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ScienceDirect
Journal of Nutritional Biochemistry 21 (2010) 147–152
Journal of Nutritional Biochemistry

Yogurt protects against growth retardation in weanling rats fed diets high in phytic acid☆

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Received 23 May 2008; received in revised form 24 November 2008; accepted 10 December 2008

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine the effects of adding yogurt to animal diets that were high in phytic acid (PA) and adequate in zinc (38 μg Zn/g). The PA:Zn molar ratio was 60:1. Zinc status was determined by documenting growth and measuring the zinc concentration in bone (tibia) and plasma. For 25 days, six groups (n=6) of Sprague–Dawley weanling rats were fed one of six AIN-76 diets. Half of the diets contained PA. Four of the diets contained yogurt with either active or heat-treated (inactive) cultures added at 25% of the diet. The diets were as follows: (a) AIN, (b) AIN with active yogurt, (c) AIN and inactive yogurt, (d) AIN with PA, (e) AIN with PA plus active yogurt and (f) AIN with PA plus inactive yogurt. Body weight, weight gain and zinc concentration in bone and plasma were measured, and food efficiency ratio was calculated. Rats fed diets with PA and yogurt had normal growth compared to the control group. Growth retardation was evident in the group fed the diet with PA and no yogurt. This group had significantly lower body weight compared to all other groups (P<.05). Rats fed diets with PA, with or without yogurt, had significantly lower zinc concentration in bone and plasma (P<.05). Adding yogurt to diets high in PA resulted in normal growth in weanling rats; however, zinc concentration in bone and plasma was still suboptimal.

Keywords: Zinc; Yogurt; Phytic acid; Zinc status; Zinc absorption

1. Introduction

Zinc deficiency develops as a result of poor zinc bioavailability as well as an inadequate dietary intake of zinc [1–10]. Diets composed primarily of plant products contain inhibitors of mineral absorption, such as phytic acid or phytate (PA), polyphenols, oxalate and fiber, with PA being the most potent inhibitor of zinc absorption [2–10]. PA, found in products made from soy, peanuts, whole grain cereals, rice, wheat and corn, reduces the amount of zinc available for absorption by binding with zinc in an insoluble complex in the gastrointestinal tract [2–7]. Rats fed diets that contain large amounts of PA have impaired zinc absorption, growth retardation and compromised zinc status [3–6,8]. In humans, PA plays a similar role in poor zinc bioavailability such that humans consuming a diet composed primarily of plant products require a higher daily zinc intake [9–13].

Zinc is an essential trace mineral required for normal growth, protein metabolism, the function of zinc metalloenzymes and immune function [1]. Zinc deficiency in animals causes anorexia, weight loss, poor food efficiency and growth retardation [1,2,14]. In humans, symptoms of zinc deficiency include stunted growth, hypogonadism, low birth weight, alopecia, skin lesions, immune deficiencies, night blindness, impaired taste and appetite, poor wound healing, diarrhea, depressed mental function and behavioral disturbances [1,2,15].

Various agricultural, food-based and dietary strategies, such as plant genetics, biofortification of plant-based staple foods, aquaculture, food processing procedures and consumption of animal products, have been implemented to limit

☆ Financial support: Veterans Administration Career Development Award, Veterans Administration Merit Review Award, NIH R01 AA10496 and NIH R01 AA10762.
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doi:10.1016/j.jnutbio.2008.12.005

Table 1
Composition of AIN-76 basal diet (ICN Nutritional Biochemicals/MP Biomedicals)

Ingredient	%
Sucrose	50.0
Casein purified high nitrogen	20.0
Cornstarch	15.0
Fiber (Alphacel non-nutritive bulk)	5.0
Corn oil	5.0
AIN-76 mineral mix[a]	3.5
AIN-76 vitamin mix[b]	1.0
DL-Methionine	0.3
Choline bitartrate	0.2

[a] Mineral mixture (in grams per kilogram of mixture): calcium phosphate dibasic, 500; potassium citrate monohydrate, 220; sodium chloride, 74; potassium sulfate, 52; magnesium oxide, 24; ferric citrate (16–17% Fe), 6; manganous carbonate (43–48% Mn), 3.5; zinc carbonate (70% ZnO), 1.6; chromium potassium sulfate, 0.55; cupric carbonate (53–55% Cu), 0.3; potassium iodate, 0.01; sodium selenite, 0.01; sucrose (finely powdered), 118.

[b] Vitamin mixture (per kilogram of mixture): pyridoxine hydrochloride, 700 mg; thiamine hydrochloride, 600 mg; riboflavin, 600 mg; cholecalciferol, 2.5 mg; folic acid, 200 mg; D-biotin, 20 mg; menaquinone, 5 mg; cyanocobalamin, 1 mg; DL-alpha-tocopherol acetate (250 IU/g), 20 g; nicotinic acid, 3.0 g; D-calcium pantothenate, 1.6 g; retinyl palmitate, 1.6 g; sucrose (finely powdered), 972.9 g.

PA's zinc binding ability and improve zinc bioavailability [16–19]. Following such procedures, as when bread [20–22] or sorghum products are fermented [5,23] or leavened [22] or oats are malted and soaked [24], zinc absorption improved.

Yogurt is a fermented dairy product produced with the organisms *Lactobacillus bulgaricus* and *Streptococcus thermophilus*. The nutritive value of yogurt reflects that of milk, although the protein and carbohydrate in yogurt are usually more digestible [25,26]. In most animal studies, yogurt increased growth and food efficiency in normal rats compared to normal rats fed milk or other unfermented dairy products [27,28]. A recent human study showed that when milk or yogurt was added to plant-based diets, zinc absorption was increased [29]. This informative study in adults was undertaken at that stage of the life cycle when all growth has been completed.

The purpose of this study was to determine the effects of adding yogurt to animal diets that were high in PA and adequate in zinc (38 mg Zn/g). The PA:Zn molar ratio was 60:1. In rats, growth and zinc concentrations of bone and blood are indicators of zinc status [1,2,14]. The most obvious indicator of zinc status is normal growth in the young of any species [15].

2. Methods and materials

2.1. Animals

Weanling male Sprague–Dawley rats (Harlan Sprague–Dawley Inc., Indianapolis, IN) with initial weights of 57–61 g were housed individually in stainless steel wire-bottom cages in a temperature-controlled room (22±0.5°C) with a 12-h light/dark cycle. During a 4-day adjustment period, all rats were trained to eat between 0800 and 1200 h. This study was approved and performed in accordance with the guidelines for the care and use of laboratory animals with both the University of Kentucky's Internal Animal Care and Use Committee and the Veterans Administration Medical Center in Lexington, KY.

2.2. Diets

All rats had free access to the AIN-76 purified diet (Table 1) (ICN Biochemicals/MP Biomedicals, Solon, OH) and variations thereof. Zinc content of the diets was 38 μg Zn/g (adequate). Sodium phytate (Sigma Chemical Co., St. Louis, MO) was added to the zinc-adequate diet for a PA/Zn molar ratio of 60:1. Yogurt was made at the University of Kentucky Dairy Laboratory using plain Dannon yogurt as the fermentation starter. Cultured yogurt contained 20% solids (25 μg Zn/g). Diets were prepared such that calorie and zinc content were not significantly different.

2.3. General procedures

Rats were divided randomly into six groups (n=6). For 25 days, six groups of weanling rats (n=6) were fed one of six AIN-76 diets. Half of the diets contained PA. Four of the diets contained yogurt with either active or heat-treated (inactive) cultures being substituted for 25% of the AIN diet. See Table 2 for diet descriptions and codes for treatment groups.

Diets were placed in shallow glass food cups with stainless steel follow-through disks to reduce food spills. To prevent spoilage, yogurt was added to specific diets immediately before the feeding period and cups were removed at the end of 4 h. Deionized water was freely available in plastic bottles with silicone stoppers. Food consumption and weight gain were recorded throughout the experiment.

All rats were humanely killed on Day 26. Rats were deprived of food for 12 h, anesthetized with sodium pentobarbital and exsanguinated by cardiac puncture. Heparinized blood and tibia (bone) were collected for analyses.

2.4. Analytical methods

Tissue samples were prepared using a nitric acid–hydrogen peroxide wet digest as previously described [5]. Zinc, copper and iron concentrations in plasma, bone (tibia) and diets were determined by flame atomic absorption spectrophotometer (Perkin Elmer Model 5000, Norwalk, CT). Integration time was 2 s with an air-acetylene flame. Wavelength was set at 213.9 nm and spectral band width was 0.7 nm.

Table 2
Diet descriptions and codes for treatment groups

Group code	Diet description without PA	Group code	Diet description with PA
C	AIN control	CP	AIN control+PA
A	AIN+active yogurt	AP	AIN+active yogurt+PA
I	AIN+inactive yogurt	IP	AIN+inactive yogurt+PA

Table 3
Mean body weight for all groups

Group code	Mean body weight (g)					
	Day 0	Day 5	Day 10	Day 15	Day 20	Day 25
C (AIN control)	59.2±6.5	76.3±9.4	104.0±11.2[a]	126.5±10.4[a]	147.3±11.6[a]	178.7±15.0[a]
A (AIN+active yogurt)	59.0±7.2	81.8±10.9	109.3±11.0[a]	132.0±13.1[a]	154.0±15.6[a]	181.8±17.3[a]
I (AIN+inactive yogurt)	58.5±6.6	81.7±11.8	105.5±12.9[a]	129.3±13.0[a]	153.7±13.6[a]	179.8±16.2[a]
CP (AIN control +PA)	57.8±8.3	62.8±14.2	78.7±19.1[b]	97.0±23.9[b]	116.0±26.4[b]	138.7±29.8[b]
AP (AIN+active yogurt+PA)	57.5±8.4	78.3±13.9	102.8±15.4[a]	126.2±16.3[a]	148.0±19.3[a]	169.5±17.7[a]
IP (AIN+inactive yogurt+PA)	58.5±7.8	79.7±10.7	105.0±11.9[a]	128.0±15.4[a]	153.5±16.9[a]	177.0±20.6[a]

Values are means±S.D., n=6 for each group.
Within columns, values having different superscripts are significantly different, P<.05.
Columns with no superscripts indicate nonsignificant ANOVA F test for comparing group means at the corresponding time point.

2.5. Statistical methods

A repeated measure analysis of variance (ANOVA) with time as a repeated measure (within-subject) factor and treatment group as a between-subjects factor was conducted for body weight, weight gain, and food efficiency ratios (FERs). The main effects of time and group and the interaction between time and group were included in the model and tested for significance using Wilks' Lambda F multivariate test. For outcomes with a significant interaction effect, the one-way ANOVA with group as the only effect in the model was conducted for each time point. If the F test was significant, the pairwise comparisons between the group means were performed. Body zinc was measured only once, at the end of the experiment, and therefore, a one-way ANOVA with treatment group as the only factor in the analysis was conducted to compare the body zinc means across groups. SPSS version 15 was used for the analysis. Statistical significance was determined by P<.05.

3. Results

Data are reported by 5-day periods for the 25 days during which the rat groups received the experimental diets. At baseline, the mean (±S.D.) body weight for all rats was 58.42±6.9 g. The group means were not significantly different at the start of the study (Table 3).

The interaction between time and group was significant for all outcomes: body weight, weight gain and FERs, implying that the differences between groups varied with time. Following the one-way ANOVA analyses, the results were as follows.

3.1. Body weight

As shown in Table 3, there were no statistically significant differences among the groups in body weight at baseline or at the end of the first 5-day study period [baseline: F(5,30)=0.045, P=.999; 5 days: F(5,30)=2.145, P=.087]. At the end of the study, the control group with PA (CP) had a significantly lower mean body weight than that of all other groups (P<.05).

3.2. Weight gain

As to weight gain, there were significant differences among groups during the first two 5-day periods [first period: F(5,30)=8.326, P<.001; second period: F(5,30)=10.594, P<.001]. The control group with PA (CP) gained significantly less weight than all other groups (P<.002). At the end of the fifth period, the control group (C) and the AIN+active yogurt (A) had a significantly greater mean weight gain than all groups with PA. The group receiving AIN+inactive yogurt (I) had a mean weight gain higher than groups receiving PA, but the differences were not statistically significant (Table 4).

3.3. Food efficiency ratios

The FER, a calculated value, is defined as the amount of food (in grams) required to produce a 1-g increase in body

Table 4
Mean weight gain per 5-day period for all groups

Group code	Mean weight gain (g) per 5-day period				
	Day 5	Day 10	Day 15	Day 20	Day 25
C (AIN control)	17.2±3.9[a]	27.7±2.3[a]	22.5±1.9	20.8±4.5	31.3±5.6[a]
A (AIN+active yogurt)	22.8±4.4[a]	27.5±2.3[a]	22.7±3.8	22.0±3.1	27.8±2.9[ab]
I (AIN+inactive yogurt)	23.2±6.3[a]	24.3±3.1[a]	23.3±3.1	24.3±1.2	26.2±4.3[abc]
CP (AIN control +PA)	6.2±7.3[b]	16.2±5.4[b]	18.3±6.0	19.0±5.9	22.7±5.5[bc]
AP (AIN+active yogurt+PA)	20.8±5.9[a]	24.5±3.0[a]	23.3±2.4	21.8±4.1	21.5±2.3[c]
IP (AIN+inactive yogurt+PA)	21.2±4.1[a]	25.3±1.5[a]	23.0±5.2	25.5±3.4	23.5±4.9[bc]

Values are means±S.D., n=6 for each group.
Within columns, values having different superscripts are significantly different, P<.05.
Columns with no superscripts indicate nonsignificant ANOVA F test for comparing group means at the corresponding time point.

Table 5
Mean FERs per 5-day period for all groups

Group code	Mean FER per 5-day period				
	Day 5	Day 10	Day 15	Day 20	Day 25
C (AIN control)	2.2±0.3	2.1±0.4[a]	2.5±0.3	3.2±0.7[ac]	2.4±0.2[a]
A (AIN+active yogurt)	1.5±0.1	1.7±0.1[a]	2.3±0.2	2.7±0.2[b]	2.4±0.2[a]
I (AIN+inactive yogurt)	1.5±0.3	1.9±0.2[a]	2.3±0.2	2.5±0.1[b]	2.6±0.3[ac]
CP (AIN control +PA)	3.5±5.0	3.0±1.3[b]	2.7±0.9	2.8±0.6[bc]	2.6±0.4[ac]
AP (AIN+active yogurt+PA)	1.5±0.4	1.8±0.1[a]	2.2±0.2	2.7±0.4[b]	2.9±0.4[bc]
IP (AIN+inactive yogurt+PA)	1.5±0.1	1.8±0.1[a]	2.3±0.4	2.4±0.2[b]	2.9±0.3[bc]

Values are means±S.D., n=6 for each group.
Within columns, values having different superscripts are significantly different, P<.05.
Columns with no superscripts indicate nonsignificant ANOVA F test for comparing group means at the corresponding time point.

weight. By the second period (Day 10), the control group with PA (CP) had a significantly higher mean FER than all other groups, indicating that the rats in this group had to eat proportionally more food per gram of weight gain. For the remaining time periods, there were no definitive differences in FER among groups (Table 5).

3.4. Bone and plasma mineral concentrations

The rat groups fed diets containing PA (CP, AP, IP) had lower mean bone and plasma zinc concentrations (P<.05) compared to groups fed diets without PA (Table 6). There were no significant differences for copper and iron in bone and plasma (data not shown).

4. Discussion

This study evaluated adding yogurt to rat diets high in PA in order to determine if yogurt would ameliorate the negative effects that PA has on normal growth and biochemical markers for zinc status. The most overt indicator of poor zinc status is growth retardation.

Our data showed that rats fed diets with PA, plus active or inactive yogurt, grew equally as well as rats fed diets without PA. Considering only the three groups with PA, the most important and totally unexpected outcome of the study was that the two groups of rats receiving yogurt and PA (AP, IP) grew decidedly better than the control group (CP) with PA alone (no yogurt). However, these same two groups with yogurt and PA (AP, IP) had no better zinc status, as measured by bone or plasma, than that of the control rats with PA (CP). Though the presence of yogurt in the diet did not improve zinc absorption, transport or storage, these data support the fact that the yogurt did contribute in some way to normal growth.

In this study, there are several important findings that emerged. First, rats fed diets with PA and added yogurt grew as well as control rats fed diets without PA. Yogurt often has been considered a food that provides numerous health benefits [25,26] due to changes brought about by the fermentation process [26–28]. The proteins in yogurt have been linked to a growth-stimulating factor, which was associated with *S. thermophilus* rather than fermentative changes in the milk [27,28,30]. It also has been suggested that the growth factor in yogurt was β-galactosidase, which would reduce the amount of undigested lactose in the intestine [27]. Reducing the level of lactose in milk has been shown to improve considerably the growth rate of animals [30,31]. There may be some intrinsic component of yogurt that, in part, allowed for normal growth in spite of suboptimal zinc absorption and status.

Second, the data showed that rats fed diets with PA and added yogurt had no better zinc status, as measured by bone and zinc concentration, than rats fed diets with PA alone. It would be expected that the bone (tibia) zinc, a storage site, would be lower in animals fed diets with PA, with available zinc being used for growth. Likewise, it would be expected that the bone zinc in the group not receiving yogurt would be even lower, and this was not true.

Poor zinc bioavailability as a result of PA in the diet in both animal and human studies has been studied and reviewed [2–13]. The PA:Zn molar ratio has been proposed as a reliable indicator of zinc bioavailability from PA-rich foods. A PA:Zn molar ratio of 10:1 to 15:1 induced marginal zinc deficiency, and at 20:1, growth rates were reduced [4].

Procedures that degrade PA have been studied as a means to improve zinc absorption and reduce the PA:zinc molar ratio [5,16–23]. Rats fed fermented sorghum gruel [5] or meal [23] had significantly better zinc absorption than rats

Table 6
Zinc concentrations in bone and plasma

Group code	Bone (tibia) zinc (μg/g)	Plasma zinc (μg/dl)
C (AIN control)	209.96±11.67[a]	171.10±7.02[a]
A (AIN+active yogurt)	199.40±6.85[a]	167.20±11.51[a]
I (AIN+inactive yogurt)	206.23±9.97[a]	160.93±8.55[a]
CP (AIN control+PA)	137.37±22.19[b]	141.00±12.34[b]
AP (AIN+active yogurt+PA)	127.98±7.03[b]	134.80±6.69[b]
IP (AIN+inactive yogurt+PA)	137.20±10.1[b]	139.10±11.44[b]

Values are means±S.D., n=6 for each group.
Within columns, values having different superscripts are significantly different, P<.05.

fed other nonfermented products. In these studies, fermentation reduced the PA:Zn ratio from 45 in the raw sorghum seeds to 24 in the fermentation product. Zinc absorption was greatly improved in rats fed whole wheat bread fermented with a sourdough starter compared to rats fed whole wheat bread fermented with yeast [20].

Our study used diets adequate in zinc (38 μg Zn/g) with PA added for a PA:Zn molar ratio of 60:1. The rats consuming a diet with PA and yogurt had normal growth but suboptimal zinc concentrations in bone and plasma. In contrast to previous studies by others [2,7,10,32], in our study, yogurt did not facilitate zinc absorption. The reason for this result remains unclear.

Animals have demonstrated the ability to adapt to high levels of PA in the diet [10,33]. In our study, there was a positive effect of yogurt on FERs during the first 10 days of the study. By the end of the study, however, there were no differences in FERs among groups. These findings suggest that the rats adapted to the diets with PA over time and functioned adequately with lower zinc concentrations. Rats [34] and humans have demonstrated some ability to adapt to lower zinc stores. Essatara et al. [35] reported plasma zinc concentrations in Moroccan subjects that were lower than the range accepted as normal for subjects in the United States. Moroccan subjects ate diets high in PA (PA:Zn molar ratio range from 33 to 47), yet they had normal growth and appeared healthy. Perhaps the fermented foods in their diet accounted for normal growth in spite of lower plasma zinc concentrations.

Third, and unique to this study, the effects of active versus heat-treated (inactive) yogurt were compared. The bacteria-induced fermentation process in yogurt reduces lactose to absorbable glucose, galactose and lactic acid [36–38]. Organic acids, such as lactic acid, have been shown to enhance zinc absorption by forming soluble ligands with zinc [2,7,10,32]. Lactic acid bacteria in sourdough cultures have been shown to degrade PA [39], and lactic acid fermentation increased some mineral solubility in vitro [21,22]. In our study, however, the microbial or bacterial action could not be the factor affecting the nutrient value of the respective diets, since both the active and inactive yogurt gave similar results.

Thus, we conclude that there is some component in yogurt (both active and heat-treated) or some mechanism by which yogurt facilitates normal growth and at the same time offsets the PA effects, allowing for normally developed rats, which showed suboptimal zinc status and not true zinc deficiency. Further research is needed to identify the growth-promoting factor(s) in yogurt.

Acknowledgments

We wish to thank Helena Truszczynska, Ph.D., and Dr. Richard Kryscio, Ph.D., for their statistical help and Nancy Meyer, M.S., R.D., for her zinc expertise.

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