Effect of thyme oil and thymol dietary supplementation on the antioxidant status and fatty acid composition of the ageing rat brain

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The present study measured changes in antioxidant enzyme activity in, and the phospholipid fatty acid composition of the ageing rat brain and tested whether dietary supplementation with thyme oil or thymol could provide beneficial effects. There were significant declines in superoxide dismutase (EC 1.15.1.1) and glutathione peroxidase (EC 1.11.1.9) activities and the total antioxidant status in the untreated rats with age, while thyme-oil- and thymol-fed rats maintained significantly higher antioxidant enzyme activities and total antioxidant status. The proportions of 18 : 2n-6, 20 : 1n-9, 22 : 4n-6 and 22 : 5n-3 in the brain phospholipids resulting from all three dietary treatments were significantly higher in 28-month-old rats than in 7-month-old rats. Only 20 : 1n-9 levels in 28-month-old thyme-oil- and thymol-treated rats were significantly higher than in the age-matched control. The proportion of 22 : 6n-3 in brain phospholipids, which declined with age in control rats, was also significantly higher in rats given either supplement. This latter finding is particularly important as optimum levels of 22 : 6n-3 are required for normal brain function. These results highlight the potential benefit of thyme oil as a dietary antioxidant.

Thyme oil: Thymol: Ageing: Polyunsaturated fatty acids: Docosahexaenoic acid

Biological membranes are the sites of enzymes, hormonal receptors and transport systems for ions and metabolites. Major components of these membranes are phospholipids containing polyunsaturated fatty acids (PUFA) which (by chain length and degree of saturation) influence membrane functions (Stubbs & Smith, 1984; Wahnon et al. 1989).

PUFA contain methylene-interrupted double bonds, which make them highly vulnerable to free-radical attack (Halliwell & Gutteridge, 1989). In living organisms, free-radical production tends to increase with age while tissue antioxidant defences tend to decline (Harman, 1995; Socci et al. 1995; Cao et al. 1996) causing numerous deleterious effects (Stubbs & Smith, 1984; Cohen & Zubenko, 1985; Spector & Yorek, 1985; Neuringer et al. 1988; Salem, 1989).

One of the most important tissues in which appropriate concentrations of PUFA are essential is the brain; its concentration of docosahexaenoic acid (DHA; 22 : 6n-3) is particularly important. Numerous reports have shown that, during the early development of the rat brain, the liver provides DHA which is then tenaciously retained (Neuringer et al. 1988; Salem, 1989; Scott & Bazan, 1989). However, the detrimental effects of ageing, especially increased free-radical production, cause concentrations of DHA to decline (Barja de Quiroga et al. 1990, 1992; Deans et al. 1994; Youdim, 1997). Alterations in levels of PUFA, especially DHA, are likely to have pronounced implications for brain function (Lamptey & Walker, 1976; Yamamoto et al. 1991; Okuyama, 1992; Chalon et al. 1998; Kaplan & Greenwood, 1998; Suzuki et al. 1998).

Previous studies have shown that dietary supplementation with plant essential oils protects and maintains levels of PUFA in cell membranes (Deans et al. 1993a,b, 1994; Recsan et al. 1997). These essential oils are present within glandular structures of plants, notably oil cells, glands, glandular hairs, oil or resin ducts. It is commonly assumed that these volatile essential oils are produced within the secretory cells of the oil gland (Deans & Svoboda, 1990). One particular essential oil of interest in our laboratory is that extracted from thyme (Thymus vulgaris L.) which contains various terpenoids such as α-pinene, myrcene, p-cymene, γ-terpinene, linalool, thymol and carvacrol. The antioxidant activities of these components have recently been characterized (K. A. Youdim and S. G. Deans, unpublished results). The present study investigated the effect of thyme oil and its major component thymol, which makes up almost 49 % of the total oil, as dietary antioxidant supplements during the rat life span on age-related changes in brain: (1) superoxide dismutase (EC 1.15.1.1; SOD) and glutathione peroxidase (EC 1.11.1.9; GSHPx) activities,

Abbreviations: DHA, docosahexaenoic acid; GSHPx, glutathione peroxidase; PUFA, polyunsaturated fatty acid; SOD, superoxide dismutase; TAS, total antioxidant status.

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Materials and methods

Samples of thawed tissue were weighed, homogenized and the total lipid extracted in chloroform–methanol (2:1, v/v) with subsequent aqueous washing according to the standard procedures of Christie (1982). Phospholipid fractions were isolated by TLC on silica gel G using a solvent system of hexane–diethyl ether–formic acid (80:20:1, by vol.). Following transmethylation by refluxing with methanol–toluene–sulfuric acid (20:10:1, by vol.) (Gurr et al. 1969), the fatty acid compositions of the phospholipid fractions were determined by GLC using a capillary column system (Carbowax, 30 m ×0.25 mm, film thickness 0.25 μm; Alltech, Carnforth, Lancs., UK) in a CP9001 instrument (Chrompack, Middleburg, The Netherlands). The column was operated at a head pressure of 71.8 kPa using the following temperature programme. The initial column temperature was 150 °C, which increased to 200 °C at 15 °C/min, followed by an increase to 250 °C at 2 °C/min. The column temperature was maintained at 250 °C for an additional 10 min to facilitate the elution of the longer chain fatty acids. The identities of the peaks were verified by comparison with the retention times of standard fatty acid methyl esters (Sigma Chemical Co.). Data analysis, using an EZ Chrom Data System (Scientific Software Inc., San Jose, CA, USA), enabled the calculation of the fatty acid composition.

Statistical analysis

A balanced factorial ANOVA was used to assess the effects of supplementing the diets of rats with thyme oil or thymol during their lifetime. Tests of significant differences between 7-month-old and 28-month-old rats and differences between dietary effects in 28-month-old rats were performed using Student’s t test, taking  P<0.05 as the limit of significance.

Results

Brain superoxide dismutase and glutathione peroxidase activities

Significant changes in SOD and GSHPx activities were observed in rats during their life span as a result of all

Table 1. Composition of the experimental diet*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ingredient</th>
<th>g/kg</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Casein, alcohol extracted</td>
<td>189.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L-Cystine</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maize starch</td>
<td>450.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maltodextrin 10</td>
<td>118.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sucrose</td>
<td>94.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cellulose, BW200</td>
<td>47.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soyabean oil</td>
<td>42.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salt mix</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ca₃(PO₄)₂, dibasic</td>
<td>12.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CaCO₃</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potassium citrate</td>
<td>15.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vitamin mix (V13401)†</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choline bitartrate</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The fatty acid composition of the whole diet was (g/100 g total fatty acids): 14:0 4.13, 16:0 16.4, 18:0 3.10, 18:1n-9 18.4, 18:1n-7 1.98, 18:2n-6 45.1, 18:3n-3 4.69, 20:5n-3 2.54, 22:6n-3 2.06.
† Contained (g/kg salt mix): NaCl 259, MgO 41.9, MgSO₄.7H₂O 257.6, Ca₃(PO₄)₂ 1125, CuS₂O₄ 0.5, KI 0.035, Fe citrate 210, MnSO₄.2H₂O 1.225, CaS₂O₄ 5.6, sucrose 399.6.
‡ Contained (g/kg vitamin mix): retinyl palmitate (150 mg retinol/g) 0.8, cholecalciferol (25 mg/g) 1.0, menadione sodium bisulfate (62.5% menadione) 0.08, biotin (10% 20), cyanocobalamin (0.1% 1.0, pteroylmoglutamic acid 0.2, nicotinic acid 3.0, calcium pantothenate 1.6, pyridoxine-HCl 0.7, riboflavin 0.6, thiamin-HCl 0.6, sucrose 988.42.
three dietary treatments ($P < 0.001$) (Fig. 1(a)). SOD activity in rats from all three dietary groups was found to be significantly lower by approximately 19% in 28-month-old rats compared with 7-month-old rats ($P < 0.001$, $P < 0.01$ and $P < 0.05$ respectively). In 28-month-old control rats, activity was lower by 30%, considerably more than in thyme-oil- and thymol-treated rats of the same age, in which it was lower by only 18% and 14%. Despite the decreases in enzyme activity in the thyme oil and thymol treatment groups, the levels were significantly higher by 18% ($P < 0.05$) and 24% ($P < 0.01$) respectively than in the age-matched control.

**Brain total antioxidant status**

There was a significant decline in the TAS as a result of all three treatments during the rat life span ($P < 0.001$) (Fig. 1(c)). The TAS in brains from 28-month-old control rats fell by approximately 55% ($P < 0.001$), almost twofold more than the declines exhibited in thyme-oil- and thymol-treated rats ($P < 0.05$). Despite the decline in the TAS in 28-month-old thyme-oil- and thymol-treated rats, it was found to be 61% ($P < 0.01$) and 71% ($P < 0.01$) higher than that in the age-matched control.

**Fatty acid composition in the brain phospholipid fraction**

Changes in fatty acid composition in the brain phospholipid fraction with age for the three treatments are shown in Figs. 2 and 3. There were significant changes ($P < 0.01$ or $P < 0.001$) in the proportions of all fatty acids except arachidonic acid (20:4ω-6) during the rat life span as a result of all treatments. The proportions of palmitic acid (16:0) in 28-month-old control, thyme-oil- and thymol-treated rats were all significantly lower compared with those in 7-month-old rats ($P < 0.01$). However, there were no significant differences in the proportion of 16:0 between treatments in old rats. In contrast, the proportions of linoleic acid (18:2ω-6), eicosenoic acid (20:1ω-9), docosatetraenoic acid (22:4ω-6) and docosapentaenoic acid (22:5ω-3) in all three dietary treatments were significantly higher in 28-month-old rats than in 7-month-old rats. In rats (28 months) given thyme oil or thymol, the proportions of 20:1ω-9 differed significantly from the age-matched control ($P < 0.05$), being approximately 30% and 26% higher respectively. There were also notable changes in the proportion of DHA (22:6ω-3) with age for the three treatments. In 28-month-old control rats, the proportion of 22:6ω-3 had declined significantly ($P < 0.001$), falling by 17%, whilst in 28-month-old thyme-oil treated-rats it fell by 4% and in thyme-oil-treated rats it had remained unchanged. The proportions of DHA in 28-month-old thyme-oil- and thymol-treated rats were 22% and 16% higher ($P < 0.001$, $P < 0.001$) than in the age-matched control. Finally, although no significant differences were observed between proportions of 20:4ω-6 in 7-month and 28-month-old rats, 28-month-old thyme-oil- and thymol-treated rats exhibited
proportions of 20:4n-6 10% higher ($P < 0.05$) than in the age-matched control.

**Discussion**

Despite the numerous antioxidant systems present in cells that are utilized to combat free radicals, there appears to be an imbalance between the production of radicals and their removal with age (Harman, 1995). These free radicals attack PUFA components of the cell membranes, consequently reducing membrane fluidity and therefore functionality (Stubbs & Smith, 1984).

The age-related decrease in brain SOD activity was found to agree with earlier studies (Benzi et al. 1988; Vanella et al. 1989; Barja de Quiroga et al. 1990; Rao et al. 1990), although others have shown it to be unchanged (Reiss & Gershon, 1976; Kurobe et al. 1990; Semsei et al. 1991) or even increased (Danh et al. 1983). In the case of brain GSHPx

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**Fig. 2.** Changes with age in the proportions of saturated and monounsaturated fatty acids in the brain phospholipid fraction (g/100 g total fatty acids) from rats fed on a control diet (●), a thyme-oil-supplemented diet (◇) or a thymol-supplemented diet (●). Values are means for five rats, with standard deviations represented by vertical bars.
activity, this appears to be the only study that has shown brain GSHPx activity to be lower in aged rats (28 months) compared with young rats (7 months), whilst the majority of other investigations report activity to be unchanged (Mizuno & Ohta, 1986; Ansari et al. 1989; Barja de Quiroga et al. 1990, 1992) or even increased (Vitorica et al. 1984; Benzi et al. 1988). Dietary supplementation with thyme oil or thymol was not found to have influenced SOD activity in 28-month-old rats in comparison with the age-matched controls. In contrast, GSHPx activities in thyme-oil- and thymol-treated rats at 28 months were significantly higher than activity in control rats at the same age. By far the most dramatic effect of thyme oil and thymol was that on the TAS. Whilst in control rats the TAS concentration declined during the rat life span, both dietary supplements were found to inhibit this process. Whether this was due to their effects on GSHPx activity is not known. However, it is possible that the higher TAS in 28-month-old rats was a consequence of

![Fig. 3. Changes with age in the proportions of polyunsaturated fatty acids in the brain phospholipid fraction (g/100 g total fatty acids) from rats fed on a control diet (●), a thyme-oil-supplemented diet (■) or a thymol-supplemented diet (○). Values are means for five rats, with standard deviations represented by vertical bars.](https://www.cambridge.org/core).
the antioxidant properties of the supplements (Youdim, 1997) and/or an increase in other endogenous antioxidants that were not measured in the present study.

The present study also found that in the phospholipid fraction, concentrations of $18:2n-6$, $20:1n-9$, $22:4n-6$ and $22:5n-3$ increased with age. Interestingly, the concentrations of these PUFA (except $22:5n-3$) were found to be higher in rats whose diets were supplemented with either thymol or thymol. The brain is one of the most important tissues for which maintaining appropriate concentrations of PUFA is essential: its concentration of DHA is particularly important. Reports have shown that the detrimental effects of ageing, especially increased free-radical production, cause concentrations of DHA to decline (Barja de Quiroga et al. 1990, 1992; Deans et al. 1994; Youdim, 1997) in agreement with the findings of the present study. However, the significant decline in the phospholipid DHA concentration with age was only observed in control rats, not those with diets supplemented with thyme oil or thymol. Similarly, $20:4n-6$ was also maintained at significantly higher concentrations in old thyme-oil- and thymol-treated rats.

The concentration of DHA is particularly high in the cerebral cortex (grey matter). Among subcellular fractions of brain tissue, the highest levels of DHA are found in synaptosomes, synaptic vesicles, mitochondria and microsomes (Onuma et al. 1984; Neuringer & Connor, 1986; Neuringer et al. 1988; Salem, 1989; Scott & Bazan, 1989) all of which can be characterized as fluid and metabolically active. The protection of PUFA levels, especially that of DHA, is likely to have pronounced implications for the functional operations of the brain (Lampney & Walker, 1976; Yamamoto et al. 1991; Okuyama, 1992; Chalon et al. 1998; Kaplan & Greenwood, 1998; Suzuki et al. 1998). As far as the nervous system is concerned, DHA has been shown to influence certain electrophysiological variables as well as learning functions, and to a great extent optimum levels of DHA ensure harmonious cerebral development (Boure et al. 1993). It has also been reported that deficiencies in DHA affect aspects of memory, motor skills and behaviour (Lampney & Walker, 1976; Yamamoto et al. 1987, 1991; Okuyama, 1992; Chalon et al. 1998; Kaplan & Greenwood, 1998; Suzuki et al. 1998).

The results presented here show that both thyme oil and thymol provided beneficial effects on the antioxidant status of the rat brain, which may in turn have influenced the concentrations of PUFA, especially DHA. This result is particularly important in light of the reported functional roles of DHA, discussed earlier. Neither supplement appeared to be more effective than the other and in the light of the fact that the thymol composition of thyme oil was less than 50 %, this observation suggests that whilst the majority of the antioxidant potency exhibited by thyme oil is as a result of its thymol composition, other possible antioxidant components within the oil, such as carvacrol (Youdim, 1997) may also be contributing to its effect.

References


