



Original Research

Pulicaria vulgaris Gaertn. essential oil: an alternative or complementary treatment for Leishmaniasis

Mehdi Sharifi-Rad¹, Bahar Salehi^{2,3*}, Javad Sharifi-Rad^{4*}, William N. Setzer⁵, Marcello Iriti⁶

¹ Department of Medical Parasitology, Zabol University of Medical Sciences, Zabol, Iran

² Medical Ethics and Law Research Center, Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran

³ Student Research Committee, Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences, 22439789 Tehran, Iran

⁴ Phytochemistry Research Center, Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran

⁵ Department of Chemistry, University of Alabama in Huntsville, Huntsville, AL 35899, USA

⁶ Department of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences, Milan State University, Milan, Italy

Correspondence to: bahar.salehi007@gmail.com; javad.sharifirad@gmail.com

Received September 12, 2017; Accepted October 26, 2017; Published June 25, 2018

Doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14715/cmb/2018.64.8.3>

Copyright: © 2018 by the C.M.B. Association. All rights reserved.

Abstract: Leishmaniasis is a neglected parasitic protozoal disease that affects approximately 12 million people and represents a public health problem in Iran. The objectives of this study were to obtain the essential oil (EO) from *Pulicaria vulgaris* Gaertn. growing in Iran and to carry out *in-vitro* antileishmanial screening of the EO against promastigotes of *Leishmania major* and *Leishmania infantum*. The EO from the aerial parts of *P. vulgaris* was extracted by hydrodistillation. Serial dilutions of the EO were screened for *in-vitro* antileishmanial activity using 96-well microtiter plates. The *P. vulgaris* EO was active against the promastigote forms of *L. major* and *L. infantum*, with IC₅₀ values of 244.70 and 233.65 µg/mL, respectively. *Pulicaria vulgaris* EO may serve as an alternative or complementary treatment for leishmaniasis.

Key words: Protozoal diseases; Parasites; Thymol; Iranian plants.

Introduction

An estimated two million people per year are afflicted by the parasitic protozoal disease leishmaniasis (1). Leishmaniasis presents a wide spectrum of clinical manifestations from cutaneous lesions to visceral distress (2-4). Visceral leishmaniasis is a serious threat to children's health. In endemic regions, children are at much greater risk compared to adults. Paediatric leishmaniasis presents symptoms that include paleness, intermittent fever, tendency to anorexia, abdominal distension, and weight loss, as well as hepatomegaly, splenomegaly, lymph node enlargement, anaemia, thrombocytopenia, hypergammaglobulinemia and leukopenia (5).

Protocols for the treatment of leishmaniasis remain problematic; currently available chemotherapeutics are associated with various limitations including the need for long-term treatments, adverse side effects, and limited or reduced efficacy (4). As a result, there is an urgent need to find novel therapeutic agents or treatment regimens that are effective in treating leishmaniasis.

In recent years, phytotherapy has been shown to be useful for treatment of many human and animal diseases (6-18). However, plants have been immensely utilized in traditional healing systems, and in only a few cases have their curative potentials in human diseases been confirmed (19-27). Essential oils (EOs) are one of the options that have been recently used to treat a variety of diseases. EOs are complex mixtures of aromatic plant secondary metabolites, volatile, and lipophilic (28-30). Health care researchers and practitioners increasingly

consider use of EO-bearing plants.

The genus *Pulicaria* Gaertn. (Asteraceae), according to Iranica flora, includes five species that exist in Iran: *P. dysenterica* (L.) Bernh., *P. arabica* (L.) Cass., *P. gnaphalodes* (Vent.) Boiss., *P. salvifolia* Bunge and *P. vulgaris* Gaertn. *P. vulgaris* is an annual plant that has many branched reddish stems and small (6-12 mm) yellow flower heads. To our knowledge, there have been no previous studies on the anti-leishmanial activity *P. vulgaris* EO.

Materials and Methods

Pulicaria vulgaris Gaertn. was collected during the flowering period, March 2014, from the area surrounding Hamun Lake, Zabol, in Sistan and Baluchestan Province of Iran. The plant species was identified at Ferdowsi University, where a voucher specimen (no. 26432) was deposited in Mashhad Herbarium. For the EO extraction, the dried aerial parts (stems, leaves, and flowers) (200 g) of *P. vulgaris* were subjected to hydrodistillation for 3 hours using a Clevenger-type apparatus based on method described by the British Pharmacopoeia (31). The EO obtained was dried using anhydrous sodium sulphate (Sigma-Aldrich Corp., St. Louis, MO, USA) and the EO obtained was stored at 4°C until analysis and further assays.

The EO of *P. vulgaris* initially was dissolved in 5% dimethyl sulphoxide (DMSO) (Sigma-Aldrich Corp., St. Louis, MO, USA)/95% water and further diluted

Table 1. Percent survival of *Leishmania major* and *Leishmania infantum* promastigotes after 72 hours treatment with different concentrations of *Pulicaria vulgaris* essential oil.

Concentration (µg/mL)	Survival (%)	
	<i>Leishmania major</i>	<i>Leishmania infantum</i>
0	100 ± 00 ^s a	100 ± 0.0 a
5	100 ± 00 a	95.56 ± 0.11 b
10	90.54 ± 1.25 b	94.34 ± 0.23 b
25	89.32 ± 0.28 c	90.56 ± 0.23 c
50	79.93 ± 1.32 d	85.55 ± 0.44 d
100	74.23 ± 1.11 d	79.45 ± 0.13 e
150	60.52 ± 1.22 e	69.59 ± 0.45 f
300	45.62 ± 2.35 f	38.95 ± 1.22 g
600	25.64 ± 1.52 g	18.54 ± 0.32 h
DMSO	-	-

^sData are expressed as mean ± SD of % viability for different concentrations of EO and controls. Significant differences of EO effects on survival of *Leishmania major* and *Leishmania infantum* promastigotes are indicated with different letters for each *Leishmania* species. That is, in each column, the values that have given different letter were significantly different in comparison with other values in the column, while the values with same letters in the each column represent those values having no significant difference with other values in the column at $P < 0.05$.

with RPMI 1640 medium (GIBCO, Grand Island, New York, USA). The concentration of DMSO in the wells was not higher than 0.01%. For assessing the antileishmanial activity of the EO, logarithmic phase promastigotes of *Leishmania major* (MRHO/IR/75/ER) and *Leishmania infantum* (MCAN/IR/96/LON49) (1×10^6 cells/mL) were seeded in a 96-well microtiter plate along with serial dilutions (600, 300, 150, 100, 50, 25, 20, 10, 5, and 0 µg/mL w/v) of the EO and afterwards incubated at 24°C, for 72 hours. Antileishmanial activity was determined by light microscope and the MTT [3-(4,5-dimethylthiazol-2-yl)-2,5-diphenyltetrazolium bromide, Sigma-Aldrich Corp., St. Louis, MO, USA] assay. The concentration inhibiting parasite growth by 50% (IC₅₀) was calculated by using the formula: EXP (LN (conc >50%) - ((signal >50%-50)/(signal >50%-signal <50%))*LN (conc >50%/conc <50%)); where EXP is exponential and LN is natural logarithm (32).

Statistical analysis

Data obtained were subjected to analysis of variance (ANOVA) following a completely random design to determine the least significant difference (LSD) at $P < 0.05$ by SPSS v. 11.5. All assays were carried out in triplicate.

Results and Discussion

The % survival of *L. infantum* and *L. major* promastigotes after 72 hours treatment, with various concentrations of *P. vulgaris* EO is shown in Table 1.

The results of this study showed that *P. vulgaris* EO had anti-leishmanial effects. In particular, *P. vulgaris* EO was active against the promastigote forms of *L. ma-*

major and *L. infantum*, with IC₅₀ values of 244.7 and 233.6 µg/mL, respectively. DMSO, used as the co-solvent for the EO, served as negative control, and had no effect on survival of *L. major* and *L. infantum* promastigotes. Torres-Santos et al. (33) have reported an IC₅₀ value of 83 µg/mL for glucantime as antileishmanial drug.

Sharifi-Rad et al. (32) investigated the chemical composition of *P. vulgaris* EO from the Zabol region. They reported that the main components were thymol, *p*-menth-6-en-2-one (carvotanacetone), thymol isobutyrate, menthan-2-one, 1-methyl-1,2-propanedione, 2,5-dimethoxy-*p*-cymene, myrtenol, linalool, and β-myrcene with 50.2%, 20.2%, 16.9%, 4.3%, 4.1%, 4.0%, 1.2%, 1.1%, and 1.9% in the EO, respectively (Table 2).

The high thymol content in *P. vulgaris* EO is notable; thymol has shown *in vitro* and *in vivo* antileishmanial activity against *Leishmania panamensis* (34) and *L. infantum* ssp. *chagasi* (35). In terms of effectiveness, the EO of this plant is certainly more active than the main components alone. However, antileishmanial activity of *P. vulgaris* EO was not as active as glucantime, and several essential oils reported in the literature have shown leishmanicidal activities with IC₅₀ in the range of 2 to 100 µg/mL (36). Therefore, for example, *Bursera graveolens* EO, rich in limonene (26.5%), β-elemene (14.1%), and (*E*)-β-ocimene (13.0%), had IC₅₀ = 36.7 µg/mL against *Leishmania amazonensis* amastigotes (37), and *Artemisia absinthium* EO, rich in *trans*-sabinyl acetate, had IC₅₀ = 13.4 µg/mL against *L. amazonensis* amastigotes (38). Nevertheless, the leishmanicidal activity of *P. vulgaris* EO is comparable to the activities of many other EOs (39). According to the results, it seems that *P. vulgaris* EO can be a promising candidate for dis-

Table 2. Major components of essential oil of *Pulicaria vulgaris*.

Plant name	Collection area	Major components	References
<i>Pulicaria vulgaris</i> Gaertn.	Hamun Lake, Zabol, Iran	Thymol (50.22%), <i>p</i> -menth-6-en-2-one (carvotanacetone, 20.2%), thymol isobutyrate (16.88%), menthan-2-one (4.31%), 1-methyl-1,2-propanedione (4.13%), 2,5-dimethoxy- <i>p</i> -cymene (4.01%), myrtenol (1.22%), linalool (1.1%), β-myrcene (1.9%).	Sharifi-Rad et. (32)

covery of new natural antileishmanial drugs, especially in terms of paediatric leishmaniasis.

Today, many classes of synthetic antileishmanial drugs are showing diminishing effectiveness because of the emergence of drug-resistant strains. Hence, using effective natural antileishmanial agents with fewer side effects is an encouraging approach to combat leishmaniasis. However, these preliminary antileishmanial screening used the promastigote (insect) form of the parasite rather than the intracellular (amastigote) form. Therefore, more studies are needed to examine *in vivo* antileishmanial effects of *P. vulgaris* EO, identify mechanism(s) of activation and investigate adverse effects.

Acknowledgments

We are also grateful to Professor Fatemeh Fallah, Department of Microbiology, School of Medicine, Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran for providing constructive criticism on the manuscript. Authors are grateful to Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran for financial support.

Conflict of Interest.

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

- Desjeux P. Leishmaniasis: current situation and new perspectives. *Comparative Immunology, Microbiology and Infectious Diseases* 2004; 27(5): 305-318.
- Charret KS, Rodrigues RF, Bernardino AM *et al.* Effect of oral treatment with pyrazole carbonylhydrazide derivatives against murine infection by *Leishmania amazonensis*. *The American Journal of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene* 2009; 80(4): 568-573.
- Hodiamont CJ, Kager PA, Bart A *et al.* Species-directed therapy for leishmaniasis in returning travellers: a comprehensive guide. *PLoS Neglected Tropical Diseases* 2014; 8(5): e2832.
- Croft SL, Seifert K, Yardley V. Current scenario of drug development for leishmaniasis. *Indian Journal of Medical Research* 2006; 123(3): 399.
- Kafetzis DA. An overview of paediatric leishmaniasis. *Journal of Postgraduate Medicine* 2003; 49(1): 31.
- Salehi B, Ayatollahi S, Segura-Carretero A *et al.* Bioactive chemical compounds in *Eremurus persicus* (Joub. & Spach) Boiss. essential oil and their health implications. *Cellular and Molecular Biology (Noisy le Grand)* 2017; 63(9): 1-7.
- Salehi B, Zucca P, Sharifi-Rad M *et al.* Phytotherapeutics in cancer invasion and metastasis. *Phytotherapy Research* 2018; 1-25: doi:10.1002/ptr.6087.
- Sharifi-Rad J, Ayatollahi SA, Varoni EM *et al.* Chemical composition and functional properties of essential oils from *Nepeta schirazi* Boiss. *Farmacia* 2017; 65(5): 802-812.
- Bagheri G, Mirzaei M, Mehrabi R, Sharifi-Rad J. Cytotoxic and Antioxidant Activities of *Alstonia scholaris*, *Alstonia venenata* and *Moringa oleifera* Plants From India. *Jundishapur Journal of Natural Pharmaceutical Products* 2016; 11(3): e31129.
- Sahraie-Rad M, Izadyari A, Rakizadeh S, Sharifi-Rad J. Preparation of strong antidandruff shampoo using medicinal plant extracts: a clinical trial and chronic dandruff treatment. *Jundishapur Journal of Natural Pharmaceutical Products* 2015; 10(4): e21517.
- Sharifi-Rad J, Hoseini-Alfatemi S, Sharifi-Rad M, Miri A. Phytochemical screening and antibacterial activity of different parts of the *Prosopis farcta* extracts against methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus*

- aureus* (MRSA). *Minerva Biotechnologica* 2014; 26(4): 287-293.
- Sharifi-Rad J, Mnayer D, Roointan A *et al.* Antibacterial activities of essential oils from Iranian medicinal plants on extended-spectrum β -lactamase-producing *Escherichia coli*. *Cellular and Molecular Biology (Noisy-le-Grand, France)* 2016; 62(9): 75-82.
- Sharifi-Rad J, Fallah F, Setzer W, Entezari RH, Sharifi-Rad M. *Tordylium persicum* Boiss. & Hausskn extract: A possible alternative for treatment of pediatric infectious diseases. *Cellular and Molecular Biology (Noisy-le-Grand, France)* 2016; 62(9): 20-26.
- Sharifi-Rad J, Mnayer D, Tabanelli G *et al.* Plants of the genus *Allium* as antibacterial agents: From tradition to pharmacy. *Cellular and Molecular Biology (Noisy-le-Grand, France)* 2016; 62(9): 57-68.
- Sharifi-Rad M, Varoni Elena M, Iriti Marcello *et al.* Carvacrol and Human Health: A Comprehensive Review. *Phytotherapy Research* 2018; doi: 10.1002/ptr.6103.
- Sharifi-Rad M, Mnayer D, Flaviana Bezerra Morais-Braga M *et al.* *Echinacea* plants as antioxidant and antibacterial agents: From traditional medicine to biotechnological applications. *Phytotherapy Research* 2018; doi: 10.1002/ptr.6101.
- Salehi B, Mishra AP, Shukla I *et al.* Thymol, thyme and other plant sources: health and potential uses. *Phytotherapy Research* 2018 ; doi: 10.1002/ptr.6109.
- Salehi B, Kumar NVA, Şener B, Sharifi-Rad M, Kılıç M, Mahady GB, Vlasisavljevic S *et al.* Medicinal Plants Used in the Treatment of Human Immunodeficiency Virus. *International Journal of Molecular Sciences* 2018; 19(5): 1459.
- Sharifi-Rad J, Salehi B, Schnitzler P *et al.* Susceptibility of herpes simplex virus type 1 to monoterpenes thymol, carvacrol, p-cymene and essential oils of *Sinapis arvensis* L., *Lallemantia royleana* Benth. and *Pulicaria vulgaris* Gaertn. *Cellular and Molecular Biology (Noisy le Grand)* 2017; 63(8): 42-47.
- Sharifi-Rad J, Salehi B, Stojanović-Radić ZZ *et al.* Medicinal plants used in the treatment of tuberculosis-Ethnobotanical and ethnopharmacological approaches. *Biotechnology Advances* 2017; doi: 10.1016/j.biotechadv.2017.07.001.
- Sharifi-Rad J, Salehi B, Varoni EM *et al.* Plants of the *Melaleuca* genus as antimicrobial agents: from farm to pharmacy. *Phytotherapy Research* 2017; 31(10): 1475-1494.
- Sharifi-Rad J, Soufi L, Ayatollahi S *et al.* Anti-bacterial effect of essential oil from *Xanthium strumarium* against shiga toxin-producing *Escherichia coli*. *Cellular and Molecular Biology (Noisy-le-Grand, France)* 2016; 62(9): 69-74.
- Sharifi-Rad M, Iriti M, Gibbons S, Sharifi-Rad J. Anti-methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA) activity of Rubiaceae, Fabaceae and Poaceae plants: A search for new sources of useful alternative antibacterials against MRSA infections. *Cellular and Molecular Biology (Noisy-le-Grand, France)* 2016; 62(9): 39-45.
- Sharifi-Rad M, Tayeboon G, Miri A *et al.* Mutagenic, antimutagenic, antioxidant, anti-lipoxygenase and antimicrobial activities of *Scandix pecten-veneris* L. *Cellular and Molecular Biology (Noisy-le-Grand, France)* 2016; 62(6): 8-16.
- Sharifi-Rad M, Tayeboon G, Sharifi-Rad J, Iriti M, Varoni E, Razazi S. Inhibitory activity on type 2 diabetes and hypertension key-enzymes, and antioxidant capacity of *Veronica persica* phenolic-rich extracts. *Cellular and Molecular Biology (Noisy-le-Grand, France)* 2016; 62(6): 80-85.
- Snow Setzer M, Sharifi-Rad J, Setzer WN. The search for herbal antibiotics: An in-silico investigation of antibacterial phytochemicals. *Antibiotics* 2016; 5(3): 30.
- Stojanović-Radić Z, Pejić M, Stojanović N, Sharifi-Rad J, Stanković N. Potential of *Ocimum basilicum* L. and *Salvia officinalis* L. essential oils against biofilms of *P. aeruginosa* clinical isolates. *Cellular and Molecular Biology (Noisy-le-Grand, France)* 2016;

62(9): 27-32.

28. Sharifi-Rad M, Varoni EM, Salehi B et al. Plants of the Genus *Zingiber* as a Source of Bioactive Phytochemicals: From Tradition to Pharmacy. *Molecules* 2017; 22(12): 2145.

29. Sharifi-Rad J, Sureda A, Tenore GC et al. Biological activities of essential oils: From plant chemoeology to traditional healing systems. *Molecules* 2017; 22(1): 70.

30. Abdolshahi A, Majd MH, Rad JS, Taheri M, Shabani A, Teixeira da Silva, JA. Choice of solvent extraction technique affects fatty acid composition of pistachio (*Pistacia vera* L.) oil. *Journal of Food Science and Technology* 2015; 52(4): 2422-2427.

31. Pharmacopoeia B. The pharmaceutical press. Her Majesty's Stationary Office, London 1998; 1: 125.

32. Sharifi-Rad J, Miri A, Hoseini-Alfatemi SM, Sharifi-Rad M, Setzer WN, Hadjiakhoondi A. Chemical composition and biological activity of *Pulicaria vulgaris* essential oil from Iran. *Natural Product Communications* 2014; 9(11): 1633-1636.

33. Torres-Santos E, Lopes D, Oliveira RR et al. Antileishmanial activity of isolated triterpenoids from *Pourouma guianensis*. *Phyto-medicine* 2004; 11(2-3): 114-120.

34. Robledo S, Osorio E, Munoz D et al. *In vitro* and *in vivo* cyto-

toxicities and antileishmanial activities of thymol and hemisynthetic derivatives. *Antimicrobial Agents and Chemotherapy* 2005; 49(4): 1652-1655.

35. D Morais SM, Vila-Nova NS, Bevilaqua CML et al. Thymol and eugenol derivatives as potential antileishmanial agents. *Bioorganic and Medicinal Chemistry* 2014; 22(21): 6250-6255.

36. Monzote L, Alarcón O, Setzer WN. Antiprotozoal activity of essential oils. *Agriculturae Conspectus Scientificus* 2012; 77(4): 167-175.

37. Monzote L, Hill GM, Cuellar A, Scull R, Setzer WN. Chemical composition and anti-proliferative properties of *Bursera graveolens* essential oil. *Natural Product Communications* 2012; 7(11): 1531-1534.

38. Monzote L, Pinon A, Sculli R, Setzer WN. Chemistry and leishmanicidal activity of the essential oil from *Artemisia absinthium* from Cuba. *Natural Product Communications* 2014; 9(12): 1799-1804.

39. Sanchez-Suarez J, Riveros I, Delgado G. Evaluation of the leishmanicidal and cytotoxic potential of essential oils derived from ten Colombian plants. *Iranian Journal of Parasitology* 2013; 8(1): 129.