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Methanol Poisoning: Ocular Toxicity Produced by Formate¹

G. MARTIN-AMAT, K. E. McMARTIN, S. S. HAYREH, M. S. HAYREH, AND
T. R. TEPHLY

The Toxicology Center, Department of Pharmacology, and Department of Ophthalmology, The University
of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa 52242

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Methanol Poisoning: Ocular Toxicity Produced by Formate. MARTIN-AMAT, G., McMARTIN, K. E., HAYREH, S. S., HAYREH, M. S. AND TEPHLY, T. R. (1978). *Toxicol. Appl. Pharmacol.* 45, 201-208. After methanol administration, monkeys developed optic edema, acidosis, and formate accumulation in blood. Formaldehyde was not measurable in any fluids or tissue. Experiments were designed to study the possible role of formate in ocular toxicity. Formate was administered by iv infusion in the form of formate buffer for the purpose of maintaining pH in the normal range. The rate of formate infusion was adjusted to maintain blood formate at toxic concentration. No formaldehyde was detected. Results were similar to those described for methanol poisoning: optic disc edema with a normal vascular bed and intracellular edema with intraaxonal swelling.

Formate
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Formaldehyde
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K.W, Ion Gap, Formate, Formaldehyde

Methanol poisoning in man and in monkeys is characterized by severe metabolic acidosis and marked ocular toxicity (Roe, 1943; Benton and Calhoun, 1953; Gilger and Potts, 1955; McMARTIN *et al.*, 1975; Clay *et al.*, 1975; Martin-Amat *et al.*, 1977a; Hayreh *et al.*, 1977; Baumbach *et al.*, 1977). Recently, several laboratories have reported the accumulation of formic acid in the blood of monkeys which had become severely acidotic after the administration of methanol (McMARTIN *et al.*, 1975; Clay *et al.*, 1975; Martin-Amat *et al.*, 1977a). In fact, those authors have reported on decreases in blood bicarbonate concentrations which equate with elevated blood formate values. It would appear that formic acid accumulation is responsible for metabolic acidosis produced in methanol poisoning in the monkey.

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The ocular toxicity produced after methanol administration in monkeys has recently been explored. Monkeys maintained on an experimental regimen with blood formate values of about 10 mEq/liter and arterial blood pH values of 7.1 to 7.3 (Martin-Amat *et al.*, 1977a) consistently had serious optic disc edema and loss of the pupillary response to light (Hayreh *et al.*, 1977). The optic disc edema appears similar to the ocular toxicity described in humans (Benton and Calhoun, 1954). Histopathologic evaluation of the optic nerves (Baumbach *et al.*, 1977) showed intraaxonal swelling in the anterior segment of the optic nerve with otherwise normal retinae, including normal ganglion cells.

Since elevated formate concentrations occurred in the presence of metabolic acidosis in animals displaying ocular toxicity, we tested the possibility that formate alone was

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responsible for the optic disc edema seen in methanol poisoning and that acidosis played either no role or only a secondary role in the development of the ocular lesion. We report the formation of marked optic disc edema in every monkey treated with sodium formate, where arterial blood pH was within physiologic limits, and we wish to draw attention to the fact that the lesions produced by formate were essentially identical to those seen previously when methanol was administered to monkeys (Martin-Amat *et al.*, 1977a; Hayreh *et al.*, 1977; Baumbach *et al.*, 1977).

METHODS

Male rhesus monkeys (*Maccaca mulatta*) weighing from 3.2 to 5.5 kg were intoxicated by intravenous formate infusion. Formate buffers [sodium formate:formic acid, 10:1 (0.5 M)] were infused after a loading dose of 1.25 mmol/kg sodium formate. The rate of infusion was calculated to produce concentrations of formate similar to those seen in methanol-intoxicated monkeys in which ocular toxicity was produced (Martin-Amat *et al.*, 1977a). In general, the rate of infusion was about 3.1 mEq/kg/hr. Animals were restrained, and the femoral artery and vein were cannulated on one side. Indwelling catheters were fixed; the venous catheter was used for the infusion, and the arterial catheter was employed to sample for arterial blood formate, formaldehyde, pH, and pCO₂. Bicarbonate values were determined from arterial blood pH and pCO₂, according to the Henderson-Hasselbalch relationship. Formate was determined by the method described by Makar *et al.* (1975). Formaldehyde measurements were performed by withdrawing blood samples into syringes which contained solutions of semicarbazide, according to methods described by Tephly *et al.* (1961) and McMartin *et al.* (1977b). The animals were allowed to have fruit and water. Cerebrospinal fluid was taken prior to sacrifice for analysis of formate and formaldehyde. Pupillary reflexes were tested periodically throughout the experiment, and fundus photography was performed as described previously (Hayreh *et al.*, 1977). Four formate-intoxicated monkeys and two control monkeys were employed in studies where histopathological evaluation of the retina, optic disc, and optic nerve was made. Tissue fixation was accomplished by intracardiac perfusion of fixative, as described previously (Baumbach *et al.*, 1977; Martin-Amat *et al.*, 1977b). Histological analyses were performed as described by the previously mentioned investigators.

RESULTS

All findings coincided with those described previously when methanol was administered to monkeys (McMartin *et al.*, 1975; Martin-Amat *et al.*, 1977a; Hayreh *et al.*, 1977; Baumbach *et al.*, 1977). After 10 hr all experimental animals accumulated formate to blood concentrations ranging between 10 and 30 mEq/liter. In general, there was a correlation between rate of onset, degree of ocular toxicity, and concentration of formate in the blood. Generally, the onset of ocular toxicity occurred more rapidly in the formate-treated animals than in animals which had received methanol in previous studies (Martin-Amat *et al.*, 1977a; Hayreh *et al.*, 1977). Blood pH values were maintained between 7.4 and 7.6 in all experimental animals. Table 1 shows the maximal value of formate in the blood achieved in various animals treated with formate, as well

OCULAR FUNCTION AND OPHTHALMOSC

Animal	Time after initiation of formate infusion (hr)	Maximum blood conc (mEq/l)
1	39	30
2	50	30
3	41	20
4	25	10

* Monkeys received formate (3.1 mEq/kg/hr)

as the clinical observations for each formate-treated animal, and in monkeys between 24 and 48 hr after the onset of

Figures 1 and 2 are fundus photographs taken at 24 and 48 hr after formate treatment. The appearance of the optic disc was as marked as that seen in methanol poisoning, and essentially identical to those observed previously (Martin-Amat *et al.*, 1977).



FIG. 1. Fundus photograph of rhesus monkey showing normal appearance of the optic nerve head (c)

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TABLE 1
OCULAR FUNCTION AND OPHTHALMOSCOPIC CHANGES IN FORMATE-INTOXICATED RHESUS MONKEYS^a

Animal	Time after initiation of formate infusion (hr)	Maximum formate blood concentrations (mEq/liter)	Clinical observations	
			Pupillary reflex	Fundus changes
1	39	34	No response mydriasis 7 mm	Moderate optic disc edema with retinal edema
2	50	30	No response mydriasis 8 mm	Severe optic disc edema
3	41	20	No response mydriasis 8 mm	Severe optic disc edema
4	25	12	Normal 3 mm	Moderate optic disc edema

^a Monkeys received formate (3.1 mEq/kg/hr) intravenously.

as the clinical observations for each animal. Pupillary reflexes were rapidly altered in formate-treated animals, and in most animals no response to light was observed between 24 and 48 hr after the onset of formate infusion.

Figures 1 and 2 are fundus photographs of a representative monkey, 1 week prior to and 24 hr after formate treatment. Marked optic disc edema was observed (Fig. 2) and was as marked as that seen in methanol-treated monkeys (Fig. 3). The findings were essentially identical to those observed previously (Hayreh *et al.*, 1977; Baumbach *et al.*, 1977).



FIG. 1. Fundus photograph of rhesus monkey, 1 week prior to initiation of formate administration. Notice normal appearance of the optic nerve head (optic disc), vessels, and retina.

Light microscopic evaluation of the optic disc area revealed severe edema localized mainly in the prelaminar region. The lesions were mainly in the central portion of the proximal part of the nerve, but, in general, the lesions did not continue to the distal part

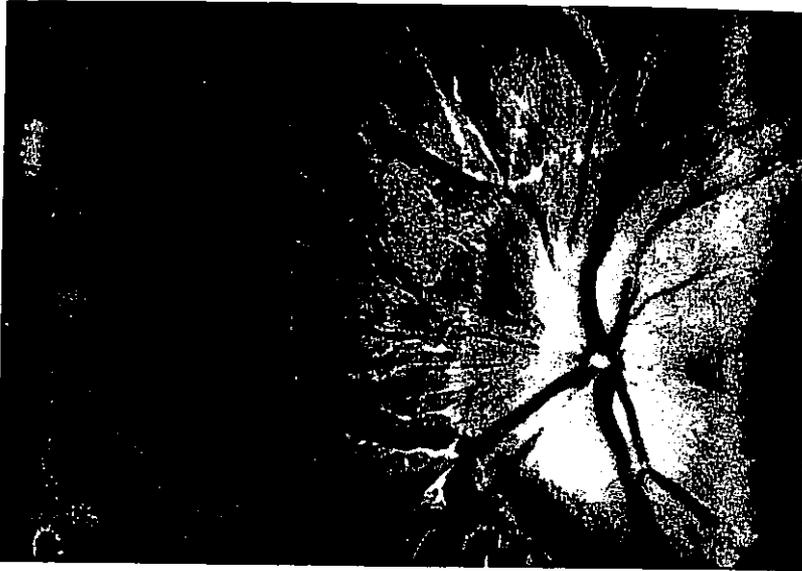


FIG. 2. Fundus photograph of rhesus monkey 41 hr after initiation of formate administration (same animal as in Fig. 1). Blurring of the optic disc (optic disc edema) is evident.

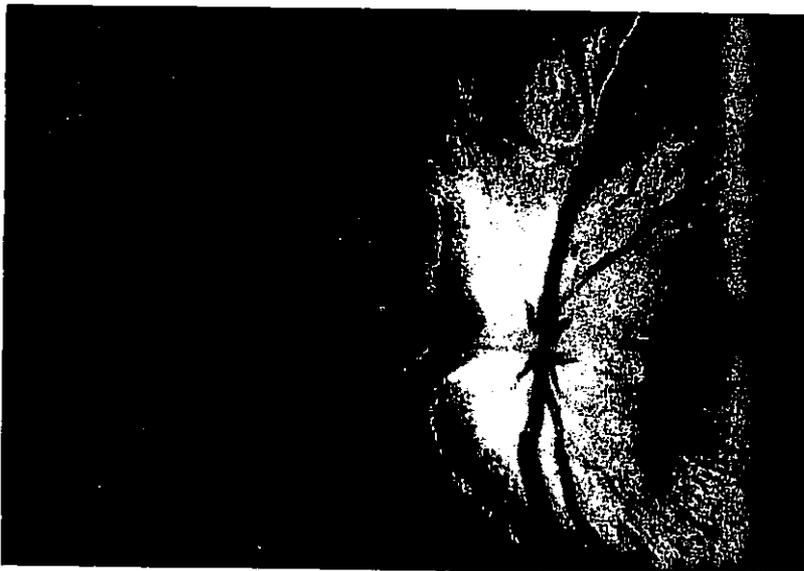


FIG. 3. Fundus photograph of methanol-intoxicated rhesus monkey 67 hr after initiation of methanol administration as described by Martin-Amat *et al.* (1977a). As in Fig. 2 there is blurring of the optic disc (less extensive).

of the optic nerve. These results are in agreement with those of Baumbach *et al.* (1977), who reported that the optic ganglion cell layer, was completely normal in methanol-poisoned monkeys (Baumbach *et al.*, 1977).



FIG. 4. Light microscopic longitudinal section of the optic nerve head showing normal appearance in the optic nerve head.

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 McMartin *et al.* (1977b) and Makar *et al.* (1977c) reported that in severe methanol poisoning, where formaldehyde appeared in blood, both formaldehyde and formic acid were present in methanol-poisoned monkeys (animals with severe methanol poisoning). The accumulation of formaldehyde was of the order of 100 mg/100 ml (McMartin *et al.*, 1977b). These observations may not be responsible for the ocular toxicity (McMartin *et al.*, 1977b). It was expected that formaldehyde would be metabolized *in vivo*, since formate was rapidly metabolized

of the optic nerve. These results are seen in Figs. 4 and 5. The retina, including the ganglion cell layer, was completely normal, as was described in methanol-poisoned monkeys (Baumbach *et al.*, 1977).



FIG. 4. Light microscopic longitudinal section of the optic nerve head of an untreated rhesus monkey. Notice normal appearance in the optic nerve head. Magnification, 160x.

DISCUSSION

McMartin *et al.* (1977b) and Makar and Tephly (1977) showed that, in animals with severe methanol poisoning, where formate blood concentrations were high, no formaldehyde appeared in blood, body fluids, or tissues. Even in folate-deficient, methanol-poisoned monkeys (animals which are profoundly sensitive to methanol), no accumulation of formaldehyde was observed in any sample of body fluid or tissue (McMartin *et al.*, 1977b). These observations led to the conclusion that formaldehyde may not be responsible for the ocular toxicity seen in methanol poisoning (Martin-Amat *et al.*, 1977b). It was expected that formate would not be converted to formaldehyde *in vivo*, since formate was rapidly metabolized to CO₂ in the rat (Palese and Tephly, 1975)

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and, in the monkey, the pathway for formate oxidation to CO_2 , appeared to be similar to that observed in the rat, although somewhat reduced quantitatively (McMartin *et al.*, 1977a). Formaldehyde was not detected in any body fluids or tissues such as blood, cerebrospinal fluid, or liver. These results were expected and point again to the inability to associate optic nerve toxicity seen in methanol poisoning with an excess, or presence, of formaldehyde. Formate does produce optic nerve toxicity, as seen in methanol



FIG. 5. Light microscopic longitudinal section of the optic nerve head of a formate-intoxicated rhesus monkey 53 hr after initiation of formate administration. Empty round spaces are evident. Magnification, 160x.

poisoning in the monkey. This was surprising but consistent. Formate produces its toxicity apart from the acidotic state which accompanies and complicates the methanol poisoning syndrome in monkeys and humans. Thus, formate infusion at physiological pH leads to pupillary reflex changes, optic disc edema, and optic nerve lesions characterized by intraaxonal swelling and mitochondrial disruption. Recent evidence suggests that optic disc edema originated by different causes is related to the status of axoplasmic flow (Minckler *et al.*, 1976; Tso and Hayreh, 1977).

The mechanism of formate toxicity is unknown, but a working hypothesis has been

suggested (Martin-Amat *et al.*, 1977). Oxidative phosphorylation by formate activity. Recent observations (Nicolini *et al.*, 1977) that inhibiting cytochrome oxidase activity in this study appear to be high (5–30%) in the cerebrospinal fluid in the curare-anesthetized rhesus monkeys (Martin-Amat *et al.*, 1977). Inhibition of energy processes by formate activity, may be directly or indirectly, in both methanol-poisoned and formate-

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suggested (Martin-Amat *et al.*, 1977a). The explanation centers around the inhibition of oxidative phosphorylation by formate based on the inhibition of cytochrome oxidase activity. Recent observations (Nicholls, 1975) indicate that formate is capable of inhibiting cytochrome oxidase activity. Although inhibitory concentrations of formate in this study appear to be high (5–30 mM), concentrations of formate achieved in blood and cerebrospinal fluid in the current studies and in previous methanol-intoxicated rhesus monkeys (Martin-Amat *et al.*, 1977a) appear to be within the limits used. The inhibition of energy processes by formate, through effects on cytochrome oxidase activity, may be directly or indirectly involved in producing the ocular toxicity seen in both methanol-poisoned and formate-intoxicated monkeys.

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SHORT

Acute Toxicity of Polychlorinated

Acute Toxicity of Polychlorinated
Toxicol. Appl. Pharmacol. **45**, 209-
 given synthesized polychlorinated dibenzodioxin
 The oral LD₅₀ was approximately 200 mg/kg. Mice
 died, hepatomegaly and atrophy of the thymus
 and dermal alterations also occurred. Microscopic
 necrotic foci accompanied by cellular degeneration
 Ultrastructural alterations of hepatocytes
 in lipid droplets and moderate hyperplasia
 these results, it was concluded that the toxicity
 associated with 2,3,7,8-tetrachlorodibenzo-

Since reports of the identification of polychlorinated dibenzodioxin impurities of two European polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB) American PCB (Bowes *et al.*, 1975) and Japanese PCB (Nagayama *et al.*, 1975), as well as the presence of polychlorinated dibenzodioxin in rice oil (Nagayama *et al.*, 1975), the problem has become of great concern. Rice oil has about 10 ppb in the adipose tissue of mice fed commercial rice oil contaminated with polychlorinated dibenzodioxin (Nagayama *et al.*, 1977), and was found in normal subjects at a concentration of 100 pg/g (Nagayama *et al.*, 1977). These findings indicate a need to monitor and the PCDF contaminants.

While many toxicological studies have been conducted on polychlorinated dibenzo-*p*-dioxins (PCDD), which are polychlorinated dibenzofurans, a few reports on the toxicity of pure polychlorinated dibenzofurans (PCDF) have been undertaken, therefore, to investigate

The PCDF used was synthesized from 42% tetrachlorodibenzofurans, 54% pentachlorodibenzofurans, and 4% hexachlorodibenzofurans, by gas chromatography (Nagayama *et al.*, 1975). Olive oil solutions of the test material were prepared.

Sixty 8-week-old CF-1 mice, male, were given single doses of PCDF via gavage (10 mg/kg), or intraperitoneally (10 to