Protective effect of methanolic extracts of *Thymus vulgaris* L. against cyclophosphamide-induced DNA damage in mouse bone marrow cells using the micronucleus test

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**Abstract**

Cyclophosphamide is a chemo-therapeutic agent used in the treatment of various cancers and autoimmune diseases. This composition has cytotoxic and clastogenic properties. The purpose of this study was to evaluate the protective effect of methanol extracts of *Thymus vulgaris* L. against DNA damage induced by cyclophosphamide in mouse bone marrow cells by the micronucleus test. The extract concentrations of 375, 750, 1500 mg/kg were injected intraperitoneally (Ip) into mice for 7 consecutive days. One hour after the last injection, cyclophosphamide 50 mg/kg Ip was injected. 24 hours after cyclophosphamide injection, the animals were killed and the samples of bone marrow were prepared and stained using the standard methods. For each sample, 1000 cells of polychromatic erythrocytes (PCE) and the same number of normochromatic erythrocyte (NCE) and the cells containing their micronucleus were counted. Cyclophosphamide increased the frequency of micronuclei polychromatic erythrocytes (MnPCE) and decreased cell proliferation (PCE/PCE+NCE). All doses of extracts significantly reduced the micronucleus frequency ratio (*P*<0.05). The cells proliferation ratio (PCE/PCE+NCE) was also increased. The best effect in reducing the micronucleus frequency was at 1500 mg/kg dosage. *Thymus* extract is able to reduce the clastogenic and cytotoxic effects of cyclophosphamide, due to its antioxidant properties, playing a protective role.

**Keywords**: Chemotherapy, Cyclophosphamide, DNA destruction, Micronucleus test, Thyme extract.

**1. Introduction**

Cancer is one of the main concerns of human communities. As a specific treatment for cancer, chemotherapy can be used with or without radiation therapy. It is stated that the chemotherapeutic agents can affect both normal bone marrow and malignant cells proliferation. Cyclophosphamide is one of the chemotherapeutic agents used for the treatment of various cancers, such as acute and chronic leukemia and malignant lymphoma. This agent can also be indicated for autoimmune diseases, in spite of its approved cytotoxicity and clastogenic properties. This compound is toxic, due to its alkalizing effect and creation of a crosslink between the two strands of DNA, breaking the DNA and protein synthesis inhibition. In the liver, cyclophosphamide is converted to aldophosphamide by the cytochrome P-450 enzyme. Then, aldophosphamide is converted to its active metabolites phosphoramidite mustard and acrolein, spontaneously. Phosphoramidite mustard has antineoplastic effect; while acrolein interferes with tissues antioxidant defense system, which leads to the formation of free radicals and has many toxic effects such as cell death,
apoptosis, necrosis and tumorigenesis (4). Free radicals are unstable structures that can damage DNA molecules and finally cause mutation(5).

The flavonoids and phenolic compounds from many natural plants have antioxidant and anti-clastogenic properties. Thyme with narrow leaves, from mint family (Lamiaceae), falls into this category (6). It is a perennial plant with a height up to 40 cm, which grows in dry weather and between rocks and mountains slopes in altitudes up to 1200 m. It is found in the western part of Gerash city, Fars province of Iran (7). Thyme oil has many properties like antispasmodic, carminative, antifungal, disinfectant, anthelmintic, and anti-inflammatory effects (8). Thyme with narrow leaves consists of various ingredients such as thymol, carvacrol, luteolin, –p-cymene, linalool, gamatripyn, camphor, cineole, burnoe, beta-caryophyllene, trypteneol, pinene, luteolin, and so on (9). Many investigators have studied thyme properties, including: antibacterial (10), antifungal (11), natural food preservative (12), antioxidant (13), and analgesic (14). So far its protective effects against DNA damage hasn’t been studied. Because of the anti-cancer and antioxidant properties of phenolic compounds, this herb might protect the DNA destruction induced by cyclophosphamide.

In the present study, in order to detect the genotoxic or carcinogenic chemicals, the micronucleus assay was used. This method was first proposed by Schmid W., and is applicable both in vitro and in vivo conditions (15). Based on the principle of micronucleus assay, in the anaphase of chromatids, the chromosome fragments becameacentric due to exposure to chemicals or ionizing radiation, while the centric chromosomes move to spindle poles. After telophase, the remaining fragments deform to a one or more secondary cores that is called micronuclei. This method can be used in proliferating tissues such as liver, bone marrow cells, peripheral blood, and cultured cells, although it is preferable to use the bone marrow (16). Micronuclei in cells without nuclei (red blood cell precursors in bone marrow) are called polychromatic erythrocytes (PCE) and normochromatic erythrocytes (NCE), which are easily distinguished (17). Frequency of erythrocyte micronucleus in bone marrow cells reflects the chromosomal abnormality induced by chemical agents.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Animals

In this study, we examined forty-five adult male mice (Balb/c strain) aged 8-9 weeks, with an approximately weight of 35 ± 2 gr in a standard condition.

2.2. Plant extract

The flowers and young leaves of thyme were collected in the spring, and their authenticity was confirmed by Jangjoo proposal (plant No. 34 contained in Table 83) (7). The aerial portions were dried at the room temperature for 4 days. The wooden particles were separated and the remaining parts were soaked (100 g of dried herb in 1 L of 75% methanol) for 72 hours.

After that, the extract was purified by Whatman filter paper No. 1. This procedure were repeated four times to clear the extract, then the filtrate was concentrated by rotary machine at 40 ºC. These processes were repeated several times to obtain sufficient extract. The extract was resolved in distilled water and propylene glycol in a ratio of 4 to 1.

2.3. Treated Animals

A total of 45 male mice (Balb/c strain) were equally divided into nine groups. The first group served as the control group and was fed on a basal diet without any injection. In the second group (solvent control), the solvent (water and propylene glycol in a ratio 4:1) without the extract was injected for 7 days continuously intraperitoneally (Ip) (10 ml/kg). In the third group (positive control), cyclophosphamide (50 mg/kg) was injected once (10 ml/kg) Ip. It was shown previously that this dose led to micronuclei formation (18).

In the fourth group, 375 mg/kg/day of the thyme methanol extract was injected daily at 9 am for 7 consecutive days, Ip (10 ml/kg). In the fifth group, 750 mg/kg/day of the thyme methanol extract were injected daily at 9 am for 7 consecutive days, Ip (10 ml/kg). In the sixth Group, 1500 mg/kg/day of the thyme methanol extract was injected daily at 9 am for 7 consecutive days, Ip (10 ml/kg). In the seventh Group, 375 mg/kg/day of the thyme methanol extract was injected daily at 9 am, Ip (10
ml/kg) for 7 consecutive days. One hour after the last dose, cyclophosphamide (50 mg/kg) was discontinued. In the eighth Group, 750 mg/kg/day of the methanol extract was injected daily at 9 am, Ip (10 ml/kg) for 7 consecutive days. One hour after the last dose, on the 7th day cyclophosphamide (50 mg/kg) was injected, Ip. In the ninth Group, 1500 mg/kg/day of the thyme methanol extract was injected at 9 am for 7 consecutive days, Ip (10 ml/kg). One hour after the last dose on the 7th day, cyclophosphamide (50 mg/kg) was injected Ip.

2.4. The micronucleus test

In all groups, 24 hours after cyclophosphamide injection Ip, the mice were killed through the cervical spinal cord transection. Both femoral bones were removed completely, then the epiphyseal portions were isolated (15). Bone marrow was gently aspirated by means of a syringe containing 1 ml of fetal bovine serum (Gibco). The suspension was collected in a test tube and centrifuged at 1500 rpm for 5 minutes. After centrifugation, the solution on top of the tube was discarded and the deposited cells were dissolved in the remainder of the serum. After that, a drop of this solution was placed on each of a set of three lamella and the smears were prepared, stained and fixed on laboratory temperature for 24 hours without chemical fixation. We used May Grunwald and Giemsa (Merck) for staining. May Grunwald staining was applied to differentiate the PCE and NCE cells and Giemsa for staining the micronucleoli. In a good preparation, a NCE and PCE appear as yellow-orange and blue-violet in color, respectively (Figure 1). We used emersion oil with light microscope with magnification of 100 times for counting the cells. 1000 cells of PCE per animal were counted; also at the same power-field, NCE and polychromatic erythrocyte containing micronucleus (MnPCE) were counted accurately. For detection of toxic effect on bone marrow cells, we counted PCE/PCE+NCE per 1000 cells of PCE. We studied two variables in this investigation: A) MnPCE cell and B) the ratio of PCE/PCE+NCE.

2.5. Statistical analysis

We used one way analysis of variance (ANOWA) and POs-Hoc tests for showing a significant difference between the groups and to indicate in which groups at 0.05 (95% CI), the differences are significant.

3. Results

3.1. Clastogenic and cytotoxic effects

There are significant differences between cyclophosphamide (positive control) and the control group ($p<0.05$). Data showed that cyclophosphamide increased the frequency of micronucleus and decreased cell proliferation (Table 1). This study didn’t show any significant differences between methanol extract and the control group on MnPCE frequency and cell proliferation ratio (PCE/PCE+NCE) ($p<0.05$). Therefore, in this research the selected doses of thyme extract didn’t have any clastogenic and cytotoxic effects (Table 1).
As can be seen in Table 1, for every dosage of extracts (375, 750, 1500 mg/kg/day), the frequency of MnPCE cells was reduced compared with the group who received only cyclophosphamide ($p<0.05$). With increasing dosages of extracts from 375 to 750 mg/kg/day, there was a statistically significant reduction in MnPCE frequency ($p<0.05$). Although this property was seen with an increased concentration from 750 to 1500 mg/kg/day, it was not statistically significant ($p<0.05$). There was a little reduction of micronucleoli with a dosage more than 750 mg/kg/day of thyme extract.

The ratio of cell proliferation (PCE/PCE+NCE) was significantly different between the cyclophosphamide group and every other groups ($p<0.05$). The results indicated that the different doses of methanol extract of thyme do not have any clastogenic and cytotoxic effects.

### 4. Discussion

In this study, in order to reduce the cytotoxicity induced by cyclophosphamide, the methanol extracts of thyme with narrow leaves were used. The extracts were dissolved in water and propylene glycol in a ratio 4 to 1. To detect the clastogenicity, the solvent alone was injected to the mice and then their bone marrow smears were assessed. The observations didn’t show any changes in MnPCE and PCE/PCE+NCE parameters compared to the control group (Table 1 and Figure 1).

In the methanol extract groups (1500, 750, 375 mg/kg), the MnPCE and PCE/PCE+NCE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Treatment</th>
<th>MnPCE/1000PCE±SD</th>
<th>PCE/PCE+NCE ±SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Control</td>
<td>5.25±1.10</td>
<td>0.47±0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Solvent (distilled water + propylene glycol)</td>
<td>6.00±1.29</td>
<td>0.48±0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Cyclophosphamide (50 mg/kg/bw)</td>
<td>97.50±10.94</td>
<td>0.30±0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Thyme methanol extract (375mg/kg/day)</td>
<td>6.25±1.25</td>
<td>0.49±0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Thyme methanol extract (750 mg/kg/day)</td>
<td>6.50±2.32</td>
<td>0.46±0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Thyme methanol extract (1500 mg/kg/day)</td>
<td>6.00±1.95</td>
<td>0.48±0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Cyclophosphamide+thyme methanol extract (375mg/kg/day)</td>
<td>47.50±6.35</td>
<td>0.41±0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Cyclophosphamide+thyme methanol extract (750 mg/kg/day)</td>
<td>36.00±5.47</td>
<td>0.38±0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Cyclophosphamide+thyme methanol extract (1500 mg/kg/day)</td>
<td>33.50±5.00</td>
<td>0.42±0.08</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

PCE=polychromatic erythrocytes, NCE=normochromatic erythrocytes.

**Figure 2.** Frequency changes of MnPCE in the control group, solvent, cyclophosphamide, and varying concentrations of methanol extract of thyme.
DNA protective effect of Thymus extract were not changed; that means thyme extract alone didn't have any cytotoxic or clastogenic effects (Table 1). Our results indicated that the methanol extract of thyme reduced clastogenic and cytotoxic effects of cyclophosphamide in mice bone marrow cells. This was assessed by detection of MnPCE in bone marrow cells, 24 hours after the last injection.

As shown in Table 1 and Figure 1, the clastogenic effects of cyclophosphamide was shown with an increasing frequency of MnPCE, from 5.25 to 97.50 in the control and cyclophosphamide groups, respectively \((p<0.05)\). Moreover, the cytotoxic effects of cyclophosphamide has been shown (Figure 3) with decrease of the ratio of PCE/PCE+NCE from 0.47 in the control group to 0.30 in the cyclophosphamide group, which was statistically significant \((p<0.05)\).

Cyclophosphamide is an alkylating agent that produces free radicals. These unstable molecules alkylate the guanine base in n-7 location of the DNA arm, leading to cross linkage between DNA arms and crushing the DNA molecules, causing mutation (19). One of the most important methods against mutation is to trap these free radicals (20). Gamal-Eldeen et al. showed that algae Sargassum dentifolium have the ability to collect the OH radicals and active oxygens, so has a protective effect against cyclophosphamide-induced abnormalities (21). Zhang et al. worked on ginsenoside, a triterpene of ginseng plant, which reduces the deleterious effects of cyclophosphamide on DNA, apoptosis of bone marrow cells, and peripheral blood lymphocytes (22). Vilar et al. reported anticlastogenic effects of Ginkgo biloba extract against cyclophosphamide and mitomycin C on the bone marrow of mice and suggested that Ginkgo biloba have both direct and indirect anticlastogenic capacities (23).

In the present research, thyme extract had excellent antioxidant properties. The important components of Thymus vulgaris extract with narrow leaves are thymol, carvacrol, linalool, and luteolin (9). Thymol is a monocyclic-phenolic compounds with antioxidant and anti-cancer properties, which protects the DNA (24). Carvacrol ia an aromatic compound with anti-cancer, antioxidant, and neuroprotective activities (25). Besides, the anticlastogenic effect of luteolin is very strong against carcinogenic substance Trp-p-2 (26). Linalool, an alcoholic monoterpenes has also anti-tumor effect (27). Therefore, the protective properties of thyme extract against cyclophosphamide-induced clastogenic effect could be due to brooming of free radicals.

The methanol extracts of thyme with decreasing the frequency of MnPCE and increasing PCE/PCE+NCE had good effects against the cyclophosphamide induced toxicity. As shown in Table 1, the 375 mg/kg injection dose of thyme extract was able to decrease MnPCE frequency from 97.5 to 47.5 and increase the cell proliferation ratio (PCE/PCE+NCE) from 0.30 to 0.49 in the control and cyclophosphamide groups, respectively, which were statistically significant \((p<0.05)\).

Although a higher abundance of MnPCE were seen with increasing the dosage to 750 mg/
kg ($p<0.05$), this was not true with the dosage of 1500 mg/kg ($p<0.05$). This means the more effective dose of thyme extract was 750 mg/kg.

5. Conclusion

In general, the results of this study were as follows: 1- Thyme extract alone didn’t show any clastogenic and cytotoxic effects in mice bone marrow cells. 2- Thyme methanol extract can protect the mice bone marrow cells against cyclophosphamide induced cytotoxicity. 3- The most effective dose of thyme extract is 750 mg/kg.

Acknowledgements

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Conflict of Interest

None declared.

5. References

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