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Original Article

UPLC–QTOF–MS and NMR analyses of graviola (*Annona muricata*) leaves

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ABSTRACT

Graviola leaves (*Annona muricata* L., Annonaceae) are used by some people to try to treat or even cure cancer, even though over-consumption of the fruit, which contains the neurotoxins annonacin and squamocin has caused an atypical form of Parkinson's disease. In previous analyses, the fruits were extracted with methanol under ambient conditions before analyses. In the present study, UPLC–QTOF–MS and NMR were used to analyze freeze-dried graviola leaves that were extracted using dry methanol and ethanol at 100 °C and 10 MPa (100 atm) pressure in a sealed container. Methanol solubilized 33% of the metabolites in the lyophilized leaves. Ethanol solubilized 41% of metabolites in the lyophilized leaves. The concentrations of total phenolic compounds were 100.3 ± 2.8 and 93.2 ± 2.0 mg gallic acid equivalents per g of sample, for the methanolic and ethanolic extracts, respectively. Moreover, the toxicophore (unsaturated γ-lactone) that is present in neurotoxic acetogenins was found in the lipophilic portion of this extract. The concentrations of the neurotoxins annonacin and squamocin were found by UPLC–QTOF–MS to be 305.6 ± 28.3 and 17.4 ± 0.89 μg/g-dw, respectively, in the dried leaves. Pressurized methanol solubilized more annonacin and squamocin than ethanol. On the other hand, a hot, aqueous infusion solubilized only 0.213% of the annonacin and too little of the squamocin to be detected. So, graviola leaves contain significant amounts of the neurotoxins annonacin and squamocin, as well as some potentially healthy phenolic compounds. Finally, the potential neurotoxicity of whole leaves in dietary supplements could be much higher than that of a tea (hot aqueous infusion) that is made from them.

Introduction

Graviola (*Annona muricata* L.) is a tropical fruit in the Annonaceae family that is grown in Asia, South America and many tropical islands (Lannuzel and Michel, 2009; Gajalakshmi et al., 2012). The leaves can be used to make a tea (Port's et al., 2013; Hansra et al., 2014) or consumed whole as dietary supplement in capsules that may have some health effects (Torres et al., 2012). However, over-consumption of graviola and products made from it may have caused an atypical form of Parkinson's diseases on the French Caribbean island of Guadeloupe and the Pacific island of Guam (Caparros-Lefebvre and Elbaz, 1999; Champy et al., 2005; Badrie and Schauss, 2009). This is due to the presence of neurotoxic acetogenins, such as annonacin (**1**) ($C_{35}H_{64}O_7$, MW 596.88) and squamocin (**2**) ($C_{37}H_{66}O_7$, MW 622.92). Like other neurotoxic acetogenins, they contain an unsaturated γ-lactone group that is the toxicophore (Smith et al., 2014). However, the neurotoxicity could be strongly dependent on the dose. That is, the first rule of toxicology is that the dose is the poison (Smith, 2014). It was over-consumption, not consumption of graviola that caused Parkinson's disease. The dose of neurotoxic acetogenins that one consumes is very dependent on the form of graviola that is ingested. For example, one study used a tea made from 10 to 12 dry leaves that were boiled in 8 oz (about 237 ml) water for 5–7 min (Hansra et al., 2014). Since acetogenins have very low solubilities in water (Höllerhage et al., 2009), this would have been a relatively low dose. The dose

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can be estimated from a previous study that found about 56 mg of annonacin per kg of leaves when about 2.5 g of leaves were boiled for 10 min in water (Champy et al., 2005). On the other hand, much higher doses would be consumed if one were to ingest the entire leaves in a dietary supplement. That is, one group reported that the "therapeutic dose" of graviola leaves is 2–3 g, taken 3 or 4 times daily (Sun et al., 2014). If whole leaves are consumed, the expected dose would be higher than that in a tea. To estimate the concentration, 100 g of dried leaves were extracted with 1 l of methanol (Champy et al., 2005). This recovered almost six times as much annonacin (about 300 mg/kg) as did the boiling water. However, this analysis was done with matrix assisted laser desorption and ionization coupled to time of flight mass spectrometry or MALDI–TOF MS (Champy et al., 2005), which separates analytes based on their molecular weights. So, annonacin will not be separated from its isomers. This could cause an over-estimation of the concentration of annonacin, since its isomers will also be detected by the MALDI–TOF MS. It was observed, boiling methanol was not able to solubilize all the annonacin (**1**) or squamocin (**2**) from another fruit in the Annonaceae family, the North American pawpaw (*Asimina triloba*; Potts et al., 2012). That is, the method used to extract annonacin and squamocin can affect the results of the analysis. Boiling water will not solubilize all the annonacin or squamocin. Instead, pressurized liquid extraction using dry methanol at 100 °C and 10 MPa (100 atm) pressure can solubilize over seven times as much annonacin and even some squamocin from the fruits (Potts et al., 2012). So, it is important to use hot, dry pressurized methanol to extract all the annonacin and squamocin. It is also important to use liquid chromatography coupled to high resolution mass spectrometry (LC-HRMS) to separate and detect isomers of annonacin and squamocin (Levine et al., 2015).

LC-HRMS is especially useful when trying to quantify trace components, like acetogenins. The MS can be tuned so that it is as sensitive as possible for the analytes of interest (Smith, 2014). However, the sensitivities for other analytes that are present in a sample are quite different. So, standards are required when quantifying analytes by MS. On the other hand, ^{1}H NMR has the same sensitivity for all the hydrogens (^{1}H isotope) in the sample (Smith, 2014). So, it can be used without standards to determine the relative concentrations of different types of hydrogens in a sample (Smith, 2014). Moreover, ^{13}C NMR can be used to determine how many different kinds of carbons are in a sample and to identify the types of compounds that are present (Smith, 2014). Therefore, NMR can be very useful in analyzing relatively unknown samples. NMR was used to analyze extracts of *A. muricata* for the presence of the α,β-unsaturated-γ-lactone toxicophore that is present in neurotoxic acetogenins (Machado et al., 2015).

Even though graviola leaves have been reported to contain about 300 mg/kg annonacin (Höllerhage et al., 2009), 32 mg/kg total phenolics and 5.6 mg/kg total flavonoids (Port's et al., 2013), little is known about its major chemical constituents. Even the concentration of total soluble substances is not well known. That is, the concentration depends on the method used to extract the soluble substances. For example, when dried leaves were soaked in distilled water for 48 h, about 5% of the solids dissolved (Florence et al., 2014). Another obtained only a 3.62% yield when leaves were extracted twice with distilled water at room temperature (Adewole and Ajewole, 2009). When soaked for 48 h in 80% ethanol, about 10.55% of the compounds in the leaves dissolved (Foong and Hamid, 2012; Hamizah et al., 2012). A different study percolated dry leaves with 95% ethanol to get a 19.3% yield of soluble substances (Singleton et al., 1999).

So, the aims of this work were characterizing the extracts obtained by this technique and see if methanol and ethanol present different results, as well as analyze annonacin and squamocin by UPLC–QTOF–MS.

Materials and methods

Chemicals and graviola leaves

Methanol (CH_3OH), chloroform ($CHCl_3$), acetonitrile (CH_3CN) and ethanol were from Honeywell Burdick & Jackson (Muskegon, MI, USA). Deuterated chloroform ($CDCl_3$), deuterated methanol (CD_3OD) and deuterated water (D_2O) were from SigmaAldrich (St. Louis, MO). Leucine-enkephalin was purchased from Waters (North Kingstown, RI, USA). Lyophilized graviola leaves were obtained by Ingrid de Moraes from a commercial cultivation located in the city of Trairi (Ceará, Brazil), latitude 3°22′15.98″S and longitude 39°17′34.46″W. Voucher specimens are kept at Embrapa in Fortaleza. The voucher number is 49002. After being harvested, the leaves were washed, sanitized with a sodium hypochlorite solution (100 μl l^{-1} or 100 ppm) and then lyophilized in a model LP 510 lyophilizer (Liobrás, São Carlos, SP - Brazil), at Embrapa Tropical Agroindustry located in Fortaleza, Ceará, Brazil.

Extractions

About 10 g of lyophilized leaves were mixed with enough of HydroMatrix™ (SigmaAldrich, St. Louis, MO) to fill the 100 ml stainless steel sample cell used in an Accelerated Solvent Extractor (ASE, ThermoFisher Scientific, Sunnyvale, CA). Then, CH_3OH or ethanol was added while the temperature and pressure were increased to 100 °C and 10.3 MPa (100 atm) over a 3 min time (static time). Next, the solvent was purged into a collection vessel. A total of four cycles were run to statically extract the sample, resulting in a total volume of about 160 ml. The solvent was evaporated off and the oily residues remaining after extraction with each solvent were weighed. A portion of the residue obtained from the methanol extraction was dissolved in 99.99% CD_3OD and analyzed by NMR. Portions of the methanolic and ethanolic residues were analyzed for total phenolics, as described below. Then, portions of the residues obtained from the methanolic and ethanolic extraction were partitioned between $CHCl_3$ and water. The $CHCl_3$ phase was collected, the solvent evaporated off, the residue redissolved in $CDCl_3$ and NMR spectra acquired. Finally, a 10 g portion of dried leaves were extracted by ultrasonication. It was done with 200 ml of 50% ethanol plus 50% water at 40 °C for 10 min, using an Ultracelaner 1450 ultrasonicator from Unique (Indaia, SP, Brazil). It was done at a frequency of 20 kHz and with 800 W power. This extract was also analyzed for total phenolics.

Also, three portions of about 2.5 g and one portion of about 5.0 g of lyophilized leaves were added to 237 ml (one cup) of water at 90 °C for 10 min, after which the solutions were filtered and analyzed by LC–MS/MS.

NMR analyses

^{1}H and ^{13}C{^{1}H}-NMR spectra were obtained using an Agilent DD2 600 MHz NMR (Santa Clara, CA). A 30° pulse width and 1 s pulse delay were used for the ^{1}H NMR, while a 30° pulse width and 2 s pulse delay were used for the ^{13}C NMR spectra. Chemical shifts were referenced to either the CD_3OD peaks at 3.35 and 4.78 (for ^{1}H) and 49.3 ppm (for ^{13}C) or the $CDCl_3$ peaks at 7.27 and 77.23 ppm for ^{1}H and ^{13}C, respectively.

Analysis for total phenolic compounds

The concentrations of total phenolics in the methanolic and ethanolic extracts were determined using the Folin–Ciocalteu reagent and a gallic acid reference standard, as described