INTRODUCTION

Hepatic fibrosis (HF) is a great health problem unless controlled it can progress to cirrhosis and primary liver cancer, which are responsible for most liver transplants and deaths [1]. HF is a healing response of the liver, which changes the normal function of the organ [3].

When the hepatic stellate cell (HSC) is activated, it loses its retinoid and starts expressing new receptors such as the platelet-derived growth factor (PDGF) receptor and transforming growth factor (TGFβ) receptor. It also expresses new proteins such as α-smooth muscle actin. The activated HSC proliferates and synthesizes extracellular matrix proteins to produce the fibrous scar [4].

Free radical–initiated lipid peroxidation plays a role in hepatic fibrogenesis, which affected the cellular permeability of hepatocytes leading to increasing levels of liver enzymes [5]. Therefore, there is a possible role of antioxidants in the prevention and treatment of liver diseases [6]. The level of liver hydroxyproline (HYP) reflects the amount of hepatic collagen which makes it an important marker of liver fibrosis to be determined in liver tissue. It has been previously reported that CCl4 intoxication leads to elevation of lipid biomarkers and accumulation of fat vacuoles, which may reflect impairment of liver function, particularly on lipid metabolism [7].

Until now, there is no standard treatment for liver fibrosis. In addition, the current therapies are often ineffective in treating the attached causes of fibrosis and are associated with many side effects. Therefore, there is a great demand for new drug classes to be proved as potent and safe antifibrotic agents, aiming at least to prevent the progression to end-stage liver disease [6].

Hesperidin (3,5,7-trihydroxy flavanone-7-rhamnoglucoside) [8], a flavanone glycoside present abundantly in citrus fruits [9]. This flavonoid has potential therapeutic benefits including, antiviral, anti-allergic, antiplatelet, anti-inflammatory and antioxidant activities [10].

Silymarin is an extract from milk thistle Silybum marianum. It is used as hepatoprotective drug based on its free radical scavenging, anti-inflammatory and antifibrotic activities. Silymarin has clinical applications in liver fibrosis, liver cirrhosis and drug-induced liver diseases [11].

Based on this background, the present study aimed to evaluate the possible hepatoprotective effects of hesperidin, as compared to the reference drug silymarin, on experimentally-induced HF in adult male Wistar albino rats.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Materials

This study was performed on healthy adult male Wistar albino rats, weighing 250±10 g. Animals were obtained from Animal House of Faculty of Pharmacy, Nahda University, Beni-Suef, Egypt and they were housed in the air-conditioned pathogen-controlled animal room in the animal house. All experimental rats were kept under stable temperature (25±1 °C) and relative humidity and allowed free access to standard
forage and tap water *ad libitum*. All procedures performed in studies involving animals were in accordance with the ethical standards of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) Guide for Care and Use of Laboratory Animals (Publication No B5-23, revised 1985).

**Drugs, chemicals and reagent kits**

CCl₄ and corn oil were purchased from El-Nasr Chemical Company (Abou-Zaabal, Cairo, Egypt). Silymarin was purchased from Sigma-Aldrich Chemical Company (St. Louis, USA). Hesperidin was purchased from Acrors Organics Company (New Jersey, USA). Tissue colorimetric kit of myeloperoxidase (MPO) was purchased from Ambiso Company (Milan Park, Abingdon, UK). Tissue colorimetric antioxidant kits of malondialdehyde (MDA), glutathione (GSH) and catalase (CAT) were purchased from Bio-Diagnostic Company (Daklalia, Egypt). Serum colorimetric kits of liver function serum alanine transaminase (ALT), aspartate transaminase (AST), albumin, total bilirubin and lipid profile [total cholesterol, triglycerides (TGs) and high-density lipoprotein cholesterol (HDL-Ch)] were purchased from BioMed company (Badr City, Industrial Area Piece, Egypt). All others chemicals, solvents and reagents were of the highest analytical grade commercially available.

**Experimental design**

Rats were randomly allocated into 5 weight-matched groups, each of 8 rats. The first group was kept as a normal control group and received only saline 5 ml/kg/d, p.o. The second group was kept as a corn oil group and received only corn oil 1 ml/kg, i.p. for two times per week for five weeks. The remaining three groups received intraperitoneal CCl₄ in corn oil (1:1) at a dose of 2 ml/kg, i.p. [12] one of them was left as fibrosis control group. The remaining two groups received the following treatments: silymarin 100 mg/kg/d, p.o. [13] as a reference treatment and hesperidin 200 mg/kg/d, p.o. [9], respectively. All the treatments were given daily for five consecutive weeks starting from the first day of induction. Doses of test agents were determined with pilot trials guided by the published literature. Blood and liver tissue samples were withdrawn 24 h after the last dose.

**Methods**

**Induction of liver fibrosis**

Induction of liver fibrosis was performed by the i.p. injection of rats with CCl₄ in corn oil (1:1) at a dose of 2 ml/kg, twice weekly for five weeks according to Hui et al. [12].

**Serum preparation**

At the end of the experiment, rats were anesthetized with light ether. Blood samples were withdrawn from the retro-orbital plexus in centrifuge tubes using heparinized micro capillary tubes. After collecting blood samples, the tubes were allowed to coagulate at room temperature. Then samples were centrifuged for 20 min at 4000 rpm using a cooling centrifuge (Sigma 3-30 k, USA). The clear supernatant was collected and stored at-80 °C in a deep freezer (Als Angelantoni Life Science, Italy) for the analysis of ALT, AST, albumin, total bilirubin, cholesterol, triglycerides, HDL, LDL and TNF-α.

**Calculation of relative liver weight**

Firstly, the animals have been weighed just before killing. Then, they were rapidly killed by cervical dislocation soon after blood samples were collected. Abdominal cavities were opened, the whole liver tissues were carefully isolated and washed several times with 0.9% sterile ice-cooled saline to remove any blood from the tissues and then pressed between 2 filter papers to absorb the excess saline solution. Each liver was weighed.

**CALCULATION**

Relative liver body weight = \( \frac{\text{Weight of liver (gm)}}{\text{Body weight of rat (gm)}} \times 100 \)

**Preparation of tissue homogenate**

Livers were cut into small portions and used for the preparation of liver homogenates and histopathology sections. A portion of the liver was homogenized with 5 volumes of isotonic ice-cold normal saline using a homogenizer (Ultra-Turrax T 25, made in Germany), to prepare 20% liver homogenate. Aliquots of liver homogenates (20%) were centrifuged at 4000 rpm for 15 min at 4 °C and the supernatant was collected, and then stored at -80 °C for analysis of HYP, TGF-β1, MDA, GSH, CAT and MPO.

**Assessment of serum biomarkers**

Serum ALT and AST levels were assayed according to the method described by Reitman and Frankel [14]. Serum albumin and bilirubin were assayed as described by Doumas et al., Malloy and Evelyn [15, 16], respectively. Serum TNF-α was assayed as described by Brouckaert et al. [17]. Serum total cholesterol, TGs and HDL were estimated by the method of Watson, Fossati and Prencipe, and Castelli et al. [18, 19, 20] and respectively, while LDL was assayed according to Friedewald et al. [21].

**Formula:** LDL = TC – HDL – (TG/5.0) mg/dl.

**Assessment of liver homogenate biomarkers**

Hepatic TGF-β1 was assayed by ELISA kit based on the principle previously described by Blanchette et al. [22]. Hepatic HYP was assessed as described by Patiyl and Katoch [23]. Hepatic MDA, GSH and CAT levels were measured colorimetrically according to Sato, Beutler et al. and Aebi [24, 25, 26], respectively, while MPO was assayed as described by Wei et al. [27].

**Histopathological and immunohistochemical study**

Samples were taken from the isolated livers of rats in different groups and immediately fixed in 10% formalin solution in normal saline and embedded in paraffin. Paraffin beeswax tissue blocks were prepared for sectioning at 4-5 microns. Sections of samples were collected on glass slides, deparaffinized, stained by hematoxylin and eosin stain for routine examination then samples were taken from the isolated livers of rats in different groups and immediately fixed in 10% formalin solution in normal saline and embedded in paraffin. Paraffin beeswax tissue blocks were prepared for sectioning at 4-5 microns. Sections of samples were collected on glass slides, deparaffinized, stained by hematoxylin and eosin stain for routine examination then the slides were then blocked with 5% bovine serum albumin (BSA) in Tris-buffered saline (TBS) for 2 h. The sections were then incubated with goat anti-rabbit secondary antibody. Sections were then washed with TBS, the sections were incubated with goat anti-rabbit secondary antibody. Sections were then washed with TBS and incubated for 5–10 min in a solution of 0.02% diaminobenzidine containing 0.01% H2O2. Countersinking was performed using hematoxylin, and the slides were visualized under a light microscope. Sections of samples were investigated by the aid of two experienced pathologists blinded to the experiment.

**Statistical analysis**

All numerical data were expressed as means of 8 values ± standard error of the mean (SEM). Statistical analysis was performed using one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) test followed by Tukey-Kramer multiple comparisons test by the aid of the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS version 22.0) computer software program (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA), where the value of p<0.05 was considered statistically significant.

**RESULTS**

**Biochemical estimations**

Effect of silymarin or hesperidin on serum level of liver function markers

CCl₄ significantly increased the serum level of ALT, AST and total bilirubin, while the serum level of albumin was significantly decreased as compared with control and corn oil groups.
Silymarin or hesperidin significantly reduced the serum level of ALT, AST and total bilirubin and significantly increased serum level of albumin as compared to the fibrosis control group.

Hesperidin treatment restored serum ALT and AST back to normal levels, while silymarin or hesperidin treatments restored serum bilirubin back to normal level (table 1).

**Table 1: Effect of silymarin or hesperidin on serum levels of ALT, AST, albumin or total bilirubin in rats with experimentally-induced liver fibrosis**

| Parameters | ALT (u/l) | AST (u/l) | Albumin (gm/dl) | Bilirubin (mg/dl) |
|------------|-----------|-----------|-----------------|------------------|
| Control (5 ml saline/kg/p.o.) | 18.0±1.2 | 13.1±1.1 | 4.7±0.4 | 1.0±0.1 |
| Corn oil (1 ml/kg/i.p.) | 14.6±1.4 | 15.0±0.8 | 5.0±0.2 | 0.9±0.1 |
| Fibrosis control CCl4 with corn oil (1:1) (2 ml/kg/i.p.) | 72.5±7.3<sup>b</sup> | 54.3±2.8<sup>b</sup> | 1.4±0.1<sup>b</sup> | 1.9±0.2<sup>b</sup> |
| Silymarin (100 mg/kg/p.o.) | 42.5±3.6<sup>b,c</sup> | 26.9±2.2<sup>c</sup> | 2.9±0.1<sup>b,c</sup> | 1.1±0.1<sup>c</sup> |
| Hesperidin (200 mg/kg/p.o.) | 24.5±1.7<sup>c</sup> | 20.2±2.0<sup>c</sup> | 3.4±0.3<sup>b,c</sup> | 1.0±0.1<sup>c</sup> |

Each value represents the mean of 8 animals±standard error of the mean (SEM). <sup>a</sup>Significantly different from control group value at p<0.05, <sup>b</sup>Significantly different from corn oil group value at p<0.05, <sup>c</sup>Significantly different from fibrosis control group value at p<0.05 and <sup>d</sup>Significantly different from silymarin reference treated group value at p<0.05

Hesperidin showed significantly better improvements of MPO and TNF-α as compared to the reference silymarin and restored MPO back to normal levels (table 3).

**Effect of silymarin or hesperidin on serum levels of ALT, AST, albumin or total bilirubin in rats with experimentally-induced liver fibrosis**

**Table 2: Effect of silymarin or hesperidin on liver contents of MDA, GSH and liver CAT activity in rats with experimentally-induced liver fibrosis**

| Parameters | MDA (nmol/mg ptn) | GSH (u/mg ptn) | CAT (mmol/mg ptn) |
|------------|-------------------|----------------|------------------|
| Control (5 ml saline/kg/p.o.) | 1.2±0.1 | 63.8±1.6 | 117.5±2.3 |
| Corn oil (1 ml/kg/i.p.) | 1.3±0.1 | 61.1±3.3 | 119.8±3.9 |
| Fibrosis control CCl4 with corn oil (1:1) (2 ml/kg/i.p.) | 19.9±1.6<sup>b</sup> | 18.9±1.6<sup>b</sup> | 47.0±3.5<sup>b</sup> |
| Silymarin (100 mg/kg/p.o.) | 13.1±0.6<sup>bc</sup> | 35.7±4.0<sup>bc</sup> | 102.8±3.4<sup>c</sup> |
| Hesperidin (200 mg/kg/p.o.) | 10.1±0.7<sup>bc</sup> | 37.5±2.7<sup>bc</sup> | 104.1±7.5<sup>c</sup> |

Each value represents the mean of 8 animals±standard error of the mean (SEM). <sup>a</sup>Significantly different from control group value at p<0.05, <sup>b</sup>Significantly different from corn oil group value at p<0.05, <sup>c</sup>Significantly different from fibrosis control group value at p<0.05 and <sup>d</sup>Significantly different from silymarin reference treated group value at p<0.05

**Effect of silymarin or hesperidin on liver contents of specific fibrosis markers**

Rats subjected to CCl4 treatment showed a significant increase in the hepatic content of TGF-β1 and HYP when compared with control and corn oil groups.

Silymarin or hesperidin significantly decreased the hepatic content of TGF-β1 and HYP as compared with fibrosis control group.

Silymarin or hesperidin treatments were restored hepatic contents of hydroxyproline back to normal level (fig. 1 and 2).

**Table 3: Effect of silymarin or hesperidin on serum level of TNF-α, liver MPO activity and relative liver weight in rats with experimentally-induced liver fibrosis**

| Parameters | MPO (u/mg ptn) | TNFα (pg/ml) | Relative liver/Body weight |
|------------|----------------|--------------|---------------------------|
| Control (5 ml saline/kg/p.o.) | 2.9±0.2 | 31.1±1.8 | 3.1±0.2 |
| Corn oil (1 ml/kg/i.p.) | 2.7±0.1 | 31.1±1.1 | 3.5±0.1 |
| Fibrosis control CCl4 with corn oil (1:1) (2 ml/kg/i.p.) | 16.7±1.4<sup>b</sup> | 130.4±5.6<sup>b</sup> | 4.9±0.2<sup>b</sup> |
| Silymarin (100 mg/kg/p.o.) | 8.5±0.9<sup>bc</sup> | 92.7±2.5<sup>bc</sup> | 3.7±0.2<sup>c</sup> |
| Hesperidin (200 mg/kg/p.o.) | 4.0±0.7<sup>cd</sup> | 73.4±2.8<sup>bc</sup> | 3.9±0.1<sup>c</sup> |

Each value represents the mean of 8 animals±standard error of the mean (SEM). <sup>a</sup>Significantly different from control group value at p<0.05, <sup>b</sup>Significantly different from corn oil group value at p<0.05, <sup>c</sup>Significantly different from fibrosis control group value at p<0.05 and <sup>d</sup>Significantly different from silymarin reference treated group value at p<0.05
Table 4: Effect of silymarin or hesperidin on serum levels of Cholesterol, TGs, HDL, and LDL in rats with experimentally-induced liver fibrosis

| Parameters | Cholesterol (mg/dl) | TGs (mg/dl) | HDL (mg/dl) | LDL (mg/dl) |
|------------|--------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Control (5 ml saline/kg/p.o.) | 145.1±5.86   | 89.0±6.06   | 61.3±1.00   | 65.99±5.76  |
| Corn oil (1 ml/kg/l. p.) | 144.0±16.30 | 82.8±3.36   | 63.8±1.46   | 64.37±6.32  |
| Fibrosis control CCl₄ with corn oil (1:1) (2 ml/kg/l. p.) | 236.8±13.40<sup>b</sup> | 133.40±3.37<sup>b</sup> | 26.4±11.68<sup>b</sup> | 183.68±14.15<sup>b</sup> |
| Silymarin (100 mg/kg/p.o.) | 191.3±3.41<sup>a</sup><sup>b</sup> | 99.7±3.33<sup>b</sup> | 38.8±1.34<sup>b</sup> | 122.5±4.07<sup>b</sup> |
| Hesperidin (200 mg/kg/p.o.) | 179.2±7.09<sup>b</sup> | 89.3±3.16<sup>c</sup> | 41.0±1.66<sup>b</sup> | 113.08±5.58<sup>b</sup> |

Each value represents the mean of 8 animals±standard error of the mean (SEM). <sup>a</sup>Significantly different from control group value at p<0.05, <sup>b</sup>Significantly different from corn oil group value at p<0.05, <sup>c</sup>Significantly different from fibrosis control group value at p<0.05 and <sup>d</sup>Significantly different from silymarin reference treated group value at p<0.05.

Histopathological study

Liver sections obtained from the control and corn oil groups showed normal hepatic architecture with central vein and radiating cords of normal hepatocytes with central rounded vesicular nuclei and prominent nucleoli. Hepatic cords are separated by blood sinusoïds lined with endothelium and Von-Kupffer cells (fig. 3a, b). CCl₄ group showed increased fibrous tissue with dilated blood vessels. In addition to dilated congested blood sinusoïds and activated Von Kupffer cells (fig. 3c, d). However, Silymarin treated group showed normal acidophilic hepatocytes with vesicular nuclei. Somewhat dilated central vein and von kuffer cells can also be noticed (fig. 3e). Hesperidin treated group showed normal central vein with slightl congested blood sinusoïds. Most hepatocytes are normal with acidophilic cytoplasm and vesicular nuclei, activation of Von Kupffer cells can be also observed (fig. 3f).

Immunohistochemical study

Immunostaining for [complete name] (α-SMA) antigen in the liver showing minimal expression of α-SMA in the portal area of control and corn oil groups (fig. 4a, b) respectively, whereas HSC's strongly positive of α-SMA in the portal areas and along the fibrous septa around the hepatic lobules were observed in group of CCl₄-intoxicated group (fig. 4c, d).

Fig. 1: Effect of silymarin or hesperidin on hepatic content of TGF-β, in rats with experimentally induced liver fibrosis

Each value represents the mean of 8 animals±standard error of the mean (SEM)

<sup>a</sup>Significantly different from control group value at p<0.05, <sup>b</sup>Significantly different from corn oil group value at p<0.05, <sup>c</sup>Significantly different from fibrosis control group value at p<0.05 and <sup>d</sup>Significantly different from silymarin reference treated group value at p<0.05.

Fig. 2: Effect of silymarin or hesperidin on hepatic content of HYP in rats with experimentally-induced liver fibrosis

Each value represents the mean of 8 animals±standard error of the mean (SEM). 

<sup>a</sup>Significantly different from control group value at p<0.05, <sup>b</sup>Significantly different from corn oil group value at p<0.05, <sup>c</sup>Significantly different from fibrosis control group value at p<0.05 and <sup>d</sup>Significantly different from silymarin reference treated group value at p<0.05.

Fig. 3: Histopathological examination of liver sections stained with H and E (×400) in normal and treated groups represented as (a) normal control group (CV: central vein, H: hepatocytes, S: sinustoïds, white arrow: von-kupffer cells). (b) corn oil group (CV: central vein, H: hepatocytes, S: sinustoïds, white arrow: von-kupffer cells). (c) fibrosis control group CCl₄ in corn oil HandE (×100) (black arrow: fibrous tissue, white arrow: dilated blood vessels). (d) fibrosis control group (black arrow: dilated congested blood sinustoïds and activated von-kupffer cells, yellow arrow: fibrous tissue). (e) CCl₄-intoxicated rat co-treated with silymarin group (CV: central vein, H: hepatocytes, S: sinustoïds, white arrow: von-kupffer cells) and (f) CCl₄-intoxicated rat co-treated with hesperidin group (CV: central vein, black arrow: blood sinustoïds, white arrow: hepatocytes with vesicular nuclei, yellow arrow: von kuffer cells).
Section of a liver obtained from CCl4-intoxicated group co-treated with silymarin and hesperidin showing moderate positive expression of α-SMA in the portal areas and along the incomplete fibrous septa around the hepatic lobules (fig. 4e, f) respectively. Compared with CCl4-intoxicated group, liver of rats treated concomitantly with silymarin and hesperidin showed markedly reduced α-SMA positive HSCs.

**Fig. 4:** Examination of alpha-smooth muscle actin (α-SMA) antigen by immunohistochemical staining (magnification×100) in liver sections represented as (a) normal control group (b) corn oil group (c) fibrosis control group CCl4 in corn oil (d) fibrosis control group (magnification×400) (e) CCl4-intoxicated rat co-treated with silymarin group and (f) CCl4-intoxicated rat co-treated with hesperidin group

**DISCUSSION**

In the present study, hesperidin was evaluated regarding its possible beneficial effect on CCl4-induced liver fibrosis in adult male Wistar albino rats as compared to the reference drug silymarin. Carbon tetrachloride is an industrial solvent and one of the most commonly experimental models used in the induction of liver fibrosis and for the screening of hepatoprotective agents [28]. It is considered as a toxic chemical that induces hepatotoxicity including fibrosis, fatty degeneration, inflammation, carcinogenicity and hepatocellular death [29].

In the current study, CCl4 intoxication induced a significant increase in serum levels of AST, ALT and total bilirubin which are the most sensitive biomarkers used in the diagnosis of liver injury and hepatic necrosis. These results are in full agreement with Li et al. [30]. During the hepatocellular damage, these enzymes are released into the blood flow from the cytoplasm after the rupture of the hepatic plasma membrane. In addition, CCl4 causes a destruction of hepatic cells and blocking of bile ducts which lead to an increase in serum total bilirubin levels [13]. In addition, CCl4 produced a significant decrease in serum level of albumin, the most important protein synthesised in the liver. This is in accordance with [30] who considered this as an indication of hepatocyte damage and loss of functional integrity.

The protective potential of hesperidin against liver fibrosis was evidenced in this study from its ability to significantly suppress serum levels of liver function markers (ALT, AST and total bilirubin) and to significantly increase serum level of albumin, revealing its hepatoprotective nature against CCl4 hepatotoxicity. This comes in agreement with the results of Elshazly and Mahmoud [9], who reported that hesperidin evoked a hepatoprotective effect against dimethylnitrosamine-induced fibrosis in rats, which is likely attributed to its antioxidant and antiapoptotic effects. These effects would reduce HSCs activation and the progression of fibrosis.

According to the findings of this study, CCl4 intoxication led to a significant decrease in the activity of the antioxidant enzyme catalase, depletion of hepatic GSH content and a significant increase in the hepatic content of MDA. These results are in accordance with those of Turkey et al. [31] who reported that CCl4 induces a marked oxidative stress in rat liver. Our observations obviously suggested that the oxidative damage might explain at least in part the CCl4-induced liver fibrosis.

The main sources of oxidants in the liver are phagocytes and inflammatory state mediators which are present in the tissues of patients with liver diseases and could generate oxidants upon activation. Oxygen radical production increased lipid peroxidation, a process of oxidative conversion of polyunsaturated fatty acids to products known as MDA or lipid peroxides. Malondialdehyde has high cytotoxicity and inhibitory action on protective enzymes causing it to act as a tumour promoter and co-carcinogenic agent [32].

Regarding the oxidative stress biomarkers, results of the present investigation declared that hesperidin restored the normal values of GSH and MDA contents and CAT activity in the liver confirming its antioxidant potential. These results are in harmony with those of Pari et al. [8] who reported that hesperidin may play a protective role in reducing the toxic effects of iron-induced oxidative damage in liver and kidney, which could be due to its antioxidant potential by scavenging the free radicals.

In this investigation, the ability of hesperidin to improve these oxidative stress biomarkers reflects its antioxidant properties, its ability to suppress lipid peroxidation, and its good free radical scavenging properties.

Data of the current study showed that CCl4 increases the hepatic MPO activity, TNFα and the relative liver weight to all rat body weight. According to the results obtained from our research, we realised that hesperidin was able to significantly suppress the hepatic MPO activity, which is a good indicator for neutrophil infiltration and tissue inflammation and to significantly suppress the serum level of the pro-inflammatory cytokine TNFα, which is one of the most important cytokines released during liver fibrosis. In agreement with our results, [33] Fouad et al. inferred the anti-inflammatory activity of hesperidin from its ability to reduce the release of inflammatory cytokines like TNFα and cyclooxygenase enzymes, which catalyse a key step in the conversion of arachidonate to prostaglandin (PGs) that plays a critical role in inflammation. Therefore, it could be concluded that inhibition of COX2 will suppress the production of inflammatory prostaglandins.

Myeloperoxidase was found to catalyse the reaction between chloride and hydrogen peroxide to generate hypochlorous acid and other reactive oxidants. The production of these oxidants beside the oxidative stress, one of the main causes of hepatic lesions produced by CCl4, increases lipid profile through cellular oxidative stress of hepatic and kidney, which could be due to its antioxidant potential by scavenging the free radicals.

Results of the current study suggested that hesperidin reduced the amount of fibrous tissue in the liver as presented by its ability to reduce the relative liver weight as compared to the fibrosis control group. Therefore, it may be suggested that hesperidin could alleviate hepatic injury caused by CCl4 partly through suppression of the inflammatory response.

It has been previously reported that high cholesterol diet leads to rapid deposition of lipid droplets in the liver. Hypercholesterolemia should be considered as a risk factor for hepatic damage as well as atherosclerosis and coronary artery disease [35].

Results of the current investigation revealed that CCl4 increased serum levels of cholesterol, triglycerides and LDL-Ch, while it produced a significant decrease in serum level of HDL-Ch. Our observations add further evidence for the previous reports of [36] who reported that CCl4 increases lipid profile through cellular oxidative stress, one of the main causes of hepatic lesions produced by CCl4 mediated by the free radicals derived from this toxic substance. The enhancement of the oxidative stress enhances the influence of non-essential fatty acids which, in turn, increase the serum and tissue levels of cholesterol and triglycerides.
Results of the present study showed that hesperidin significantly reduced serum levels of lipid biomarkers such as total cholesterol, triglycerides and LDL cholesterol, while it produced a significant elevation in serum level of HDL cholesterol, probably through the antioxidant mechanism exerted by the flavones in hesperidin. It has been shown that antioxidants and flavonoids can act as inhibitors of lipid peroxidation by neutralising the radicals of polyunsaturated fatty acids and by interrupting the chain reactions, suppress the influence of non-essential fatty acids which, in turn, decrease the serum and tissue levels of cholesterol and triglycerides [36].

Similar results were also shown by Wang et al. [37] who stated that hesperidin effectively alleviated the steatosis of fatty liver, adipose tissue, liver weights and serum total cholesterol concentrations in rats fed with high cholesterol diet and play an important role in reducing the risk of cardiovascular disease.

Hepatic fibrosis is initiated by a damage of hepatocytes that lead to a formation of inflammatory cells and activation of kupffer cells, which subsequently lead to enhanced production of profibrotic cytokines such as TNFα and TGF-β. Activated TGF-β activates expression of many ECM proteins and decreases their degradation by matrix metalloproteinases through increasing the level of tissue inhibitor of metalloproteinases [38]. When the overexpression of TGF-β is inhibited, the result is a marked improvement of hepatic fibrosis, and for this reason, several inhibitors of TGF-β are investigated as potential drug candidates [39].

Data of the current study declared that CCl4 significantly increased the hepatic content of TGF-β1 and HYP as compared to the normal control group. Our observations add further evidence for the previous reports of Alada-Muruato et al. [39] who mentioned that prolonged CCl4 treatment was associated with progressive fibrogenesis, even after stopping administration of CCl4.

Results of the current investigation showed that hesperidin significantly suppressed the hepatic content of TGF-β1, which is a major indicator for liver fibrosis and HYP which serve as a biochemical indicator of collagen production. It is a good marker for HSCs activation and establishment of liver fibrosis model. This comes in agreement also with the results of Pérez-Vargas et al. [40] who reported that hesperidin prevents fibrosis through its ability to modulate profibrotic signals.

Importantly for further molecular and clear interpretation, the expression of α-SMA from the immunohistochemical study was examined. It was found that a dramatic increase in the expression of α-SMA in the CCl4 intoxicated group. This was considered as an evidence of severe liver fibrosis induced by CCl4. It is a good marker for HSCs activation and establishment of liver fibrosis model. These findings were in line with the previous reports of Domitrović et al. [41] who stated that liver fibrosis was characterised by activated HSC with accelerated proliferation and enhanced production of ECM components. Hepatic stellate cell activation involves the trans-differentiation from a quiescent state into myofibroblast-like cells with the appearance of α-SMA and loss of cellular vitamin A storage.

On the other hand, it was noticed that hesperidin decreases the expression of α-SMA as compared to the CCl4-treated group. In the agreement, previous investigations [9] showed similar results, they reported that hesperidin suppressed the progression of HSCs activation, which is manifested as a significant reduction of α-SMA expression.

In this study, deposition of collagen in the damaged hepatic areas, associated with increased α-SMA, indicates that activated HSCs are responsible for the fibrosis seen in CCl4-intoxicated rats. The aforementioned biochemical results were supported by histopathological improvement observed in the group treated with hesperidin. Hesperidin modulated the severity of hepatic damage caused by CCl4 leading to a further confirmation of its anti-fibrotic effect.

Silymarin has been recorded as a hepatoprotective agent against different toxicants as alcohol, CCl4 or in the case of long uses of many drugs such as acetaminophen [42]. In this study, silymarin showed generally hepatoprotective effects. It attenuated the effect of CCl4 toxicity in all the measured biochemical parameters, which is also supported by histopathological examination. Interestingly, hesperidin showed generally superior hepatoprotective effects compared to silymarin. These results suggest that hesperidin might be more therapeutically beneficial in ameliorating the progression of hepatic fibrosis than silymarin and sheds light on its potential value for treating various liver injuries.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, results of the present study indicate that hesperidin significantly ameliorated CCl4-induced liver fibrosis in rats based on its antioxidant, anti-inflammatory, anti-lipidemic and anti-fibrotic activities. These effects would reduce HSCs activation and the progression of fibrosis. The effects of hesperidin were not only comparable to but also even better than silymarin, making it a potential therapeutic option from natural sources to prevent liver fibrosis induced by CCl4.

AUTHORS CONTRIBUTION

ASMAA RAMADAN ABD EL-STTAR: Design of the work, data collection, and writing the manuscript.

MARWA MAHMOUD KHALAF: Data analysis and interpretation, drafting the article.

AMIRA M. ABOYOUSSEF: Critical revision of the article.

ALI AHMED ABOSAIF: Final approval of the version to be published.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

Declared none

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