

Research Article

“In Vitro Anticancer Activity of an Ethanol Extract of *Coleus forskohlii* Root against Liver Cancer cell line”

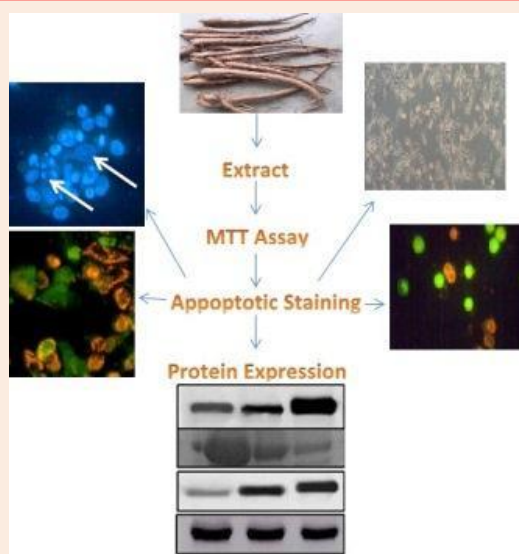
R Malathi¹ and K Rajkumar^{2*}

¹Assistant Professor & Head, Department of Biotechnology, Bharathidasan University Constituent College, Kurumbalur, Perambalur - 621107, Tamilnadu, India

²Assistant Professor, PG and Research Department of Biotechnology, Sri Vinayaga College of Arts and Science, Ulundurpet - 606107, Tamilnadu, India

Abstract

Human liver cancer is the fifth most common cancer in the world. It is one of the serious health problems in most developing countries. The present investigation proved that ethanol extract of *Coleus forskohlii* root extract significantly suppressed the growth and induced the apoptosis in the liver cancer (HepG2) cell lines. IC₅₀ dose was measured with Methyl thiazolyl tetrazolium (MTT) assay. 65.61 µg of extract showed 50% reduction of in HepG2 cell line growth at 48 hrs of incubation. *Coleus forskohlii* root extract induced apoptotic features of cell death were stained with Acridine orange/ethidium bromide, Hoechst Staining and Rhodamine 123 staining. Lipid peroxidation markers (TBARS) were significantly elevated; enzymatic antioxidants such as superoxide dismutase (SOD), catalase (CAT), glutathione peroxidase (GPx) were slightly decreased in their activities compared to control. DNA damage was confirmed by comet tail formation. The protein expression of Bax, Bcl2 and Caspase-3 were analyzed through Western blotting. Thus, the study concludes that *Coleus forskohlii* root ethanol extract is an effective anti-proliferative and anti-cancer agent.



Keywords: *Coleus forskohlii*; Hep G2 cell lines; DNA damage; Apoptosis; Western Blotting

*Correspondence

K Rajkumar

Email: krajkumarbiotech@gmail.com

Introduction

Cancer is believed to be the result of external factors combined with a hereditary nature for cancer [1]. Human liver carcinoma is the fifth most common cancer in the world and it is responsible for >600 000 deaths annually [2]. The majority of patients with hepatocellular carcinoma die within 1 year after the diagnosis. At present, the treatment of hepatocellular carcinoma mainly includes surgery and chemotherapy, but the curative effects of the existing chemotherapeutic drugs are not good enough and they have numerous side effects. Therefore, searching for highly efficient antitumor drugs remains a hot research area. Plants have been a rich source of therapeutic agents and still an important source of new drugs for diseases that continue to lack a cure, such as cancer. [3]. Certain plant components capable of killing cancer cells are also known to suppress the tumor promoting actions of immune and other tumor stromal cells [4]. *Coleus forskohlii* is a common indigenous medicinal plant belongs to Lamiaceae family[5]. It is native to India, where it has been used for centuries in Ayurvedic medicine to treat various diseases of the cardiovascular, respiratory, gastrointestinal, central nervous systems, digestive disorders, and dysentery treatment[6]. *Coleus forskohlii* which played a major role in stimulating cyclic adenosine monophosphate (cAMP) and other biological activities[7,8] and further exhibits some anti-bacterial activity[9,10,11]. *Coleus forskohlii* is believed to be beneficial may be used as a prebiotic due to its modifying effect on some intestinal bacteria. *Coleus forskohlii* may have an anti-tumor effect [12] our GCMS analysis report shows that ethanol extract of *Coleus forskohlii* root have

several phytochemicals particularly Betulin, cedrol etc. and it's have anticancer properties [13]. In this study, we aimed to find a new source of natural anticancer agent produced by *Coleus forskohlii* from root extracts to screen for the cytotoxicity, apoptotic activity to Hep G2 cancer cell lines.

Experimental

Materials and Reagents

Chemicals

Coleus forskohlii root ethanol extract, Ethidium Bromide (EtBr), Rhodamine 123, Hoechst 33258, Fetal Bovine Serum (FBS), Antibiotics, 0.25% trypsin EDTA, Dulbecco's Modified Eagles Medium (DMEM) and Roswell Park Memorial Institute 1640 medium (RPMI-1640), MTT (3-(4,5-di-methylthiazol-2-yl)-2,5-diphenyl-2 tetrazolium bromide) were purchased from Hi-media Lab Ltd, Mumbai, India.

Cell culture and Maintenance

HepG2 liver carcinoma cell lines were obtained from the National Center for Cell Science Pune, India. Cells were grown in Dulbecco's Modified Eagles Medium (DMEM) and Roswell Park Memorial Institute 1640 medium (RPMI-1640) supplemented with 10% fetal bovine serum (FBS) and 1% penicillin-streptomycin. The cells were maintained as monolayers in 25 cm² plastic tissue culture flasks at 37°C in a humidified atmosphere of 5% CO₂ and 95% air incubator under standard conditions. The cells were harvested using 0.25% trypsin EDTA then washed in the culture medium to inactivate the trypsin before reseeding or analysis. The cells were fed every 2-3 days and sub-cultured once they reached 70-80% confluence. Cells were plated at an appropriate density; exponentially growing cells were used in all the experiments.

Preparation of Root extract:

The roots were separated and made free from soil matter. They were dried and powdered by using hand pulveriser to a coarse powder. Then the powder was extracted with ethanol by using soxhlet apparatus at a temperature of 50-55°C for 8 hours. The extracts were concentrated using vacuum evaporator and stored for further analysis.

Preparation of drug

Coleus forskohlii root ethanol extract was suspended in 1% dimethyl sulfoxide (DMSO) just before treatment and the final concentration of DMSO in the culture medium was 0.01% W/V. 0.01% DMSO was used as the control.

MTT Assay

The 3-(4, 5-Dimethylthiazol-2-yl)-2, 5-diphenyltetrazolium bromide (MTT), proliferation assay was utilized in HepG2 cell lines to assess the dose-dependent effect of *Coleus forskohlii* root ethanol extract on cell proliferation. Cells were plated and grown in 200 µl of growth medium in 96-well microtiter plates. After an overnight attachment period, cells were treated with varying concentrations of *Coleus forskohlii* root extract (10, 20, 30, 40, 50, 60, 70, 80, 90, 100 µg/ml) for 24 h, 48 h and 72 h. All studies were performed in triplicates and repeated three times independently. Cell growth was quantified by the ability of living cells to reduce the yellow dye, MTT, to a purple formazan product. Cells were incubated with MTT at 37°C in a humidified 5% CO₂ atmosphere for 2 h. The MTT formazan product was then dissolved in DMSO, and absorbance was measured at 570 nm in a microplate reader. The percentage inhibition was calculated, from this data, using the formula:

$$\frac{(\text{Mean absorbance of control cells}) - (\text{Mean absorbance of treated cells})}{(\text{Mean absorbance of control cells})} \times 100$$

Apoptotic Morphology Analysis

Unstained live Morphological Assay

Hep G2 cells were grown in glass cover slip (22 X 22 mm) placed in plates containing six well at a density of 5 X 10⁵ cells/well and allowed to settle for 24 h before treatment with the 24 h IC₅₀ values of root ethanol extract. The medium was subsequently removed from each well of the treated and untreated Hep G2 cells, and a cover slip inverted and placed over the slide. The gross morphological changes in the treated and untreated control cells were observed using a phase contrast light microscope (Axio Scope A1, Carl Zeiss, Germany) and photographed.

Dual Staining

Acridine orange and Ethidium Bromide staining were performed as described by [7]. 25 µl of cell suspension of each group (both attached, released to floating by trypsinization), containing 5 X 10⁵ cells, were treated with Acridine

Orange (AO) and Ethidium Bromide (EtBr) solution (1 part of 100 µg/ml AO and 1 part of 100 µg/ml EtBr in PBS) and examined using a fluorescent microscope with an UV filter (450-490 nm) and photographed.

Hoechst 33258 Staining

Based on the method of [8] the cell pathology was detected by staining of trypsinized cells (5×10^5 /ml) with 1 µl of Hoechst 33258 (1 mg/ml, aqueous) for 10 min at 37 °C. A drop of cell suspension was placed on a glass slide and a cover slip was laid over to reduce light diffraction and cell pathology were observed using a fluorescent microscope (Axio Scope A1, Carl Zeiss, Germany) fitted with a 377-355 nm filter and the cells reflecting pathological changes were observed and photographed.

Rhodamine 123 fluorescent staining

Mitochondrial membrane potential of the treated and untreated cells were measured by the method of [9] using the fluorescent probe Rhodamine123. The cells (5×10^5) were grown in glass cover slip (22 X 22 mm), placed in six well plates and treated with the Root ethanol extract at the respective IC_{50} values. The cells were stained with Rhodamine123 dye after 24 h and 48 h exposure. The mitochondrial depolarization patterns of the cells were observed using a fluorescent microscope fitted with 485-545 nm filters and photographed.

Measurement of intracellular ROS

The measurement of intracellular ROS formation was based on the oxidation of 20, 70-dichlorodihydrofluorescein diacetate (DCFH-DA), which first gets hydrolyzed by the cellular esterases to DCFH, which on oxidation forms fluorophore dichlorofluorescein (DCF). The cells were treated with *Coleus forskohlii* root extract and incubation was continued for 12 and 24 h in the dark. After that the cells were harvested and washed twice with PBS, incubated with 10 mM DCFH-DA in PBS for 30 min, washed, and overlaid with RPMI 1640, 10% FBS medium under strictly dark conditions to avoid any nonspecific artifacts. The fluorescence intensity was measured at 480 nm excitation and 530 nm emissions in a Jasco F 6500 Spectrofluorimeter (Jasco, MD, USA).

Measurement of lipid peroxidation byproducts and antioxidants

Hep G2 cells were seeded in a T75 flask at a density of 1×10^6 cells/flask treated with 24 h IC_{50} values of Root ethanol extract for 24 h and 48 h. The cells were harvested by trypsinization and washed with PBS. The cells were suspended in 130 mM KCl, 50 mM PBS and 10 µM dithiothreitol and centrifuged at 20,000g for 15 min at 4 °C. The supernatant was collected and used for biochemical estimations. The concentrations of lipid peroxidation byproducts such as thiobarbituric acid reactive substances (TBARS) was measured by the method [10] and the activities of enzymic antioxidants such as superoxide dismutase (SOD) was assayed by [11] catalase (CAT) by the method of [12] and glutathione peroxidase (GPx) by the method of [13].

DNA damage by Comet Assay

DNA damage was studied by single cell gel electrophoresis (Comet assay) by the method of [41]. Frosted microscopic slides were covered with 200 µl of 1% normal melting agarose in PBS at 65 °C, cover slip removed and the second layer of 100 µl of 1% low melting agarose containing approximately 105 cells at 37 °C was added. Cover slip was placed immediately and the slides were placed at 4 °C. After solidification of the low melting agarose, the cover slip was removed and the slides were placed in the chilled lysis solution containing 2.5 M NaCl, 100 mM EDTA, 100 mM Tris-HCl, 1% Trisma base, 1% Triton X-100 and 10% DMSO for 16 h at 4 °C. The slides were removed from the lysing solution and placed on a horizontal electrophoresis tank filled with freshly prepared alkaline buffer (300 mM NaOH, 1 mM EDTA, pH >13.00). The slides were equilibrated in the same buffer for 20 min and electrophoresis was carried out for 20 min. After electrophoresis, the slides were washed gently with 2 M Tris-HCl buffer, pH 7.4 to remove the alkali. The slides were then stained with 50 µl of EB and visualized using a Nikon fluorescent microscope equipped with a 365 nm excitation filter and a 435 nm barrier filters. The quantification of DNA strand breaks of the stored images was done using the CASP software and % DNA in tail, tail length and olive tail moment were obtained directly.

Western blot analysis

Hep G2 cells were seeded in 3.5 cm dishes for 24 h and incubated with different concentrations of complex in the presence of 10% FBS. Then cells were harvested in lysis buffer. After sonication, the samples were centrifuged for 20 min at 13,000 g. The protein concentration of the supernatant was determined by BCA assay. Sodium dodecyl sulfate-polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis was done loading equal amount of proteins per lane. Gels were then transferred to poly (vinylidene difluoride) membranes (Millipore) and blocked with 5% non-fat milk in TBST (20 mM Tris-HCl, 150 mM NaCl, 0.05% Tween 20, pH 8.0) buffer for 1 h. The membranes were incubated with primary antibodies at 1:5,000 dilutions in 5% non-fat milk overnight at 4 °C, and after washed for four times with TBST for a

total of 30 min, then the secondary antibodies conjugated with horseradish peroxidase at 1:5,000 dilution for 1h at room temperature and washed for four times with TBST. The blots were visualized with the Amersham ECL Plus western blotting detection reagents according to the manufacturer's instructions. To assess the presence of comparable amount of proteins in each lane, the membranes were stripped finally to detect the β -actin.

Statistical Analysis

Data were analyzed by one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) and a significant difference among treatment groups were evaluated by Duncan's Multiple Range Test (DMRT). The results were considered statistically significant at $p < 0.05$. All statistical analyses were made using SPSS 17.0 software package (SPSS, Tokyo, Japan).

Results and Discussion

Cell Cytotoxicity (MTT assay)

Natural products are known to be endowed with excellent properties as well as tolerability and reliability for the development of new drugs. Cytotoxicity tests generally possess a broad spectrum of sensitivity and are able to detect many novel anticancer drugs, which potentially inhibit the biochemical activity of a variety of cancer cells of animal and human origin [22]. The results clearly revealed that when the cancer cells were treated with *Coleus forskohlii* root ethanol extract for long times (72 h), the IC_{50} values were stand minimum dose. Supplementation with ethanol extract to the culture medium inhibits growth of Hep G2 cells in a dose and time dependent manner, revealing the cytotoxic potential of extract. The Hep G2 cell line required higher concentrations of *Coleus forskohlii* root ethanol extract to induce 50% of cancer cell death at 81.22 μ g and 65.61 μ g for 24 hr and 48 hr. (Figure 1 and Table 1).

Table 1 Time dependent effect of *Coleus forskohlii* root ethanol extract on HepG2 cancer cell line cytotoxicity

IC_{50} values of <i>Coleus forskohlii</i> on Hep G2 Cell linne			
Concentration in μ g/mL	Inhibition of cell viability		
	24 h	48 h	72 h
10	3.57	10.42	26.98
20	8.86	15.92	39.7
30	11.11	21.68	51.01
40	14.26	32.18	57.2
50	20.67	43.4	62.75
60	29.45	50.21	68.58
70	35.05	53.41	74.43
80	49.28	67.03	79.65
90	57.85	78.34	83.03
100	68.14	87.7	91.05

Data are expressed as means \pm SD of six independent experiments

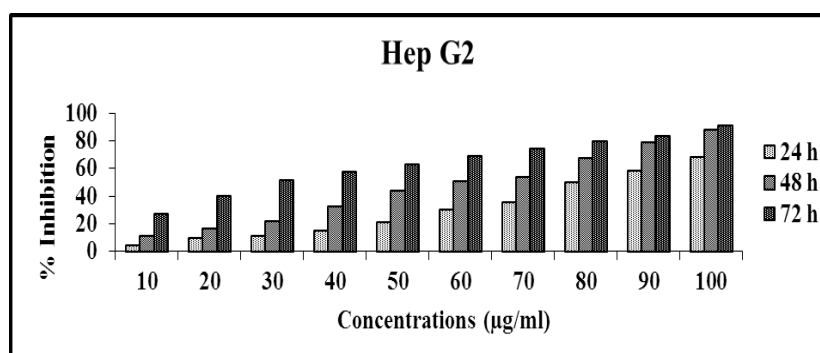


Figure 1 Effect of *Coleus forskohlii* root ethanol extract on HepG2 cancer cell cytotoxicity (MTT assay)

The cells were treated with different concentrations of *Coleus forskohlii* ethanol extract (10-100 $\mu\text{g/mL}$), which affected cell viability in a time dependent manner 24 h, 48 h and 72 h respectively. Data are expressed as means \pm SD of six independent experiments

Apoptosis is a physiological process leading to cell death far distinct from necrosis [23] deletion of excess cells from normal tissues and for specific pathologic events. Thus, apoptosis could be a therapeutic target for cancer cells, at the same time cell death or apoptosis induced by harmful stimuli should be prevented in normal cells. Biochemically and morphologically distinct from cellular necrosis, apoptosis involves chromatin condensation, cell shrinkage, DNA fragmentation, plasma membrane blebbing and the formation of membrane enclosed apoptotic bodies [24, 25]. In the study the Hep G2 cancer cells treated with *Coleus forskohlii* root ethanol extract was stained with AO/EtBr and Hoechst 33285 staining, it exhibited many characteristics of apoptotic morphology, i.e., cell shrinkage, loss of cell membrane integrity, impaction of nuclei and more cells appeared in the granules in size and shape. No morphological change was observed in control cells (Figure2), chromatin condensation, membrane blebbing and apoptotic bodies (Figure3 and Figure 4)

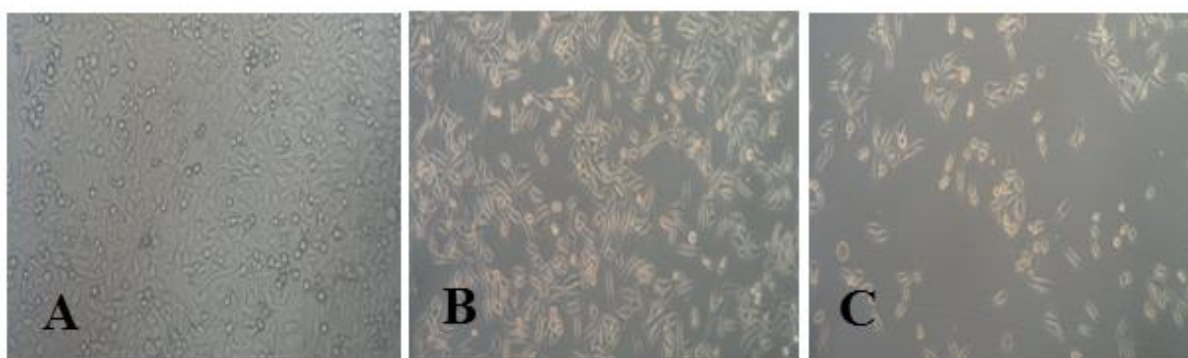


Figure 2 Effect of *Coleus forskohlii* root ethanol extract on HepG2 cancer cell cytotoxicity (MTT assay) on cell morphology

Control cells show well defined cellular morphology (A). *Coleus forskohlii* treated (24 h and 48 h) cells show characteristics of apoptosis i.e., cell shrinkage, loss of cell membrane integrity, impaction of nuclei many granules like appearance (B and C).

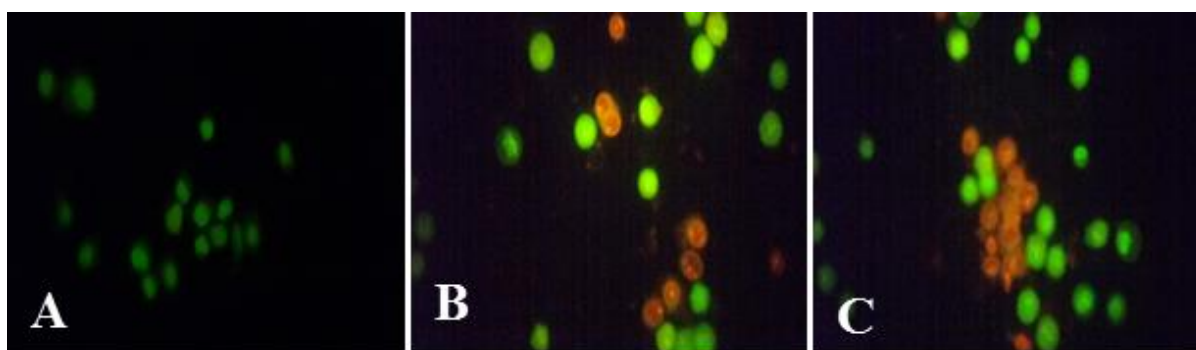


Figure 3 Effect of *Coleus forskohlii* root ethanol extract on cell morphology with Acridine orange/Ethidium bromide (AO/EtBr) staining

Control shows uniformly green fluorescing, viable cells (A). *Coleus forskohlii* treated cells shows chromatin condensation, membrane blebbing and apoptotic bodies, which fluoresce uniformly in bright red and orange (B and C).

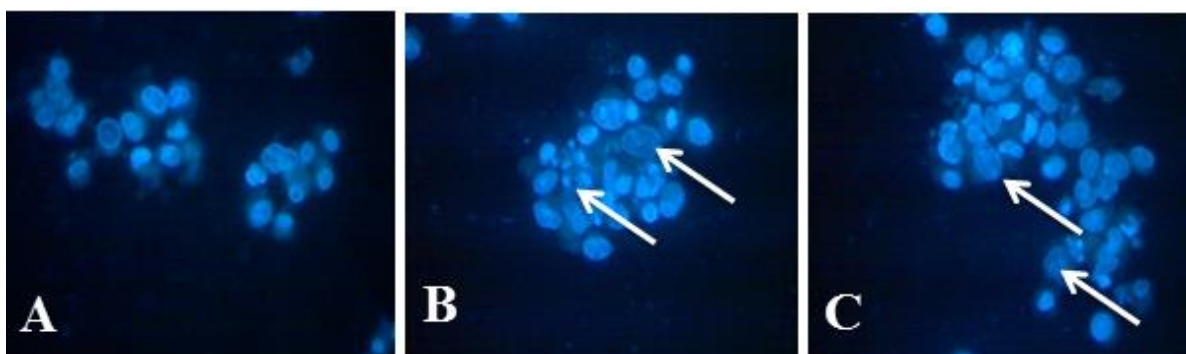


Figure 4 Effect of *Coleus forskohlii* root ethanol extract on nuclear morphology with Hoechst 33258 staining

Control shows normal nuclei (A). *Coleus forskohlii* root ethanol extracts treated cells show loss of membrane integrity, nuclear swelling and dot-like chromatin fragmentation (arrowheads) (B and C).

Mitochondria as main targets for anticancer agents is because they have a central role in the induction and regulation of both necrotic and apoptotic cell deaths [26]. In our study loss of mitochondrial membrane potential ($\Delta\psi_m$) was observed on *Coleus forskohlii* root ethanol extract treated Hep G2 cell line stained with Rhodamine 123. In the non-apoptotic cancer cells the dye (Rhodamine 123) accumulated and aggregated within the mitochondria, resulting in green fluorescence while the apoptotic cells revealed weak staining underlining the anticancer effects of root ethanol extract (Figure 5).

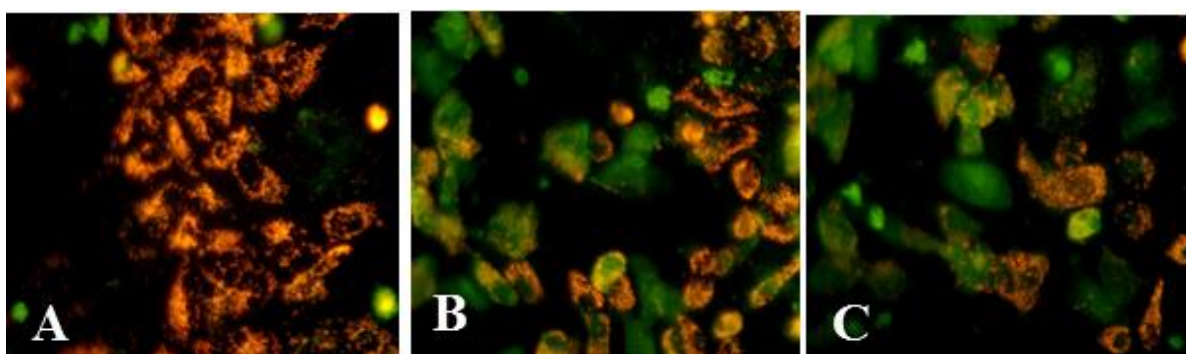


Figure 5 Effect of *Coleus forskohlii* root ethanol extract on mitochondrial membrane potential (JC-1)

Control shows intense red fluorescence indicating no changes in mitochondrial membrane potential (A). *Coleus forskohlii* ethanol extract treated cells show weak red fluorescence and which showed green fluorescence at 24 h and 48 h due to mitochondrial membrane depolarization (B and C).

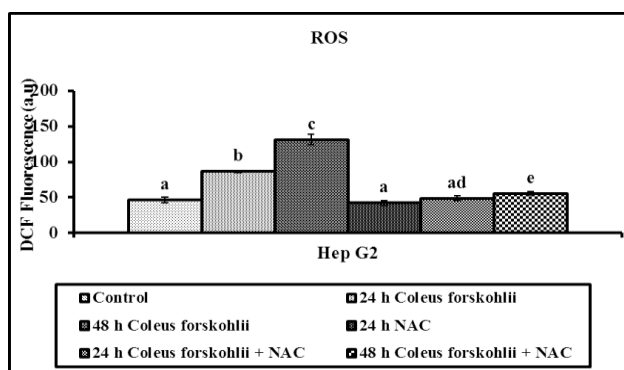


Figure 6 Effect of *Coleus forskohlii* root ethanol extract on intracellular ROS

Data are presented as the means \pm SD of six independent experiments in each group. Values not sharing a common superscript letter (^{a-c}) differ significantly at $p < 0.05$ (DMRT).

ROS is involved in triggering apoptotic signalling by inducing depolarization of the mitochondrial membrane ($\Delta\psi_m$) which eventually leads to an increase in the levels of pro-apoptotic molecules intracellularly [27]. Treatment with *Coleus forskohlii* root ethanol extract to Hep G2 cell lines showed significant ($p < 0.05$) increase in the intracellular ROS production in a time dependent manner (24 h and 48 h) as compared to the control cells. However more amount of ROS production was observed at 48 h time point as compared to the 24 h time point. (Figure 6).

Furthermore, enhanced lipid peroxidation byproducts (TBARS) and decreased activities of antioxidant enzymes (SOD, CAT and GPx) observed in the present study correlates with *Coleus forskohlii* root ethanol extract induced ROS production (Figure 7) and (Table 2). Thus over all root ethanol extract exerts a beneficial action in cancer cells in the presence of low antioxidant defense. These effects by *Coleus forskohlii* root ethanol extract could be associated with inhibition of cell proliferation, induction of tumor cell death and alterations in the levels of oxidative stress markers. Induction of apoptosis is an ideal cancer therapy strategy. In our study root ethanol extract exploits this process by selectively inducing cell death through the ROS dependent apoptotic pathway in Hep G2 cells. Thus our findings suggest that root ethanol extract selectively possesses potent anticancer properties.

Table 2 Effect of *Coleus forskohlii* root extract on antioxidant enzymes (SOD, CAT and GPx)

Antioxidant Enzymes	Hep G2 Cell lines		
	Control	24 h	48 h
SOD #	3.60 \pm 0.02 ^a	3.09 \pm 0.16 ^b	2.27 \pm 0.15 ^c
CAT @	6.42 \pm 0.49 ^a	4.08 \pm 0.46 ^b	2.21 \pm 0.21 ^c
GPx §	7.73 \pm 0.29 ^a	6.39 \pm 0.32 ^b	5.03 \pm 0.30 ^c

#50% NBT chromogen reduction/min/mg protein; @ μ moles of H₂O₂ consumed /min/mg protein; § μ moles of GSH consumed /min/mg protein. Data are presented as the means \pm SD of six independent experiments in each group. Values not sharing a common superscript letter are (a-c) differ significantly at $p < 0.05$ (DMRT).

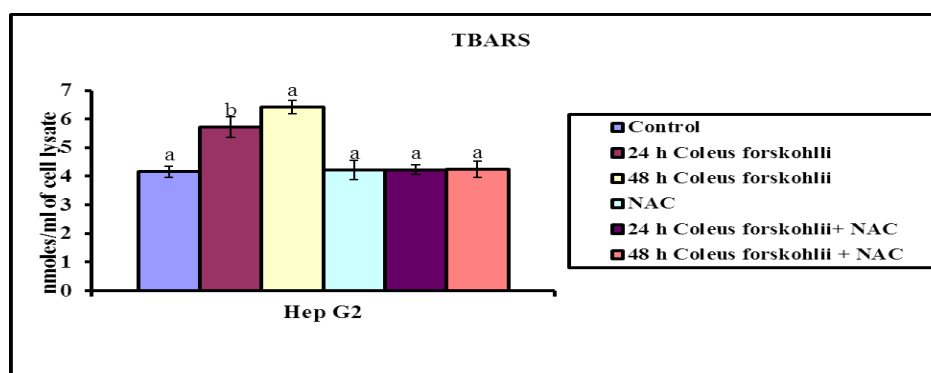


Figure 7 Effect of *Coleus forskohlii* root ethanol extract on lipid peroxidation byproducts

Data are presented as the means \pm SD of six independent experiments in each group. Values not sharing a common superscript letter are (a-c) differ significantly at $p < 0.05$ (DMRT)

Molecular studies and preclinical trails are warranted to know the exact mechanism of apoptosis by *Coleus forskohlii* root ethanol extract. As it is known that chemotherapeutic agents induce apoptosis and that DNA strand breaks may be an indication of on-going programmed cell death[28]. We searched for morphological signs of apoptosis and for its molecular hallmark, the DNA damage by comet assay. The cells were scored using comet analysis software (CASP). Control groups showed no significant DNA damage while treated with *Coleus forskohlii* root ethanol extract cells showed significant DNA damage. The nuclear head, comet tail and other comet parameters were recorded and the comparative data were generated and depicted in (Figure 8a&b). It was observed that the treatment with extract

caused damage to DNA at 24 h and the percentage of damaged cells increased on treatment with extract treated cells at 48 h, which is evident by the appearance of prominent comet with tails. The extent of DNA damage was increased with increasing duration of exposure.

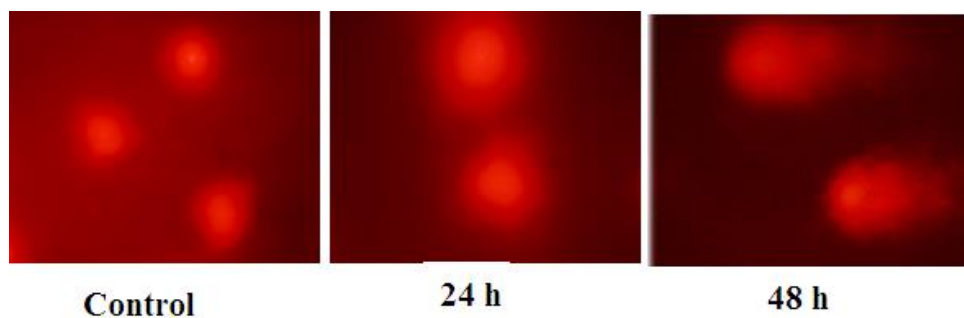


Figure 8 Effect of *Coleus forskohlii* root ethanol extract on DNA damage by comet assay in HepG2 cell

Round intact nucleus of Hep G2 control cells. The image of *Coleus forskohlii* ethanol extracts treatment at 24 h. The image of *Coleus forskohlii* ethanol extracts treatment at 48 h showing comet like DNA.

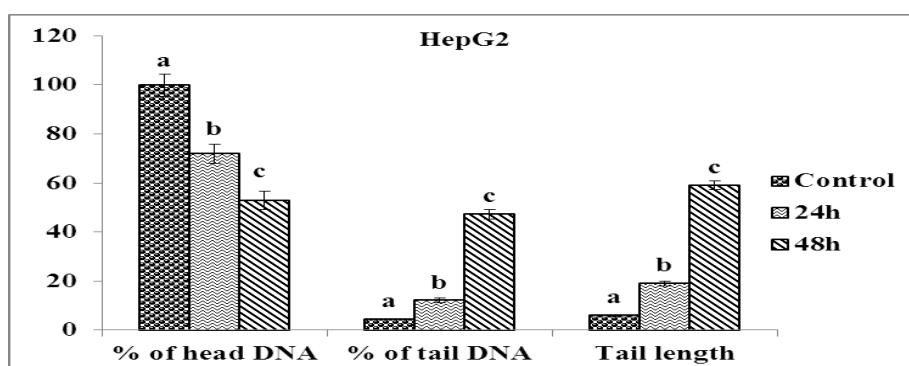
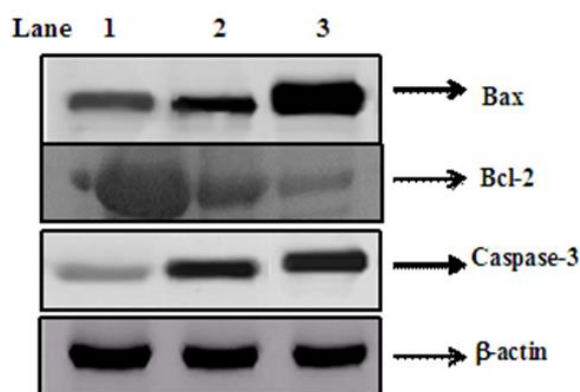


Figure 8a DNA damage was analysed by image analysis software (CASP)

To explore the potential signaling pathways underlying the *Coleus forskohlii* root ethanol extract induced apoptosis of cancer cells and apoptosis related protein expressions, cleaved caspase-3, bax, bcl 2 were evaluated with western blotting. The expression levels of cleaved caspase-3, were increased in dose-dependent manner, and the expression levels of Bax and Bcl2 were decreased in dose-dependent manner (Figure 9a & b).



Lane 1: Control; Lane 2: 24 hr treatment; Lane 3: 48 hr treatment

Figure 9 Effect of *Coleus forskohlii* root ethanol extract on Bax, Bcl-2 and Caspase-3 protein expressions in HepG2 cell

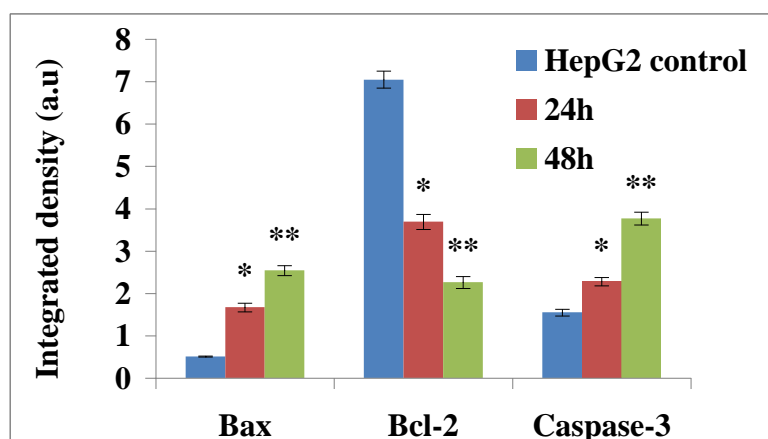


Figure 9a Band intensity scanned by densitometer

Histograms of densitometric analysis represent the ratio of Bax, Bcl-2 and caspase-3/ β -actin expression. The graph represents the quantification results normalized to β -actin levels. Values not sharing a common superscript differ significantly at $P \leq 0.05$ (DMRT).

Conclusions

Our data clearly demonstrates that *Coleus forskohlii* root ethanol extract could inhibit the proliferation of Hep G2 cells by inducing apoptosis via mitochondrial pathway involving oxidant/antioxidant imbalance. Furthermore, *Coleus forskohlii* root ethanol extract could be a potential candidate for development of an anticancer drug for the treatment of liver cancer.

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