

MASTER'S THESIS

Study of the modulating effects of Astragalus saponins on tumor angiogenesis and invasiveness in colon cancer cells

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**Study of the Modulating Effects of Astragalus Saponins on
Tumor Angiogenesis and Invasiveness in Colon Cancer Cells**

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ABSTRACT

Colorectal cancer is prone to develop into invasive cancer, while metastatic development is the major cause of cancer-related deaths. Astragalus saponins (AST) exhibit anti-carcinogenic effects in various cancer cell lines in our previous studies. Our latest findings indicate that AST could suppress tumor growth in nude mice xenograft of HT-29 colon cancer cells. The results were comparable to the conventional chemotherapeutic drug 5-FU with fewer adverse effects. Here, we attempted to further explore the *in vitro* and *in vivo* effects of AST on colon tumor progression.

AST (80 $\mu\text{g/ml}$) significantly inhibited the growth of HCT 116 cells by 75% after 72 h of treatment. Vascular endothelial growth factor (VEGF) and basic fibroblast growth factor (bFGF) are the key angiogenic growth factors for blood vessel formation and contribute to tumor angiogenesis. Matrix metalloproteinase, MMP-2 and MMP-9, which have been found to be elevated in colon cancer, are the collagen IV gelatinase responsible for the extracellular matrix (ECM) degradation that facilitate cell invasion. Our results revealed that AST could significantly downregulate the protein expression of these angiogenic factors and invasive molecules. Some signaling molecules involved in PI3K/AKT/mTOR pathway were also examined. AST increased PTEN expression, decreased the phosphorylation of Akt and its downstream target, mTOR. Rapamycin alone could reduce the protein expression of VEGF, bFGF, MMP-2 and MMP-9, while co-treatment of rapamycin and AST further decreased the expression. HIF-1 α is the key transcriptional activator of the VEGF gene and will be elevated under hypoxic conditions. In cobalt chloride (II) (CoCl₂)-mimicked hypoxia, the induced HIF-1 α and VEGF in HCT 116 cells could be suppressed by AST and the effect was intensified with rapamycin co-treatment. In HCT 116 xenografted nude mice model, tumor volume and

tumor weight were found to be reduced by 42.7 % and 33.9 %, respectively, by AST treatment when compared to the control group. AST was found to markedly reduce the serum level of VEGF when compared to the control group. Immunohistochemical staining of the tumor sections also showed decreased VEGF expression in AST-treated group. The chemotherapeutic drug vinblastine (VBL) has been widely used for treating different human cancers and exhibited potential anti-carcinogenic effects in colon cancer cells in our pilot study. The therapeutic effects of the combined use of AST and VBL on colon cancer development were also investigated in the present study. The anti-invasion effects of AST were demonstrated using LoVo metastatic colon cancer cells. The number of invaded cells was decreased by AST treatment by using the cell invasion assay. AST also increased the localization of cadherin-catenin complex at the cell membrane, indicating that AST might hinder cell invasion by increasing cell-cell interaction. A splenic liver metastasis animal model was used to study the anti-metastatic effects of AST. A smaller extent of metastases was observed in the liver in AST-treated mice when compared to that in control animals. AST could also downregulate the expression of various metastasis-associated proteins and genes in the tumor-bearing liver biopsy.

In conclusion, our results suggest that AST could attenuate tumor progression of colon cancer through inhibition of angiogenesis, probably via downregulation of the AKT/mTOR signaling and inhibition of invasion by modulating the invasive factors.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DECLARATION	I
ABSTRACT	II
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	IV
TABLE OF CONTENTS	V
LIST OF FIGURES	VIII
LIST OF TABLES	X
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	XI
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION	1
A. OVERVIEW OF COLON CANCER.....	1
1. <i>Epidemiology</i>	1
2. <i>Pathogenesis</i>	2
3. <i>Treatments</i>	6
3.1 Contemporary chemotherapy	7
3.2 Chinese medicines as an alternative chemotherapeutic option	8
B. ANGIOGENESIS AND CANCER	10
1. <i>Tumor angiogenesis</i>	10
2. <i>Involvement of mTOR signaling pathway in tumor angiogenesis</i>	13
3. <i>Hypoxia and tumor angiogenesis</i>	14
C. TUMOR CELL INVASION AND METASTASIS	17
D. RADIX ASTRAGALUS	20
1. <i>Description and uses in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM)</i>	20
2. <i>Chemical constituents</i>	21
3. <i>Pharmacology and contemporary clinical indications</i>	24
3.1 Pharmacological studies of Astragalus saponins	24
3.2. Experimental findings on the anti-carcinogenic effects of Astragalus saponins	28
3.3 Toxicology.....	30
CHAPTER 2 MATERIALS AND METHODS	31
A. MATERIALS	31
B. CELL LINES AND CELL CULTURE.....	34
C. DRUG TREATMENT	35
D. CELL VIABILITY STUDIES	36
E. WESTERN BLOT ANALYSIS	37

F.	IMMUNOFLUORESCENCE STAINING	39
G.	FLUORESCENCE-ACTIVATED CELL SORTER (FACS) ANALYSIS.....	40
H.	REVERSE TRANSCRIPTION PCR	41
I.	IMMUNOPRECIPITATION.....	43
J.	TUMOR XENOGRAFTS IN NUDE MICE.....	44
K.	IMMUNOHISTOCHEMICAL STAINING	45
L.	BIOCHEMICAL ASSAYS (ELISA)	47
M.	CELL INVASION ASSAY	48
N.	WHITE BLOOD CELLS COUNT	49
O.	STATISTICAL ANALYSIS	50
CHAPTER 3 RESULTS		51
A.	EFFECTS OF AST ON HCT 116, DLD-1 AND LoVo CELL VIABILITY	51
B.	WESTERN BLOT ANALYSIS OF ANGIOGENIC AND INVASIVENESS-RELATED PROTEINS IN HCT 116 AND DLD-1 CELLS.....	55
C.	EFFECT OF AST ON PI3K/AKT/MTOR PATHWAY IN HCT 116 CELLS	60
	1. <i>Effect of AST on different signaling molecules involved in PI3K/AKT/mTOR pathway.....</i>	60
	2. <i>Additional inhibitory effect of co-treatment of AST and rapamycin in HCT 116 cells on bFGF, VEGF, MMP-2 and MMP-9</i>	62
D.	ANTI-ANGIOGENIC EFFECTS OF AST ON HCT 116 CELLS UNDER HYPOXIA	64
	1. <i>Study of HIF-1α and VEGF expression under CoCl₂-mimetic hypoxic condition.....</i>	64
	2. <i>Combined effect of AST and rapamycin on HIF-1α and VEGF under CoCl₂-mimetic hypoxic condition</i>	67
E.	COMBINED EFFECTS OF AST AND CHEMOTHERAPEUTIC DRUGS ON COLON CANCER.....	69
	1. <i>Study of the combined effects of AST and VBL on the growth and apoptosis of HCT 116 cells</i>	69
	2. <i>Study of the combined effect of AST and VBL on the angiogenic and invasive factors in HCT 116 cells</i>	74
	3. <i>Combined effects of AST and chemotherapeutic drugs on anti-angiogenesis in nude mice xenograft using HCT 116 cells.....</i>	76
	3.1 <i>Effects of AST and chemotherapeutic drugs on tumor growth inhibition in HCT 116 xenografted nude mice.....</i>	76
	3.2 <i>Effects of AST and chemotherapeutic drugs on VEGF in HCT 116 xenografted nude mice.....</i>	82
	3.3 <i>Hematopoietic Effect of AST and chemotherapeutic drugs on Total White Blood Cells (WBC).....</i>	86
F.	INHIBITION OF LoVo CELL INVASIVENESS	88
	1. <i>Invasion assay.....</i>	88
	2. <i>Effect on cell adhesion</i>	88
G.	ANTI-METASTATIC EFFECT OF AST IN A SPLENIC LIVER METASTASIS MODEL	91
H.	EFFECTS OF AST ON THE SMAD SIGNALING PATHWAY	94
CHAPTER 4 DISCUSSION.....		97

CHAPTER 5 PROSPECTIVE WORKS	110
A. FURTHER INVESTIGATION OF THE ANTI-INVASIVE AND ANTI-METASTATIC EFFECTS OF AST ON COLON CANCER	110
B. PROTEOMIC ANALYSIS OF METASTATIC-ASSOCIATED PROTEINS IN AST-TREATED CELLS	111
REFERENCES	112
PUBLICATIONS AND CONFERENCES.....	127
CURRICULUM VITAE.....	128