Case Report

Turmeric Induced Liver Injury: A Report of Two Cases

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Turmeric is a commonly used oral herbal supplement with purported anti-inflammatory and antineoplastic properties. It is promoted as safe, with limited reports of severe adverse effects directly related to oral turmeric thus far in the literature. Herein we report two cases of turmeric supplement induced severe hepatitis. These cases highlight the need for physicians to be aware of patients taking this common supplement and the potential risks that exist.

1. Introduction

Idiosyncratic drug induced liver injury (DILI) is estimated to occur in 1 in 10,000 to 1 in 100,000 people who take a medication [1]. It is the most frequent adverse event leading to abandonment of new drugs and is implicated in 13% of acute liver failure cases in the United States [2]. Herbal and dietary supplements (HDS) account for at least 9% of cases overall [1], with this rate thought to be an underestimate due to their popularity and underreporting.

Turmeric, with its major active ingredient curcumin, is one of the most commonly used HDS [3]. In recent years it has gained attention for its anti-inflammatory, anti-cancer, and other properties across a variety of disorders [4]. Regarding safety, dosing studies and randomized controlled trials have thus far concluded that curcumin treatment is safe, with minimal reported severe adverse effects [4–7].

We report two cases of likely turmeric supplement induced severe liver injury, including one in which a positive rechallenge occurred.

2. Case 1

A 52-year-old Caucasian female presented to her general practitioner with a one-week history of nausea, pruritus, and painless jaundice with associated pale stools and dark urine. This occurred approximately one month following commencement of a turmeric supplement among other medications. She rarely consumed alcohol, was a nonsmoker, and had no history of tattoos, illicit drug use, or recent travel. She had no prior history of liver disease and had normal liver function tests three months before. Her medical history was notable only for oligoarticular osteoarthritis.

On presentation she was found to have a bilirubin of 162 μmol/L with a hepatocellular profile on liver function
tests (ALT 2591U/L, AST 1770U/L, ALP 263U/L, and GGT 370U/L) and preserved hepatic synthetic function (INR 1.0, albumin 32 g/L) (Figure 1). She was jaundiced, with no hepatomegaly or clinical features of chronic liver disease on examination. With progressive jaundice over the subsequent days she was referred to the emergency department, at which point her bilirubin peaked at 536 μmol/L.

Approximately one month prior to presentation she had commenced one tablet per day of Ancient Wisdom Modern Medicine® High Potency Turmeric (375mg curcuminoids and 4 mg black pepper per tablet), along with a flaxseed oil supplement and occasional diclofenac use for arthritic pain. Her long-term medications of cholecalciferol 50mcg daily and over-the-counter medicines. A detailed method is published elsewhere [9]. A further sample was analyzed by validated liquid chromatography quadruple time-of-flight (LC-QTOF) mass spectrometry method. Results were compared to a toxicology library containing approximately 1400 compounds, including medications, illicit drugs, and over-the-counter medicines. A detailed method is published elsewhere [9]. A further sample was analyzed by inductively coupled plasma (ICP) mass spectrometry for the presence of trace and toxic elements. The turmeric supplement tested negative for drugs, adulterants, or toxic heavy metals.

### 3. Case 2

A 55-year-old man of Italian background presented to his general practitioner for a routine checkup and was referred to a hepatologist for causes of acute hepatitis. Apart from a positive ANA titre of 1:160, screening was unremarkable. Hepatic synthetic function was preserved with a normal INR and albumin of 45 g/L. Abdominal ultrasonography showed diffuse steatosis, but no ductal or vascular pathology. A drug reaction was suspected, and the turmeric supplement was ceased.

Close follow-up occurred over the subsequent four months. Near normalization of liver function tests occurred by one month (ALT 96U/L, bilirubin 10μmol/L) with further improvement by four months after cessation (ALT 46U/L, bilirubin 11 μmol/L). The turmeric supplement was the presumed cause of the hepatitis and as such the patient was not rechallenged. The RUCAM score was 6, or “probable”
[8]. The turmeric supplement was not known, and therefore further analysis could not be performed on the supplement.

4. Discussion

Turmeric rhizome has been used for thousands of years as a spice, a dye and for its purported medicinal properties. An increasing body of in vivo data and emerging clinical evidence exists for the anti-inflammatory, antioxidant, immunomodulatory, wound healing, antiproliferative, and antimicrobial activities of its major active curcuminoid constituent, curcumin, across a number of conditions [4, 10].

Products containing turmeric are generally listed by the curcuminoid content, commonly making up only 3-5% of turmeric rhizome and giving turmeric its yellow appearance [10]. Curcumin exhibits poor bioavailability, undergoing extensive first pass metabolism with doses of at least 4 g per day required for detectability in plasma [5, 6]. Formulation modifications to improve bioavailability include the use of liposomal encapsulation, nanoparticles, emulsions, and sustained released preparations [10–12]. When delivered with the alkaloid piperine, derived from piper nigrum (black pepper) and other piper species, plasma levels of curcumin have been shown to be augmented in humans and rats due to increased intestinal absorption and inhibition of hepatic glucuronidation by piperine [13].

Paradoxically to the presented cases, curcumin has been studied for its benefits in a number of hepatic pathologies. In humans, a combination formula of 1 g each of curcumin and Tinospora cordifolia has been shown to reduce hepatotoxicity in patients with active tuberculosis undergoing antituberculous treatment [14]. In another human pilot study, patients with nonalcoholic fatty liver disease randomized to 70 mg curcumin daily for 8 weeks displayed a significant reduction in sonographic liver fat content compared to placebo [15].

Regarding adverse effects, a number of severe adverse effects have been reported when given orally [16–18], topically [19], vaginally [20], and intravenously [21]. Mild liver function test derangement has been reported in approximately 5% of cases in randomized controlled trials [22], with one report of drug induced autoimmune hepatitis reported recently [22]. The potential for drug interactions has been recognized, with dose-dependent inhibition of cytochrome p450 subtypes CYP3A4 and CYP1A2 in the liver [23] and intestines [24] identified. Accordingly, the addition of curcumin to medications metabolized by CYP3A4 can lead to an increase in plasma levels, with curcumin associated with acute calcineurin inhibitor nephrotoxicity due to CYP3A4 inhibition [25].

However, while clinical studies may assess pure curcumin compounds, the products available to patients in pharmacies and nutritional food stores contain varying concentrations of curcumin plus numerous additives, potentially accounting for differing real-life risk profiles [26]. In case 1, the supplement used contained 4 mg of piperine in addition to 375 mg of curcumin. A dose of 20 mg of piperine in a similar ratio to curcumin has been shown to increase curcumin bioavailability 20-fold compared to curcumin alone due to inhibition of first pass metabolism in the intestines and liver [13]. Given the known pharmacological mechanisms of piperine and lack of any reported direct adverse effects in the literature, the hepatotoxicity in case 1 is felt more likely to be due to augmented effects of curcumin than the piperine itself. Furthermore, no other known toxic substances or toxic levels of heavy metals were found in the supplement on LC-QTOF mass spectrometry, respectively, essentially excluding a contaminant albeit for rare, unknown compounds. The curcumin supplement used in case 2 is not known, and hence comment on additives cannot be made.

The presented cases are “highly probable” and “probable,” respectively, for turmeric induced hepatotoxicity based on RUCAM scores. In both cases the timing of turmeric supplement use with respect to onset and offset of liver injury was compatible, and both underwent extensive serological screening excluding other causes of deranged liver function. The rechallenge in case 1, along with the histology consistent with drug toxicity and lack of any other known toxins on further analysis of the supplement, provides an even stronger case for the turmeric inducing hepatotoxicity and negates any relationship between other medications and the liver injury.

With high community interest in HDS therapies and emerging evidenced based support for turmeric across specialties, there will likely be increasing use by patients. In this context, the reported cases of turmeric induced hepatotoxicity highlight the need for the physician to be aware of patients taking this therapy and the potential risks that exist.

Consent

Consent was obtained from the patients for inclusion in this manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors report no conflicts of interest.

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