Excess use of *Momordica charantia* extract may not be safe with respect to thyroid function and lipid peroxidation

Sunanda Panda and Anand Kar*

Thyroid Research Unit, School of Life Sciences, D.A. University, Vigyan Bhawan, Khandwa Road, Indore 452 017, India

Effects of alcoholic extract of *Momordica charantia* fruits (100, 200, 400 and 500 mg kg\(^{-1}\) body weight day\(^{-1}\) for 15 days) on the alterations in serum thyroxine (T\(_4\)) and triiodothyronine (T\(_3\)) concentrations and on hepatic lipid peroxidation (LPO), superoxide dismutase (SOD) and catalase (CAT) activities were studied in adult male mice. Higher concentrations of *M. charantia* (400 and 500 mg kg\(^{-1}\)) decreased the serum concentrations of T\(_3\) and T\(_4\) and enhanced hepatic LPO with a concomitant decrease in CAT activities, indicating a thyroid inhibitory and peroxidative role of the plant extract. However, with the lower doses (100 and 200 mg kg\(^{-1}\)) these adverse effects were not seen. Although 200 mg kg\(^{-1}\) was found to enhance T\(_3\), T\(_4\) was reduced. Since two higher doses inhibited thyroid hormone concentrations and increased hepatic LPO, we suggest that *M. charantia* fruit extract, when used in excess may prove to be harmful with respect to thyroid function and lipid peroxidation.

BITTERGOURD, *Momordica charantia*, Linn (Family-Cucurbitaceae), commonly known as ‘Karela’ in India is a climbing plant, cultivated throughout southern Asia. This plant is mainly used for the consumption of its fruits as vegetables. While, its antispermatic, hypoglycaemic and antidiabetic properties have been documented from time to time\(^1\)-\(^6\), no study was made with respect to alterations in thyroid hormone(s). In fact, literature on the regulatory role of commonly used consumable plant materials on the thyroid function is meagre\(^7\)-\(^9\), despite the fact that thyroid gland is one of the most important endocrine organs\(^7\), primarily responsible for the regulation of body metabolism. Therefore, in the present study, an attempt has been made to reveal the possible role of *M. charantia* fruit extract in the alteration of two thyroid hormones, triiodothyronine (T\(_3\)) and thyroxine (T\(_4\)). Lipid peroxidation (LPO), superoxide dismutase (SOD) and catalase (CAT) activities were also investigated in order to evaluate the safe nature of the extract.

Diethylene triamine pentaacetic acid (DTPA) was purchased from Sigma Chemical Co, USA and thiobarbituric acid (TBA) was from E. Merck, Germany. Sodium dodecyl sulphate (SDS), pyrogallol and hydrogen peroxide were of reagent grade, obtained from Loba Chemie, Mumbai, India. Radioimmunoassay (RIA) kits for the quantification of T\(_3\) and T\(_4\) levels were supplied by Bhabha Atomic Research Centre (BARC), Mumbai, India.

An alcoholic extract of Momordica fruits was prepared according to the method of Shibib *et al.*\(^7\). In brief, fresh fruits purchased from the local market were thoroughly washed in tap water, cut into pieces and the seeds removed manually. About 1 kg of seedless vegetable was then blended with 1500 ml of 95% ethanol, left at room temperature with occasional shaking for 48 h. The suspension was filtered through a cheesecloth and the filtrate was evaporated to remove alcohol and to produce a free flowing powder. On the day of experimentation, the desired amount of powder was suspended in distilled water for the final administration.

Three-month-old Swiss albino male mice weighing 32 ± 3 g were used in five groups of 8 each. Groups II, III, IV and V were administered with different doses (100, 200, 400 and 500 mg kg\(^{-1}\) body wt) of *M. charantia* extract by gastric incubation. Two of these doses (200 and 500 mg kg\(^{-1}\)) were taken from earlier studies\(^2\)-\(^3\). The other two doses were considered because of the fact that our preliminary investigation with 500 mg kg\(^{-1}\) proved to be toxic (data not shown). Group I, receiving 0.1 ml of vehicle (distilled water) served as control. The treatment was continued for 15 days. On the last day of experimentation, blood was collected from each animal and serum was separated by centrifugation and stored at −20°C for the estimation of T\(_3\) and T\(_4\) levels. After exsanguination, the liver was removed, washed twice in phosphate buffered saline and immediately processed for estimation.

Serum concentrations of T\(_3\) and T\(_4\) were estimated by RIA, following the protocol of BARC, as followed earlier in our laboratory\(^8\),\(^9\). Lower limits of sensitivity for T\(_3\) and T\(_4\) were 0.07 ng ml\(^{-1}\) and 0.12 ng ml\(^{-1}\), respec-

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*For correspondence.
tively. Inter-assay variation was less than 5% for both the hormones.

Liver was homogenized in 10% (w/v) ice-cold 0.15 M phosphate buffer (pH 7.4) using Potter–Elvehjem teflon homogenizer and the homogenate was centrifuged at 15,000 g at 4°C for 30 min. Assay of LPO was done by the method of Okhawa et al.\(^\text{10}\) and the amount of malondialdehyde (MDA) formed was measured by taking the absorbance at 532 nm (extinction coefficient 1.52 \(\times\) 10\(^5\)) using Shimadzu UV-160 A spectrophotometer. LPO was finally expressed as the nmole of MDA formed per h per mg protein.

Hepatic SOD activity was assayed according to the method of Marklund and Marklund\(^\text{11}\), and the enzyme activity was expressed as units per mg protein. One unit of this enzyme is defined as the enzyme activity that inhibits autooxidation of pyrogallol by 50%. CAT activity was estimated in the liver homogenate following the method of Aebi\(^\text{12}\), which was expressed as \(\mu\)mol H\(_2\)O\(_2\) decomposed per min per mg protein. Hepatic protein content was estimated according to the method of Lowry et al.\(^\text{13}\). For statistical evaluation of data, analysis of variance (ANOVA) followed by Student’s ‘t’ test was used.

The results are summarized in Figure 1 and Table 1. Dose-specific alterations in hepatic LPO and in thyroid hormone concentrations were observed. LPO was significantly high in 400 mg kg\(^{-1}\) body wt \((P < 0.05)\) and in 500 mg kg\(^{-1}\) body wt \((P < 0.01)\) treated animals compared to the control value. CAT activity was also significantly decreased \((P < 0.001)\) by these doses. In these groups, there was also a significant decline in both \(T_3\) and \(T_4\) concentrations \((P < 0.001)\) for both the hormones. However, in 200 mg kg\(^{-1}\) treated group, although \(T_3\) concentration was significantly more, \(T_4\) concentration was reduced \((P < 0.001)\) for both.

The results clearly reveal a dose-dependent alteration in thyroid hormone concentrations following the treatment of \(M.\) charantia fruit extract. An increase in \(T_3\) concentration by 200 mg kg\(^{-1}\) body wt of the plant extract and a decrease by the two higher doses (400 and 500 mg kg\(^{-1}\) body wt) suggest that low dose may stimulate the synthesis and/or release of \(T_3\) whereas, higher doses are inhibitory to both the hormones. Although some other plant extracts have already been reported to inhibit thyroid function\(^\text{14,16}\), the dose-dependent alterations in thyroid hormone concentrations and in LPO as observed presently following \(M.\) charantia extract treatment, is an interesting observation.

Out of the two thyroid hormones, \(T_4\) is synthesized by the thyroid gland, whereas \(T_3\), which is metabolically more potent than \(T_4\), is largely produced by peripheral conversion of the latter hormone in the liver and kidney\(^\text{14,15}\). Therefore, \(M.\) charantia-induced alterations in both the thyroid hormones indicate that the plant extract might be acting both at the level of the thyroid gland and at the level of extra-thyroidal tissues, including liver. Interestingly, when hepatic LPO was studied, it was enhanced by the two higher doses of the plant extracts, indicating the hepatotoxic effects of these doses. Changes in the antioxidant enzyme, CAT, also corroborate with that of LPO. Since LPO is a deleterious process, increase in LPO and a concomitant decrease in CAT activity in higher dosed groups, reveal that excess use of the extract could be harmful.

Although other mechanisms of action(s) of \(M.\) charantia cannot be ruled out, from the present findings it is evident that chronic use of moderate amounts of alcoholic extract of \(M.\) charantia fruit may not cause hepatic damage, but the higher doses may prove to be deleterious, at least with respect to thyroid function and hepatic LPO.

Table 1. Effect of four different doses of alcoholic extract of \(M.\) charantia fruits (100, 200, 400 and 500 mg kg\(^{-1}\) body wt) daily for 15 days in the alterations in hepatic LPO (nmol of MDA formed h\(^{-1}\) mg\(^{-1}\) protein), SOD (units mg\(^{-1}\) protein) and CAT (\(\mu\)mol of H\(_2\)O\(_2\) decomposed per min per mg protein) activities in male mice. Data have been expressed as mean ± SEM, \(n = 8\) in each group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>LPO</th>
<th>SOD</th>
<th>CAT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>0.623 ± 0.042</td>
<td>5.250 ± 0.208</td>
<td>47.560 ± 1.820</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcoholic extract treated</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100 mg kg(^{-1}) h.wt</td>
<td>0.733 ± 0.092</td>
<td>5.501 ± 0.138</td>
<td>48.101 ± 0.940</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>200 mg kg(^{-1}) h.wt</td>
<td>0.566 ± 0.071</td>
<td>6.031 ± 0.224</td>
<td>50.931 ± 1.080</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>400 mg kg(^{-1}) h.wt</td>
<td>0.914* ± 0.099</td>
<td>4.880 ± 0.529</td>
<td>24.760*** ± 0.941</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>500 mg kg(^{-1}) h.wt</td>
<td>1.260** ± 0.166</td>
<td>4.231 ± 0.279</td>
<td>27.840*** ± 0.540</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(*P < 0.02; **P < 0.01; ***P < 0.001\) compared to the respective control values.

Figure 1. Effect of \(M.\) charantia fruit extract (100, 200, 400 and 500 mg kg\(^{-1}\) body wt for 15 days) on serum concentrations of \(T_3\) (ng ml\(^{-1}\)) and \(T_4\) (ng ml\(^{-1}\) x 10) in male mice. Vertical lines indicate SEM. 

Emission of N\textsubscript{2}O-N emission to the extent of 60, 41.5.


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