The Spermatogenic Effect of 50% Ethanol Extracts of Yacon and Its Ameliorative Effect Against 2,3,7,8-tetrachlorodibenzo-p-dioxin Induced Testicular Toxicity in the Rat

Jeong Sook Park¹, Seock Yeon Hwang², Bang Yeon Hwang¹, and Kun Han¹,*

¹College of Pharmacy, Chungbuk National University
Cheongju, Haemyunggu Gaeshindong San 12, Chungbuk 361-763, South Korea
²Department of Clinical Laboratory Science, Juseong College
Cheongwongun, Naesueup San 4, Chungbuk 363-794, South Korea

Abstract – The authors screened the pharmacological effects of 50% ethanol extracts of Yacon on spermatogenesis in rats. Numbers of sperm in animals treated with 25, 50, or 100 mg/kg/day for 6 weeks of Yacon tuber extracts (YTE) were approximately 1.51, 1.61 and 1.78 times higher, respectively, than in the untreated control group. Moreover, the spermatogenic effect of Yacon leaf extract was found to be 1.03-1.38 times higher than that of YTE. The ameliorative effect of Yacon tuber extracts on 2,3,7,8-tetrachlorodibenzo-p-dioxin (TCDD) induced toxicities in the rat were also investigated. Rats were assigned to three groups (6 rats/group), a control group, a TCDD exposed group, and a group treated with Yacon tuber extract (YTE) after TCDD exposure (TCDD/YTE group). 40 µg/kg of TCDD was injected i.p., and 200 mg/kg/day of YTE was also administered for 4 weeks by oral gavage. The TCDD/YTE group showed a significant increase in sperm number as compared with the TCDD exposed group. In conclusion, TCDD induced testicular toxicity was significantly ameliorated by YTE. The results of the present study suggest that Yacon extract is a possible therapeutic for the treatment of spermatogenic disorder.

Keywords – Smallanthus sonchifolius; Yacon; spermatogenesis; sperm; TCDD; testicular toxicity

Introduction

Male reproductive function seems to have deteriorated considerably in the past 4 to 5 decades. Carlsen et al. (1992) observed a significant decline in mean sperm concentrations from 115 × 10⁶/ml in 1940 to 66 × 10⁶/ml in 1990; a fall of 0.94 × 10⁶/ml/year. The World Health Organization defines in fertility as the inability of a couple to conceive after 1 year of regular, unprotected intercourse (WHO, 1995). Moreover, approximately 15% of all couples who attempt to conceive fail to do so within the first year (WHO, 1991).

A number of plants, e.g., Withania somnifera, Cynomorium coccineum, Macuna pruriens have been reported to increase the production of sperm (Abdel-Magied et al., 2001; Ahmed et al., 2007). These plants usually have several pharmacologic effects, such as anti-stress, adaptogenic, and cardioprotective effect. Smallanthus sonchifolius (Yacon, Asteraceae) was originally cultivated in South America and has gradually received more attention due high contents of fructooligosaccharide and phenolic compounds. The tubers of Yacon contain fructose, glucose, saccharose and β-(2-1)-fructooligosaccharide (inulin type oligofructans) (Ohyama et al., 1990; Goto et al., 1995). Valentova et al. (2003) reported on the presence of large amounts of phenolic compounds in extracts of Yacon leaves and tubers, and these were primarily found to contain chlorogenic, protocatechuic, ferulic, rosmarinic, gallic, gentisic, and caffeic acids and their derivatives (Simonovska et al., 2003; Valentova et al., 2003). Moreover, five caffeic acid derivatives were isolated from Yacon tubers (Takenaka et al., 2003). With regard to its biological activity, Yacon has been reported to have a hypoglycemic effect (Manual et al., 2001), antioxidant activity (Valentova et al., 2003; Yan et al., 1999), and an anti-fungal effect (Inoue et al., 1995). In this study, we screened the pharmacological effects of Yacon extracts on spermatogenesis in rats.

Furthermore, we investigated the ability of Yacon extracts to treat 2,3,7,8-tetrachlorodibenzo-p-dioxin (TCDD)
induced spermatogenic disorder. TCDD and its related congeners have been shown to act as developmental and reproductive toxicants (Peterson et al., 1993; Sommer et al., 1996; Chaffin et al., 1996), which reduce testicular and accessory sex organ weights, alter testicular morphology, and decrease sperm production (Mably et al., 1992). The present study was conducted to evaluate the possibility of using Yacon extracts as a therapeutic agent to treat spermatogenic disorders caused by endocrine disruptors, like dioxin.

**Material and Method**

**Preparation of Yacon extracts** – The Yacon tubers and leaves were purchased from Bongwha (Kyungbuk, Korea) and authenticated by Dr. Hwang a botany Professor at the College of Pharmacy, Chungbuk National University (Cheongju, Korea). The dried, pulverized tubers or leaves were extracted with 50% absolute alcohol at 50°C for 5 hr with sonication and then filtered through filter paper (Whatman No. 1). Extracts were evaporated and dried under vacuum at −70°C, to yield dark brown residues.

**HPLC analysis of the phenolic acids of Yacon extracts** – Yacon tuber extract (YTE) was analyzed by HPLC (Hitachi L-6000 pump, L-6200 intelligent pump, L-4200 UV-VIS Detector and D-2500 Chromato-integrator) using a Kromasil C18 column (250 × 4.6 mm). The mobile phase consisted of phase A (10% (v/v) CH3CN in water, 0.05% (v/v) of acetic acid) and phase B (90% (v/v) CH3CN in water, 0.05% (v/v) of acetic acid). Elution was performed using the linear gradient detailed in Table 1. The injection volume was 25 µL and phenolic acid elution was monitored at 236 nm.

**Animal model** – Six-week-old Sprague-Dawley albino male rats (Samtako, Kyungkido, Korea), weighing 200 g, were used to examine levels of spermatogenesis. Animals were maintained under controlled conditions [temperature (23 ± 1°C), relative humidity (55 ± 10%), and 12-h/day lighting]. Standard laboratory chow and tap water were provided ad libitum.

**Administration of Yacon extracts** – The Yacon tuber or leaf extracts were dispersed in purified water. Rats were assigned randomly to weight matched groups (9 rats/group) and extract was administered after allowing them a week to acclimatize. The rats were dosed once daily, by oral gavage at 0 (control), 50, 100 and 200 mg/kg/day for 6 weeks. The volume administered was 2 ml/kg of body weight. Body weights were recorded before starting this administration and then at every 3 or 4 days, and on the day of necropsy.

**Induction of oligospermia by TCDD in rats, and the ameliorative effect of YTE** – YTE (Yacon tuber extract) was also administrated to rats in order to determine the ameliorative effect of this extract on TCDD induced oligospermia. Initially, rats were injected with 40 µg TCDD/kg i.p. At one week after TCDD exposure, YTE was administered to rats once daily, by oral gavage at 200 mg/kg/day for 4 weeks. Body weights and daily food intakes were measured every 3 or 4 days. Control, TCDD exposed, and YTE treated after TCDD exposure (Yacon treated) groups were sacrificed at 5 weeks after TCDD exposure.

**Sperm counts** – Male rats were weighed and anesthetized with ether on day following final dosing. Right testes were weighed and used for sperm analysis. Numbers of sperm heads in testes were counted using a light microscope (Nikon, YS 100).

**Testicular histology** – Left testes were fixed in Bouin’s fluid, dehydrated in a graded ethanol series, cleared in xylene and embedded in paraffin wax. The sections were cut at 5 µm, stained with Harris’ hematoxylin and eosin, and observed under a microscope.

**Serum testosterone measurements** – Serum total testosterone levels were estimated using solid phase (antibody-coated tube) RIA, using materials purchased from the Diagnostic Products Corporation (CA, USA) according to the manufacturer’s instructions.

**Influence of YTE on the estrous cycle** – The influence of YTE on the estrous cycle was investigated by administering YTE at dose of 0 (control) or 200 mg/kg/
day. After 8 weeks, the estrous cycle of each animal was checked using the method described by Yamazaki et al. (1977). Vaginal smears of rats were obtained before 9:00 AM, applied to a slide glass, and observed under an optical microscope. Three main cell types were used to classify the estrous cycle, i.e., leukocytes, epithelial cells and cornified epithelial cells. Fig. 1 and Table 2 show the characteristic of the estrous cycle.

### Statistics
Data was analyzed using one-way ANOVA followed by Dunnett's test as a post hoc test using SigmaStat®. Differences were considered statistically significant at the *p* < 0.05 and **p** < 0.01 levels, as indicated.

### Results

**HPLC analysis of phenolic acids in YTE** - Simonovska et al. (2003) reported that crude extracts of Yacon leaves contain phenolic acids, i.e., chlorogenic acid, ferulic acid, and caffeic acid, by HPLC/MS analysis. In the present study, chlorogenic acid and caffeic acid were found to be major components of YTE (Fig. 2). The peak shown in the figure at a retention time of 21.34 min was presumed to be a dianhydrocaffeoylquinic acid by LC-MASS (not shown data). The position of caffeoyl group is going on study by NMR. The amount of crude extract obtained from Yacon tubers (10 g) using 50% ethanol was 7.31 g, and the amount of chlorogenic acid obtained from 10 mg

### Table 2. Microscopic characteristics of vaginal smears as a function of the sexual cycle

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Duration days</th>
<th>Microscopic characteristics of vaginal smears</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Diestrus</td>
<td>1-3</td>
<td>Exclusively leukocytes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proestrus</td>
<td>~ 1</td>
<td>Leukocytes and nucleated epithelial cell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early estrus</td>
<td>0.5-1</td>
<td>Epithelial cells, may have some cornified cell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estrus</td>
<td>0.5-1</td>
<td>Exclusively cornified cells</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metestrus</td>
<td>~ 1</td>
<td>Leukocytes and cornified cell</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Fig. 1. Vaginal smears, day of proestrus, estrus, metestrus and diestrus respectively, in nat. Bar = 50 µm (Ref. Fundamentals of Toxicologic Pathology, Academic Press, pp 491-494).*

*Fig. 2. HPLC chromatograms of standard solutions and YTE. (a); chlorogenic acid, (b); caffeic acid.*
of YTE was 56.52 mg.

The effects of YTE on body, testis and epididymis weights – Body, testes, and epididymides weights in the three groups at the end of the treatment period were similar to those of non-treated controls, suggesting that YTE induced a dose dependent increase in spermatogenesis without altering testes and epididymides weights (Table 3).

Table 3. Body, testes and epididymides weights after administering YTE to rats for 6 weeks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Body Weight (g)</th>
<th>Testis (g)</th>
<th>Epididymis (g)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>404.44 ± 63.86</td>
<td>3.200 ± 0.169</td>
<td>1.144 ± 0.058</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YTE 50mg/kg</td>
<td>415.56 ± 27.44</td>
<td>3.145 ± 0.252</td>
<td>1.111 ± 0.070</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YTE 100mg/kg</td>
<td>378.89 ± 31.00</td>
<td>3.185 ± 0.303</td>
<td>1.103 ± 0.119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YTE 200mg/kg</td>
<td>401.25 ± 29.49</td>
<td>3.175 ± 0.177</td>
<td>1.080 ± 0.095</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data are presented as means ± SD (n = 9).

Table 4. Sperm numbers in testis after administering YTE to rats for 6 weeks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Testis (g)</th>
<th>Sperm/Rat (× 10^6)a)</th>
<th>Sperm/g (× 10^6)</th>
<th>Sperm/day (× 10^6)b)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>3.200 ± 0.169</td>
<td>234.15 ± 40.07</td>
<td>73.17 ± 12.52</td>
<td>37.70 ± 6.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YTE 50mg/kg</td>
<td>3.145 ± 0.252</td>
<td>347.13 ± 88.95*</td>
<td>110.38 ± 28.28</td>
<td>59.48 ± 13.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YTE 100mg/kg</td>
<td>3.185 ± 0.303</td>
<td>375.59 ± 57.65**</td>
<td>117.92 ± 18.10</td>
<td>61.57 ± 9.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YTE 200mg/kg</td>
<td>3.175 ± 0.177</td>
<td>409.77 ± 47.24**</td>
<td>130.03 ± 15.44</td>
<td>66.70 ± 8.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

b) a)/6.1, 6.1 is the period required for spermatids to develop from stage I to XIV. Data are presented as means ± SD (n = 9).

* , ** significantly different from the controls (ANOVA test, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01).

Table 5. Sperm numbers in testis and seminiferous tubule (ST) numbers and diameters after administering YLE to rats for 6 weeks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Testis Weight (g)</th>
<th>Sperm No/g (× 10^6)</th>
<th>ST Number</th>
<th>ST Diameter (µm)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>3.633 ± 0.327</td>
<td>72.75 ± 18.31</td>
<td>74.00 ± 6.13</td>
<td>28.73 ± 0.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YLE 50 mg/kg</td>
<td>3.793 ± 0.468</td>
<td>113.42 ± 8.99**</td>
<td>78.00 ± 3.39</td>
<td>27.40 ± 0.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YLE 100mg/kg</td>
<td>3.732 ± 0.427</td>
<td>135.11 ± 16.61**</td>
<td>81.67 ± 3.01</td>
<td>26.65 ± 0.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YLE 200 mg/kg</td>
<td>3.671 ± 0.359</td>
<td>179.30 ± 16.62**</td>
<td>84.40 ± 4.22</td>
<td>27.79 ± 0.36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data are presented as means ± S.D.(n = 9).

** significantly different from the controls (ANOVA test, ** p < 0.01).

Fig. 3. Sperm numbers in testis after administering YTE or YLE to rats for 6 weeks. Data are presented as means ± SD (n = 9).

* , ** significantly different from the controls (ANOVA test, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01).
YLE administered animals, numbers of sperm heads in epididymides tended to be higher than in testis, but this was without significance (Fig. 4).

**The effect of YTE on serum testosterone levels** – Mean serum testosterone levels were significantly higher in animals treated with 200 mg/kg/day of YTE than in controls (5.09 ± 2.53 ng/ml vs. 1.66 ± 1.08 ng/mL, respectively).

**Influence of YTE on the estrous cycle of female rats** – In male rats, serum testosterone levels in the YTE treated groups were significantly higher than in the control group. Accordingly, we examined the estrous cycle administering YTE orally at 200 mg/kg for 8 weeks to estimate the effect of YTE in female rats. YTE was found to have no significant difference on the estrous cycle versus untreated controls, suggesting that YTE did not affect the estrous cycle.

**Sperm counts in rats administered YTE after TCDD exposure** – As shown in Fig. 5, TCDD exposed rats showed body weight reductions at one week after TCDD exposure compared with the control group. However, this weight loss was reduced by treating rats with TCDD/YTE, i.e., with YTE after TCDD exposure. The TCDD exposed group also showed significant testis and epididymides weight loss versus untreated controls (Table 6). On the other hand, TCDD/YTE treated rats showed lower weight losses body, testis, and epididymides versus TCDD treated rats, and YTE treatment also increased seminiferous tubule numbers and diameters (Table 6), and significantly increased sperm numbers in testes (Table 7 & Fig. 6). These findings indicate that YTE has an ameliorative effect on TCDD-induced weight loss, reduced sperm production, and testicular atrophy.

**Testes Histopathology in TCDD/YTE treated rats** – In the control group, histopathologic examinations of seminiferous tubules showed the usual arrangement of Leydig’s cell, Sertoli cells, and intracellular spaces (Fig. 7, a). However, in TCDD-treated rats, cell differentiation, including that of spermatogonia, tended to be lower than
in controls (Fig. 7, b), maturation levels of spermatocytes and spermatids were also lower. In TCDD/YTE treated animals (Fig. 7, c), all sperm developmental stages had almost completely returned to the control level (Fig. 7, b), and sperm development was higher than in TCDD treated animals.

### Discussion and Conclusions

Decreases in human sperm number and quality caused by endocrine disruptor, particularly dioxin, are of considerable concern. TCDD, a derivative of dioxin, is known to be one of the most potent toxic environmental pollutants (Poland and Knuston, 1982). It is highly lipophilic and extremely resistant to biodegradation, which leads to TCDD accumulating in adipose tissue and being recycled via the food chain. It seems impossible to substantial protection from the environmental pollutants. Many scientists have attempted to screen the agent that can protect the toxic damage induced by endocrine disruptors. We reported on the protective effect of tissue cultured *Panax ginseng* against TCDD-toxicity (Park et al., 2006).

In the present study, Yacon extract was administered orally to rats over a 6-week period, and it was found that sperm numbers in testis were significantly higher than in untreated rats after TCDD exposure. (a) Control, (b) TCDD exposed, (c) TCDD/YTE treated rats.

### Table 6. Organ weights and seminiferous tubule numbers and diameters (ST) after administering YTE to TCDD exposed rats

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Control</th>
<th>TCDD alone</th>
<th>TCDD + YTE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Body weight (g)</td>
<td>333.33 ± 28.75</td>
<td>220.00 ± 24.49¹</td>
<td>235.00 ± 35.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Testis (g)</td>
<td>3.48 ± 0.28</td>
<td>2.82 ± 0.17¹</td>
<td>3.00 ± 0.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epididymis (g)</td>
<td>1.02 ± 0.13</td>
<td>0.82 ± 0.08¹</td>
<td>0.91 ± 0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of ST</td>
<td>85.67 ± 2.94</td>
<td>79.2 ± 6.83</td>
<td>81.6 ± 2.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diameter of ST (µm)</td>
<td>28.3 ± 0.37</td>
<td>26.53 ± 0.29</td>
<td>27.26 ± 0.21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data are presented as means ± SD (n = 6).

¹ significantly different from the controls (ANOVA test, *p < 0.05).

### Table 7. Sperm numbers in epididymides after administering YTE to TCDD exposed rats

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Epididymis (g)</th>
<th>Sperm/Rat (× 10^9) a)</th>
<th>Sperm/g (× 10^9)</th>
<th>Sperm/day (× 10^6) b)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>1.02 ± 0.13</td>
<td>307.62 ± 19.52²</td>
<td>301.58 ± 19.14</td>
<td>50.43 ± 3.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TCDD alone</td>
<td>0.82 ± 0.08</td>
<td>172.93 ± 37.56*</td>
<td>210.89 ± 45.80</td>
<td>28.35 ± 6.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TCDD + YTE</td>
<td>0.91 ± 0.06</td>
<td>292.19 ± 59.95*</td>
<td>321.09 ± 65.88</td>
<td>47.90 ± 9.83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

b) a)6.1.6.1 is the period required for spermatozids I to X IV develop from stage to.

Data are presented as means ± SD (n = 6).

², *significantly different from the controls (ANOVA test, #, *p < 0.05).
nutrients and enzymes, such as Vitamins (C, E, B12) (Rolf et al., 1999; Sandler and Faragher, 1984), minerals (Zinc, Copper, Selenium, Calcium) (Scott et al., 1998), amino acids (Schacter et al., 1973), Coenzyme Q10 (Lewin and Lavon, 1997). However, no reports have been issued on the spermatogenic activities of polyphenols, like chlorogenic acid and caffeic acid.

Polyphenols have antioxidant activities that are similar to those of Vitamins C and E, which can enhance fertility by decreasing free-radical damage to sperm cells (Fraga et al., 1991; Geva et al., 1996). In the present study, chlorogenic and caffeic acids were found to be the major components of YTE. Accordingly, we estimated the spermatogenic effect of chlorogenic acid, but found that it had a substantially lower effect than expected (unpublished data). Thus, the spermatogenic effects of Yacon extract are possibly due to the combined effects of chlorogenic acid and other phenolic components.

Yacon tubers also contain fructose, glucose, saccharose and β-(2-1)-fructo oligosaccharide (Ohyama et al., 1990; Goto et al., 1995). Seminal plasma also contains high concentrations of fructose, which is essential for normal sperm metabolism and also serves as a nutrient for spermatozoa during their journey in the female genital tract (Schoenfeld et al., 1979). In the present study, YTE administration to male rats increased serum testosterone levels and numbers of sperm in the testis. Testosterone is synthesized by the Leydig cells of the testes, and promotes the growth and function of the epididymis, vas deferens, prostate, seminal vesicles and penis, whereas estrogens play a central role in female reproduction, but also affect the male reproductive system (Hess et al., 1991; Geva, Bartoov, and Zabludovsky, 1996). In the present study, we investigated the ameliorative effect of YTE on the toxicity of TCDD in rats. TCDD (40 µg/kg) caused a significant decrease in testis weight in YTE treated rats greater than in non-treated controls (Table 6) and significant increased daily sperm production (Table 7, Fig. 6). These results suggest that YTE has promotes testicular development, and thus, affects sperm production. We propose that YTE might ameliorate the testicular damage cause by environmental toxins.

Acknowledgement

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