CLINICAL STUDY

The effects of 4-MEI on cell proliferation, DNA breaking and DNA fragmentation

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ABSTRACT

4-Methylimidazole (4-MEI) is a color widely found in cola drinks, roasted foods, grilled meats, coffee and other foods. This study was aimed to investigate the 4-MEI effects on the cell proliferation, purified circular DNA and DNA from cells of rats treated with the 4-MEI. In this study, mouse 3T3-L1 cell line was treated with 4-MEI at concentrations of 300, 450, 600 and 750 μg/mL for 24 hours and 48 hours periods, after that cytotoxic effect of the 4-MEI was studied by MTT test. Also, the effect of 4-MEI on purified circular DNA (pET22b) was investigated by treating of the DNA with 4-MEI concentrations of 300, 450, 600 and 750 μg/mL. DNA was extracted from liver cells of rats that have been treated with 4-MEI doses of 25 and 50 mg/kg for 10 week and it was subjected to agarose gel electrophoreses analyses. 4-MEI significantly inhibited cell proliferation of 3T3-L1 cell line at highest concentration for 24 h and at all concentration for 48 h treatment time. DNA fragmentation assay showed that 4-MEI at 50 mg/kg concentration clearly produced characteristic DNA smear and no DNA laddering (200bp) was observed when mouse was exposed to 4-MEI. The results obtained from plasmid DNA damaging assay showed that 4-MEI has noeffect on the DNA, because the electrophoretic pattern of DNA treated with 4-MEI showed three bands on agarose gel electrophoresis as it was for untreated control. 4-MEI showed cytotoxic effect on 3T3-L1 cells but no effect on plasmid DNA breaking. According to DNA fragmentation assay 4-MEI has necrosis effects on mouse liver cells (Tab. 1, Fig. 4, Ref. 27). Text in PDF www.elis.sk.

KEY WORDS: 4-Methylimidazole, MTT, DNA fragmentation, plasmid DNA breaking.

Introduction

The 4-Methylimidazole (4-MEI) is found in natural dyes during the ammonia and ammonia-sulfite caramelization processing (Maillard reaction) of carbohydrates. Caramel colors of foods have been grouped in 4 classes by the Joint FAO/WHO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations/WORLD Health Organization) Expert Committee on Food Additives (JECFA), and the European Union Scientific Committee for Food (1). 4-MEI (a heterocyclic organic chemical compound) is extensively used in human foods. Caramel color (which is the most-used food and beverage coloring), dark beers and common brands of cola drinks may contain more than 100 μg of this compound per 12-ounce serving. Also, this substance is found in roasted foods, grilled meats, and coffee (2, 3).

Some researchers have reported regarding the detrimental effect of the commonly used substances, for example NTP, found equivocal evidence of carcinogenic activity in female rats (F344/N) based on increased incidence of mononuclear cell leukemia and no evidence of carcinogenic activity in male rats. However, the manufacturing of certain artificial caramel colorings can lead to the formation of carcinogens (4, 5). On the other hand, Caramel showed mutagenic activity in Salmonella typhimurium TA 100 (6). In contrast to these researches, other experimental studies reported that 4-MEI provide chemopreventive effects against some cancers (5, 7). The decreased incidences of tumors in rats were mentioned in the NTP results, but they were not given much prominence, because NTP commonly focuses on cytotoxic identification rather than cancer prevention (4).

According to our knowledge there are not enough studies regarding genotoxic and cytotoxic effects of the 4-MEI, so by considering the extreme usage of the 4-MEI worldwide, this study was aimed to investigate of the effects of 4-MEI on the inhibition of cell proliferation, DNA breaking and DNA fragmentation.

The 3T3-L1 cell line was originally derived from Swiss mouse embryo tissue by Dr. Howard Green of Harvard Medical School. The 3T3-L1 is most commonly used in short- and long-term non-toxicological in vitro studies on cytotoxicity, cancer, biocompati-

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bility, or mechanisms of cellular uptake of nanoparticles (8, 9). MTT assays are well known tests for evaluation of chemoradiation studies and radiosensitivity (10, 11, 12). MTT assays are well known to study chemosensitivity or toxicity of drugs in cell lines (13, 14). The assay is less common to study survival of cancer cells after irradiation, in particular when the MTT assay is performed for studying proliferation of treated cells. The base of this method is the formation of dark-colored formazan dye by reduction of the tetrazolium salt MTT by metabolically active cells (15).

A hallmark feature of apoptosis was the observation that nuclear DNA extracted from apoptotic cells was often degraded in an inter-nucleosomal pattern (16). That is, DNA cleavage during apoptosis occurred at sites between nucleosomes, protein-containing structures that occur in chromatin at approximate 200-bp intervals. This DNA fragmentation was often analyzed using agarose gel electrophoresis to demonstrate a “ladder” pattern (17). On the other hand, genomic fragments of irregular sizes are generally induced during necrotic cells, and a DNA smear is obtained during agarose gel electrophoresis (18).

The characteristics of the major classes of food coloring are that in order to express their genotoxicity and carcinogenicity, they must be metabolized to reactive intermediates that are capable of interacting covalently with DNA (19). Damage to DNA is likely to be a major cause of cancer and other diseases.

Materials and method

Materials

In this study, 4-MEI (CAS Number: 822-36-6, Purity: 98%, Molecular Weight: 82.11) was purchased from Sigma Aldrich and used as a test substance. The molecular structure of the substance as shown in Figure 1.

In this research pET22b plasmid was purchased from Novagen and MTT dye (3-(4, 5-dimethylthiazol-2-yl)-2,5- diphenyl tetrazolium bromide), Dimethylsulfoxide (DMSO), mouse embryo 3T3-L1 cells were purchased from the Sigma and RPMI 1640 medium was purchased from Life technologies.

Assessment of cytotoxicity

The mouse embryo 3T3-L1 cells were obtained from Department of Medical Biology, Medicine Faculty of Cukurova University, Adana, Turkey. The culture medium included Dulbecco’s RPMI 1640 medium. The cell culture condition was 37 °C in humidity, Adana, Turkey. The culture medium included Dulbecco’s RPMI 1640 medium. The assay is less common to study survival of cancer cells after irradiation, in particular when the MTT assay is performed for studying proliferation of treated cells. The base of this method is the formation of dark-colored formazan dye by reduction of the tetrazolium salt MTT by metabolically active cells (15).

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Fig. 1. The structure of 4-methylimidazole
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(200ng from all samples) mixed with loading dye and electrophoresed on 1.8 % agarose in Tris borate (pH 8) for 2 h at 150 volt. Gels were stained in 0.05 mg/ml ethidium bromide for 30 minute.

**Plasmid DNA Breaking Potential**

DNA damaging potential of 4-MEI was evaluated on pET22b plasmid DNA (Novagen). The experiments were performed in a volume of 10 μl in a microfuge tube containing 3 μl pET22b (150 ng) plasmid DNA, and 7 μl of 4-MEI in the concentrations of 300, 450, 600 and 750 μg/ml, respectively. In this research, untreated controls (untreated pET22b plasmid DNA) and positive controls (1 μl of 30 % H2O2, 3 μl pET22b plasmid DNA, and 6 μl of H2O) were also used. The reactions were incubated at room temperature for 30 min. After incubation, the reaction mixture (5 μl) along with gel loading dye (6×) was loaded on a 1.8 % agarose gel for electrophoresis (23).

**Results**

*The effects of 4-MEI on the inhibition of cell proliferation in 3T3-L1 cell line*

In order to do MTT assay, the cells were treated with different concentrations of the 4-MEI (300, 450, 600 and 750 μg/ml) and incubated for 24 and 48 hours. After that cell concentration was assayed by spectrophotometer (OD570) and subjected to calculation of relative cell concentrations. The cytotoxic effect of 4-MEI on 3T3-L1 cell line is shown in Table 1. In this study 4-MEI at highest concentration of 24 h and at all concentration for 48 h treatment time significantly inhibited cell proliferation when it was compared with control. The 4-MEI decreased the growth of the cells by about 13.41 % at concentration of 750 μg/ml for 24 hours and 17.80 at concentration of 300 μg/ml, 20.07 % at concentration of 450 μg/ml, 31.91 % at concentration of 600 μg/ml and 39.77 % at concentration of 750 μg/ml for 48 hours treatment periods. Also, exposing to the 4-MEI for 48 hours leaded to a decrease in cells proliferation in concentration dependent manner (Fig. 2).

Assessment of apoptosis and necrosis by DNA fragmentation assay

DNA fragmentation in samples of mouse treated livers obtained from untreated and treated groups was studied by agarose gel electrophoresis (24). Genomic fragments of irregular sizes are generally induced during necrotic cells, and a DNA smear is obtained during agarose gel electrophoresis (18). Figure 3 show the fragmentation of DNA from liver cells of mouse (which were treated with 25 and 50 mg/kg 4-MEI for 10 week) and from control animals. The analysis showed that 4-MEI at 50 mg/kg concentra-

![Fig. 2. The cell proliferation inhibition in 3T3-L1 cell line treated with 4-MEI for 48 h treatment periods.](image)

| Test Substance | Treatment | Mean value (%)±SE |
|---------------|-----------|------------------|
| Control       | 24 - 0±1.76 |                   |
| 4-MEI         | 24 300 -2.91±3.21 |
|               | 450 -10.30±4.06 |
|               | 600 0.46±1.69 |
|               | 750 13.41±0.541 |
| Control       | 48 - 0±4.06 |                   |
| 4-MEI         | 48 300 17.80±4.04 |
|               | 450 20.07±4.52 |
|               | 600 31.91±3.63 |
|               | 750 39.77±1.023 |

Data are expressed as the mean values (±SE) obtained from 8 repeat; (n=8). A: significant from untreated control; a,b: p < 0.05; a,b: p < 0.01; a,b: p < 0.001.

![Fig. 3. The effect of 4-MEI on DNA fragmentation (lane 1, 25 mg/kg 4-MEI (♂), lane 2, 25 mg/kg 4-MEI (♀), lane 3, 50 mg/kg 4-MEI (♂), lane 4, 50 mg/kg 4-MEI grup (♀), lane 5, Untreated control, lane M, Marker.](image)

![Fig. 4. Electrophoretic pattern of pET22b plasmid DNA after treatment with 4-MEI and H2O2. Lane 1: pET22b plasmid DNA (untreated control); lane 2: plasmid DNA treated with H2O2; lanes 3: pET22b plasmid treated with 300 μg/ml of 4-MEI; lanes 4: pET22b plasmid treated with 450 μg/ml of 4-MEI; lanes 5: pET22b plasmid treated with 600 μg/ml of 4-MEI; lanes 6: pET22b plasmid treated with 750 μg/ml of 4-MEI.](image)
tion clearly produced characteristic DNA smear and no DNA laddering (200 bp). Also, exposing to the 4-MEI led to an increase in DNA smear in a concentration dependent manner. According to this result 4-MEI has necrotic effects on mouse cells.

Discussion

According to our knowledge, this is the first study that addresses the cytotoxic potential of 4-MEI in 3T3-L1 cell line. This research the MTT assay was carried out to measure cytotoxicity. The assay showed that 4-MEI at highest concentration of 24 h and at all concentration for 48 h treatment time significantly inhibited cell proliferation of 3T3-L1 cell line. The result of this study showed that 4-MEI has cytotoxic effect on cells. The results obtained from DNA fragmentation assay showed that 4-MEI at 50 mg/kg concentration clearly produced characteristic DNA smear and no DNA ladder (200 bp) were observed. According to this result, 4-MEI has necrosis effects on mouse cells.

Short-term genotoxicity assays for the detection of potential human carcinogens have been used by many investigators and have been validated in international collaborative programs (25). Similarly, we tested the effect of 4-MEI on plasmid DNA breaking.

The results obtained from plasmid DNA damaging assay showed that 4-MEI has no effect on DNA breaking, because, the electrophoretic pattern of DNA after 4-MEI treatment showed three bands on agarose gel electrophoresis as untreated control comprised of super coil, open supercoil and linear DNA. According to the findings of this research, it can be said that 4-MEI has cytotoxic effect on 3T3-L1 cell line and have necrotic effect on rat liver cells. Rayes studied the effects of histological and microbiological effects of cola-flavored soft drink on bacterial strains. According to the result of Rayes research, Cola soft drinks were alarming since it was lethal to pathogenic bacteria tested strains. Similarly, this research also showed that 4-MEI has necrotic effect on rat liver cells.

Conclusion

As a result, 4-MEI has cytotoxic effect on 3T3-L1 cell line and has necrotic effect on rat liver cells. The result of plasmid DNA breaking assay showed that 4-MEI has no effect on plasmid DNA breaking. Therefore, it can be concluded that 4-MEI might pose a potential risk for humans. However, it must be evaluated with different new studies.

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