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Oxidative Stress in Drug-Induced Liver Injury: Mechanistic Pathways and Modifying Factors

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ABSTRACT

Drug-induced liver injury (DILI) is a leading cause of acute liver failure and a major barrier in drug development and clinical therapeutics. Among the diverse mechanisms implicated in DILI, oxidative stress plays a central role in initiating and propagating hepatocellular damage. Oxidative stress results from an imbalance between the generation of reactive oxygen species (ROS) and the capacity of antioxidant defenses, leading to macromolecular damage, mitochondrial dysfunction, and cell death. A wide range of drugs, including acetaminophen, antibiotics, antiepileptics, and anticancer agents, induce oxidative stress through metabolic activation, redox cycling, and disruption of mitochondrial electron transport. Importantly, individual susceptibility to oxidative damage is influenced by genetic polymorphisms, age, sex, nutritional status, co-medications, and underlying liver disease. Additionally, sex hormones, gut microbiota composition, and environmental exposures modify redox pathways and DILI risk. Understanding how oxidative stress integrates with immune responses, inflammation, and cell death pathways provides insight into mechanisms of liver injury and suggests therapeutic targets. This review synthesizes current knowledge of oxidative stress in DILI pathogenesis, highlights key modifying factors, and discusses potential antioxidant-based interventions for the prevention and mitigation of liver injury.

Keywords: Drug-induced liver injury, oxidative stress, reactive oxygen species, mitochondria, antioxidant defense

INTRODUCTION

Drug-induced liver injury (DILI) refers to liver damage caused by prescription medications, over-the-counter drugs, herbal products, and dietary supplements [1]. DILI encompasses a spectrum from asymptomatic elevations in liver enzymes to fulminant hepatic failure necessitating liver transplantation. It accounts for a significant proportion of acute liver injury cases in clinical practice and remains a leading reason for regulatory actions, drug withdrawals, and restricted approvals[2]. Although the mechanisms of DILI are multifactorial, oxidative stress is recognized as a central initiating event in many forms of injury[3]. Oxidative stress arises when reactive oxygen species (ROS) and reactive nitrogen species (RNS) overwhelm cellular antioxidant defenses. ROS, including superoxide anion (O_2^-), hydrogen peroxide (H_2O_2), and hydroxyl radicals ($\bullet OH$), are normally generated during mitochondrial respiration and drug metabolism[4]. Under physiological conditions, antioxidant systems—such as glutathione, superoxide dismutase (SOD), catalase, and peroxiredoxins—neutralize ROS and maintain redox balance[5]. In DILI, drugs or their metabolites disrupt redox homeostasis by increasing ROS production or depleting antioxidants, leading to direct oxidative damage to lipids, proteins, and DNA[6]. Oxidative stress also propagates secondary injury through mitochondrial dysfunction, activation of stress signaling pathways, and promotion of inflammatory responses[7]. The severity and outcome of DILI depend not only on the intrinsic toxicity of the drug but also on host factors that influence redox capacity and stress responses.

This review details the mechanistic pathways by which oxidative stress contributes to DILI, describes modifying factors that influence susceptibility, and discusses emerging strategies to mitigate oxidative injury.

2. Sources and Consequences of Oxidative Stress in the Liver

2.1 Endogenous and Exogenous ROS Production

Reactive oxygen species in hepatocytes arise from both endogenous metabolic processes and exogenous drug-related insults. Under physiological conditions, mitochondria are the primary endogenous source of ROS, generated as byproducts of electron transport during oxidative phosphorylation[8]. Limited electron leakage at complexes I and III leads to superoxide formation, which is normally neutralized by mitochondrial antioxidant systems[9]. During drug-induced toxic stress, however, mitochondrial dysfunction increases electron leakage, overwhelming antioxidant defenses and resulting in excessive ROS accumulation. Drug metabolism represents a major exogenous contributor to oxidative stress in the liver[10]. Cytochrome P450 enzymes, particularly CYP2E1, CYP1A2, and CYP3A4, are heavily involved in the bioactivation of xenobiotics. Many drugs are converted into reactive intermediates that participate in redox cycling, continuously generating ROS while depleting intracellular antioxidants such as glutathione[11]. In addition, activation of hepatic immune responses contributes to oxidative stress. Kupffer cells and recruited inflammatory cells produce ROS as part of innate defense mechanisms[12]. While this response is protective in acute injury, sustained or excessive ROS release extends damage to surrounding hepatocytes and amplifies liver injury.

2.2 Oxidative Damage to Macromolecules

Excessive ROS directly damages essential cellular macromolecules, leading to loss of hepatocellular integrity[13]. Lipid peroxidation targets polyunsaturated fatty acids in cellular membranes, generating reactive aldehydes that disrupt membrane structure and intracellular signaling[14]. Protein oxidation modifies amino acid side chains, impairing enzyme activity and structural stability, particularly in metabolic and mitochondrial proteins[15]. ROS also induce DNA base modifications and strand breaks, triggering apoptosis or cellular senescence. Collectively, these events destabilize cellular homeostasis and activate hepatocellular death pathways that underpin drug-induced liver injury.

3. Mechanisms of ROS Generation in DILI

3.1 Drug Metabolism and Redox Cycling

Many drugs undergo phase I metabolism in the liver via cytochrome P450 enzymes, producing reactive metabolites that can directly or indirectly generate reactive oxygen species[16]. These metabolites may form covalent adducts with cellular proteins or lipids, impairing their function, or participate in redox cycling, a process in which repeated oxidation and reduction reactions continuously produce ROS[17]. Redox cycling amplifies oxidative stress and disrupts the delicate balance between ROS generation and antioxidant defenses.

Acetaminophen is the prototypical example of metabolism-driven oxidative stress. At therapeutic doses, it is mainly metabolized through glucuronidation and sulfation and safely eliminated[17]. In overdose, however, cytochrome P450 enzymes convert acetaminophen to N-acetyl-p-benzoquinone imine, a highly reactive intermediate[18]. This metabolite binds to cellular proteins and depletes glutathione, the primary intracellular antioxidant, leading to unchecked ROS accumulation. The resulting oxidative burden causes mitochondrial injury and activates cell death pathways. Other drugs, including isoniazid, diclofenac, and methotrexate, similarly generate reactive intermediates that disturb redox homeostasis and sensitize hepatocytes to oxidative damage.

3.2 Mitochondrial Dysfunction

Mitochondria serve as both a major source and target of ROS in drug-induced liver injury[19]. Certain hepatotoxic drugs impair electron transport chain function, causing electron leakage and elevated ROS production[20]. This leads to loss of mitochondrial membrane potential, opening of the mitochondrial permeability transition pore, and release of cytochrome c and other pro-apoptotic factors[21]. Mitochondrial dysfunction also shifts metabolism toward anaerobic glycolysis, depleting ATP and triggering apoptosis or necrosis depending on injury severity[22]. Cumulative mitochondrial damage amplifies oxidative stress, establishing a vicious cycle of ROS production and hepatocellular injury[23].

4. Oxidative Stress-Mediated Cell Death Pathways

Oxidative stress triggers hepatocellular death through several interrelated mechanisms, each contributing to the progression and severity of drug-induced liver injury.

4.1 Apoptosis

Reactive oxygen species activate stress-responsive kinases, including c-Jun N-terminal kinase (JNK) and p38 MAPK, which initiate pro-apoptotic signaling cascades[24]. Oxidative damage compromises mitochondrial membrane integrity, facilitating the release of cytochrome c into the cytosol[25]. Cytochrome c then engages the apoptotic protease activating factor-1 (Apaf-1) complex, leading to caspase activation and programmed cell death[26]. Apoptosis is a controlled process that limits inflammatory spillover, but extensive apoptotic loss of hepatocytes contributes significantly to liver dysfunction and parenchymal depletion.

4.2 Necrosis

When oxidative damage exceeds cellular repair capacity and ATP levels are depleted, necrosis becomes the predominant mode of cell death[27]. Necrotic hepatocytes release damage-associated molecular patterns (DAMPs), which amplify local inflammation by activating Kupffer cells and recruiting immune cells[28]. This feed-forward loop extends tissue injury beyond the initially affected hepatocytes, contributing to widespread liver damage.

4.3 Ferroptosis

Ferroptosis is an iron-dependent form of cell death driven by lipid peroxidation[29]. In the context of oxidative stress, impaired glutathione peroxidase 4 activity leads to accumulation of lipid ROS, triggering ferroptotic hepatocyte death[30]. Recent studies indicate that ferroptosis plays a significant role in certain drug-induced liver injuries, particularly those involving iron overload or compromised antioxidant defenses, linking redox imbalance directly to cell demise[31]. Collectively, these oxidative stress-mediated pathways interact dynamically, determining the extent, severity, and reversibility of hepatocellular injury.

5. Immune Activation and Oxidative Stress

Oxidative stress interacts closely with innate and adaptive immune responses in DILI[32]. Hepatocellular damage releases DAMPs that activate Kupffer cells and recruit neutrophils and monocytes[33]. These immune cells generate additional ROS via NADPH oxidase, amplifying oxidative injury. Pro-inflammatory cytokines such as TNF- α and IL-1 β upregulate inducible nitric oxide synthase (iNOS), increasing production of nitric oxide (NO) and reactive nitrogen species (RNS)[34]. Peroxynitrite (formed by NO and superoxide reaction) is highly reactive and exacerbates oxidative damage[35]. This bidirectional relationship between oxidative stress and inflammation creates a feed-forward loop that escalates liver injury.

6. Biomarkers of Oxidative Stress in DILI

The identification of reliable biomarkers for oxidative stress in drug-induced liver injury is crucial for early detection, monitoring disease progression, and guiding therapeutic interventions[36]. Among the most studied markers are serum malondialdehyde and 4-hydroxynonenal, which reflect lipid peroxidation and indicate damage to cellular membranes. Protein carbonyls serve as markers of protein oxidation, providing insight into the functional impairment of enzymes and structural proteins within hepatocytes[37]. The ratio of reduced to oxidized glutathione (GSH/GSSG) is a sensitive indicator of cellular redox status, with a decreased ratio signaling heightened oxidative stress. Circulating mitochondrial DNA, released from damaged hepatocytes, reflects mitochondrial injury and may serve as an early warning of hepatocellular dysfunction. Combining these oxidative stress biomarkers with conventional liver function tests and clinical assessment enhances the ability to stratify patients by risk, monitor progression, and potentially identify individuals who may benefit from antioxidant or protective interventions. This integrative approach holds promise for improving the management and prognosis of DILI.

7. Future Perspectives

Future research on oxidative stress in drug-induced liver injury should focus on comprehensive, integrative approaches to improve understanding and patient care. Systems biology techniques can map complex redox pathways and their interactions with drug metabolism, immune responses, and cell death mechanisms[38]. Development of integrative biomarker panels that combine oxidative, inflammatory, and genetic indicators may enhance risk prediction and early detection of DILI. Personalized medicine frameworks incorporating host-specific factors, such as genetic polymorphisms, age, sex, and comorbidities, can guide individualized prevention strategies[39]. Well-designed clinical trials evaluating targeted antioxidant therapies and mitochondria-protective interventions across diverse drug classes are also needed to translate mechanistic insights into effective clinical management[40]. Together, these strategies will advance prevention, early diagnosis, and therapeutic interventions for DILI.

CONCLUSION

Oxidative stress is a fundamental mechanistic pathway in drug-induced liver injury. Through direct macromolecular damage, mitochondrial dysfunction, activation of cell death pathways, and amplification of inflammation, ROS and RNS drive hepatocellular injury across many drug classes. Individual susceptibility to oxidative DILI is shaped by genetic, physiological, and environmental modifiers that influence redox balance. While antioxidant therapies like N-acetylcysteine have transformed the treatment of acetaminophen toxicity, broader strategies targeting oxidative stress and its downstream effects hold promise for improving outcomes in DILI. A deeper mechanistic understanding integrated with clinical biomarkers and personalized risk assessment will pave the way for more effective prevention and intervention.

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