

Original Article

The Aqueous Extract of *Mentha piperita* (Peppermint) Can Alter Depression Parameters: A Behavioral Study in Mice

Fatemeh Moghari¹, Somayyeh Esmaeili^{2*}, Shadi Sarahroodi^{3*}

¹Faculty of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences, Tehran Medical Sciences, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran

²Department of Traditional Pharmacognosy, School of Pharmacy Medicine, Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran

³Department of Pharmacology and Toxicology, Faculty of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences, Tehran Medical Sciences, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran

Article history:

Received: May 14, 2023

Revised: June 24, 2023

Accepted: June 27, 2023

ePublished: June 30, 2023

*Corresponding authors:

Somayyeh Esmaeili,

Email: soesmaeili@yahoo.com

and Shadi Sarahroodi,

Email: sarahroodi@yahoo.com

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Abstract

Background: This study aimed to investigate the potential antidepressant-like effect of the aqueous extract of *Mentha piperita* (peppermint) leaves using two predictive models of depression, namely, forced swimming test (FST) and tail suspension test (TST), in male Wistar albino mice. For this purpose, after weighting, coding, and classifying the mice, they were grouped (n=6) as test (175 mg/kg, 350 mg/kg, and 700 mg/kg *M. piperita* aqueous extract; i.p.) and control (20 mg/kg fluoxetine and 30 mg/kg imipramine; i.p.) groups and the blank group (normal saline; i.p.) and received medication or extract for 28 days before the tests.

Results: All doses of the aqueous peppermint extract compared to the control group markedly reduced the immobility duration in both FST and TST when administered intraperitoneally for 28 days. In addition, our results demonstrated that 350 mg/kg and 700 mg/kg of the peppermint aqueous extract increased swimming time significantly ($P < 0.001$) without any significant change in climbing (struggling) duration.

Conclusion: The results of this study suggest that the aqueous extract of *Mentha piperita* leaves has anti-depressant-like activity in the animal models of depression that might be a cause of increasing central serotonergic activity. However, more studies are required to determine the exact mechanisms of action.

Keywords: Antidepressant-like effect, *Mentha piperita*, Aqueous extract, Forced swimming test, Tail suspension test, Serotonergic activity, Mice



Please cite this article as follows: Moghari F, Esmaeili S, Sarahroodi S. The aqueous extract of *Mentha piperita* (peppermint) can alter depression parameters: a behavioral study in mice. Avicenna J Pharm Res. 2023; 4(1):44-49. doi:10.34172/ajpr.1088

Introduction

Major depression (major depressive disorder), one of the most common and severe psychiatric medical conditions, affects about 300 million of the world's population (1). It is the second cause of disability in industrial countries after cardiovascular diseases (2). Depression may lead to suicidal ideation in some patients and negatively affect cognitive behavior (3). Available pharmacological options for this condition include monoamine oxidase inhibitors, tricyclic antidepressants, selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors, serotonin and norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors, serotonin modulators, and atypical antidepressants (4).

Nevertheless, all of our available medications for depression are associated with adverse drug reactions such as weight gain (5), sexual dysfunction (6), gastrointestinal complaints (7,8), and cardiovascular disease (9), as well as some life-threatening side effects (1).

Side effects may diminish patient admission and delay

recovery (10). In addition, recent studies have revealed that less than half of patients have recovered by consuming antidepressants (11).

Thus, seeking new effective antidepressants with the least possible number of adverse effects seems to be necessary.

Many herbal-originated medications are discovered through their use in traditional medicine (12). Several herbal medicines, such as *Hypericum perforatum* L. (13), *Valeriana officinalis* L. (14), *Melissa officinalis* L., and *Verbena officinalis* L. (15), have successfully entered the market as complementary and alternative medicines for psychiatric conditions (16). Their most important advantages are the lower price of herbal drugs and their availability and safety (17). The mentioned items make them a suitable choice even for self-medication. It is evident that among various types of self-medication, which is considered a serious challenge to our health system worldwide (18-21), self-treatment with herbals is



safer, cheaper, and has a highly long history (17).

Mentha piperita L. (peppermint), belonging to the Lamiaceae family, is native to the Mediterranean region and has been spread around the globe due to its medicinal properties, taste, and aroma (22). This *Mentha* species is famous for its medicinal and flavoring properties and has been used in medications, food, and cosmetics (23). Peppermint has several biological activities, such as antifungal (24), antibacterial (25), antimutagenic (26), chemo-preventive (27), carminative (28), anti-inflammatory (29), antispasmodic (30), analgesic (31) and antiallergic activities (32).

Based on the mentioned evidence of the beneficial effects of *M. piperita* on the nervous system, the present study was conducted to evaluate the antidepressant effects of its aqueous extract in mice.

Materials and Methods

Animals

In this experimental study, 72 male albino NMRI mice weighing 22–32 g were randomly divided into 12 groups of 6. The animals were obtained from Pasteur Institute (Iran) and housed in a 12-hour light/12-hour dark cycle, controlled temperature (24–26 °C), and relative humidity of 45–55%. They were housed in groups of 6 in Plexiglas animal cages with free access to tap water and standard rodent chow. All experiments were performed between 8:00 AM and 2:00 PM from May to August 2021 at Tehran Medical Sciences Islamic Azad University, School of Pharmacy, and each animal was used only once. The experimental protocol was observed according to the rules of the National Institute of Health. The proposal was approved and evaluated by the Research Ethics Board at Islamic Azad University. (IR.IAU.PS.REC.1400.291)

Plant Material and Preparation of Extracts

Mentha piperita leaves were purchased from a grocery in Tehran, Iran, and identified by Mr. Alireza Dolatyari at the Traditional Medicine and Materia Medica Research Center Herbarium, Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran (No. HMS-4618). Plant leaves were dried in the shadow until desiccated. Then, all were crushed into powder and stored at room temperature in appropriate containers. About 150 g of dried powder was infused for 30 minutes in 1500 mL of boiled distilled water by filtration and concentrated by vacuum evaporation. Next, it was dried at a low temperature.

Drugs

The aqueous extract of *M. piperita* leaves, fluoxetine hydrochloride (Arya Pharmaceutical Company, Iran), and imipramine hydrochloride (Medicine Pars Company, Iran), all in powder form, were used for this study. The doses were selected based on extract dry weight. All extracts and drugs were dissolved in normal saline and administered at a constant volume of 10 mL/kg intraperitoneally (i.p.).

The positive control groups received fluoxetine (20 mg/kg, i.p.) and imipramine (30 mg/kg, i.p.). Negative control groups were treated with normal saline (10 mL/kg, i.p.), and the test groups were administered 175 mg/kg, 300 mg/kg, and 700 mg/kg of *Mentha* aqueous extract, respectively.

Behavioral Tests

Tail Suspension Test

In this animal model, mice were individually suspended by their tail at a height of 50 cm above the floor of the table edge with the aid of adhesive tape at about 1 cm from the tip of the tail. The animals were separated both visually and acoustically from each other during the whole test. The total duration of immobility induced by tail suspension was manually calculated with a stopwatch for 6 minutes. The first 2 minutes were allocated to matching the animals to the environment, and the last 4 minutes were recorded in seconds by chronometer as immobility duration. The animals who did not exhibit any body movements and hung inertly were considered immobile (33).

Forced Swimming Test

In this behavioral model, the mice were separately drooped in the tank of the glass cylinder (40 cm in height and 25 cm in diameter). The water level (25 °C) was 15 cm from the bottom and was marked on the tank to ensure that the volume of water was consistent across mice. During the swim test, the tank's dimensions were selected so that the mice could not touch the bottom of the tank, either with their feet or their tails. The height of the tank was high enough to prevent the mice from escaping from the tank. Each mouse was judged immobile when it ceased the struggle and remained motionless, floating on the water, making only necessary movements to keep its head above it. Each animal's immobility, swimming, and climbing duration were registered during the 4-minute test after 2 minutes of adaptation. The reduction of immobility time reflects the antidepressive-like effect (34).

Statistical Analysis

The data were analyzed using GraphPad Prism version 9.00 for Windows (GraphPad Software, Inc., San Diego, CA, USA). One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), followed by Tukey's post hoc test, was used to identify statistical differences between means. All data were presented as means $\pm$ standard error of means, and statistical differences were considered significant at a *P* value of less than 0.05.

Results

Figure 1 depicts the effects of *M. piperita* aqueous extract (175 mg/kg, 350 mg/kg, and 700 mg/kg i.p.) on swimming duration. The one-way ANOVA indicated a significant increase in swimming duration [*F* (5, 26) = 7.841, *P* < 0.001] in mice treated with *Mentha* extract (175 mg/kg, 350 mg/kg, and 700 mg/kg i.p.) compared to the vehicle group. Based on the results of the one-way

ANOVA, no significant differences were found in the swimming duration yielded with *Mentha* extract (175 mg/kg, 350 mg/kg, and 700 mg/kg i.p.) in comparison to that produced with imipramine and fluoxetine.

Figure 2 shows the effect of the *Mentha piperita* aqueous extract (175 mg/kg, 350 mg/kg, and 700 mg/kg i.p.) on immobility duration in a forced swimming test (FST). The one-way ANOVA demonstrated a significant decrease in immobility duration [F (5, 21)=34.36, $P<0.001$] in the mice treated with *Mentha* extract (175 mg/kg, 350 mg/kg, and 700 mg/kg i.p.) compared to the control group. Nonetheless, immobility time had no significant decrease ($P>0.05$) when compared with the imipramine and fluoxetine groups. The results revealed that *Mentha* extract (350 mg/kg and 700 mg/kg i.p.) significantly decreased ($P<0.05$) the immobility duration of mice in comparison to the *Mentha* extract (175 mg/kg i.p.) group.

Figure 3 displays the effect of the *Mentha* extract in

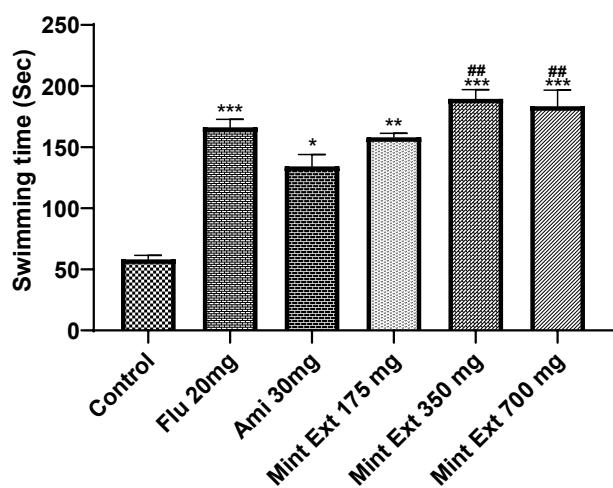


Figure 1. Effects of *Mentha piperita* Aqueous Extract (175 mg/kg, 350 mg/kg, and 700 mg/kg), Fluoxetine (Flu 20 mg/kg), and Amitriptyline (Ami 30 mg/kg) on the Duration of Swimming Time in FST. Note: FST: Forced swimming test; SD: Standard deviation. Data are presented as means $\pm$ SD (n=6). * $P<0.05$, ** $P<0.01$, and *** $P<0.001$ compared with the control group. ## $P<0.01$ compared with the amitriptyline-treated group

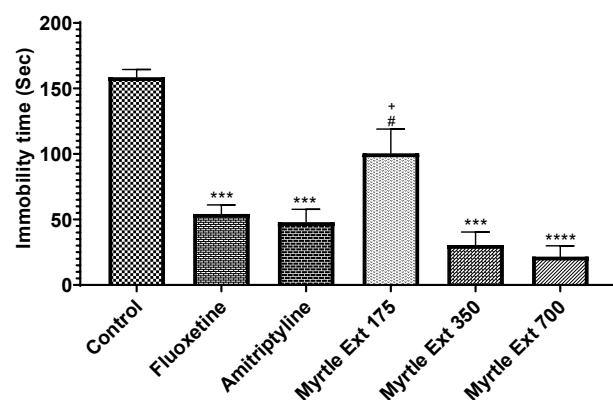


Figure 2. Effects of *Mentha piperita* Aqueous Extract (175 mg/kg, 350 mg/kg, and 700 mg/kg), Fluoxetine (Flu, 20 mg/kg), and Amitriptyline (Ami, 30 mg/kg) on the Duration of Immobility Time in FST. Note: FST: Forced swimming test; SD: Standard deviation. Data are indicated as means $\pm$ SD (n=6). *** $P<0.001$, **** $P<0.0001$ compared with the control group. + $P<0.05$ compared with the fluoxetine-treated group. * $P<0.05$ compared with the imipramine-treated group

different doses, fluoxetine, and imipramine, on mice's climbing' (struggling) duration in the FST. According to our analysis, only imipramine significantly ($P<0.001$) increased climbing time in comparison with the control (saline) group. Nonetheless, this behavior did not improve markedly in different doses of *Mentha* extract and fluoxetine-treated groups ($P>0.05$).

The effect of fluoxetine, imipramine, and *Mentha* extracts (175 mg/kg, 350 mg/kg, and 700 mg/kg) on mice's duration of immobility in the tail suspension test (TST) is depicted in Figure 4. In this test, fluoxetine ($P<0.05$), imipramine ($P<0.05$), as well as 700 mg/kg of *Mentha* extract ($P<0.05$), could significantly reduce the immobility time in comparison with the control group. Nevertheless, there was no significant reduction in the duration of immobility with 175 mg/kg and 350 mg/kg of *Mentha* extract compared to the control group ($P>0.05$).

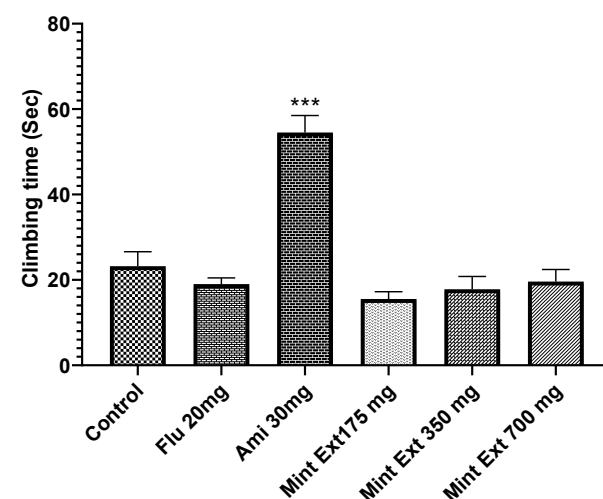


Figure 3. Effects of *Mentha piperita* Aqueous Extract (175 mg/kg, 350 mg/kg, and 700 mg/kg), Fluoxetine (Flu, 20 mg/kg), and Amitriptyline (Ami, 30 mg/kg) on the Duration of Climbing Time in FST. Note: FST: Forced swimming test; SD: Standard deviation. Data are expressed as means $\pm$ SD (n=6). *** $P<0.001$ compared with the control group

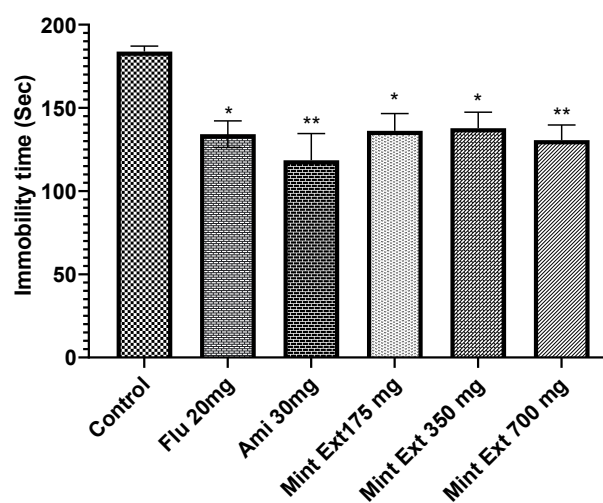


Figure 4. Effects of *Mentha piperita* Aqueous Extract (175 mg/kg, 350 mg/kg, and 700 mg/kg), Fluoxetine (Flu, 20 mg/kg), and Amitriptyline (Ami, 30 mg/kg) on the Duration of Immobility Time in TST. Note: TST: Tail suspension test; SD: Standard deviation. Data are presented as means $\pm$ SD (n=6). * $P<0.05$ and ** $P<0.01$ compared with the control group

Discussion

In the present study, we used the TST as well as the FST to compare the effects of *Mentha piperita* aqueous extract with imipramine (a standard tricyclic antidepressant) and fluoxetine (a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor as a common antidepressant) on antidepressant-like behaviors such as immobility and swimming in mice.

The FST is the most widely used paradigm of antidepressant screening in mice and rats. A significant relationship has been demonstrated between the effectiveness and efficacy of an agent and a FST (34). FST is sensitive to a broad range of antidepressant agents and can differentiate between antidepressants and medications not aimed at managing depression (e.g., benzodiazepines), primarily anxiolytic or neuroleptic agents (35-37). The TST is another animal model for estimating the anti-depression effects of chemical and herbal agents in rodents (37). TST has higher pharmacological sensitivity and is less stressful than FST (38). Several studies have proven that climbing is sensitive to drugs with selective effects on noradrenergic transmissions such as imipramine (39) and other Three Cyclic Antidepressants (TCAs). At the same time, swimming is sensitive to serotonergic agents such as fluoxetine and other selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (40). The results of our study revealed that fluoxetine reduced the immobility time and increased the swimming time but did not affect the climbing time. Nonetheless, imipramine increased the climbing time without significantly changing the swimming time (41). In the present study, all doses of the aqueous extract of *M. piperita* compared with the control group significantly reduced immobility time (a posture thought to reflect a state of "behavior despair" in which animals have given up the hope to escape) of mice exposed to TST. However, only 350 mg/kg and 700 mg/kg of the *Mentha* extract could insignificantly reduce immobility time in FST compared to the control group.

On the other hand, all doses of the *Mentha* extract increased swimming time in comparison to the control group, but 350 mg/kg and 700 mg/kg of the extract increased swimming time more pronouncedly than the imipramine group. The other part of our study demonstrated that the climbing behavior did not significantly enhance compared to our control group. Therefore, according to the results of our research, the behavior pattern that is induced by the aqueous extract of *M. piperita* is similar to serotonergic medications such as fluoxetine (immobility time reduction and swimming time enhancement) while different from noradrenergic agents, similar to amitriptyline (an increase in climbing time but no change in swimming duration). Although the exact mechanism of the antidepressant effect of *M. piperita* has not been established, consistent with the results of other studies and our findings, serotonergic neurotransmission has a vital role in the antidepressant-like activity of *Mentha*.

Several studies reported that *M. piperita* aqueous

extract consists of several active compounds, which may be responsible for antidepressant effects.

The phytochemistry of *M. piperita* has shown several ingredients such as terpenoids, steroids, phenols, flavonoids, and alkaloids (42). Menthol is the most crucial compound in peppermint (the essential oil) (43), and many biological and pharmacological properties of peppermint are assumed to be related to menthol (44), which is a monoterpene, and previous studies have confirmed its anti-inflammatory and analgesic effects (45). Menthol is also an antioxidant; one study revealed that antioxidants have antidepressant effects (41). On the other hand, the other demonstrated that antioxidants could inhibit 5-HT reuptake (46), which could increase 5-HT in synaptic clefts and desensitize the 5-HT receptors involved in depression. The other significant components of peppermint are menthone (a monoterpene), 1,8-cineole (a terpene), and linolenic acid, which, based on their antioxidant properties, may demonstrate antidepressant effects (47).

Conclusion

In general, the results of our study showed that *M. piperita* might have potential therapeutic applications in depressive disorders, and its effect is comparable with fluoxetine. However, further studies are required to determine the exact antidepressant mechanism of *M. piperita* and to find and extract the active ingredient responsible for this pharmacological property of *M. piperita*.

Acknowledgments

This study is extracted from a Doctor of Pharmacy thesis (IR.IAU.PS.REC.1400,291) submitted to the Pharmacy Faculty, Tehran Medical Sciences Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran. The authors are grateful to Tehran Chemie Pharmaceutical Company and Dr. Nima Naderi for providing fluoxetine and amitriptyline pure powders, respectively.

Authors' Contribution

Conceptualization: Shadi Sarahroodi, Somayyeh Esmaeili.

Data curation: Fatemeh Moghari.

Formal analysis: Shadi Sarahroodi

Funding acquisition: Fatemeh Moghari.

Investigation: Fatemeh Moghari, Shadi Sarahroodi, Somayyeh Esmaeili.

Methodology: Shadi Sarahroodi, Somayyeh Esmaeili.

Project administration: Shadi Sarahroodi, Somayyeh Esmaeili.

Resources: Shadi Sarahroodi, Somayyeh Esmaeili.

Software: Shadi Sarahroodi.

Supervision: Shadi Sarahroodi, Somayyeh Esmaeili.

Validation: Shadi Sarahroodi, Somayyeh Esmaeili.

Visualization: Shadi Sarahroodi, Somayyeh Esmaeili.

Writing—original draft: Shadi Sarahroodi.

Writing—review & editing: Shadi Sarahroodi, Somayyeh Esmaeili.

Competing Interests

None.

Ethical Approval

This study was approved by the Research Ethics Board at Islamic Azad Tehran Medical Sciences University (IR.IAU.PS.REC.1400.291).

Funding

The funding was all with Dr. Fatemeh Moghari as her thesis project in Islamic Azad University.

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