

Identification of natural peptides as a new class of antimalarial drugs by *in silico* approaches

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1. ABSTRACT

Malaria is one of the most widespread and serious parasitic diseases worldwide. Currently available antimalarial drugs have side effects, and many strains of *Plasmodia* have developed resistance to such drugs. The present review examines the use of annexins and of natural peptides from snake venom as a new class of anti-malarial agents, with the key property of reducing inflammation. Severe cases of malaria manifest elevated serum levels of liver enzymes, inflammation, fibrin deposition, apoptosis, and reduction in peripheral CD8⁺

T cells. The annexin-A1/5 proteins trigger inflammation via increased expression of diverse cytokines (tumor necrosis factor alpha, interleukin-1beta, interleukin-10), however, by shielding microbial phospholipids they prevent injury via damage-associated molecular patterns (DAMPs). Here, we also review an *in silico*-based bioengineering approach that may allow for a better design, synthesis and characterization of novel peptides from snake venom as a more effective approach to treatment due to their improved antimalarial activity.

2. INTRODUCTION

Malaria, a mosquito-borne disease caused by *plasmodium* species, is a major public health problem, annually affecting over 300-500 million people worldwide (1-3). In 2012 in sub-Saharan Africa, 207 million new cases of malaria caused 627,000 deaths, mostly of young children (4-7). Malaria reduces personal productivity and contributes to the development of poverty; the cost of treatment also causes an economic burden of 12 billion dollars per year. In Singapore, the annual incidence of malaria ranges from 2.9 - 11.1 per 100,000 population, causing 38 deaths per year. Among these, 92.1 percent of the cases are caused by *P. falciparum*, while the remaining cases are caused by *P. vivax* (8, 9). The *Anopheles* vector surveillance data (1983-2007) collected by the National Environmental Agency revealed that the majority of the reported cases (91.4 - 98.3 percent) were from Southeast Asia and the Indian subcontinent (9-11). Central and Southeast Asia contribute to 39 percent of the global malaria burden by *P. falciparum* (3, 4, 12), with high endemicity in Orissa state (Eastern India), Western Myanmar and the lowlands of New Guinea (4). The global population at risk of *P. vivax* transmission not only spans India, but also includes other parts of Asia, particularly China, Indonesia, Pakistan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Myanmar, Thailand and Bangladesh (13, 14). South Korea, on the other hand, has been declared malaria-free after having 937,634 indigenous cases reported in the years 1993 to 2005 (15).

Currently available serological diagnoses provide indirect evidence of human exposure to the parasite. Nevertheless, advances in the field have led to the development of a rapid diagnostic test for malaria that has completed phase IV clinical trials (16). Preventive treatments for malaria have so far been challenging, especially for non-immune travelers visiting endemic areas, due to the lack of data for the at-risk population (17, 18). In fact, the systemic use of insecticide-impregnated bed nets showed that the incidence of malarial infection was only reduced by 50 percent (19). The lack of effective vaccines and the emergence of drug resistance against *P. falciparum* have been a concern for the last three decades, due to the possibility that malaria-attributable child mortality will soon double in Eastern and Southern Africa, as well as globally in the near future (4, 20-29). Although the use of antimalarial drugs such as artemisinin is generally considered safe, long-term treatment may pose severe toxic side-effects, including death (30).

To date, newly developed antimalarial drugs and vaccines are only at experimental stages or in phase I-IV clinical trials. In fact, most of the agents derived from natural compounds are still at experimental stages (16), and most of the leading malarial vaccine candidates, such as Mosquirix™ (RTS,S trade name), have

shown only limited efficacy (31). In light of this, snake venom might offer a promising therapeutic potential for malaria (32). The cocktail of enzymes and non-enzymatic proteins in snake venom has myriad functions including anesthetic (33-35), bactericidal (36, 37), anti-inflammatory and anti-parasitic (39), and it inhibits human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) (38).

This review focuses on the role of annexin A-1/5 (ANXA1/5) peptides and their pathophysiological interactions in the plasma of malaria patients. *In silico*-based approaches aimed at producing new antimalarials from natural snake venom molecules, targeting these mechanisms, are poised to enhance significantly the opportunities for antimalarial agents.

3. PATHOLOGICAL CHANGES INDUCED BY MALARIAL PARASITES

The clinical symptoms of malaria include pulmonary edema, cerebral malaria, acute kidney injury, hypoglycemia, lactic acidosis, and anemia. Severe infection of the liver by *P. falciparum* can lead to high mortality and morbidity due to liver failure. Liver is the main organ involved in the pathogenesis of malaria as it is implicated in the development of plasmodial sporozoites into merozoites (hepatic stage), before being released into the circulation to penetrate erythrocytes (erythrocytic stage). The parasitized red blood cells (PRBCs) or erythrocytes are then sequestered into small blood vessels, resulting in thrombosis. Degraded hemozoin pigments are also engulfed by local tissue macrophages, such as Kupffer cells and alveolar macrophages (Figure 1).

The clinical-pathologic features of liver infected by *P. falciparum* include reactive Kupffer cells, retention of hemozoin pigment, and minimal levels of PRBC sequestration (40, 41). A high load of hepatomegaly, PRBC and elevated levels of liver enzymes are also observed in malaria patients (42). Earlier studies confirmed that liver pathology, such as the induction of inflammation, leads to important changes in intervillous fibrin deposition (43), infarction regulation and cellular apoptosis in liver tissues, which affects the organ's function. Another study reported that infections by *P. falciparum*, but not by *P. vivax*, induced erythrocytic apoptosis due to strong inflammatory imbalance after the infection. PRBCs are not only involved in the development of anemia, but are also the main factor contributing to the development of thrombosis. The pathogenesis of anemia can be exacerbated by the increase in apoptosis in non-PRBCs (44).

The transcription factor NF-kappaB is known to regulate diverse cellular processes such as inflammation, immunity, cell proliferation and apoptosis (46). Apoptosis and NF-kappaB activation in malaria (*P. falciparum*

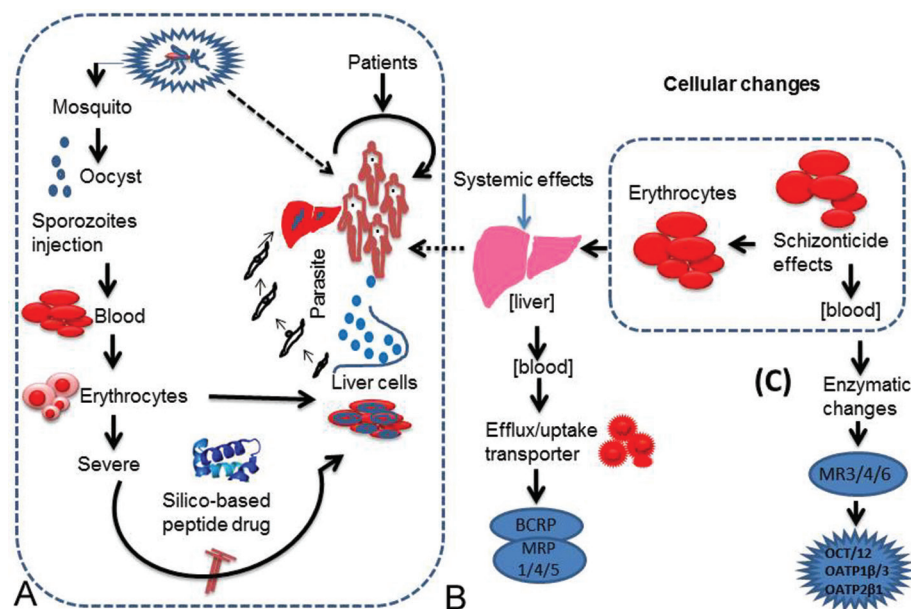


Figure 1. A-C. Flow chart showing disease pathology and involvement of liver in the malaria parasite's life cycle during the hepatic stage, which includes development of malaria sporozoites into merozoites. Merozoites are released into the circulation, penetrate erythrocytes, and cause diverse cellular and enzymatic changes that involve systemic effects in the liver, neurotoxic effects in the brain and schizonticidal effects in blood uptake of efflux or transporter molecules.

infection) are often associated with elevated levels of total bilirubin (TB). In addition, one study has shown that NF-kappaB and pro-inflammatory responses are activated in human brains exposed to PRBCs (47). The pathological changes, on the contrary, are correlated with the presence of Kupffer cells and lymphocytes in the portal tracts (45). However, ANXA5, which is often associated with apoptosis, is found, surprisingly, in the non-apoptotic cells that undergo plasma membrane damage and shrinkage, as demonstrated by flow cytometry (48).

4. ROLE OF ANNEXIN (ANX) IN PLASMA OF MALARIA PARASITE-INFECTED PATIENTS

Endogenously, ANXA1 is constantly expressed in leukocytes, epithelial cells and sub-populations of lymphocytic cells, and its expression is usually enhanced to regulate inflammatory processes (50-53). Studies exploring the association between malarial parasitic infection and ANXA1 in the plasma of malaria patients have revealed that ANXA1 expression differs among lymphocytes, being decreased in CD4+/CD8+ T cells, but increased in regulatory T cells (Treg) (49). This difference in ANXA1 expression may influence cell proliferation and IL-10 release into the plasma of patients infected with *P. vivax*.

In combination with the T-cell receptor (TCR), cytokines modulate the differentiation of T-helper lymphocytes (59, 60). Low-affinity binding of TCR to the antigen presented in a major histocompatibility complex

(MHC) leads to the induction of Th2 responses, whereas high-affinity binding leads to Th1 responses (59). Involvement of the regulatory T cells during *P. vivax* infection is balanced by pro- and anti-inflammatory cytokines (58). Host immunity against intracellular pathogens is orchestrated by the production of inflammatory cytokines, such as interferon (IFN)-gamma and tumor necrosis factor (TNF)-alpha, to mediate the elimination of plasmodium-infected hepatocytes (pre-erythrocytic) by activated CD8+ T cells (56). CD4+ T cell responses, on the other hand, have been associated with the restriction of parasitic growth within PRBCs via secretion of cytokines (IL-1beta, IL-10, TNF-alpha), activation of macrophages and mediation of humoral immunity (57). Nevertheless, severe infection with *P. vivax* can lead to dysfunctional T cells and lymphopenia, which is implicated in sustaining the disease (54, 55).

ANX is an important protein that targets several phospholipids and DAMPs in reducing inflammatory events during infection (64, 65). ANXA5 has been shown to be involved in repairing damaged membranes by acting as a shield to phospholipid DAMPs that trigger inflammatory response, besides resealing mechanically-damaged membrane to decrease inflammation. This protein is not only a universal repair tool with multiple functions, it also plays a critical role in malaria and ageing (61). Therefore, ANXA5 presents a unique therapeutic strategy to prevent injury at the DAMP recognition level, thus limiting or controlling the most proximal end of the inflammatory response (62, 63).

In patients infected with *P. falciparum*, the pro-inflammatory S100 calcium binding protein A8 (S100A8) was reported to be increased, resulting in the inhibition of cytotoxic T cells that kill the parasites by Treg cells (CD4⁺CD25⁺Foxp3). This, in turn, causes the diminished immune response that is observed in malarial patients (66). In addition, hospital-based study findings showed that high-density lipoprotein (HDL) was also elevated and implicated in the pathogenesis of malaria (67). In the absence of a positive blood film, low levels of cholesterol and platelets in malaria patients can provide a useful clinical diagnosis (68). In children infected with *P. falciparum*, higher levels of IL-10 in the plasma and specific antibody production against merozoite surface protein 3 have been documented (69). The induction of severe host immune responses by the parasite involves pathogen-associated molecular patterns (PAMPs) being released into the circulation during schizogony (70). Particularly, glycosylphosphatidylinositol (GPI) toxin from *P. falciparum* activates leukocytes and stimulates the release of inflammatory cytokines to induce the expression of adhesion molecules via toll-like receptors-2 and -4 (TLR-2 and -4) (71).

5. ANXS

ANXs have been divided into five extensively studied groups, namely human (ANXA1- ANXA13), animal (ANX B9, ANX B10, ANX B11, ANX B12), fungal (ANX C1-C5), plant (ANX D1- D25) and protist (ANX E1-E3) (72, 73). Of all these, annexin-A1 (ANXA1) is well-known for its anti-inflammatory effects induced by glucocorticoids, and it is associated with a diverse range of inflammatory mediators to control inflammatory responses. This protein belongs to the multi-gene family of calcium-mediated phospholipid binding proteins and regulates several pathophysiological processes, such as inflammation, phagocytosis, cell proliferation, cell migration, differentiation and apoptosis (53, 74, 75).

5.1. Molecular structure of ANX

ANXs are membrane-interacting, calcium (Ca²⁺) and phospholipid binding proteins expressed in eukaryotes throughout the plant and animal kingdoms (76). The vertebrate ANXs are characterized by a highly conserved alpha-helical region and four repeat regions that are tightly packed in the protein core domain, and two principal domains consisting of an NH₂-terminal head and a conserved COOH-terminal protein core (75, 79) (Figure 2). Having approximately 70 amino-acid residues that represent a Ca²⁺ regulated membrane binding module (72, 76-78), the protein also contains a unique central core for a hydrophilic pore, proposed to function as a Ca²⁺ channel.

5.2. Structural activity relationship of ANX binding to bilayers

ANXs are cytosolic proteins that bind to phospholipids, including the intercellular leaflet of

phosphatidylserine (PS), phosphatidylethanolamine (PE), and phosphatidylglycerol (PG) or phosphatidylinositol (PI) (82, 83). ANXA2 and 8, for example, are more specifically associated with membrane lipids of phosphatidylinositol-4,5-bisphosphate (PIP2) (84). Structural studies reveal that ANXA5/ANX B12 bind to phospholipid bilayers in the liquid crystal phase, whereas ANXA1/2 bind to the phospholipid head groups in the bilayer, along with Ca²⁺ binding sites (80). A molecular dynamics simulation confirms that two water molecules are replaced by an oxygen from the polar head groups of the protein in the presence of phospholipids (81). The conserved hydrophobic amino acids (AA) in the AB loops allow communication of the protein with the lipid bilayers via the hydrophobic acyl chains of phospholipids. The net charge of the polar head groups of the phospholipids is important for recruiting ANX to the membrane. As such, the molecular interaction of the lipid head groups and the specific residues strongly influences the binding affinity with the lipid binding sites. Experimental studies have also validated the hypothesis that the antimalarial drug hydroxychloroquine (HCQ) reverses the anti-phospholipid-mediated disruptions of ANXA5 on phospholipid bilayers (PLBs) in cultured cells as well as in the plasma of anti-phospholipid (aPL) syndrome (APS) patients (85, 86). In addition, HCQ reduces the binding of aPL immunoglobulin G (IgG)-beta 2GPI complexes to phospholipid bilayers, and this disintegration of aPL-beta2GPI complexes is evident using image analysis of atomic force microscopy (AFM) (87, 88). This drug not only reduces thrombosis in animal models of APS, but also reverses aPL-mediated platelet activation (89, 90).

5.3. ANXA1 and NF-κB mediated signaling pathway

ANXA1 is an endogenous protein that is constantly expressed in leukocytes and epithelial cells (51, 52, 93, 94). Previous studies have shown that ANXA1 exhibits anti-inflammatory properties and potent anti-migratory activity on neutrophils by regulating the adhesion and transmigration of leukocytes to inflammation sites (51, 52, 74, 91). In addition, the protein also serves as an important homeostatic regulator in mature T cells by modulating TCR signaling, provides an important molecular target in the differentiation and proliferation of lymphocytes, and inhibits various enzymes implicated in inflammatory response, including phospholipase A₂ (PLA₂), cyclooxygenase-2 (COX-2) and inducible nitric oxide synthase (iNOS). The cleaved N-terminal domain binds to the formyl peptide receptor (FPR), accelerating cell disconnection and inhibiting leukocyte movement to resolve inflammatory response (92). A recent study confirmed that ANXA1, besides regulating IFN-gamma, IL-17, TNF-alpha, and IL-6 production by T cells (95), also suppresses the effects of apoptotic cells on the immune reaction (96). Mechanistically, ANXA1 has been reported to interact with NEMO and RIP1 to constitutively activate IKK

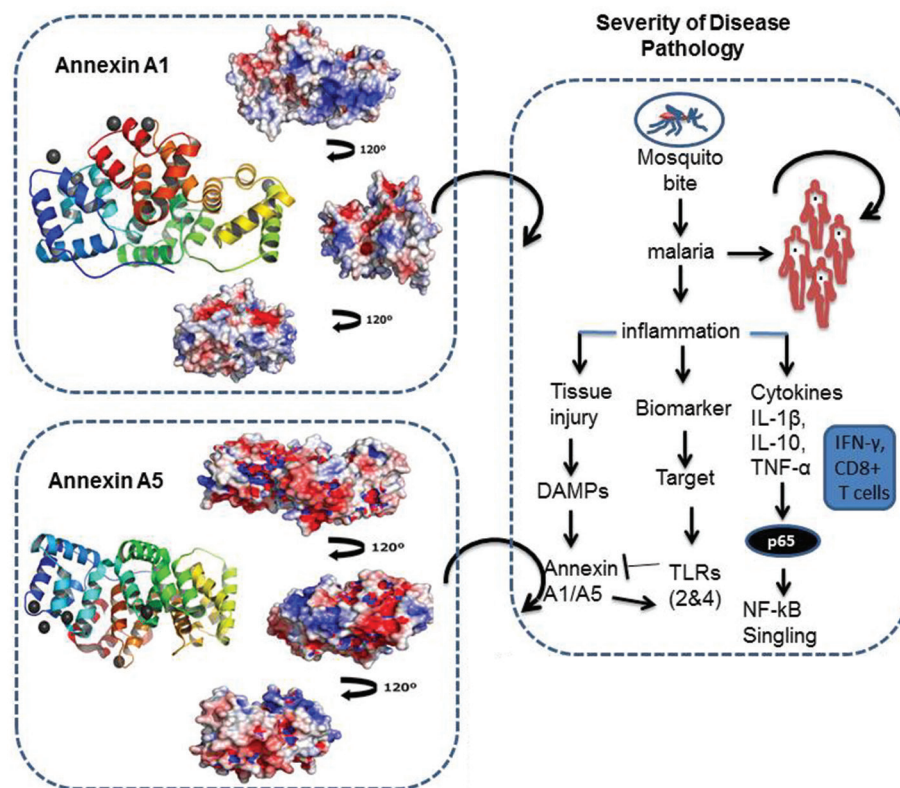


Figure 2. Severe infection caused by the parasite induces inflammatory cytokines (IL-1 β , IL-10, TNF- α), NF- κ B, and activation of macrophages. Annexin A1 (ANXA1) levels increase in plasma of patients infected with malaria, causing elevated lymphocyte levels but reduced numbers of T cells. ANXA1 regulates the inflammatory processes, leading to diverse cellular and molecular changes. Annexin A2 (ANXA2) structure (DOI: 4FTG from PDB), consisting of amino-terminal head and carboxyl domains.

complex and NF- κ B, which are thought to play a central role for disease progression. The nuclear transcription factor NF- κ B pathway involves hemozoin (malarial pigment) and 15 (S,R)-hydroxy-6,8,11,13-eicosatetraenoic acid (15-HETE)-mediated activation of matrix metalloproteinase-9 (MMP-9) in human monocytes (95). Therefore, depending on cell stimulus, ANXA1 expression may be upregulated to control the inflammatory response (53).

5.4. Interaction of ANXA1 with PLA₂

ANXA1 was initially reported as a PLA₂ inhibitor. There are two isoforms of PLA₂ – secretory PLA₂ (sPLA₂) and cytosolic PLA₂ (cPLA₂). The latter is an enzyme activated by an elevation in the cytosolic calcium to catalyze the release of arachidonic acid from the sn-2 arachidonyl chain of a 1-O-ether-linked choline-containing glycerophospholipid, providing the precursor for eicosanoids (97, 98). Eicosanoids are the important secondary messenger molecules that play a key role in inflammation. Immunoprecipitation studies have suggested that ANXA1 inhibits cPLA₂ directly, rather than by substrate depletion (98). This is further supported by enzyme kinetic studies that measure the inhibitory potential of substrate and calcium concentrations, and the

results showed that inhibition of the enzyme was largely due to substrate concentration (100). However, cPLA₂ activity can only be inhibited by full-length and C-terminal region of ANXA1, not by the N-terminal region (99), and this interaction is cell type-specific, being more prominent in hepatocytic cell lines (101).

6. ANTIMALARIAL POTENTIAL OF SNAKE VENOM PLA₂

Snake venoms (SVs) contain a mixture of pharmacologically active molecules with varied enzymatic and non-enzymatic properties. Most SVs contain PLA₂ as the main component along with phosphodiesterase, phosphomonoesterase, L-amino acid oxidase, and specific and non-specific endopeptidases (102, 103). The plethora of molecules in SVs contribute to the variety of biological properties found in them, including anti-inflammatory (104), anti-diabetic (105), anti-viral (also against HIV) (106), anti-cancer (107), and anti-arthritis. For instance, the antibacterial potential of a basic PLA₂ obtained from Russell's viper (*Daboia russellii pulchella*) can be effective against *Staphylococcus aureus* and *Bacillus subtilis* at 13-24 micrograms per milliliter (108). Antibacterial and antiparasitic activities attributable to other

Table 1. Antimalarial potency of venoms/proteins/peptides derived from animal sources

Proteins/peptides	Species derived	Testing	Properties	References
Secreted phospholipase (sPLA ₂) such as IA, IB, IIA and III	Different intra-erythrocytic developmental stages of <i>P. falciparum</i>	Antiparasitic	Antiparasitic activities even at an IC ₅₀ of 0.1 µM	(113)
PLA ₂ s	Bee Scorpion Snake venoms	Antiparasitic	Effectively prevents the intra-erythrocyte development of <i>P. falciparum</i>	(114)
Crotoxin complex PLA ₂ (Crotoxin B)	<i>Crotalus durissus cumanensis</i>	Antiparasitic fraction II possesses activity against the parasite	0.76 microgram per milliliter (0.6 microgram per milliliter)	(115)
Natural toxin	<i>Bothrops marajoensis</i> venom	Antiparasitic	Effect of at 0.13 microgram per milliliter, PLA ₂ (0.01 microgram per milliliter)	(39)
Phospholipase A ₂ (PLA ₂)	<i>Bothrops asper</i>	Antiplasmodial	At 0.13-22.9 microgram per milliliter concentrations	(116)

SV proteins and non-venomous snake serum-derived peptide analogues are shown in Table 1 (38, 39, 109-116).

Of particular interest, the PLA₂ from *Crotalus adamanteus* inhibits different malarial parasites (*P. falciparum* and *P. gallinaceum*) during their development in the mosquito midgut epithelium by preventing ookinete association/oocyst formation (38). Besides these natural proteins, synthetic propeptides have the capabilities to disrupt ookinete interactions with the midgut as well (117). In fact, transgenic *Anopheles stephensi* mosquitoes expressing a PLA₂ venom gene have been shown to block the development of *P. berghei* oocysts and their transmission to mice (118-121).

6.1. Antimalarial potency of SV-derived peptides

Antimicrobial peptides (AMPs) that are diverse in sizes (~20 amino acids), cationic at physiological pH, hydrophobic, having unique secondary structures (36) and linear α -helices free of cysteine residues can be easily synthesized. Previous studies showed that these AMPs (PIP-8, PNT-II, AMP-1 and AMP-2) exert potent anti-inflammatory, anti-bacterial (also against MRSA), wound-healing and anti-viral actions (110). Compared to original proteins used as models, these novel peptides can be more effective anti-malarial candidates, being devoid of cellular toxicities and lytic effects on human erythrocytes.

6.2. Antimalarial activity of other peptides

Recently, several anti-plasmodial peptides were synthesized from N- and C-terminal regions of *P. falciparum* serine repeat antigen 5 (PfSERA5), which is critical for the intra-erythrocytic development of malarial parasites. These peptides co-localize with PfSERA5 within the parasite and reduce its activity, thus conclusively demonstrating the potential of inhibiting the

PfSERA5 enzyme as a target for new peptide-based anti-malarials (122). A synthetic derivative of NK-2 has been reported to be effective on *P. falciparum*-infected erythrocytes (PfRBC) at an IC₅₀ of 1-10 micromolar (123) and for synthetic peptide D-HALO-rev, the IC₅₀ was reported at 0.1 micromolar (125). Dermaseptin NC7-P peptide from *Phyllomedusa sauvagii* (K4-S4) was shown to affect the PfRBC ring stage at a 5.3 micromolar dose, but inhibited the trophozoite stage at 6.2 micromolar (124), whereas K4K20-S4 (dermaseptin) and K4-s4 (1-13) affected PfRBC at 0.2 micromolar and 6 micromolar, respectively (126). Cationic host-defense peptides (defensins/cecropins), membrane-active peptides (gramicidins), hydrophobic peptides (cyclosporins) and thiopeptides (thiostrepton), in contrast, cause severe damage to membrane integrity and affect specific intracellular targets of the mosquito parasites.

Cationic, lysine-branched peptides (Ac-GXRKXHKXWA-NH) display anti-plasmodial effects at IC₅₀ greater than 100 micromolar (127), while tetrapeptides Phe-Orn-Phe-Orn (4) and Lys-Phe-Phe-Orn (5) exert activity at IC₅₀ of 2.5 and 3.3 micromolar, respectively, against *Plasmodium berghei* (128). Synthetic hybrid peptides (1-3) from cecropin B and melittin caused at least 60 percent mortality of *P. berghei* ookinetes at 50 micromolar concentration (129). Scorpion venom from *Pandinus imperator* effectively inhibits *P. berghei* ookinetes and gametes at approximately 1 micromolar and 10 micromolar, respectively (130, 131), while drosomycin isolated from *Drosophila melanogaster* inhibits 70 percent of *P. berghei* gametocytes at 20 micromolar dose (134). Peptides from mosquitoes, such as Gambicin isolated from *Anopheles gambiae*, inhibit 54.6 percent of *P. berghei* ookinetes (133), while the defensin A peptide from *Aedes aegypti* cleared approximately 85 percent of *P. gallinaceum* oocysts in transgenic mosquitoes (135). Even the peptide derivative (IDR-1018) of bactenecin,

which can be isolated from bovine neutrophils, has been demonstrated to be protective against cerebral malaria (132). A more recent report has also confirmed the promising antimalarial activities of peptides based on those that are already in phase I (NVB302) and phase II (omiganan and OP-145) clinical trials (136). Few peptides have been studied in preclinical animal models for severe malaria (137), and none of them has progressed towards pre-clinical or clinical development as a therapeutic agent due to the concern that most of them cause systemic toxicity, and the fact that their mechanisms of action are relatively unknown.

Secondary metabolites derived from fungi are also rich sources of chemotherapeutic agents. Peptides isolated from fungal species consist of unusual amino acids, (128) such as alpha-aminoisobutyric acid, isovaline, beta-alanine, and hydroxyproline. For example, efrapeptins produced by the fungus *Tolypocladium niveum*, which belongs to the subspecies *inflatum*, inhibit mitochondrial FOF1 ATPase and some bacterial ATP synthases (138). This biological effect of efrapeptins leads to altered plasma membrane potential in the parasite (139). Another study has also revealed that three antibiotic peptides (efrapeptins, zervamicins and antiameobin) can kill *P. falciparum* in culture with 50 percent inhibitory effects at micromolar concentrations (140). Diverse antimalarial peptides have been synthesized or isolated from natural sources (128, 141). Linear synthetic peptides such as leukinostatin A, efrapeptin, zervamicin, and antiameobin have been shown to elicit potent activity (140). Dimer, trimer, tetramer, and pentameric peptides including cyclic analogs (142) exert inhibitory activity against *P. falciparum* at an IC_{50} of 7.5. micromolar concentration. A series of several short synthetic peptides, like pentapeptides derived from several *Actinomyces* species (IC_{50} =31 nanograms per milliliter) (140), cyclotetrapeptides such as apicidin and apicidin A derived from HC-toxin I (IC_{50} =125 nanograms per milliliter) (143), and a linear tetrapeptide hirsutellic A acid isolated from *Hirsutella* species BCC 1528 fermentation broth that contains an anthranilic acid residue at the C-terminus (IC_{50} =8.0. micromolar) (144), have all been demonstrated to display promising antimalarial effects. Dipeptides such as 2-(2-tert-butoxycarbonylamino-4-methylpentanoyl-amino)-cyclooctanecarboxylic acid methyl ester and 2-(2-tert-butoxycarbonylamino-3-phenyl-propionylamino)-cyclooctanecarboxylic acid methyl ester are very effective at inhibiting late schizonts at 3.8 and 3.6 micrograms per milliliter concentrations, respectively (142).

7. THERAPEUTIC POTENTIAL OF PEPTIDES BY SILICO APPROACHES AND DRUG DESIGN

Silico drug design involves the identification of possible target proteins of a drug via computational tools.

In silico methods can be used to analyze target structures for active binding sites, and with this information, they can develop candidate molecules. In addition, they can check the molecules for their drug likeness and attempt to dock these molecules with the target, after which they can proceed to rank these molecules according to their binding affinities and attempt to improve other binding characteristics. The quantitative structure activity-relationship (QSAR) regression model can then be used to summarize and interpret the quantitative relationship between the activity of the candidate molecule and its structure. It does so via statistical and modern data mining techniques, which include ligand-based virtual screening and virtual profile affinity (145). Identifying any drug-induced alterations in either electrophysiology or neurochemical networks can be accomplished using neurochemical and biophysical models (146-148).

7.1. Diverse silico methods for drug design and discovery

In silico, or silico, approaches are used to describe experiments that involve the use of computers. In most cases, *in silico* methods are used to generate data for the accurate modeling and validation of applications. Although it is a comparatively novel tool, there have been many diverse *in silico* drug-designing efforts described (149, 150). These include homology modelling (112) and molecular docking, which are used to determine, score and rank the affinity of particular ligands towards an active site of specific receptors. Currently, there are different methods available to assess the docking of ligands to different binding sites, which include ArgusDock, DOCK, FRED, eHITS, AutoDock and FTDock (151), hologram quantitative structure activity relationship (HQSAR), comparative molecular field analysis (152), and molecular similarity indices analysis (CoMSIA).

Other *in silico* approaches involve three-dimensional (3D) pharmacophore mapping and microarray techniques. Both significantly contribute towards the elucidation and optimization of molecules discovered by high-throughput screening from combinatorial libraries (153, 154). This enables a large number of classical drug candidates to be screened more rapidly within a short period of time, compared to conventional virtual screening (154, 158-160). Microarray techniques are also widely used in different fields for the development of efficient new drugs (155), conformational analysis, Monte Carlo simulation (156) and molecular dynamic simulation (157). These virtual ligand screening and profiling methods play an important role in drug discovery throughout pharmacology. Ligand design and optimization is useful for characterizing basic pharmacological actions of molecules, including absorption, distribution, metabolism, excretion and toxicity (154). Thus, these approaches may lead to improved drug design and represent a "discovery gate" into the future (161).

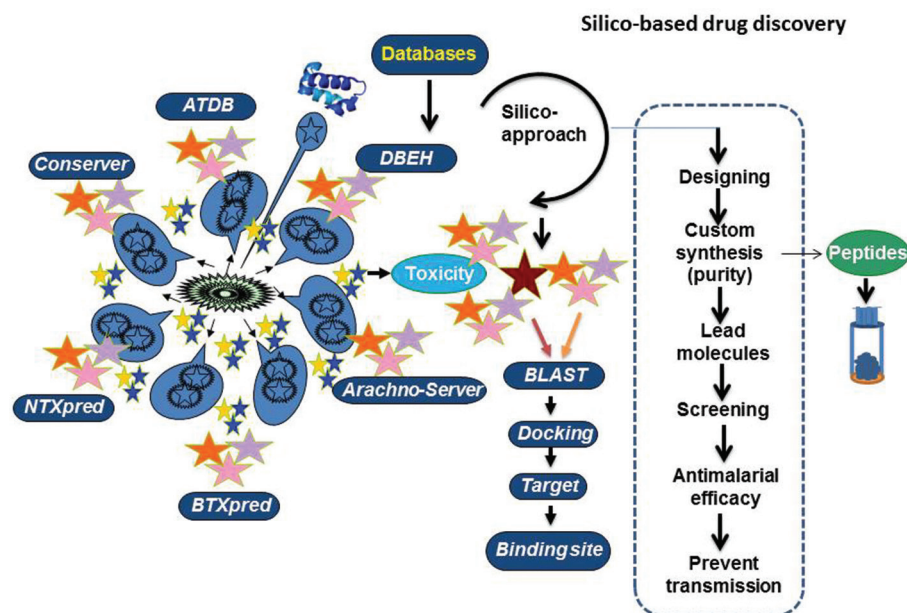


Figure 3. Schematic representation shows the designing of small molecules by bioinformatics tools for the *in silico*-based drug discovery of novel antimalarial drugs.

7.2. Significance and impact of silico methods

Synthetic chemical drugs currently used for the treatment of *P. falciparum* infection in humans are losing therapeutic efficacy because of drug resistance. Therefore, viable silico-based strategies might serve as a novel anti-malarial drug discovery pipeline in producing new drugs to fight these parasites (162). Many efforts yield some anti-malarial agents following high-throughput screening of chemicals from the chemical libraries on parasite cultures (163-165). An estimated two million small molecules were screened against *P. falciparum*, of which 13,533 agents inhibited parasitic growth (80 percent or greater) at 2 micromolar concentration, while 800 agents were reported to have promising activity against a drug-resistant strain (Dd2) (163). Several recent studies used a bioluminescent parasite (*P. falciparum*) to detect shifts in the viability of microcultures (165). For instance, a dermaseptin-4 (DS4) peptide was designed, synthesized and evaluated by screening platforms described above. The results proved that a reduction in parasite viability was consistent with bioluminescence emitted from the parasite micro-cultures after exposure to bacterial extracts containing the DS4 peptide (165-167). The DS4 peptide is lipophilic, highly electrostatic, and possesses an affinity to cell membranes (168). Chemically diverse types of CoA pathway inhibitors can also effectively control malarial parasites at 120 nanomolar to 6 millimolar dose range (169). There are many beneficial features of the candidate molecules from the novel class of peptides in terms of high specificity, biological properties, penetration and low production cost (170, 171). However, major concerns for developing peptide-based drugs are still present, due to the lack of stability, severe toxicity

and immunogenicity. Nevertheless, instability can be overcome by incorporation of alpha-aminoxy amino acid and D-amino acids (172, 173).

7.3. Development of new silico approaches for predicting toxicity

Recently, there was an attempt to develop new silico approaches for predicting toxicity of peptides by using diverse databases such as BTXpred (174), NTXpred (175), Conserver (176), ATDB (177), DBETH (178) and Arachno-Server (179). These silico based models will be useful not only in predicting toxicity of protein/peptides, but also in designing less toxic peptides and discovering toxic regions in proteins (180). Overall, these *in silico* approaches may be useful for peptide/protein-based drug discovery (Figure 3).

8. DELIVERY METHOD OF PEPTIDE DRUGS

There are many problems associated with therapeutic peptides. These often include low bioavailability via the oral route (181), poor permeability/metabolic inactivation (182), proteolysis or enzymatic degradation, binding to plasma proteins, toxicity and resistance (183). Additionally, costs for peptide production can be very high if there is a need to scale-up production, and as a result, drugs will become less affordable for people in poorly developed countries. This can be overcome by using alternative approaches, such as AMPs that coat contact lenses to prevent lens-related infections, in the case of eye infections (184). For malaria, bed nets, cream-based drugs for topical application and/or a combination of drugs using a suitable delivery method

may make peptide use more cost effective. Currently, biotechnological approaches that graft bioactive peptides into suitable biocompatible carriers can enhance peptide bioavailability at the site of action (39, 185, 186). Peptide analogues that are encapsulated in biodegradable polymers can be injected at an appropriate site (187). PEGylated poly-L-lysine-based peptide dendrimers, which are prepared and coated with chondroitin sulphate A (CSA), can be used to encapsulate drug molecules by a dialysis method for a controlled and sustained delivery of a blood schizonticide, chloroquine phosphate (CQ). This method promisingly reduced the trophozoite stage of *P. falciparum* in culture (188). These types of drug delivery approaches will improve some of the prevailing negative effects attributed to current anti-malarial management.

9. MARKET POTENTIAL OF THERAPEUTIC PEPTIDE-BASED DRUGS

Current market potential in the US for synthetic therapeutic peptides exceeds 13 billion dollars per year, representing 1.5 percent of total drug sales globally. In Europe, it is Germany and the UK that account for 63 percent of the peptide therapeutic market, with France, Italy, Scandinavia and Spain making up the rest of the major markets. Furthermore, the market for synthetic peptides rose from 5.3 billion dollars in 2003 to 8 billion dollars in 2005. It was estimated that one peptide share would reach 14.1 billion dollars in 2013 and that it will reach 25.4 billion by 2018 (189, 190). New synthetic strategies to improve productivity and reduce metabolism of peptides, along with alternative routes of administration, have been developed in recent years, with a large number of peptide-based drugs now being marketed (191, 192). With increased approval of peptide-based drugs, and the advances in peptide-associated technologies, peptide-based drug therapeutics will become more significant, thus opening up more commercial opportunities for treating malarial infections (186).

10. DEVELOPMENT OF DRUG TARGETS BASED ON MALARIAL PARASITE PROTEINS

Protein phosphorylation, a form of post-translational modification, significantly regulates protein function. Recently, the systematic analyses of *Plasmodium* protein (PP) phosphatases, such as phosphoprotein phosphatases (PPPs), metallo-dependent protein phosphatases (PPMs), protein tyrosine phosphatases (PTPs) and gene product NLI-interacting factor-like phosphatases (NIFs) (193-197), revealed that they play a vital role during ookinete to oocyst transition and subsequent transmission in a rodent malaria model (197, 198). PPM2, PPM5 and PPM10 in particular are regulated by phosphorylation (199) and are involved in important functions during asexual development/differentiation of *P. falciparum* (200). During every stage of development, the parasite uses a number of signal

transduction mechanisms, including reversible protein phosphorylation catalysed by protein kinases (PKs) and phosphatases (PPs). While the PKs are known to be important therapeutic targets (201), the PPs are only now emerging as a target for clinical intervention (202).

11. CLINICAL SIGNIFICANCE AND CONCLUSIONS

Malaria is still one of the most important and urgent global medical challenges. This is predominantly due to the number of people affected by the disease, and the severe complications associated with inappropriate treatment. The majority of fatal malaria cases are caused by *P. falciparum*, and rarely by *P. vivax* or *P. malariae*. Infection by *P. falciparum* causes serious complications, and often results in relapses after treatments and subsequently death (203). These mortality rates peak during monsoon season in Southeast Asia and other parts of the world (204). Patients with severe cases of malaria are given intravenous quinine/quinidine, while artemisinin derivatives are recommended for quinine-resistant cases (205). The main symptoms of malaria include cerebral and pulmonary edema, acute renal failure, severe anemia, and bleeding, which make malaria a disease in need of a panacea. With the lack of effective current treatments, alternatives are clearly necessary (206). Gaining a better understanding of the underlying molecular mechanisms will aid in identifying the appropriate targets that are linked to clinical manifestations, and one important area to focus on would be the role of DAMPs, which are known to trigger inflammation. Furthermore, a better understanding of the mechanisms will also allow for proper diagnosis and better management of malarial parasitic infections.

Understanding the mechanisms associated with ANXA1/5 will be useful to better understand the disease pathology and may be useful as a target for developing diagnostic biomarkers in clinical settings. Cytokines like TNF-alpha and IL-1beta most likely contribute to the pathogenesis of severe malaria parasitic infections, which can progress rapidly and lead to mortality in a few hours or days. The lack of advance diagnostic approaches and non-microscopic methods that are only now being introduced aggravate the outcomes of the disease (207). In addition, as drug resistance develops rapidly in parasites, novel and more efficacious antimalarial drugs that halt malarial parasite development are required. Despite all these obstacles, therapy with a monoclonal antibody against TNF-alpha for controlling fever, when used in combination with drugs such as artemether-lumefantrine or atovaquone-proguanil, lowers the risk of resistance and yields better results than treatment with mefloquine or quinine alone (55). Thus, peptides from snake venom proteins may potentially serve as more

potent anti-infective and antimalarial agents using *in silico* approaches, which ultimately will contribute to improved malaria management.

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Abbreviations: AMPs: antimicrobial peptides; ANX: annexin; CD8: T cluster of differentiation-8; CSA: chondroitin sulphate A; CQ: chloroquine phosphate; HIV: human immunodeficiency virus; IFN-gamma: interferon gamma; IL-17: interleukin-17; IL-6: interleukin-6; TNF-alpha: tumor necrosis factor-alpha; NEA: National Environmental Agency; NIFs: NLI-interacting factor-like phosphatases; DAMPs: damage-associated molecular pattern molecules; NF-kappaB: nuclear factor kappa-light-chain enhancer of activated B cells; PfSERA5: *Plasmodium falciparum* serine repeats antigen-5; PEG: Polyethylene glycol; PEG-PLL: Polyethylene glycol based peptide dendrimers; PPPs: phosphoprotein phosphatases; PPMs: metallo-dependent protein phosphatases; PTPs: protein tyrosine phosphatases; PKs: protein kinases; PP: phosphatases; RBC: Red blood cells; RTS,S: trade name of Mosquirix; sPLA₂: secretory phospholipase A₂; TCR: T cell receptor; WHO: World Health Organization; PRBC: parasitized red blood cells; Treg: regulatory T cells; PAMP: pathogen-associated molecular patterns.

Key Words: *Plasmodium* strains, Annexin, Secretory phospholipase A₂ (sPLA₂), Antimicrobial peptide (AMPs), Review

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