Research Article

Antifungal Activity of Maytenin and Pristimerin

Fernanda P. Gullo,1 Janaina C. O. Sardi,1 Vânia A. F. F. M. Santos,2 Fernanda Sangalli-Leite,1 Nayla S. Pitanguí,1 Suêlen A. Rossi,1 Ana C. A. de Paula e Silva,1 Luciana A. Soares,1 Julhianny F. Silva,1 Haroldo C. Oliveira,1 Maysa Furlan,2 Dulce H. S. Silva,2 Vanderlan S. Bolzani,2 Maria José S. Mendes-Giannini,1 and Ana Marisa Fusco-Almeida1

1 Laboratory of Clinical Mycology, Department of Clinical Analysis, Faculty of Pharmaceutical Sciences, UNESP, Rua Expedicionários do Brasil 1621, 14801-902 Araraquara, SP, Brazil
2 Institute of Chemistry, UNESP, Rua Professor Francisco Degni 55, 14800-900 Araraquara, SP, Brazil

Correspondence should be addressed to Ana Marisa Fusco-Almeida, ana.marisa@uol.com.br

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1. Introduction

Fungal infections in humans have increased alarmingly in recent years, particularly in immunocompromised individuals. Among the infections systemic candidiasis, aspergillosis, cryptococcosis, paracoccidioidomycosis, and histoplasmosis mortality are more prevalent and more severe in humans. The current high incidence of dermatophytosis is in humans, especially as the main etiologic agents Trichophyton rubrum and Trichophyton mentagrophytes. Molecules pristimerin and maytenin obtained from the plant Maytenus ilicifolia (Celastraceae) are known to show various pharmacological activities. This study aimed to evaluate the spectrum of antifungal activity of maytenin and pristimerin and their cytotoxicity in human keratinocytes (NOK cells of the oral mucosa). It was concluded that the best spectrum of antifungal activity has been shown to maytenin with MIC varying from 0.12 to 125 mg/L, although it is also active with pristimerin MIC ranging between 0.12 and 250 mg/L. Regarding the toxicity, both showed to have high IC50. The SI showed high pristimerin against some species of fungi, but SI maytenin was above 1.0 for all fungi tested, showing a selective action of fungi. However, when comparing the two substances, maytenin also showed better results. The two molecules can be a possible prototype with a broad spectrum of action for the development of new antifungal agents.

Maytenus ilicifolia (Celastraceae), popularly known as “espinheira santa,” has been used in traditional medicine since the mid-1920s [6]. The secondary metabolites, maytenin and pristimerin (Figure 1), are classified as quinonemethide triterpenoids and mainly isolated from the bark of the roots of mature M. ilicifolia plants [7]. Several studies have shown that maytenin exhibits strong antimicrobial activity against Gram-positive and Gram-negative organisms, but there are no studies detailing the effects of these substances on fungi [8].

In Brazil, the use of medicinal plants in traditional medicine has increased considerably in recent years. The wide distribution of natural resources in Brazilian ecosystems and natural diversity of chemical components and provides the country with potential bioactive materials [5].
The need to discover new antifungal molecules and natural products is of great importance for the development of new therapeutic tools. This paper proposes the study of the potential antifungal potential of maytenin and pristimerin against fungi, an agent of important mycoses. The potential broad spectrum of these molecules was evaluated, and the cytotoxicity of these substances in cell lines was evaluated, suggesting possible prototypes of a broad spectrum of components for the treatment of mycoses.

2. Methods

2.1. Microorganisms. ATCC strains and clinical isolates belong to the mycology collection of the Laboratory of Clinical Mycology, Department of Clinical Analysis, Faculty of Pharmaceutical Sciences, UNESP, Araraquara, were used in the current study. The strains used were: *Candida albicans* ATCC 90028, *Candida krusei* ATCC 6258, *Candida parapsilosis* ATCC 22019, *Candida glabrata* ATCC 90030, *Candida tropicalis* ATCC 750, *Cryptococcus neoformans* var. *grubii* ATCC 90012, *Histoplasma capsulatum* (G217B), *Aspergillus niger* ATCC 16404, *Aspergillus fumigatus* ATCC 7100, *Trichophyton interdigitalis* ATCC 40131. Clinical isolates from *Paracoccidioides brasiliensis* (18), *Trichophyton rubrum* and *Trichophyton mentagrophytes* (102), *Cryptococcus neoformans* var. *grubii* resistant to fluconazole (R30), two clinical isolates from *Cryptococcus neoformans* var. *grubii* susceptible to fluconazole (S26 and S27), and *Cryptococcus gattii* (118) isolate from animals, resistant to fluconazole, and *Histoplasma capsulatum* (M238P) (lung bat) were also used.

2.2. Minimum Inhibitory Concentration (MIC). All microorganisms were tested for susceptibility to specific commercial drugs for the treatment of each gender. The test for yeast was carried out in accordance with the microdilution method described according to the M27-S3 of the CLSI (Clinical and Laboratory Standards Institute) (2008), with modifications. The filamentous fungi susceptibility testing was performed according to the M38-A2 of the CLSI (2008) [9] with modifications to determine the minimum inhibitory concentration (MIC).

Two pure substances extracted from *Maytenus ilicifolia*, maytenin and pristimerin, were prepared as described by Scorzoni et al. 2007 [10]. The antifungal drugs were diluted according to CLSI M27-S3 [9]. Inoculums were prepared in RPMI-1640 (Sigma-Aldrich, St. Louis, MO, USA) with L-glutamine, without sodium bicarbonate, supplemented with 2% glucose, and buffered to a pH of 7.0 using 0.165 M MOPS, (Sigma-Aldrich, St. Louis, MO, USA). The yeast suspension was adjusted to a final concentration of $1 \times 10^4$ CFU/mL in RPMI-1640 and for filamentous fungi, a suspension of microconidia was adjusted to $2.5 \times 10^3$. In the 96-well plates, substances were added in serial dilutions, starting from a concentration of 250 mg/L to 0.48 mg/L. The plates were incubated in a shaker at 37°C/150 rpm to a specific time determined for each microorganism. The reading of MIC was performed by spectrophotometry at 490 nm and confirmed using Alamar Blue (Sigma-Aldrich, St. Louis, MO, USA).

2.3. Minimum Fungicide Concentration (MFC). A qualitative analysis of fungal viability was performed, by transferring a portion of the wells to a plate with Sabouraud (Sigma-Aldrich, St. Louis, MO, USA) medium and incubated at 37°C during the time determined for each fungal agent. The MFC was determined as the lowest concentration of the extract that did not allow the growth of any fungal colony on the solid medium after the incubation period [11]. A visual reading was performed to confirm the death or growth inhibition provided by the antifungal substances, maytenin and pristimerin.

2.4. Cell Cytotoxicity Assay. The cytotoxicity of maytenin and pristimerin was assessed by MTT for cell lines NOK
Table 1: MIC values and quantitative analysis of fungal cellular viability of pure substances maytenin and pristimerin front of the yeasts and filamentous pathogenic strains causing the most mycoses and evaluation of cytotoxic activity in NOK cells and selectivity index from the ratio of the IC_{50} and MFC.

|                              | Maytenin MIC/MFC | Pristimerin MIC/MFC | Amphotericin B reference values MIC | Itraconazole reference values MIC | Maytenin IC_{50} (mg/L)/SI | Pristimerin IC_{50} (mg/L)/SI |
|------------------------------|------------------|---------------------|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------|
| Candida albicans ATCC 90028  | 62.50/62.50      | 250.00/250.00       | 0.50–2.00                           | —                                | 265.7/4.25♦                  | *                           |
| Candida krusei ATCC 6258     | 15.62/62.50      | 7.81/62.50          | 0.25–2.00                           | 0.12–0.50                        | 78.33/1.25♦                  | 24.25/0.38♦                  |
| Candida parapsilosis ATCC 22019 | 15.62/31.25  | 125.00/125.00       | 0.25–1.00                           | 0.06–0.25                        | 78.33/2.50♦                  | *                           |
| Candida tropicalis ATCC 750  | 15.62/31.25      | 31.25/62.52         | 0.50–2.00                           | —                                | 78.33/2.50♦                  | 203.98/3.26♦                 |
| Candida glabrata ATCC 90030  | 31.25/31.25      | 125.00/125.00       | 0.25–1.00                           | —                                | 203.98/6.52♦                 | *                           |
| Cryptococcus neoformans ATCC 90012 | 0.48/0.48   | 0.97/0.97           | 0.50                                | 0.125                             | 2.53/5.29♦                   | 3.92/4.04♦                   |
| Cryptococcus neoformans R30  | 3.90/3.90        | 7.81/7.81           | 1.00                                | >32.00                           | 22.18/5.68♦                  | 24.25/3.10♦                  |
| Cryptococcus neoformans isolated 26 | 0.48/0.48 | 1.95/1.95           | 0.50                                | 0.125                             | 2.53/5.29♦                   | 6.41/3.28♦                   |
| Cryptococcus neoformans isolated 27 | 0.48/0.48 | 3.90/3.90           | 0.50                                | 0.125                             | 2.53/5.29♦                   | 20.10/5.15♦                  |
| Cryptococcus gattii 118      | 1.95/1.95        | 3.90/3.90           | 1.00                                | >32.00                           | 9.84/5.05♦                   | 20.10/5.15♦                  |
| Paracoccidioides brasiensis Pb18 | <0.12/-       | <0.12/-             | 0.015–0.25                          | <0.0039                           | **                        | **                          |
| Histoplasma capsulatum ATCC 0G217B | 0.97/0.97   | 0.48/0.48           | 0.06–0.25                           | 0.25–2.00                        | 3.70/3.81♦                   | 6.43/13.40♦                  |
| Histoplasma capsulatum isolated M238P | 0.48/0.48 | 0.48/0.48           | 0.06–0.25                           | 0.25–2.00                        | 2.53/5.29♦                   | 6.43/13.40♦                  |
| Aspergillus fumigatus ATCC 7100 | 125/-        | >250/-              | 0.12–2.0                            | 0.12–> 16.00                     | *                         | *                           |
| Aspergillus niger ATCC 16404 | 0.97/0.97       | 250/250              | 0.12–0.5                            | 0.12–1.00                        | ♦ 3.70/3.81                  | *                           |
| Trichophyton rubrum clinical isolated | 1.95/1.95 | 250/250              | —                                  | 0.03–4.00                        | ♦ 9.84/5.05                  | *                           |
| Trichophyton mentagrophytes ATCC 40131 | 3.9/3.9    | 62.5/250            | —                                  | 0.03–0.25                        | ♦ 22.18/5.68                 | 150.24/0.6♦                  |
| Trichophyton mentagrophytes clinical isolated 102 | 3.9/3.9    | 125/250              | —                                  | 0.03–0.25                        | ♦ 22.18/5.68                 | *                           |

MIC: minimum inhibitory concentration; MFC: minimum fungicide concentration. ♦ IC_{50}/IS values in NOK cells. * IC_{50}/IS not apply because the MIC and MFC values are above 62.5 mg/L. ** IC_{50}/IS not apply because the MIC and MFC values are below 0.12 mg/L. IC_{50}: 50% inhibitory concentration. SI: selectivity index obtained from the relationship between the IC_{50} (NOK) by MFC for each fungi.

(keratinocyte oral mucosa), obtained from the American Type Culture Collection (Manassas, VA, USA). The cells were grown in own culture medium NOK (Keratinocytes—SFM, GIBCO), and maintained at 36.5°C. A concentration ranging from 2.5 to 5.0×10⁴ cells/mL was used for the formation of monolayer cells. The concentrations of pure substances were kept in contact with the cells for 24 hours. After the incubation period, the cells treated with the MTT reagent has an additional 5 mg/mL added, (Sigma-Aldrich, St. Louis, MO, USA) and the cells were incubated again for another 4 h. After the formation of formazan crystals, 100 µL of isopropanol was added to solubilize the precipitate and allow the reading of the result by changing the color of the medium [12]. The absorbance of formazan was quantified using an ELISA reader (enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay) set at 560 nm. As a positive control test, hydrogen peroxide was used.

3. Results

3.1. Minimum Inhibitory Concentration (MIC). Table 1 present the results of the antifungal activity of maytenin and pristimerin, isolated from *Maytenus ilicifolia*. Maytenin activity was classified as potent for both yeasts and for filamentous fungi, when compared to positive controls itraconazole and amphotericin B; since the MIC ranged
between 0.12 and 62.5 mg/L. Pristimerin previously showed a significant variation in the action potential. For yeasts, the pristimerin showed potent activity, with the exception of \textit{C. glabrata} ATCC 90030 which showed moderate activity and \textit{C. albicans} ATCC 90028, which presented low antifungal activity. For the filamentous fungi, pristimerin showed moderate activity, with the exception of \\textit{Trichophyton mentagrophytes} ATCC 40131, which showed a MIC of 62.5 mg/L and was classified as having potent activity.

### 3.3. Cell Cytotoxicity Assay.

The cytotoxicity assay for the test of fungal viability was flawed, since the growth of greater than the diamentous fungi (Table 1).

Testing cell viability, which occurs in MIC fungal cell death existing drugs [15].

Drugs which are more potent antifungal, but safer, than cells. For this reason, there is a continuing search for new to drugs in addition to presenting high toxicity for human [14]. The treatment of fungal infections is not always effective because of resistance to drugs in addition to presenting high toxicity for human cells. For this reason, there is a continuing search for new drugs which are more potent antifungal, but safer, than existing drugs [15].

The present study showed that pristimerin and maytenin can be considered prototypes that are excellent anti-\textit{Histoplasma}.

Few studies have searched for new drugs from natural products for \textit{P. brasiliensis} [17, 18]. There are reports of the activity of anti-\textit{Paracoccidioides} of \textit{Piper regnellii} and “\textit{Baccharis dracunculifolia}” 30 mg/L [17, 19]. The results expressed in this study were excellent for \textit{P. brasiliensis}, MIC of 0.12 mg/L for both molecules at a concentration 65 times lower than the results of the studies mentioned above.

The systemic mycosis caused by yeasts \textit{Cryptococcus} spp. has increased because of AIDS [20]. In the current results indicate that the molecules had an excellent MIC for the yeasts this genus, ranging from 0.48 to 3.9 mg/L for maytenin and 0.97 to 7.8 for pristimerin. Another study revealed the antifungal activity of extracts of \textit{Maytenus undata} against \textit{C. neoformans}, which showed MIC of 0.09 mg/L after 24 h, and 0.18 mg/L after 48 h [21]. The species \textit{Candida} are classified as the fourth most common pathogen in hospitals and are associated with increased mortality of bloodstream infections due to these fungi having high resistance to existing antifungal [22]. For this yeast, the pristimerin showed potent activity, with the exception of \textit{C. glabrata} ATCC 90030, which showed moderate activity, and \textit{C. albicans} ATCC 90028, which obtained low antifungal activity. Maytenin showed moderate antifungal activity for this specie. For \textit{C. albicans}, maytenin and pristimerin showed fungicide activity; however, the \textit{Candida non-albicans} the result was fungistatic, except for \textit{C. glabrata} in contact pristimerin.

Although dermatophyte infections are restricted to certain areas of the epidermis, they can be invasive and cause serious injury [23]. Due to the high incidence there is a great need to find new drugs which act on the dermatophytes. Maytenin showed potent activity with MIC ranging from 1.95 to 3.9 mg/L. For filamentous fungi, the pristimerin showed moderate activity, with the exception of \textit{Trichophyton mentagrophytes} ATCC 44131, which showed a MIC of 62.5 mg/L. Many studies have demonstrated the plant antifungal potential against these dermatophytes [23–25], as the study of Lau et al. 2010 [24], that evaluated extracts \textit{Eucalyptus Folium} and \textit{Fructus Psoraleae Globuli}. Both the pure compounds effectively inhibit the growth of \textit{T. mentagrophytes} and \textit{T. rubrum} [25].

Invasive aspergillosis is an important cause of mortality in transplant patients [26]. Maytenin had better results against \textit{Aspergillus niger} with an MIC value of 0.97 mg/L, whereas the MIC for \textit{A. fumigatus} was 125 mg/L and pristimerin was similar for both 250 mg/L. Maytenin showed good fungicidal activity for most filamentous fungi, while pristimarin showed high MIC (Table 1).

On the other hand, the cytotoxicity tests performed with NOK (keratinocytes oral mucosa) showed that the experimental substances are not cytotoxic to this cell examined in experiment (Table 1). Although most of the antifungal agents available on the market are of synthetic origin, natural products of the study received the attention of researchers, mainly, due to the occurrence of unwanted factors, such as the resistance of some strains the conventional antifungal agents—especially in immunocompromised individuals—and the presence of these toxic effects. Figueiredo et al. (1998)
found antimalarial activity of various substances, including the pristimerin but the cytotoxicity was only for the 17-(methoxycarbonyl)-28-nor-isoguinesterin in adenocarcinoma cell line HT-29 [27].

With respect to selectivity index (SI), it is known that the higher the SI of a substance, the greater is its security. In our study we found that the maytenin substance had SI above 1.0 for all species tested, so we can demonstrate the safe use of this. Likewise, the pristimerin presented high SI against some fungal species, as described for H. capsulatum (SI 13.40). However, when comparing the two substances, maytenin still showed better results (Table 1).

5. Conclusion

The results of this study indicate the potential use of maytenin and pristimerin for the treatment of fungal infections, which showed a potent antifungal activity against the fungi studied. Therefore, the data obtained are promising. Although the medicinal plant “Maytenus ilicifolia” is consolidated in the treatment of gastritis and ulcers more pharmacological studies will be necessary to evaluate these molecules as antifungal prototypes.

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