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EFFECT OF FLUORIDE ON SOFT  
TISSUES IN VERTEBRATES  
(A REVIEW)

by

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Detectable traces of fluoride occur in almost every substance, and animals everywhere consume measurable amounts of fluoride. At sub-lethal doses, the concentration of fluoride in blood will approach a steady state, proportional to the rate of fluoride infusion (1). However the total amount of fluoride in sera of different species given the same dose of fluoride varies considerably, and the peak concentration of fluoride in sera of these different species occurs at different times and varies in duration (2).

Signs of acute high dose fluoride poisoning in mammals are nausea, vomiting and diarrhea, followed by cramping, collapse, coma, and death. In humans, death from an oral dose usually occurs within 4 hours. The signs of chronic (low dose) fluoride poisoning are, however, less well defined.

The purpose of this paper is to summarize data concerning the effects of fluoride on various soft tissue systems in vertebrates after oral, subcutaneous, or intraperitoneal administration.

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### Endocrine System

Adrenals: Several authors have reported an increase in weight of adrenals after fluoride intoxication, allegedly due to an increased content of protein (3,4). McGown and Suttie (5) reported a four-to five-fold increase in plasma epinephrine and suggested that the hyperglycemia induced by the fluoride was mediated by epinephrine, secreted by the adrenal medulla. It is possible that these phenomena represent a general stress response, secondary to metabolic poisoning by fluoride, and mediated through the sympathetic nervous system.

Thyroid: In high enough concentrations, fluoride will interfere with the functions of the thyroid directly or indirectly (6-8), but this effect will be minimized when the supply of iodine is adequate (6). Fluoride may interfere with the normal functioning of follicular cells, for example, by inhibiting the proteinases responsible for splitting thyroglobulin molecules into thyroxine and triiodothyronine (9, 10). There could possibly be an effect of fluoride on the feedback mechanism mediated through the hypothalamus and adenohypophysis which regulate thyroid secretions through thyrotropin (TSH).

Parathyroid: Studies on humans and animals indicate that, in high enough concentrations, fluoride affects the function of the parathyroids indirectly by altering serum calcium and phosphate (11-17). Evidence for secondary hyperparathyroidism in fluoride-treated animals and man is structural and ultrastructural appearance (12, 14, 15, 17-19). It is also based on changes in bone resorption (20) and direct measurements of parathormone concentrations in blood by radioimmunological assay methods (12, 21). In sheep, treated with 100 mg of fluoride ion per day for four weeks, circulating parathormone increased five-fold (12). In humans, four out of nine patients suffering from skeletal fluorosis had elevated levels of immunoreactive parathormone (21). However, in studies with rats, no changes were found in the parathyroid glands, bone resorption and circulating levels of parathormone (22-25).

Fluoride has caused a drop in the circulating calcium in man and in several experimental animals (26-28). It has been suggested that the reduction in circulating calcium is due to fluorapatite formation and, because of its decreased crystal solubility, inhibition of osteoclastic bone resorption. Any situation which causes decreased levels of circulating calcium would induce parathormone release and, if prolonged, would lead to secondary hyperparathyroidism. Due to species variability (29-31) and the dose-dependent effect of fluoride, it is reasonable to assume that rats, which are known to be more resistant to fluoride than sheep and rabbits, would exhibit fewer toxic changes, particularly if the fluoride dose is not excessive, as in the recent studies of Rosenquist et al. (25).

### Urinary System

Nephropathy is a major manifestation of fluoride toxicity in its early stages. Large doses of fluoride induce necrosis of the convoluted tubules and inflammation of glomeruli, changes which result in impaired kid-

ney function such as polyuria, polydipsia, and increased non-protein nitrogen (33). In rats, at low levels (for example 1 to 10 ppm NaF), alterations to kidney structure and function are reported to be minimal(34-37).

Renal function studies on rats exposed to constant IV infusion of fluoride have produced, in dose-dependent responses, an increase in urine flow rate, urinary osmolality, inner medullary sodium and chloride concentrations, and glomerular filtration rate, and a decrease in the excretion of sodium, chloride, and potassium (38).

All published data reflect the dose-dependent effect of fluoride on kidney tissues. Tissue destruction increasing with the dose, and the toxic effects are seemingly related to altered activity of enzyme systems, some stimulated (37,39-40) and some inhibited (39, 41-42). As kidney damage increases, clearance of fluoride is reduced (43). The toxic effects of fluoride are also exacerbated by the altered renal clearance of other electrolytes, metabolites, and waste.

### Digestive System

Gastrointestinal tract: Waldbott et al. (44) have designated stomach and bowel disorders as cardinal features of fluoride intolerance in humans. Formation of hydrofluoric acid in the gut appears to account for the symptoms of nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, and diarrhea associated with fluoride poisoning (44,45). Data on the effect of fluoride on absorption of calcium from the gastrointestinal tract are equivocal (46-48). On theoretical grounds, it might be expected that simultaneous administration of fluoride and calcium would result in reduced calcium absorption due to precipitation of the relatively insoluble fluoride salts of calcium. It is not known whether fluoride interferes with the absorption of calcium by the epithelial cells of the duodenum and jejunum. The possibility that fluoride interferes with the active transport mechanism or with calcium-binding proteins has not been explored.

Oral Mucosa: Branemark (49) cautioned dentists about the potential toxicity of topical fluoride to gingiva, particularly when the tissue is inflamed. Gabler (50) showed that fluoride ions can be absorbed through the oral mucosa of rats, even if at a relatively slow rate.

The gingival crevice is a natural sink for the retention of fluoride long after topical application has been completed. Patients with extensive supra and/or infra-bony gingival pockets would be predisposed to prolonged retention of fluoride against tissues.

In rabbits, Hume et al. (51) found that exposure to gingival explants to levels of fluoride up to 10,000 ppm reduced incorporation of H<sup>3</sup> proline and H<sup>3</sup> thymidine, and that the degree of depression varied directly with the concentration and exposure time. Comparison of their data with that of previously reported studies showed that gingival tissue metabolism was profoundly depressed by fluoride applications at or near the in vitro threshold for preventing growth of suspected periodontal pathogens. However, if gingival epithelium were intact, fluoride toxicity

from topical application was considered to be negligible. Different cellular responses to NaF in vitro, namely genotoxic transformations, have been reported with other cells (52).

Liver: Fluoride interferes with the normal functioning of the liver and causes disruption of hepatocytes (53,54). The route of fluoride administration is important. Pathological changes in the liver of rats ensued following use of a gastric tube to administer chronic doses of the sodium fluoride and to ensure that each animal received a constant daily dose (55). On the other hand, deCamargo and Merzel (37) who simply added the fluoride to the water supply, found no changes in the liver. In the latter experiments, if the animals ate first and then drank, the fluoride would have entered a full stomach which might have resulted in decreased absorption of fluoride.

#### Cardiovascular System

Branemark (49) applied 0.05, 0.2, 1.0 and 2.0 per cent solutions of sodium fluoride to the cheek pouch of hamsters. The resulting disturbances varied in degree and severity according to the concentration of fluoride and the state of the tissue. Vascular changes, characterized by microvascular injury, perivascular disintegration of tissue cells, and vascular proliferation, predominated. Another indication of the vulnerability of vessels to fluoride is the microscopic appearance of the bruise-like skin lesions, Chizzola maculae which have been emphasized by Waldbott (44). (See "Skin" for additional details).

Large doses of NaF (12 mg/kg) fed to rats (56) have induced chronic myocarditis and dystrophic changes in heart muscle fibres. Massive doses of fluoride can cause severe heart damage resulting in cardiac irregularities and low blood pressure in experimental animals (57). Changes in ECGs of humans and dogs due to massive doses of fluoride have been cited by Baltazar et al. (58). It is not clear whether these cardiac changes are secondary to fluoride poisoning or a direct effect of fluoride on cardiovascular tissue. Most authors agree that calcification of arteries is an integral feature of skeletal fluorosis.

#### Central Nervous System

In humans, the partial and complete paralysis of arms and legs in advanced fluorosis is usually considered to be related to pressure upon the spinal cord by newly formed bone protruding into the spinal canal, and upon nerves at the point of their exit from the spine. However, it has been suggested that the spinal cord lesions and muscular damage in patients suffering occupational fluorosis are also the result of a direct action of the fluoride ion on the ganglion and muscle cells (59).

Due to a lack of precise experimental data, it is difficult to draw conclusions concerning the effects of fluoride on the central nervous system. It seems likely that chronic ingestion of low doses of fluoride stimulates enzymes systems (60), and that this effect may be mediated through fluoride activated adenylate cyclase (61,62).

**Eyes:** Large doses of NaF are toxic to the retina in varying degrees. Waldbott (44) observed in his patients, that fluoride could cause a widening of retinal vessels leading to retinitis and involvement in cataract formation.

Rabbits and mice show dystrophy of retinal pigment cells with subsequent damage to the photoreceptors by fluoride doses exceeding 25 mg/kg body weight (55). In the ganglion cells of the retina, the content of rRNA was reduced in mice when the dose of fluoride was 12 mg NaF/kg body weight. This inhibition of RNA synthesis was more pronounced in the ganglion cells, and a decrease in protein synthesis was detected in the perikaryons of the photoreceptors. It has been proposed that this retinopathy is correlated with a disturbance of ascorbic acid metabolism, namely in the transport of its oxidized form (4). The retina is basically composed of modified neurons (rods, cones). As such, it is susceptible to fluoride toxicity. Furthermore, the production of rhodopsin (visual purple) is dependent upon several enzyme-catalyzed reactions, which may be inhibited by fluoride.

#### Respiratory System

Gaseous fluoride above 3 ppm for more than 10 minutes (63) is toxic to respiratory tissues. Whitford et al. (64) however, found no evidence of fluoride binding in the lung of rats following a single intravenous injection of <sup>18</sup>F, 9.1  $\mu$ Ci/rat. Detailed histological investigations as well as studies on the effects of ingested fluoride on respiratory tissues seem to be lacking.

#### Some Selective Tissues

**Muscle:** The signs and symptoms of muscle involvement in acute fluoride toxicity, namely hyperactive reflexes, painful muscle spasms, weakness and tetanic contractions have been related to fluoride-induced hypocalcemia. Studies are lacking on the direct effect of an acute dose of fluoride on muscle. In chronic fluoride intoxication, fluoride seems to alter muscle function and to damage muscle cells (44, 65,66) but, if the dose is not excessive (4), muscle is able to adapt to the insult.

**Skin:** From clinical observations, Steinegger (67) and Waldbott (68) described a characteristic sign of chronic fluoride poisoning which occurs mainly in children and women, namely, pinkish to bluish-brown skin lesions called Chizzola maculae (inflammation around capillary blood vessels). These lesions can be distinguished from traumatic bruises, mainly because they are always round or oval, about 1 to 2.5 cm in diameter, and are usually asymptomatic. They fade after 5 to 7 days but do not turn yellow as do bruises, which can be any size or shape. There is little doubt that fluoride is involved in the production of these lesions. However the lesions were not reproduced experimentally; their high prevalence among children and women suggest that other factors as well as fluoride may be involved (68,69).

**Collagen:** Fluoride influences the metabolism of bones and teeth. It

has been proposed, but not proven, that it is essential for normal calcification (70,71). Excessive fluoride intake can interfere with bone metabolism, particularly through its effect on collagen formation: 2 mg F/kg body weight given to young rabbits (72) interfered with the normal hydroxylation of proline, producing inadequately hydroxylated collagen; fluoride reduced the synthesis of tropocollagen molecules with reduced numbers of aldehydes resulting in inadequate cross-linked collagen fibres; reduced lysine residues which caused inadequate cross links in collagen; and the collagen laid down during excessive exposure to fluoride was more rapidly catabolized. Fluoride has also been shown to decrease the amount of soluble and insoluble collagen in skin and lungs (73). Joseph and Tydd (74), however, found that 10 and 150 ppm sodium fluoride in the drinking water of rabbits accelerated tissue regeneration during the first three or four weeks following removal of the whole thickness of 1 cm<sup>2</sup> of the rabbit's ear.

The mechanism of the effect of fluoride on collagen metabolism is still unknown. At high concentrations, fluoride may inhibit proline uptake into collagen and its conversion into hydroxyproline but at the same time stimulate enzyme systems involved in collagen formation. It is difficult to compare the work of Susheela and Sharma (71) and that of Drozd et al. (73), with that of Joseph and Tydd (74) because their research protocols differed; tissues and animals studied were different; the fluoride was administered differently and the fluoride doses differed. Nevertheless, fluoride administration seems to lead to production of abnormal collagen (75).

Retention of fluoride in soft tissues: Under normal conditions soft tissue organs contain little or no fluoride (68,76). However, with impaired kidney function or prolonged fluoride exposure, relatively large amounts of fluoride can accumulate in soft tissues (44). Based on data from a survey by Call et al. (77) on humans, the order of magnitude of storage is as follows: aorta, thyroid, lung, kidney, heart, pancreas, brain, spleen and liver. Levels as high as 8400 (78) ppm in the aorta have been recorded in a fluoridated area; 290 ppm in skin (79), 186 in nails (79), 185 in bladder (79), and 181 (79) in kidneys in an area with little or no fluoride in water.

Accumulation of fluoride may be involved in many disease processes and it may induce a wide variety of signs and symptoms. Fluoride is one of the most reactive ions in nature. To what extent it affects the function of vital organs remains an enigma. Further work on this and on certain idiopathic clinical phenomena are warranted.

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