Jerusalem Balsam Lowers Kynureninic Acid Formation: An In Vitro Study

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Abstract

The present study evaluates the action of Jerusalem Balsam with respect to the biosynthetic machinery of Kynureninic Acid (KYNA) synthesis e.g. the activity of the enzyme synthesizing KYNA, Kynurenine Aminotransferase II (KAT II) in the rat liver homogenate. Subsequently we compared the action of Jerusalem Balsam on KAT II activity in the rat liver homogenate with the action of Cerebrolysin and D-cycloserine, known to inhibit rat liver KAT II activities. We found that Jerusalem Balsam blocked dose-dependently and significantly KAT II activity in the rat liver homogenate. The effect of Jerusalem Balsam on KAT II activity comparing to action of Cerebrolysin or D-cycloserine was strong and significant and the inhibition was seen up to 5 hrs of assay incubation time. Obtained data suggest that lowering of KYNA synthesis by Jerusalem Balsam is a notable biochemical effect since it might influence KYNA levels. Increased KYNA levels, respectively KYNA synthesis has been reported in stroke patient, in patient with respiration and cardiovascular problem and in neuropsychiatric disorders. The possible therapeutic mechanism and advantage of the remedy Jerusalem Balsam, i.e., mixture of plants might be due to modulation of KYNA synthesis and improvement of biochemical processes in the periphery and likely in the CNS.

Keywords: Kynurenine aminotransferase; Kynurenic acid; Liver; Cardiovascular disease; Dementia; D-cycloserine; Cerebrolysin; Jerusalem Balsam

Introduction

The Jerusalem Balsam was formulated in 1719 in the pharmacy of the Saint Savior monastery in the old city of Jerusalem and was replicated and prepared in Europe. The Jerusalem Balsam is based on an ethnologic extract of herbal mixture. There are variations of the formula in current pharmacopoeias (B.P., 1998. The Stationary Office, London, p: 1510; Sweetman, S.C., Blake, P.S., McGlashan, J.M., Parsons, A.V., Martindale: The Extra Pharmacopeia, 33rd edition. Pharmaceutical Press, London, p: 1101). Moussaiief et al. [1] have reported about five different formulas, all referred to as “The Jerusalem Balsam”. One of the formulas, found in a manuscript form in the archive of the monastery, contains four plants: Aloe (Aloe sp.), myrrh (Commiphora spp.), olibanum (Roswellia spp.) and mastic (Pistacia lentiscus L.). Authors conducted pharmacological investigations on this four-plant formula and found its anti-inflammatory, as well as anti-oxidative and anti-septic properties [1]. Recently, Kurkiewicz et al. [2] published composition of the original Jerusalem Balsam was published recently by Kurkiewicz et al. [2]. The compound Cerebrolysin was obtained from EBEWE Pharma, Unterach, Austria. Cerebrolysin is produced by using a standardized controlled enzymatic breakdown of lipid-free porcine brain proteins and consists of free amino acids and peptides with molecular weights of less than 10 kD. In solution Cerebrolysin contains 40 mg dry substance per ml, with a nitrogen content of 5.3 mg.

Material and Methods

D-cycloserine, L-kynurenine, KYNA and pyridoxal-5’-phosphate were purchased from Sigma. All other chemicals used were of the highest commercially available purity. Original Jerusalem Balsam was provided by Dr. Marcelin Jan Pietryja, Herbarium św. Franciszka, Instytut Medycyny Klasztornej, Klasztor Braci Mniejszych Franciszkanów Katowice-Panewniki, Poland. The composition of the original Jerusalem Balsam was published recently by Kurkiewicz et al. [2]. The compound Cerebrolysin was obtained from EBEWE Pharma, Unterach, Austria. Cerebrolysin is produced by using a standardized controlled enzymatic breakdown of lipid-free porcine brain proteins and consists of free amino acids and peptides with molecular weights of less than 10 kD. In solution Cerebrolysin contains 40 mg dry substance per ml, with a nitrogen content of 5.3 mg.

Animals

Male Sprague-Dawley rats (Forschungsinstitut für Versuchstierzucht, Himberg, Austria) of 250-280 g body weight were used. The animals were housed in groups of four to five per cage, in a room with controlled light/dark cycle (12 h light/12 h dark), and were given free access to laboratory chow and tap water. Rats were sacrificed in the morning organs were immediately removed and tissue was frozen at ~70°C until analysis. The number of rats used was N=5.

Assay of KAT II activities

Preparation of homogenate: The tissue samples were homogenised

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in an ice bath in 5 volumes (wt/vol) of 5 mM Tris-acetate buffer 
ph 8.0 containing 50 µM pyridoxal-5'-phosphate and 10 mM 
mercaptoethanol, additionally diluted with the buffer as requested in 
the assay procedure and the homogenates obtained were used for KAT 
II activity determination.

KAT II assay

KAT II activity in the liver homogenate was measured using 
an enzymatic assay described by Baran and Kepplinger [15]. In 
brief, the reaction mixture contained homogenate (0.25 mg of liver 
tissue), 100 µM L-kynurenine, 1 mM pyruvate, 70 µM pyridoxal-5'- 
phosphate and 150 mM Tris-acetate buffer pH 7.4 for KAT II in a 
total volume of 200 µl. After incubation for 2 h at 37°C the reaction 
was stopped by adding 14 µl of 50% trichloroacetic acid and 1 ml 
of 0.1 M HCl. Denatured proteins were removed by centrifugation 
and the synthesized KYNA was purified on a Dowex 50W cation-
exchange column and quantitated by High Performance Liquid 
Chromatography (HPLC) method. Blanks were prepared by boiling 
samples of homogenate for 15 min before adding the reaction mixture. The whole preparations for the assay were performed on 
ic, before the incubation started.

HPLC method for KYNA detection

Measurement of KYNA was performed as described by Baran and 
Kepplinger [15]. The HPLC system consisted of the following: Merck 
Hitachi LaChrom Pump L-7100, Autosampler L-7200, Fluorescence 
Detector L 7485 and a Merck Hitachi D-7500 Integrator. The mobile 
phase consisted of 50 mM sodium acetate, 250 mM zinc acetate, 
an 4% acetonitril, pH 6.15, and was pumped through a 10 × 0.4 
cm column (HR-80, C-18, Particle size 3 µM, InChrom, Austria) 
at flow rate of 0.7 ml/min. The fluorescence detector was set at an 
excitation wavelength of 340 nm and an emission wavelength of 398 
nm. The injection volume was 50 µl. The retention time of KYNA 
was approximately 8.1 min, with a sensitivity of 50 fmol per injection 
(signal: noise ratio=5).

Effect of Jerusalem Balsam on rat liver KAT II activity

To verify the Jerusalem Balsam action on rat liver KAT II activity, 
the homogenate of rat liver (1:100 wt/vol) was incubated in the absence 
and in the presence of different amounts of Jerusalem Balsam (0, 1, 5, 10 
µl) under standard assay condition and the amount of KYNA formed 
was determined as described before. Five independent experiments 
were performed. Jerusalem Balsam, alcoholic plants extract was diluted 
(1:10 vol/vol) and used for the assay. Blanks and control samples 
received respectively amount of vehicle. In separate experiment the 
effect of Jerusalem Balsam on KAT II activity in rat liver homogenate 
using different doses of 1, 5 and 7.5 µl under standard assay condition 
was investigated.

Comparison of the effect of Jerusalem Balsam on KAT II activity 
to the effect of Cerebrolysin and D- cycloserine in rat 
liver homogenate

To compare the effect of Jerusalem Balsam on KAT II activity to 
the effect of Cerebrolysin and D-cycloserine in the same experiment 
the homogenate of rat liver (1:100 wt/vol) was incubated in the absence 
and in the presence of Jerusalem Balsam (1 and 7.5 µl), in the presence 
of effective dose of Cerebrolysin (15 µl) and in the presence of effective 
dose of D-cycloserine (168 µM) under assay condition as described in 
Material and Methods. The incubation period lasted for 1, 3 and 5 hrs.

Statistical Analyses

Results were expressed in means ± the standard error of the mean 
(SEM). For statistical analyses, the one-way ANOVA-test and Student 
t-test were applied, respectively. Each sample (number of sample 
are given in parenthesis) was determined in triplicate. Asterisks indicate a 
significant difference: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001 compared to 
control.

Results

Effect of Jerusalem Balsam on rat liver KAT II activity

Jerusalem Balsam significantly and dose-dependently (0, 1, 5, 10 µl) 
lowered the rat liver KAT II activity, comparing to controls (Table 1). 
KAT II was 49.6, 29.6 and 10.1% of control, P<0.001, respectively. One-
way ANOVA analysis of variance between 4 groups revealed the means 
of KAT activity levels statistically different (F=344.55, P=9.65389E-15, 
Table 1).

The chromatograms of determined synthesized KYNA in the 
absence and presence of Jerusalem Balsam (1, 5 and 7.5 µl) are 
shown in Figure 1. Chromatograms indicate that Jerusalem Balsam 
dose-dependently lowered KYNA synthesis in rat liver homogenate, 
comparing to control.

Comparison of effects of Jerusalem Balsam, Cerebrolysin and 
D-cycloserine on KAT II activity in rat liver homogenate

The effects of Jerusalem Balsam, Cerebrolysin and D-cycloserine on 
KAT II activity in rat liver homogenate after 1, 3 and 5 hrs incubation 
time are shown in Figure 2. Jerusalem Balsam dose-dependently and 
significantly lowered KAT II activity in the rat liver homogenate up to 
5 hrs of incubation time. The action of Jerusalem Balsam to block KAT 
II activity was remarkably effective, similar to effects of Cerebrolysin or 
D-cycloserine.

Discussion

Jerusalem Balsam is widely used because of good reputation as a 
natural remedy. It is a mixture of certain plants, which suppose 
has antibacterial and anti-oxidative properties. Jerusalem 
Balsam is used to improve liver and lung diseases, as for example bronchopneumonia [1,2]. Further, Jerusalem Balsam is suggested to be 
helpful as an adjuvant treatment of various tumour burdens [1,2]. But there are no studies which confirm its positive effect and indicate its 
pharmacological actions. Beside that the mechanism of action might be 
complex since it is a mixture of several plants. Nevertheless, it is 
interesting to search if this mixture, as an adjuvant treatment, might 
exert special properties. Central and peripheral organs of mammals 
are excessively involved in tryptophan metabolisms to synthesize the 
nocrotransmitter serotonin and along kynurenine pathway to form 
several neuroactive compounds including KYNA. Our data for the first 
time demonstrate that Jerusalem Balsam lowers KYNA synthesis by 
blocking KAT II activities in the rat liver homogenate. Revealed data 
suggest that application of Jerusalem Balsam might modulate KYNA in
the periphery and probably in the brain. Similar effect to lower KYNA synthesis was observed with the anti-dementia drug Cerebrolysin, a piglet’s brain extract [15] and with the tuberculostaticum D-cycloserine [16]. In the present study we could confirm our previous findings and in addition we could show a high capacity of natural plant product to affect KYNA synthesis. Jerusalem Balsam has also ability to block KAT III activity in rat liver homogenate (data not shown), similarly as we have seen by Cerebrolysin and D-cycloserine [15,16]. Interestingly, the inhibitory effect of Jerulasem Balsam lasted until 5 hrs, at least in vitro, similar to Cerebrolysin or D-cycloserine, what means that this remedy offers long lasting effects. Revealed observation is important since Jerusalem Balsam is used since centuries and this without reported side effects. Gottlieb et al. described that D-cycloserine enhanced learning significantly [17]. Furthermore, it has been shown that D-cycloserine improved memory consolidation and facilitation of behavioural therapy for delusions by schizophrenia [17,18]. On the other hand, meta-analysis provided evidence that Cerebrolysin has an overall beneficial effect and a favorable benefit-risk ratio in patients with mild-to-moderate Alzheimer’s disease [19]. Accumulated observations suggest that lowering of KYNA by Jerusalem Balsam

Figure 1: Effect of different doses (1, 5 and 7.5 µl) of Jerusalem Balsam (Jer) on KAT II activity in rat liver homogenate. Chromatograms represent peak of Kynurenic Acid (KYNA; retentions time is ca. 8.1 min). KAT II activities were assayed as described in Material and Methods. Notes: Chromatogram B2 represents standard of KYNA (50 µl injection volume of 250 fmol of KYNA; i.e., 5 nM); Chromatogram CO demonstrates peak of synthesized KYNA in rat liver homogenate in the absence of Jer. Chromatogram Jer 1 µl demonstrates peak of synthesized KYNA in rat liver homogenate in the presence of 1 µl of Jer; Chromatogram Jer 5 µl represents peak of synthesized KYNA in rat liver homogenate in the presence of 5 µl of Jer; Chromatogram Jer 7.5 µl represents peak of synthesized KYNA in rat liver homogenate in the presence of 7.5 µl of Jer. The height of KYNA peaks are: B2 is 24935; CO is 526764; Jer 1 µl is 256946; Jer 5 µl is 130122; Jer 7.5 µl is 66385.
might be a significant approach for many pharmacological strategies. Endogenous component “Glia depressing factor” which we found in human cerebrospinal fluid and in serum can also lower KYNA content [20]. We believe that our approach to measure the inhibitory capacity of biological materials, in respect to block KATs activities, might be useful to describe the inhibitory properties of biological materials used for the therapy reason as an anti-dementia drug by various disorders. The approach to measure the inhibition capacity of biological material has been patented [21]. In summary, our data demonstrate that Jerusalem Balsam, a mixture of special plants significantly lowered KYNA formation in rat liver homogenate in an in vitro study. Today pharmacological researches are looking for oral application of tolerable compounds which show the ability to lower KYNA content and which are well tolerable by patients. We suggest that Jerusalem Balsam could have therapeutic application due to its ability to modulate KYNA synthesis. Further studies on Jerusalem Balsam and on other formulas of Jerusalem Balsam, particularly on certain plants in respect to block KATs activities and to influence KYNA synthesis need to be performed.

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Ethical Considerations

The procedures of the research proposal from Halina Baran have been approved by Austrian Ethical Regulations Veterinary University Vienna.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest. The idea for the article was conceived by Halina Baran. The investigations were performed by Halina Baran and Carina Kronsteiner. The data were analyzed by Halina Baran and Berthold Keppinger and was read, corrected and accepted by all authors.

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