Gender difference in arsenic biotransformation is an important metabolic basis for arsenic toxicity

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Research Article

Keywords: Arsenic, Gender difference, MMA, DMA, SAM, ARR, NAD, PNP, PK, MPO, As3MT

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-252094/v1

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Abstract

**Background:** There are gender differences in the biotransformation of arsenic. We investigated the effects of gender differences on arsenic metabolism and arsenic toxicity mechanisms in rat liver tissues.

**Methods:** Rats were treated with different amounts of arsenic compounds. Arsenic form MMA and DMA in the liver was determined by high performance liquid chromatography-hydride generation atomic fluorescence spectroscopy. SAM, ARR, NAD, PNP, PK, and MPO in rat liver were determined by enzyme-linked immunoassay. RT-qPCR was used to determine AS3MT in the liver.

**Results:** Compared with male and female animals in the same group, MMA and DMA were statistically significant in the three groups of iAs$^{3+}$ high, iAs$^{3+}$ medium and iAs$^{5+}$ low (P <0.05). The MMA of male rats in iAs$^{3+}$ high and medium groups was higher than that of female rats, and the DMA of male rats was lower than that of female rats. As$^{3+}$MT mRNA in the male iAs$^{3+}$ high group was higher than that of females. Besides, compared between male and female, only in iAs$^{3+}$ low dose, iAs$^{3+}$ medium dose, iAs$^{5+}$ low dose, and iAs$^{5+}$ medium dose groups, there was significant difference in SAM level (P<0.05). Compared with male and female animals in the same group, male rats had significantly higher PNP and ARR activities while lower PK activity than female rats (P<0.05). Between the male and female groups, only the iAs$^{3+}$ high dose and medium dose group had a statistically significant difference (P<0.05). The NAD activity of females in iAs$^{3+}$ high dose group was higher than that of males.

**Conclusion:** Conclusively, under the same arsenic exposure, there were gender differences between female and male rats, and arsenic metabolism was more cytotoxic to male rats than to females.

Background

Arsenic exposure is common, which can be from contaminated drinking water and industrial activities [1]. The toxicity of different forms of arsenic is not only related to the environment, but also closely related to the metabolism and detoxification mechanism of the organism [2]. When inorganic arsenic enters the organism, it is converted into an organic form mainly through methylation in the liver, which is then excreted from the body. Generally, inorganic arsenic enters the body in the form of arsenite (iAs$^{3+}$) or arsenate (iAs$^{5+}$). The iAs$^{5+}$ can be reduced to iAs$^{3+}$, and then undergo methylation and other reduction reactions to form monomethyl aracid (MMA) and dimethyl aracid (DMA). Arsenic (+3 oxidation state) methyltransferase (AS3MT) uses S-adenosylmethionine (SAM) as a methyl donor to catalyze the methylation of arsenic [3, 4]. Arsenate respiratory reductase (ARR) catalyzes the reduction of arsenate to arsenite [5]. Arsenic exposure increases the level of pyruvate kinase M2 from week 2 of exposure [8] and promotes a significant increase in serum myeloperoxidase (MPO) activity [9]. The severity of arsenic poisoning is closely related to changes in metabolic enzyme activities. Therefore, exploring
changes in metabolic enzyme activity during arsenic poisoning may help to identify individuals who are particularly vulnerable to arsenic toxicity.

The methylation ability of arsenic varies among species, individuals and populations. Previous study has shown that gender is a major factor influencing arsenic metabolism [10]. Women have better methylation efficiency than men, although women are likely to consume nutritious foods, like meat and fresh vegetables [11]. Another important methyl donor is choline, which could either be derived from the diet or from phosphatidylcholine. The synthesis of phosphatidylcholine was reported to be up regulated by estrogen, partially explaining the better methylation of arsenic among women compared to men [12].

In order to explore the difference in methylation ability between male and female rats, in this study, we measured arsenic metabolites and enzyme activity in the liver. Meanwhile, we studied the effects of arsenic, gender, and exposure level on arsenic metabolism in rats.

**Materials And Methods**

**Animals**

Four-week-old Wistar rats with body weight between 80-120g (n = 70, including 35 males and 35 females) were from the Experimental Animal Center of Xinjiang Medical University. The animal usage license number was SYXK (new) 2003-0001. All rats were kept in an environment with a relative humidity of 40–60% and room temperature of 18°C to 22°C.

All animal experiments were conducted according to the ethical guidelines of Experimental Animal Center of Xinjiang Medical University. This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Xinjiang Medical University. All efforts were made to minimize animal suffering.

**Arsenic poisoning model establishment and animal grouping**

After 1 week of adaptive feeding, the rats were randomly divided into 7 groups, namely the normal control (deionized water) group, the low-dose (1/45LD50, 2.33mg/kg)/medium-dose (1/15LD50, 6.67mg/kg)/high-dose (1/5LD50, 20.00mg/kg) iAs\(^{5+}\) exposure groups, and the low dose (1/45LD50, 2.33mg/kg)/medium dose (1/15LD50, 6.67mg/kg)/high dose (1/5LD50, 20.00mg/kg) iAs\(^{3+}\) groups, with 10 animals in each group, half male and female. Free drinking water was used for the poisoning, and the poisoning was continued for 90 days. The stock solution of iAs\(^{3+}\) and iAs\(^{5+}\) was re-dispensed every two days during the poisoning period. During the poisoning period, the animal’s water consumption was recorded daily, and the animal’s body weight was measured every 6 days. The Horn method [13] was used to determine that the oral intake of sodium arsenite (iAs\(^{3+}\)) and sodium hydrogen arsenate (iAs\(^{5+}\)) in Wistar rats. The food intake was recorded, and the concentration of the arsenic-exposed aqueous
solution was adjusted according to the average body weight and water consumption of each group of
animals, that is, appropriate amounts of iAs$^{3+}$ and iAs$^{5+}$ were measured.

The sodium bicarbonate stock solution was diluted according to the average weight of the rats and the
amount of water they drank on the day to prepare the arsenic-exposed aqueous solutions for each group
of rats to ensure the consistency of the arsenic dose.

**Sample collection**

After 90 days of exposure, the animals were sacrificed by cervical dislocation. Then the liver was
dissected immediately, and rinsed with normal saline at 4°C. After that, the wet weight of the liver was
weighed. Then, the liver tissues were then homogenized with an electric homogenizer in a volume of 3mL
PBS. The homogenate was centrifuged at 3000 r/min at 4°C for 20 minutes. Then, the supematant was
collected and stored at -80°C until use.

**High performance liquid chromatography-hydride
generation atomic fluorescence spectroscopy**

The rapid solvent extraction (ASE) method was used for sample pretreatment [14]. The contents of
arsenic speciation products (iAs$^{3+}$, iAs$^{5+}$, MMA, DMA) in liver tissues were determined by high
performance liquid chromatography-hydride generation atomic fluorescence spectroscopy. The detection
limit of the method was 6.67–12.03µg/L, RSD < 3%. The average recovery rate of DMA in each
iAs$^{3+}$group was between 98.9% and 102.9%.

**ELISA**

The activities of pyruvate kinase (PK), ARR, MPO, SAM, NAD and PNP were measured with Enzyme-linked
immunoassay kits (Shanghai Huole Biological Technology Co, Ltd, Shanghai, China) according to the
instructions. PK was expressed as mU/L. The results of ARR, MPO, NAD, and PNP were shown as U/L.
The result of SAM was shown as nmol/L.

Real-time fluorescent quantitative PCR(RT-qPCR)

Total RNA was isolated from liver tissues using the Trizol reagent (Invitrogen, USA). cDNA was
synthesized with a high capacity cDNA reverse transcription Kit (Fermentas) from 1µg total RNA. The
PCR procedure for AS3MT was: 95°C, 2 min; 95°C, 5 sec, and 58°C, 30 sec, 40 cycles; that forβ-actin was :
95°C, 2 min; 95°C, 5 sec, and 55°C, 30 sec, 40 cycles. The primers used were as follows: rat AS3MT: 5-
GGG ACA CAT CAC CGG GAT AGA C-3’ (Forward) and 5’-AAC ATC TCA ATT TGG CCG TGA AG-3’
(Reverse); and rat β-actin: 5’-TCC TGT GGC ATC CAT GAA ACT-3’ (Forward) and 5’-GAA GCA TTT GCG
GTG CAC GTA-3’ (Reverse). Each sample was analyzed in duplicate and expression of the AS3MT mRNA
was normalized to that of β-actin.

**Statistical analysis**
SPSS 15.0 software was used for data analysis. All experiments were repeated three times, and the results were expressed as mean ± standard deviation. For data of normal distribution, one-way variance analysis was used for multi-comparison followed by LSD-t test for pairwise comparison. Dunnett test was used when the data was of non-normal distribution. Pearson correlation method was used for correlation analysis. The P < 0.05 was considered as statistically significant.

Results

Comparison of arsenic DMA and MMA in rat liver

The ASE method was used to extract the arsenic metabolites in the liver, and the arsenic metabolites, including MMA and DMA, in the liver were analyzed by high performance liquid chromatography-hydride generation atomic fluorescence spectrometry. The results showed that in each group, DMA and MMA in the liver of male and female rats were significantly higher than those in the normal control group (Fig. 1A and 1B, P < 0.05). Compared with the low-dose group, except for the male iAs\textsuperscript{5+} high-dose group, the differences in MMA and DMA in other groups were all statistically significant (P < 0.05). When comparing the effects of different arsenic compounds in the same dose group, the MMA differences between the female iAs\textsuperscript{5+} low-dose group and the male iAs\textsuperscript{5+} high-dose and medium-dose groups were statistically significant. The DMA levels were all statistically significant between male and female rats (P < 0.05). Compared with male and female animals in the same group, the MMA in groups of iAs\textsuperscript{3+} high, medium, and iAs\textsuperscript{5+} low was all statistically significant, and the differences in DMA were statistically significant (P < 0.05). However, the MMA of male rats was higher in iAs\textsuperscript{3+} high and medium dose groups than that of female rats, and the DMA of male rats was lower than that of female rats.

Effect of gender on the relative expression of As3MT mRNA in rats

RT-qPCR was used to detect the expression of As3MT mRNA in the liver. After different doses of iAs\textsuperscript{3+} or iAs\textsuperscript{5+} treatment, As3MT in both male and female rats in each group was higher than that in the normal control group (p < 0.05) (Fig. 2). Compared with the low-dose group, only the same test substance in the female AH group, AM group, male AH group, and BH group had statistical differences (P < 0.05). Comparing different test substances in the same dose group, only the female AH group, the female AM group, and the male AH group had statistical differences (P < 0.05). Compared with male and female animals in the same group, the expression of As3MT mRNA in AH group was higher in males than females (P < 0.05).

Effect of gender on MPO activity in the liver of rats

The MPO activity in the liver was determined by ELISA. Compared with the control group, the MPO activity of the iAs\textsuperscript{3+} low-dose group and the iAs\textsuperscript{5+} high-dose group increased (P < 0.05). Besides, the difference between male and female in the same group was statistically significant (P < 0.05, Fig. 3).
Effects of gender on SAM in the liver of rats

The SAM level in the liver was also determined by ELISA. Compared with the control group, the SAM activity of each iAs$^{3+}$ or iAs$^{5+}$ group was significantly increased ($P < 0.05$) (Fig. 4). Compared with the iAs$^{3+}$ low-dose group, the activity of SAM in the iAs$^{3+}$ high-dose group was lower ($P < 0.05$). The activity of SAM was lower in iAs$^{5+}$ high and medium dose groups than that in iAs$^{5+}$ low dose groups ($P < 0.05$). In the iAs$^{3+}$ medium/low-dose groups, and iAs$^{5+}$ medium/low-dose groups, the SAM activity of females was lower than that of males ($P < 0.05$, Fig. 4).

Effects of gender on ARR activity in the liver of rats

As shown in Fig. 5, the ARR activity of the iAs$^{3+}$ low-dose group was higher than that of the normal control group, while the ARR activity of the male iAs$^{5+}$ high-dose group was higher than that of the normal control group. Additionally, the ARR activity of the iAs$^{3+}$ high-dose group was lower than that of the iAs$^{3+}$ low-dose group. The ARR activity of iAs$^{5+}$ high-dose group was higher than iAs$^{5+}$ low-dose group. In the same group, compared between male and female, except for the iAs$^{3+}$ high-dose group, the ARR activity of males in other groups was higher than that of females (Fig. 5).

Effect of gender on PNP level in the liver of rats

The analysis of PNP activity in the liver of each group of rats found that in the same group of animals, the PNP activity of male rats was higher than that of female rats ($P < 0.05$, Fig. 6).

Effects of gender on the PK activity in the liver of rats

The PK activity in the liver was determined by ELISA. After exposure to different doses of iAs$^{3+}$ or iAs$^{5+}$, except for the iAs$^{3+}$ high-dose group, the PK activity in remaining groups was statistically different from that in the control group ($P < 0.05$) (Fig. 7). Compared with the low-dose group, only iAs$^{3+}$ had statistical difference ($P < 0.05$). In addition, there was a statistical difference between the female iAs$^{3+}$ high-dose group and the iAs$^{5+}$ high-dose group ($P < 0.05$). In the same group, comparison between male and female, except for the control group, PK activity in other groups of female rats was higher than that of male rats ($P < 0.05$, Fig. 7).

Effect of gender on NAD level in the liver of rats

ELISA was performed to determine the NAD level in the liver. Compared with the control group, there was a statistical difference in NAD of female iAS$^{3+}$ low dose group, the iAS$^{5+}$ low/medium dose group and the male iAS$^{3+}$ low dose group ($P < 0.05$) (Fig. 8). Compared with the low-dose group, the activity of NAD in the iAS$^{3+}$ high-dose group decreased ($P < 0.05$). In comparison between male and female, the NAD activity of females in iAs$^{3+}$ high and medium dose groups was higher than that of males ($P < 0.05$).
These results indicate that under the same iAs$^{3+}$ exposure, arsenic inhibited NAD activity in males, and promoted NAD activity in females.

**Discussion**

The results of this study showed that after exposure to iAs$^{3+}$ or iAs$^{5+}$, the content of DMA and MMA in the liver of male rats and female rats in each group was significantly higher than that in the normal control group, reflecting that arsenic exposure may affect DMA and MMA content. The DMA content of male rats was lower than female rats in the same group. This is consistent with the conclusion of a study that women had higher urine excretion levels of DMA than men [15]. Studies have shown MMA is more toxic than DMA [16, 17]. The MMA content of male rats was greater than that of female rats in the same group. This may be the metabolic basis for the gender difference in arsenic poisoning. The results of an animal experiment also showed that arsenic in males was more pathogenic than that in females [18], and the cytotoxic effect of arsenic on males was stronger than that of females. It is inferred that arsenic metabolites may have higher toxic effects on liver tissues of male rats than on those of females. This conclusion is also consistent with the results of population based epidemiological investigations and clinical studies [19, 20].

AS3MT is a cysteine-rich enzyme that can catalyze the biomethylation of arsenic in vivo and in vitro. The liver is the main site of arsenic methylation metabolism. In this study, we explored the effects of different valences of arsenic on the expression of As3MT in rat liver. The results showed that the expression of AS3MT in the high, medium, and low dose groups of iAs$^{3+}$ and iAs$^{5+}$ were higher than those in the control group, indicating that arsenic exposure can increase expression of AS3MT. The expression level of AS3MT in the high and medium dose groups of iAs$^{3+}$ was higher than that in the low dose group, and the expression level gradually increased as the dose of iAs$^{3+}$ increased. The expression level of AS3MT in the iAs$^{5+}$ high-dose group was lower than that in the low-dose group, and the expression level gradually decreased as the iAs$^{5+}$ dose increased. It shows that there may be a positive correlation and a negative correlation between the exposure of iAs$^{3+}$ and iAs$^{5+}$ and the expression of As3MT, and there may be a certain dose-effect relationship, which was contrary to the study using frogs [21]. The expression of AS3MT in the liver in the iAs$^{3+}$ high dose group was higher than that of the iAs$^{5+}$ high-dose group. Thus, it can be inferred that arsenic with different valences has different arsenic methylation patterns in the body. The arsenic methylation and level of arsenic would accelerate the excretion of methylated arsenic through urine [22, 23], but it can also enhance the potential genotoxicity and long-term effects [24], which is consistent with the same metabolic pattern of low-dose iAs$^{5+}$ liver arsenic. Obviously, the high dose of iAs$^{5+}$ in the liver inhibited the expression of AS3MT to a certain extent. Compared with male and female animals in the same group, the relative expression of AS3MT mRNA in male rats in the AH group was higher than that in female rats, indicating that arsenic has different arsenic methylation patterns in different sexes. This result reflects the tension or disorder of arsenic methylation and detoxification pathways in males, which is consistent with previous study [25].
In this study, it was found that compared with the control group, both the iAs$^{3+}$ low-dose group and the iAs$^{5+}$ high-dose group promoted the increase of MPO activity in rats. MPO is present in the cell and all three subtypes of MPO can form a strong complex with DNA to prevent damage during oxidation and ensure the normal differentiation of cell functions [26]. The increase in MPO content caused by arsenic poisoning may also contribute to lipid peroxidation and oxidative cell damage [27]. In this study, MPO activity of male rats was greater than that of female rats. These results indicate that male rats and female rats may have different lipid peroxidation processes. It has been found that after external environmental stimuli, the activity of MPO decreases and the production of ROS is also reduced, thereby reducing the damage of arsenic to the body [28]. Therefore, the higher MPO activity in males will increase the damage of arsenic to the body.

The results showed that SAM in the liver of rats after exposure to iAs$^{3+}$ or iAs$^{5+}$ was significantly higher than that in the control group, indicating that different valences of arsenic affected the activity and level of SAM to change the methylation of DNA and histones [29]. Comparing with the low-dose group, the content of SAM in iAs$^{3+}$ high-dose group, iAs$^{5+}$ high- and medium dose groups was lower, and the content gradually decreased with increasing dose. It can be inferred that there is a certain dose-effect relationship between the exposure of iAs$^{3+}$ and iAs$^{5+}$ and the content of SAM in the body, that is, the higher the arsenic exposure, the lower the SAM level [30, 31]. Additionally, we observed that compared with different valences, iAs$^{3+}$ had higher SAM excessive consumption or failure than iAs$^{5+}$. Therefore, the arsenic methylation of iAs$^{5+}$ is relatively sufficient, which will generate more MAs and DMAs [32]. During this process, there will be more active free radicals, resulting in abnormal DNA methylation, leading to stronger genotoxicity and exerting long-term effects such as carcinogenesis [30, 33]. Compared with male and female animals in the same group, the SAM activity of female rats in the iAs$^{3+}$ medium and low-dose groups and iAs$^{5+}$ medium and low-dose groups was lower than that of male rats. This indicates that the same arsenic exposure may exert greater acute toxicity, stronger genotoxicity and long-term effects such as carcinogenesis in males.

We also found that the activity of ARR in the iAs$^{5+}$ high-dose group and iAs$^{3+}$ low-dose group was higher than that in the control group. The ARR activity of the iAs$^{3+}$ high-dose group was lower than that of the iAs$^{3+}$ low-dose group, and the ARR activity of the iAs$^{5+}$ high-dose group was higher than that of the iAs$^{5+}$ low-dose group. Therefore, exposure to high doses of arsenic can lead to changes in ARR activity, and the effect of iAs$^{5+}$ on ARR shows a certain dose relationship. On the other hand, the ARR activity of the iAs$^{5+}$ high dose/medium dose group was higher than that of the iAs$^{3+}$ high dose/medium dose group; and that of the iAs$^{5+}$ low dose group was lower than that of the iAs$^{3+}$ high dose group. This may be related to the different mechanisms by which arsenic of different valences inhibit ARR activity [34, 35]. Comparison between male and female animals in the same group, except for the iAs$^{3+}$ high dose group, the ARR activity of males in the other groups was higher than that of females, indicating that the males may compensatively stimulate the body to produce more ARR.
As for PNP, we found that male rats could promote the compensatory increase of PNP activity more than female rats. Li et al found that PNP mRNA expression was significantly positively correlated with MMA% [36]. The increased expression of PNP mRNA will increase the level of MMA in the urine of the population, thus exerting greater long-term effects such as genotoxicity or carcinogenesis and mutagenesis. Therefore, arsenic may exert greater long-term effects such as genotoxicity or carcinogenesis and mutagenesis in males than females [37].

By detecting the activity of PK can help to understand the degree of arsenic methylation and its influencing factors, and to infer the toxicity mechanism of arsenic [38]. The results of this study showed that the activity of PK in the control group was higher than that in the iAs\textsuperscript{5+} high-dose group, indicating that high-dose arsenic exposure can cause abnormal PK activity. The PK activity of the iAs\textsuperscript{3+} group was higher than that of the iAs\textsuperscript{5+} group. It can be inferred that arsenic with different valences may affect PK activity through interfering with the glycolysis process, leading to abnormal cell energy metabolism [8]. Compared with males and females of the same group of animals, the PK activity of females was higher than that of males, suggesting that arsenic may change the glycolysis process by inhibiting the activity of PK in males, which may then affects the body's energy supply and causes greater toxicity.

Furthermore, we found that after exposing to different doses of iAs\textsuperscript{3+} or iAs\textsuperscript{5+}, the NAD of male iAs\textsuperscript{3+} high-dose group was lower than that of control group. It may be caused by the interference of physiological and biochemical process by high-dose iAs\textsuperscript{3+}, which leads to insufficient cellular ATP synthesis required for metabolism [39, 40]. There was a statistically significant difference between the different doses of iAs\textsuperscript{3+}, suggesting that lower dose of iAs\textsuperscript{3+} promoted the activity of NAD, which may be because of the oxidation to iAS\textsuperscript{5+} by NADH [41]. In addition, the difference between males and females in each group was statistically significant, indicating that arsenic promoted the NAD activity of females and inhibited the NAD activity of males. Moreover, arsenic also inhibited glycolysis and caused abnormal metabolism, thus exerting a toxic effect [39, 40].

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, most studies only observed and analyzed the relationship between a single gene and arsenic. This study analyzed the content and activity of multiple arsenic metabolism-related enzymes in the liver of rats of different genders. It is found that arsenic had more toxic effects on male animals than females. In the future, it is necessary to further study the combination of multiple arsenic metabolism-related genes and the interaction between genes and the environment.

**Declarations**

The study was carried out in compliance with the ARRIVE guidelines.

**Ethics approval and consent to participate**
All animal experiments were conducted according to the ethical guidelines of Experimental Animal Center of Xinjiang Medical University. This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Xinjiang Medical University.

**Consent for publication**

Not applicable.

**Availability of data and materials**

The data used and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

**Competing interests**

All authors declare no financial competing interests.

All authors declare no nonfinancial competing interests.

**Funding**

This work was funded by grants from the National Natural Science Foundation of China (Grant No.81560513), Natural Science Foundation of the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region in China (Grant No. 2018D01C147), and Public Health and Preventive Medicine, a key discipline in the 13th Five-Year Plan of Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region.

**Authors' contributions**

JW designed the study. MM, MY and RX collected the data. MM analyzed and interpreted the data. JW collected the funds. MM wrote the paper. JW revised the paper. All authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

**Acknowledgements**

Not applicable.

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