization of Bcr–Abl. Coiled coils are one of the best-studied (if not the best studied) protein–protein interface motifs, and it is reasonable to expect that future work will lead to the design and discovery of heterodimeric partner peptides to disrupt the homodimerization of Bcr–Abl.

Methods

Protein expression and purification. Using optimal codons for *Escherichia coli* expression²⁴, a synthetic gene sequence, denoted Bcr_{1–74}, was constructed to encode residues 1–74 of the human Bcr gene (SWISS-PROT: P11274). A Factor Xa cleavage site was incorporated upstream of the coding sequence. The constructed gene was inserted into the BamHI–HindIII restriction sites of the expression vector pMALc2x (New England Biolabs), from which Bcr_{1–74} can be expressed as a chimera with *E. coli* maltose binding protein (MBP). The plasmid pMBP/Bcr_{1–74} was expressed in *E. coli* TOP 10 F' competent cells. Cells were lysed by French press, and the fusion protein was purified using amylose agarose (New England Biolabs). Beads were suspended in Factor Xa cleavage buffer (50 mM Tris–HCl, pH 8.0, 100 mM NaCl and 2 mM CaCl₂). Factor Xa was added at a 1:500 (w/w) ratio of protease to fusion protein, and the reaction was incubated for 2 d at room temperature. During cleavage, approximately half of the Bcr_{1–74} protein was further trimmed to Bcr_{1–72}. The two fragments, Bcr_{1–74} and Bcr_{1–72}, were readily separated by reverse-phase high-performance liquid chromatography (HPLC) (Waters, Inc.) using a Vydac C18 preparative column (Vydac) with a water–acetonitrile gradient of 0.1% min^{–1} in the presence of 0.1% (v/v) trifluoroacetic acid. Peak fractions were verified by mass spectrometry and lyophilized. Bcr_{30–65} was synthesized on a Perkin Elmer Model 431A peptide synthesizer using the method described²⁵. All peptides had an acetylated N-terminus and

a C-terminal amide. Peptides were purified by reverse-phase HPLC and lyophilized.

A Bcr_{1–74}C38A mutant gene fragment (Cys 38 mutated to Ala) was constructed by primer-mediated recombinant PCR mutagenesis²⁶. The PCR product was inserted into the MBP-expression vector pMALc2x. pMBP/Bcr_{1–74}C38A plasmids were transformed into *E. coli* JM109 competent cells for protein expression. The purification scheme for the mutant protein was the same as for wild type. In the final step, two fragments — Bcr_{1–74}C38A and Bcr_{1–72}C38A — were purified and lyophilized. For SeMet protein expression, the pMBP/Bcr_{1–74}C38A vector and LacI^q gene-carrying pREP4 plasmids were cotransformed into *E. coli* strain DL41 (ref. 27). Large-scale cell growth was carried out as described²⁸. SeMet-protein was purified by a procedure similar to that of the native protein, except 10 mM dithiothreitol (DTT) or β -mercaptoethanol was added to each digestion and purification step.

Table 1 Data collection, phasing, and refinement statistics

	SeMet $\lambda 1$	SeMet $\lambda 2$	SeMet $\lambda 3$
Data collection (20.0–2.2 Å)			
Wavelength (Å)	0.9793	0.9789	0.9684
Completeness ¹ (%)	99.2 (98.7)	99.5 (99.0)	99.3 (98.7)
R _{sym} ^{1,2}	0.054 (0.199)	0.060 (0.256)	0.062 (0.267)
Phasing statistics (20.0–2.6 Å)			
R _{culis} ³			
Acentric		0.85	0.85
Centric		0.90	0.67
Anomalous		0.62	0.67
Phasing power ⁴			
(acentric / centric)		0.91 / 0.58	1.59 / 1.12
Overall figure of merit (before solvent flattening)			0.62
Refinement statistics (20.0–2.2 Å)			
Nonhydrogen protein atoms		4,366	
Water molecules		422	
Number of reflections			
Working		48,746	
Test		2,505	
R _{cryst} ^{1,5}		0.262(0.308)	
R _{free} ^{1,5}		0.295(0.387)	
R.m.s. deviations from ideal			
Bond lengths (Å)		0.008	
Angles (°)		1.42	

¹Values in parentheses correspond to highest resolution shell (2.15–2.20 Å).

² $R_{sym} = \sum_j |I_j - \langle I \rangle| / \sum_j \langle I \rangle$, where I_j is the recorded intensity of the reflection j and $\langle I \rangle$ is the mean recorded intensity over multiple recordings.

³ $R_{culis} = \sum ||F_{(h,k,l)} \pm F_{(h,k,l)}| - |F_{h(k,l),c}| || / \sum |F_{(h,k,l)} \pm F_{(h,k,l)}|$, where $F_{h(k,l),c}$ is the calculated heavy atom structure factor.

⁴Phasing power = $\langle F_{h(k,l)} \rangle / E$, where $\langle F_{h(k,l)} \rangle$ is the r.m.s. heavy atom structure factor and E is the residual lack-of-closure error.

⁵ $R_{cryst}, R_{free} = \sum ||F_o| - |F_c|| / |F|$, where the crystallographic R-factor and R_{free} are calculated using the working and free reflection sets, respectively.

Circular dichroism (CD). CD experiments were performed on an Aviv 62A DS CD spectrometer. Measurements from 200–260 nm were performed in a 10 μ M solution of protein sample in PBS (50 mM Na phosphate and 150 mM NaCl, pH 7.4) in a 1 mm path-length cuvette. Thermal denaturation was performed in a 10 mm pathlength cuvette, and samples were heated from 0–98 °C, with equilibration times of 2 min and an averaging time of 1 min. Protein concentrations were determined by absorbance at 280 nm in 20 mM phosphate-buffered 6 M guanidine hydrochloride, pH 6.5 (ref. 29).

Crystallization, X-ray data collection and structure determination. The best-diffracting crystals grew from 1 μ l of 10 mg ml⁻¹ Bcr_{1–72}C38A sample added to 1 μ l of reservoir buffer, containing ~2.5 M ammonium sulfate, and allowed to equilibrate against 500 μ l of reservoir buffer. Crystals were in space group P2₁ (a = 36.31 Å, b = 122.12 Å, c = 60.45 Å, $\alpha = \gamma = 90^\circ$ and $\beta = 93.24^\circ$). SeMet-Bcr_{1–72}C38A was crystallized in ~1.8 M ammonium sulfate, and crystals were isomorphous to wild type protein. Prior to data collection, native and SeMet-Bcr_{1–72}C38A crystals were transferred into paraffin oil and flash-frozen using X-stream (Molecular Structure Corporation) or Oxford Cryosystems cryogenic crystal coolers. Initial data were collected on a Rigaku RU300 rotating-anode X-ray generator mounted on an R-axis IV area detector (Molecular Structure Corporation). Final native and MAD data sets for Bcr_{1–72} were collected at the Howard Hughes Medical Institute Beamline X4A at Brookhaven National Laboratory using an ADSC Quantum-IV detector. For MAD data, the peak and inflection wavelengths of the selenium K absorption edge as well as the remote wavelength were selected based on the fluorescence spectrum of the SeMet-Bcr_{1–72} crystal (Table 1). To minimize crystal decay between data sets, they were collected in 20° batches, allowing each batch to be collected at each wavelength before moving on to the next. Reflections were integrated and scaled with DENZO and SCALEPACK³⁰. Further diffraction data processing, phase determination and map calculations were performed using the CCP4 suite³¹. Intensities were reduced to amplitudes with TRUNCATE³¹, and the data sets for the wavelengths closest to the selenium K absorption edge (λ_1 , λ_2) were scaled with SCALEIT³¹ to the remote wavelength (λ_3) data set (Table 1). MAD phases were generated with MLPHARE³¹ (Table 1) from 20 selenium atoms located within the asymmetric unit using SOLVE³². Phases were improved and extended to higher resolution with DM³³. Electron density map interpretation and model building were done with O³⁴. The structure of Bcr_{1–72} was refined at 2.2 resolution using CNS³⁵. Both native and MAD data were persistently affected by crystal freezing. For final refinement, we used the MAD (λ_1) data because it suffered less from freezing artifacts and yielded better statistics. The correctness of the structure was checked with simulated annealing omit maps and with PROCHECK³⁶. All residues of Bcr_{1–72} occupy the favored areas of the Ramachandran plot. The conformations of the majority of the residues are well defined, except for a few terminal residues and the loop regions between α -helices.

Coordinates. The coordinates for Bcr_{1–72} have been deposited in the Protein Data Bank (accession code 1K1F) and are available immediately at the website <http://web.wi.mit.edu/kim>.

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Correspondence should be addressed to P.S.K. email: peter_kim@merck.com

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