Lithium-based antioxidants: electrochemical properties and influence on immune cells

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Abstract

Introduction: Lithium salts are known as effective psychotropic medicine for treatment bipolar disorder and may be used to treat alcoholism, schizoaffective disorders, and cluster headaches. The antioxidant activity and immunomodulatory effects of prospective lithium compounds have been investigated in this work.

Materials and Methods: The antioxidant properties were studied by the voltammetry method. Influence of the lithium compounds on the immune cells of human blood were determined by measuring phagocytic activity of leucocytes and by the rate of blast transformation of lymphocytes.

Results: Relatively better antioxidant and immunotrophic properties have been revealed for lithium ascorbate, compare to widely used drug-lithium carbonate. Lithium aspartate revealed antioxidant activity, as well.

Conclusion: Studied lithium salts can be considered as prospective psychotropic antioxidant with immunomodulatory effects. The combination of these properties significantly extends the potential medical applications of lithium salts.

Keywords: antioxidant activity; immunomodulatory effects; voltammetry; lithium ascorbate; lithium aspartate

Introduction

Lithium greatly affects neurochemical processes occurring in the human brain. It is well known; lithium is the primary choice for the treatment of bipolar disorder and used to treat alcoholism, cluster headaches and schizoaffective disorders (Ellenhorn et al., 1997). However, lithium has a relatively narrow therapeutic index and causes poisoning (Maj, 2003).

More severe consequences may occur in combination with additional medications, such as loop diuretics, thiazide, non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) and angiotensin-converting enzyme inhibitors (ACEIs) (Oruch et al., 2014). Proper doses of these drugs have to be chosen with care to avoid serious drug interactions (Lehmann, 1995). Therapeutic level of lithium in blood equals 0.6 mmol/L for psychoses treatment, but side effect can occur at levels equal 1.2 mmol/L and higher Lithium
levels must be carefully monitored to avoid toxic side effects. It is necessary to note that the brain has a comparatively high vulnerability to oxidative damage, and therefore, reactive oxygen species are an important link in the pathogenesis of mental disorders (Ng, Berk, 2008, Siwek et al., 2013). Work on antioxidant activity of the human blood cells confirm an exhaustion of antioxidant protective systems of a patients affected by the mental diseases (Korotkova et al., 2011). Investigations along these lines have revealed the necessity of antioxidant activity estimation of lithium salts for the oxidative stress correction. Nowadays, there are many methods of antioxidant activity determination. In this work, voltammetry was applied as an effective and convenient approach for the antioxidant activity detection (Korotkova et al., 2003). As a rule, mental diseases require long, often lifelong, medicinal/medical therapy. Therefore, it is very important to design new psychotropic remedies with low side effects, based on their antioxidant properties. The goal of present study was to investigate perspective lithium salts for revealing their respective antioxidant and immunomodulatory properties, as basis for designing new psychotropic drugs with expanded positive effect and low side effects.

Materials and methods

The following lithium compounds have been used in present study - lithium ascorbate, lithium aspartate (Figure 1), lithium carbonate (Sygma-Aldrich, Germany) as reference drug and ascorbic acid (Sygma-Aldrich, Germany) as a standard antioxidant for antioxidant activity testing. Lithium ascorbate and lithium aspartate were prepared in laboratory in the ion exchange reaction with the calculated amount of lithium carbonate and ascorbic or aspartic acids. To separate reaction products in the crystalline state we used a well-known purification method - salting out by proteolytic solvents (ethanol) from aqueous solutions. White crystalline powder were obtained after double recrystallization, used in further experiments. The concentration of lithium ions for all of the tested substances was confirmed by atomic emission spectrometry.

Stock solutions of lithium salts were prepared in the distilled water. These solutions were diluted to the working concentration after mixing with phosphate buffer 0.025 mol·l⁻¹ (equimolar mixture of Na₂HPO₄ and KH₂PO₄, pH 6.86), which was used as a supporting electrolyte for voltammetry analysis. The automated voltammetric analyzer “TA-2” (“Tomanalyt”, Tomsk, Russia) with three-electrode open electrochemical cell was used for antioxidant activity detection.

Detection of antioxidant activity by voltammetry

The electrochemical oxygen reduction (ER O₂) on working mercury film electrode progresses at several stages with the formation of the reactive oxygen species (ROS), such as O₂⁻. This process is similar to the oxygen reduction in the tissues of a living organism. The measurement includes the recording the current of oxygen at the cathode electrode with and without the investigated compounds under the following conditions: potential rate scan 0.03V·s⁻¹, potential range from 0.0V to -0.8V, amplitude 10 mV. All tested substances were added in the electrochemical cell in volume 0.1 ml. The following concentrations were chosen for more objective comparison in this test: equal-mass concentrations for all samples 0.5 mg/ml; equimolar concentrations 1.36 µmol/ml, this concentration for lithium ions may be considered as toxic level for medical application; the concentrations corresponding to therapeutic concentrations of lithium in the blood of patients (0.6 µmol/ml of Li⁺ ions recalculated to substance weight). The last dosage is more important for comparison from medical point of view (Mashkovsky, 2002).

Antioxidants react with ROS and decrease of ROS concentration at the electrode. The current of ER O₂
also decreases. Detailed scheme of these interactions has been previously described (Tur’yan et al., 2004).

Coefficient of antioxidant activity of the substances, \( K \), in μmol·l⁻¹·min⁻¹, reflects the amount of active oxygen radicals being scavenged by the antioxidants within certain time, according to the formula 1.

\[
K = (1 - \frac{I}{I_0}) \times \left( \frac{C_0}{t} \right)
\]  

(1)

Where \( C_0 \) (μmol·l⁻¹) is the oxygen concentration in solution, \( I \) is the ER O₂ current with the investigated substance in the solution, \( I_0 \) is the limiting ER O₂ current without the substance in the solution, \( t \) (min) is time of the interaction between the reactive oxygen species and an antioxidant at the working electrode.

**Influence of lithium compounds in the reaction of blastic transformation of lymphocytes**

Measurement of proliferative responses of human lymphocytes allows estimating biological responses of immune cells before and after the addition of a stimulating agent. The method is based on phytohemagglutinin (PHA) - induced proliferative response of the lymphocytes. The blood samples obtained from healthy donors. Lymphocytes were isolated by gradient centrifugation and resuspended with RPMI 1640, containing 20% fetal bovine serum, L-glutamine, streptomycin. Aliquots of 0.1 ml (2×10⁶ cells/ml) of the mixture were placed in a separate microculture plates. Substances were added to the plate in equal-molar concentrations, where all samples were in concentration 1.36 μmol/ml and corresponding to the therapeutically acceptable levels (μmol/ml of Li⁺ ions recalculated to substance weight), with or without PHA. Control group contained no substances. Cultured plates were sealed and incubated for 72 hours at 37°C. Lymphocyte transformation was detected by method (Goldberg et al., 1992).

**Statistical Analysis**

Statistical analysis was performed using Statistica 6.0 software. The mean changes in coefficients of antioxidant activity and cell influences of tested substances were calculated after running the experiment three time. Data are presented as mean±SD.

**Results**

Mean coefficients of antioxidant activity for all substances are evaluated and shown in table 1. Coefficient \( K \) reflects the rate of interaction between oxygen radicals and antioxidant, otherwise known as velocity of radicals scavenging. According to Table 1, the highest comparative antioxidant properties was expressed by lithium ascorbate for all concentrations. Lithium aspartate showed much lower activity, but for all substances, lowest antioxidant activity was detected at therapeutic concentration of lithium ions. Results of the influence of lithium compounds on immune blood cells “in vitro” (reaction of blastic transformation of lymphocytes) are presented in the table 2.

It is notable that there was a rising of spontaneous lymphocytes proliferation under influence of lithium aspartate, mean while ascorbate had no significant action and carbonate revealed suppressive activity.

The phagocytic activity of the neutrophils was studied using phagocytosis method (Novikov, Novikova, 1996). The Gram-positive bacteria, *Staphylococcus aureus* - H209, was used as the substrate. *Staphylococcus aureus* was added to the leukocyte suspension obtained from the human blood. The investigated substances were added to the microculture plates in different concentration (0.1-0.001 mg/ml). The phagocytic index was calculated as the number of neutrophils positive for *Staphylococcus aureus* (S. aureus) ingestion per 100 neutrophils. The avidity index was calculated as the total number of *S. aureus* cells engulfed per 100 positive neutrophils and divided by 100. The index of phagocytosis completeness was calculated as the number of *S. aureus* killed in phagocytes divided by the total number of the microbes engulfed by phagocytes per 100.
Lithium aspartate also showed slight rising of PHA-induced lymphocytes proliferation, compared with that in the control, other salts had no significant influence on this parameter, as shown in Table 2. Ascorbate and aspartate lithium revealed no suppressive effect on stimulated and intact lymphocytes in all concentrations. The impact of the lithium compounds on immune cells, as indicated by the phagocytic activity of neutrophilic leucocytes “in vitro” are presented in the tables 3, 4 and 5.

Lithium aspartate enhanced the percentage of phagocytosis completeness even at therapeutic concentration of lithium salts. Figure 2 shows comparison of changes in phagocytosis activity under influence of different lithium salts at different concentrations.

Active phagocytosis percentage and avidity index changed slightly under action of aspartate, but lithium carbonate slightly decreased these parameters and increased phagocytosis completeness.

**Discussion**

Antioxidants depending on the concentration can change their activity rate/intensity against free radicals. For comparison, lithium salts used three different doses, including therapeutic concentration of lithium ions. Study of antioxidant properties in equal-mass concentration revealed that lithium ascorbate had the highest effect, even compared with widely used antioxidant ascorbic acid, which revealed coefficient K of 1.15 μmol l⁻¹ min⁻¹ in same concentration of 0.5 mg/ml. Similar trend was revealed for equimolar concentration. It is well known ascorbic acid and its sodium salt detoxify the free radicals and turn them into harmless reduced substances in vitro and in vivo (Yourga et al., 1944), similar activity revealed for its lithium salts. Antioxidant and neuroprotective properties

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Substance name</th>
<th>Antioxidant activity coefficient, K (μmol l⁻¹ min⁻¹)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>C (equal-mass), 0.5 mg/ml</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>C (equal-molar), 1.36 μmol/ml</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>C (therapeutic), Li⁺ 0.6 μmol/ml</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lithium ascorbate</td>
<td>1.55±0.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lithium aspartate</td>
<td>0.46±0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lithium carbonate</td>
<td>0.11±0.09</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2:** Lithium compounds influence on lymphocytes proliferation (asterisks indicate a significant difference from control, P <0.05)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Substance</th>
<th>lymphocytes proliferation without PHA, percentage</th>
<th>PHA - induced proliferation of lymphocytes, percentage</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>C(equal-molar) 1.36 μmol/ml</td>
<td>C (therapeutic) Li⁺ 0.6 μmol/ml</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lithium ascorbate</td>
<td>6±0.5%</td>
<td>7±1.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lithium aspartate</td>
<td>6±0.5%</td>
<td>*9±2.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lithium carbonate</td>
<td>6±0.5%</td>
<td>*4±1.5%</td>
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of lithium salts are also confirmed by recent works (Thuy et al., 2015). Lithium ions are possibly enhancing antioxidant activity of salts in vitro and provide psychotropic properties. Thus, lithium-based antioxidant could be considered as prospective mood stabilizer (normothymics) for bipolar psychosis and alcoholism treatment. It should be noted, that lithium could provide indirect antioxidant activity, as it was shown in work (Vasconcellos et al., 2006) and concluded that lithium presented antioxidant properties,
but is not able to prevent oxidative damage induced by chronic stress. Lithium can recover/revive behavioral and neurochemical impairments induced by stress (Parveen et al., 2013). From this point of view, it was extremely important to compare properties of lithium compounds in equal therapeutic concentration of lithium ions in blood of patients with bipolar psychosis. Lithium ascorbate shows antioxidant activity, higher than other lithium compounds in all concentration ranges (Table 1). Excellent antioxidant activity of lithium ascorbate was revealed even at level of therapeutic lithium concentration 0.6 µmol/ml (0.11 mg/ml of substance weight), that provides an important advantage for medical application, taken into account depletion of antioxidant systems/reservoirs of the body (Korotkova et al., 2013). According to this result, lithium aspartate show rather moderate antioxidant properties. The “gold standard” mood stabilizer - lithium carbonate revealed low antioxidant properties in all concentration ranges by voltammetry method.

For assessment immunomodulatory properties in vitro, lithium ascorbate (best relative antioxidant, as established before), lithium aspartate and lithium carbonate (reference drug) were tested in therapeutic concentration range of lithium ions (for bipolar psychosis treatment 0.005–0.008 mg/ml), recalculated to substance weight. Lithium ascorbate did not affect spontaneous lymphocytes proliferation in all investigated doses. PHA-stimulated blastic transformation of lymphocytes revealed no significant differences between the reaction with and without lithium salts, with the exclusion of aspartate which showed a slight stimulatory effect. This can be interpreted as the absence of suppressive or toxic influence on immune cells. Lithium ascorbate does not appreciably influence on the phagocytic activity (table 3). As can be seen in table 4, similar data were obtained for lithium aspartate in all dosage, but index of phagocytosis completeness in all investigated concentrations significantly increases. This reflects improving functional activity of the neutrophils and correlate to increasing of proliferative ability in vitro and natural killer cell toxicity up to 2.5 times, as it was shown for lithium chloride (Kubera et al., 1994), but immunostimulatory effect lasted only for prolonged administration of lithium chloride. Thus, immunomodulatory effect of lithium depends on the type of cell and administration and is manifested mainly indirectly in vivo.

Findings indicate slightly stimulating influence of lithium salts on the phagocytic-related immunity and the absence of any toxic effects on immune blood cells. A Noticeable stimulation effect on phagocytosis was revealed for lithium aspartate in therapeutic dosage. Lithium ascorbate has low toxicity on mice of a BALB/c line with intraperitoneal introduction. As it shown in earlier studies (Balashov et al., 2008), lithium ascorbate revealed absence of toxic action on the experimental animals (LD$_{50}$=4840 mg/kg), while for carbonate lithium LD$_{50}$ is 531 mg/kg (Badmaev, Gudzovsky, 1988.). that was not the case.

Besides, lithium ascorbate (in comparison with lithium carbonate) had no damaging influence on brain cells of the experimental animals. Because of the known possible risk of kidney failure by long-term lithium treatment and other side effects (Timmer, Sands, 1999), we encourage further research on this topic, with the focus on lithium compounds that possess excellent antioxidant properties, as a possible way to minimize their undesirable effects.

**Conclusions**

Lithium ascorbate shows the best antioxidant activity, higher than other investigated lithium compounds. Lithium ascorbate and lithium aspartate reveal lack of immune cells suppressive effects and the presence of phagocytic stimulating activity in the human blood “in vitro”. Therefore, lithium ascorbate could be considered as a new perspective normothymic agent with possible stimulating activity on, especially complex therapy of addictive disorders and alcoholism associated with depletion of antioxidant and defective immune system (Korotkova et al., 2013) and even for healthy people (Khairova et al., 2011), due to excellent antioxidant properties and low toxicity.

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Author Contributions

Conflict of interest
The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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