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Biotransformation reactions of xenobiotics: Mechanisms and implications for environmental and human health

Bhaskar Mahanayak *

Department of Zoology, Berhampore Girls' College, Berhampore, Murshidabad, West Bengal, India.

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Abstract

This paper provides a comprehensive overview of the biotransformation reactions of xenobiotics, focusing on their mechanisms and implications for environmental and human health. Xenobiotics are foreign chemical substances introduced into the environment and living organisms through activities such as industrial processes, agricultural practices, and pharmaceutical usage. They include pharmaceuticals, pesticides, industrial chemicals, environmental pollutants, and food additives. Xenobiotics can have toxic effects on biological systems, including acute and chronic toxicity, carcinogenicity, teratogenicity, endocrine disruption, and immunotoxicity. Biotransformation reactions, primarily occurring in the liver, convert xenobiotics into more hydrophilic forms, facilitating their excretion from the body. These reactions are divided into two phases: Phase I and Phase II. Phase I reactions (non-synthetic) involve oxidation, reduction, and hydrolysis, primarily mediated by enzymes such as cytochrome P-450. Phase II reactions (synthetic) involve conjugation reactions, where metabolites of xenobiotics combine with endogenous polar or ionic moieties, making them more water-soluble. Key Phase II reactions include glucuronide formation, methylation, sulfate conjugation, acetylation, amino acid conjugation, and glutathione conjugation. Understanding these biotransformation mechanisms is crucial for mitigating the toxic effects of xenobiotics. However, biotransformation can sometimes produce more toxic metabolites, posing significant risks to environmental and human health. Environmental implications include the persistence and bioaccumulation of xenobiotics, ecotoxicity, and the development of antibiotic resistance. Human health implications involve increased toxicity and carcinogenicity, adverse drug reactions due to drug interactions, and genetic variability affecting individual susceptibility to xenobiotic toxicity. To address these challenges, effective risk assessment and management strategies are essential. Environmental monitoring using advanced analytical techniques, regulatory frameworks such as REACH and TSCA, and bioremediation using engineered microbes are crucial for mitigating the impact of xenobiotics. This paper underscores the importance of understanding biotransformation reactions to develop strategies for reducing the harmful effects of xenobiotics and protecting public health and the environment.

Keywords: Xenobiotics; Biotransformation; Phase I reactions; Phase II reactions; Toxicology

1. Introduction

1.1. Definition of Xenobiotics

Xenobiotics are chemical substances that are not naturally produced or expected to be present in an organism. They are typically introduced into the environment and living organisms through human activities such as industrial processes, agricultural practices, and pharmaceutical usage. The term "xenobiotic" comes from the Greek words "xenos" meaning foreign, and "bios" meaning life, signifying that these substances are foreign to the biological systems in which they are found (Williams, 1959).

*Corresponding author: Bhaskar Mahanayak.

1.2. Types of Xenobiotics

Xenobiotics can be classified into several types based on their source and nature:

- **Pharmaceuticals**: These include medications and drugs designed to treat various medical conditions. While beneficial in therapeutic contexts, they can become xenobiotics when present in non-target organisms or the environment (Kramer, 2009).
- **Pesticides**: Chemicals used in agriculture to control pests, such as herbicides, insecticides, and fungicides. These substances can persist in the environment and affect non-target species (Casida, 2017).
- **Industrial Chemicals**: Compounds used in manufacturing processes, including solvents, plasticizers, and flame retardants. Examples include polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) and dioxins (Safe, 1994).
- **Environmental Pollutants**: Substances released into the environment through human activities, including heavy metals (e.g., lead, mercury), polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), and various organic pollutants (WHO, 2010).
- **Food Additives and Contaminants**: Substances added to food for preservation, flavoring, or coloring, as well as contaminants that unintentionally enter the food supply (Munro, 1996).

1.3. Toxic Effects of Xenobiotics

The toxic effects of xenobiotics depend on their chemical nature, dose, duration of exposure, and the biological system they affect. Some common toxic effects include:

- **Acute Toxicity**: Immediate harmful effects that occur shortly after exposure to a high dose of a xenobiotic. Symptoms can range from mild (e.g., headaches, dizziness) to severe (e.g., respiratory distress, organ failure) (Eaton & Gilbert, 2008).
- **Chronic Toxicity**: Adverse effects resulting from long-term exposure to low levels of a xenobiotic. Chronic toxicity can lead to conditions such as cancer, liver damage, and neurological disorders (Hodgson, 2010).
- **Carcinogenicity**: The ability of certain xenobiotics to induce cancer by causing mutations in DNA. Examples include asbestos, benzene, and certain pesticides (IARC, 2012).
- **Teratogenicity**: Xenobiotics that cause developmental abnormalities or birth defects when exposure occurs during pregnancy. Thalidomide and certain pharmaceuticals fall into this category (Shepard, 1995).
- **Endocrine Disruption**: Some xenobiotics interfere with the endocrine system, leading to hormonal imbalances. These can affect reproductive health, growth, and development. Common endocrine disruptors include bisphenol A (BPA) and phthalates (Gore, 2007).
- **Immunotoxicity**: Xenobiotics that weaken or alter the immune system, increasing susceptibility to infections and diseases. Heavy metals and certain pesticides are known to have immunotoxic effects (Descotes, 2004).

2. Biotransformation Reactions

2.1. Definition of Biotransformation Reaction

Biotransformation is the biocatalytic conversion of toxic xenobiotic compounds into hydrophilic forms to facilitate their excretion from the body (Williams, 1959). The conversion of toxic xenobiotic compounds into less toxic metabolites and then forming conjugates may be termed as biotransformation.

2.2. Sites of Biotransformation Reactions

The biotransformations of xenobiotics are catalyzed by enzymes, primarily in the liver of vertebrates. These enzymes also occur in the skin, kidneys, lungs, intestines, placenta, gonads, aorta, lymphocytes, blood platelets, adrenal cortex, and medulla, but not in the nervous system (Parkinson, 2001). In insects, such enzymes have been reported in the mid-gut, fat body, and Malpighian tubules (Brattsten, 1983). The most important biotransformation sites in vertebrates, including humans, are the liver, kidneys, intestines, skin, and lungs (Gibson &Skett, 2001).

3. Mechanism of Biotransformation

R.T. Williams first studied the mechanism of biotransformation of xenobiotics in 1959 and divided the entire process into two phases:

1. **Phase I Reactions (Non-synthetic Reactions)**: These involve oxidation, reduction, and hydrolysis.
2. **Phase II Reactions (Synthetic Reactions)**: These involve the formation of conjugates, i.e., metabolites of the parent toxicant combined with endogenous polar or ionic moieties.

3.1. Phase I Reactions

3.1.1. Oxidation

The biotransformation of a wide variety of xenobiotic compounds involves oxidation processes. In these reactions, one atom of molecular oxygen is reduced to water, and the other is incorporated into the substrate. The most important enzyme system catalyzing the oxidation reactions is cytochrome P-450 and NADPH cytochrome P-450 reductase (Ortiz de Montellano, 2005). There are microsomal oxidoreductases (monooxygenases) located in the smooth endoplasmic reticulum and non-microsomal oxidoreductases located in the mitochondria (Guengerich, 2001).

3.1.2. Reduction

Xenobiotic compounds may undergo reduction through the function of reductases. These reactions are less active in mammalian tissues but frequent in intestinal and intracellular bacteria. An important example is the reduction of prontosil to sulphanilamide. Like oxidation, reduction may also be of two types: microsomal reduction and non-microsomal reduction (Hodgson, 2010).

3.1.3. Hydrolysis

Various toxicants with ester-type bonds are subjected to hydrolysis. These include esters, amides, and compounds of phosphates. Mammalian tissues, including plasma, contain a large number of non-specific esterases and amidases that participate in hydrolysis. Esterases can be divided into four classes: arylesterases, cholinesterases, carboxylesterases, and acetylesterases (Heymann & Krisch, 1967).

3.2. Phase II Reactions

Phase II reactions involve several types of endogenous metabolites that form conjugates with the xenobiotics or their metabolites. Generally, these conjugates are more soluble in water and can be readily excreted from the body. Examples include:

3.2.1. Glucuronide Formation

This is the most common and important type of conjugation reaction. The enzyme catalyzing this reaction is UDPGT (Uridine Diphosphate Glucuronyl Transferase), and the coenzyme is UDPGA (Uridine 5’-diphospho-α-D-glucuronic acid). This enzyme is located in the endoplasmic reticulum. Four classes of chemical compounds can form conjugates with glucuronic acid: aliphatic or aromatic alcohols, carboxylic acids, sulfhydryl compounds, and amines (Bock & Köhle, 2009).

3.2.2. Methylation

This reaction is catalyzed by methyltransferases, with the coenzyme being SAM (S-adenosylmethionine). However, methylation is not a major route of biotransformation of toxicants because of the broader availability of UDPGA, which leads to the formation of glucuronides. Moreover, it does not always increase the water solubility of the methylated products. Few reactions of methylation include N-methylation, O-methylation, and S-methylation (Borchardt, 1980).

3.2.3. Sulphate Conjugation

This reaction is catalyzed by sulphotransferases. These enzymes are located in the cytoplasm of the liver, kidneys, and intestines. The coenzyme is PAPS (3’-phosphoadenosine-5’-phosphosulphate). The functional groups of the foreign compounds for sulphate transfer include phenols and aliphatic alcohols, as well as aromatic amines. The primary reaction for PAPS-mediated conjugation is the formation of sulphate esters (Mulder, 1992).

3.2.4. Acetylation

Acetylation involves the transfer of acetyl groups to primary aromatic amines, hydrazines, hydrazides, sulphonamides, and certain primary aliphatic amines. The enzyme and co-enzyme involved are N-acetyl transferases and acetyl coenzyme A, respectively (Weber & Hein, 1985).

3.2.5. Amino Acid Conjugation

This conjugation is catalyzed by amino conjugates and coenzyme A. Aromatic carboxylic acids, arylacetic acids, and aryl-substituted acrylic acids can form conjugates with α-amino acids, mainly glycine, but also glutamine in humans and ornithine in birds (Caldwell, 1980).

3.2.6. Glutathione Conjugation

This significant reaction is facilitated by glutathione S-transferases, with the cofactor being glutathione. Glutathione is a tripeptide composed of three amino acids: cysteine, glutamic acid, and glycine. Glutathione conjugates subsequently undergo enzymatic cleavage and acetylation, forming N-acetylcysteine (mercapturic acid) derivatives of the toxicants, which are readily excreted. Glutathione can also conjugate with unsaturated aliphatic compounds and displace nitro groups in chemicals (Hayes & Pulford, 1995).

It is important to mention that in the process of biotransformation of xenobiotics, a number of highly reactive electrophilic compounds are formed. Some of these compounds can react with cellular constituents and cause cellular death or induce tumor formation. The role of glutathione is to react with electrophilic compounds and thus prevent their harmful effects on the cells. However, exposure to very large amounts of such reactive substances can deplete glutathione, thereby resulting in marked toxic effects (Hodgson, 2010).

3.2.7. Environmental Implications

Persistence and Bioaccumulation

Not all xenobiotics are completely metabolized; some persist in the environment, leading to bioaccumulation and biomagnification in the food chain. Persistent organic pollutants (POPs), such as polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) and certain pesticides, resist biotransformation and can accumulate in fatty tissues of organisms, affecting entire ecosystems (Jones & de Voogt, 1999).

Ecotoxicity

Incomplete biotransformation can result in the release of toxic metabolites into the environment. Pharmaceuticals, for instance, can undergo partial metabolism in human bodies and enter water systems through wastewater. These metabolites can adversely affect aquatic life, altering reproductive cycles, growth, and survival rates (Fent, Weston, & Caminada, 2006).

Antibiotic Resistance

The biotransformation of antibiotics in the environment can lead to the formation of antimicrobial-resistant bacteria. These bacteria can proliferate and transfer resistance genes to other microorganisms, posing a significant threat to both environmental and public health (Martínez, 2009).

3.2.8. Human Health Implications

Toxicity and Carcinogenicity

Biotransformation reactions can convert xenobiotics into more toxic or carcinogenic compounds. For instance, the metabolic activation of benzo[a]pyrene, a polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbon, by CYP450 enzymes produces intermediates that can form DNA adducts, leading to mutagenesis and cancer (Shimada & Fujii-Kuriyama, 2004).

Drug Interactions

Xenobiotics, particularly pharmaceuticals, can interfere with the biotransformation of other drugs. This can lead to adverse drug reactions (ADRs) due to increased toxicity or reduced therapeutic efficacy. The inhibition or induction of CYP450 enzymes is a common mechanism underlying these interactions (Zanger & Schwab, 2013).

Genetic Variability

Individual variability in biotransformation capacity, due to genetic polymorphisms in metabolizing enzymes, influences susceptibility to xenobiotic toxicity. Polymorphisms in genes encoding CYP450 enzymes, for example, can lead to variations in drug metabolism, affecting efficacy and risk of adverse effects (Ingelman-Sundberg, 2004).

3.2.9. Risk Assessment and Management

Environmental Monitoring

Monitoring the levels of xenobiotics and their metabolites in the environment is crucial for risk assessment. Advanced analytical techniques, such as mass spectrometry, enable the detection and quantification of these compounds at trace levels, facilitating the evaluation of environmental impact (Petrovic, Barceló, & de Alda, 2002).

Regulatory Frameworks

Regulatory frameworks, such as the European Union's REACH (Registration, Evaluation, Authorization and Restriction of Chemicals) and the US EPA's Toxic Substances Control Act (TSCA), aim to manage the risks associated with xenobiotics. These regulations require comprehensive testing and evaluation of chemicals to ensure safety for human health and the environment (ECHA, 2007; US EPA, 2016).

Bioremediation

Bioremediation, the use of microorganisms to degrade xenobiotics, offers a sustainable approach to mitigate environmental contamination. Engineered microbes with enhanced biotransformation capabilities can be employed to clean up polluted sites, reducing the environmental burden of persistent xenobiotics (Singh & Ward, 2004).

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, xenobiotics represent a diverse group of foreign chemical substances that can have significant toxic effects on living organisms and the environment. Understanding their types and mechanisms of toxicity is crucial for developing strategies to mitigate their impact and protect public health. Biotransformation reactions play a crucial role in the detoxification and excretion of xenobiotics from living organisms. By converting lipophilic toxicants into more hydrophilic forms, these enzymatic processes help to reduce the toxic load on the body and protect against potential damage. Understanding the mechanisms of Phase I and Phase II reactions is essential for developing effective strategies to mitigate the harmful effects of xenobiotics and enhance public health. The biotransformation of xenobiotics has profound implications for environmental and human health. While biotransformation generally enhances the excretion of xenobiotics, it can also produce toxic metabolites, contribute to environmental persistence, and drive the development of antibiotic resistance. Understanding these processes is essential for developing effective risk assessment and management strategies, ensuring the protection of ecosystems and public health.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

Author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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