

Formononetin, an isoflavone, relaxes rat isolated aorta through endothelium-dependent and endothelium-independent pathways

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Received 6 February 2009; received in revised form 10 March 2009; accepted 17 March 2009

Abstract

We evaluated the vasorelaxation effects of formononetin, an isoflavone/phytoestrogen found abundantly in *Astragalus mongholicus* Bunge, on rat isolated aorta and the underlying mechanisms involved. Cumulative administration of formononetin, genistein, daidzein and biochanin A relaxed phenylephrine-precontracted aorta. Formononetin and biochanin A caused a similar magnitude of relaxation whereas daidzein was least potent. Mechanical removal of endothelium, L-NAME (100 μ M) and methylene blue (10 μ M) suppressed formononetin-induced relaxation. Formononetin increased endothelial nitric oxide (NO) synthase (eNOS), but not inducible NO synthase, activity with an up-regulation of eNOS mRNA and p-eNOS^{Ser1177} protein expression. In endothelium-denuded preparations, formononetin-induced vasorelaxation was significantly reduced by glibenclamide (3 μ M) and iberiotoxin (100 nM), and a combination of glibenclamide (3 μ M) plus iberiotoxin (100 nM) abolished the relaxation. In contrast, formononetin-elicited endothelium-independent relaxation was not altered by ICI 182,780 (10 μ M, an estrogen receptor (ER α /ER β) antagonist) or mifepristone (10 μ M, a progesterone receptor antagonist). In single aortic smooth muscle cells, formononetin caused opening of iberiotoxin-sensitive Ca²⁺-activated K⁺ (BK_{Ca}) channels and glibenclamide-sensitive adenosine triphosphate (ATP)-dependent K⁺ (K_{ATP}) channels. Thus, our results suggest that formononetin caused vascular relaxation via endothelium/NO-dependent mechanism and endothelium-independent mechanism which involves the activation of BK_{Ca} and K_{ATP} channels.

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Keywords: Formononetin; Nitric oxide; Vasorelaxation; BK_{Ca} and K_{ATP} channels

1. Introduction

Cardiovascular disease is a major cause of death or disability in many developed countries. Smoking, high cholesterol and obesity are well-known risk factors of cardiovascular disease, and they are associated with decreased availability of endothelial cells-derived nitric oxide (NO) in the cardiovascular system. Isoflavones are phytoestrogens that have been gathering an increased interest in the areas of clinical nutrition and diseases prevention [1,2] especially for postmenopausal women in view of the some unfavorable consequences/potential risks (e.g., stroke and coronary heart disease) associated with the use of estrogen-like substances (so-called

hormone replacement therapy) [3]. Thus, there is an urgent need for estrogen alternatives (e.g., phytoestrogens) for providing beneficial cardiovascular effects. Recent studies provided evidence that isoflavones can restore endothelial dysfunction via an increase of NO generation [4–8].

Formononetin [7-hydroxy-3(4-methoxyphenyl)chromone (C₁₆H₁₂O₄) (Fig. 1)] is an isoflavonoid found abundantly in traditional Chinese medicine *Astragalus mongholicus* Bunge (known as Huang Qi in China and Ougi in Japan) and *Trifolium pratense* L. (red clover). They belong to the family *Leguminosae*. The extract of these herbs has been used clinically to treat different diseases including cardiovascular diseases in China for a long time [9–11]. In addition, formononetin possesses hypolipidemic properties [12], mammary gland proliferation function [13] and antioxidative and estrogenic effects [14]. The extract of *Astragalus membranaceus* has also been demonstrated to possess endothelium-dependent and endothelium-independent vasodilatory effects [15–17], and daidzein, a metabolite of formononetin formed in vivo, can relax rats' aorta and pulmonary artery [18–

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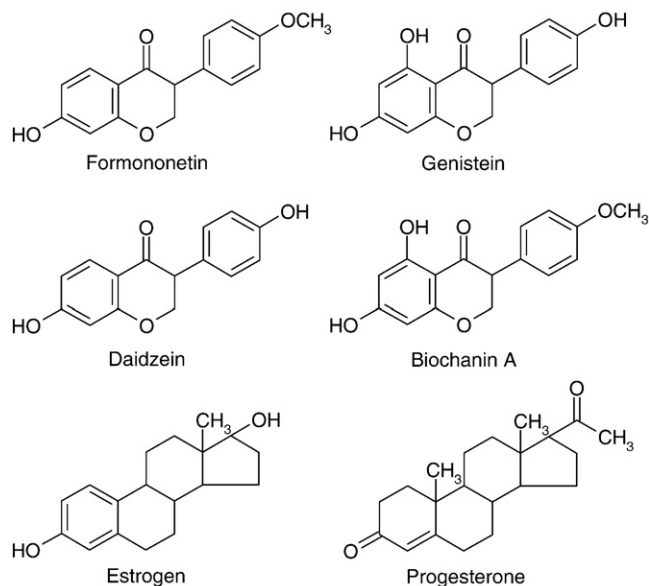


Fig. 1. Chemical structures of formononetin, genistein, daidzein, biochanin A, estrogen and progesterone.

20]. However, the underlying mechanisms of formononetin involved (especially its effects on ion channels modulation) in eliciting vasorelaxation has not been elucidated in details. Thus, in this study, we tested the hypothesis that formononetin-induced vascular relaxation involved the openings of K⁺ channels of the vascular smooth muscle. More importantly, as formononetin is a phytoestrogen which shares a chemical structure similar to estrogen/progesterone (Fig. 1), the participation of estrogen and progesterone receptors in mediating the vascular responses will be elucidated.

2. Material and methods

2.1. Drugs and chemicals

Formononetin was purchased from Acros Organics (Belgium) and the stock solution (100 mM) of formononetin was prepared in dimethyl sulphoxide and stored at -20°C until use. Genistein, daidzein, biochanin A, phenylephrine hydrochloride, acetylcholine hydrochloride (ACh), neostigmine hydrobromide, indomethacin, N ω -nitro-L-arginine methyl ester (L-NAME), methylene blue (MB), propranolol and prazosin were obtained from Sigma-Aldrich (St. Louis, MO, USA). 1400W; ICI 182,780; mifepristone; iberiotoxin and glibenclamide were purchased from Tocris Bioscience (Bristol, UK). Kits for the determination of NO levels, endothelial NO synthase (eNOS), inducible NO synthase (iNOS) were provided by Nanjing Jiancheng Bioengineering Company (Nanjing, PR China). Other chemicals used were analytical grade.

2.2. Arterial rings preparation

Male Sprague–Dawley rats (~250–300 g) were killed by cervical dislocation, and thoracic aortas were dissected from animals immediately. The thoracic aortas were cleared from connective tissues and cut into rings (3 mm in length) and immersed in Krebs' solution of the following composition (mM): NaCl 118, KCl 4.7, MgSO₄ 1.2, KH₂PO₄ 1.2, NaHCO₃ 25, glucose 11 and CaCl₂ 1.8 (pH 7.4). Care was taken not to touch the lumen of the thoracic aortas during dissection to ensure the endothelium intact, unless otherwise stated. The thoracic aortic rings were immersed in a 5-ml glass (water-jacketed) tissue baths containing Krebs' solution (37±1°C) aerated continuously with a gas mixture of 95% O₂ and 5% CO₂ (pH 7.4; 37±1°C). The thoracic aortic rings were mounted on L-shaped metal prongs, which were connected to a force

Table 1
The primer sequences used for real time RT-PCR experiments

Gene name	Forward primer	Reverse primer	Product size (bp)	Accession Number
eNOS	5'CGATTCTGGCAAGACCGATTAC3'	5'GTTGAGGACTTGTCCAACACT3'	159	U18336
GAPDH	5'TGCACCACCAACTGCTTAG3'	5'AGTGATGCAGGGATGATG3'	180	NM_017008

displacement MLT1030/D transducer (AD Instruments, NSW, Australia) coupled to the data acquisition programme (PowerLab 8SP, AD Instruments) for continuous recording of isometric tension changes. An optimal load of 10±1 mN (determined from our preliminary studies) was applied progressively (2 mN/min) to aortic rings. Then, tissues were allowed to equilibrate for 60 min under the optimal resting tension. During the equilibration period, tissues were washed with drug-free Krebs' solution every 15 min, and the resting tension was readjusted, if necessary, before commencing the experiments. After equilibration, the integrity of the aortic rings was confirmed with high K⁺ (65 mM) until two consecutive contractile responses were reproducible. To exclude the involvement of cyclo-oxygenase cascade, indomethacin (1 μM, a nonselective cyclo-oxygenase inhibitor) was included in the bath solution throughout the experiments. After equilibration, the aortic ring was challenged with phenylephrine (1 μM) to establish a sustained contraction (~20 mN) before formononetin and other drugs (genistein, daidzein and biochanin A) (0.1–100 μM) were added cumulatively to the organ baths. A completed (i.e., 100%) relaxation was considered when the phenylephrine-induced active tone returned to basal level.

The integrity of the functional endothelium was confirmed by acetylcholine (10 μM)-induced relaxation (>85%) on high K⁺ (30 mM) precontracted aortic preparations. In some studies, the successful removal of endothelium (by mechanical rubbing the lumen of the aorta with a blunted forceps) was considered when the acetylcholine (10 μM)-induced relaxation was <5%. In studies with manoeuvres such as endothelium denudation and administration of L-NAME, concentration of phenylephrine added was adjusted (0.35–0.6 μM) so as to achieve a comparable magnitude of contractile tone (~20 mN) as observed in endothelium-intact preparations in response to 1 μM phenylephrine challenge. Inhibitors employed in this study were added 30 min before phenylephrine administration and present throughout the experiments.

The Animal Experimentation Ethics Committee of The Chinese University of Hong Kong (Hong Kong SAR, PR China) approved all experiments performed in this study (approval no: 04/054/MIS). The recommendations from the Declaration of Helsinki and the internationally accepted principles for the use of experimental animals were adhered to. Every effort was made to limit animal suffering and to limit the number of animals used in these experiments.

2.3. Incubation of aortic rings

To evaluate the in vitro effect of formononetin on isolated aorta, the aortas (thoracic and abdominal) were excised and cleared of all adherent tissues in ice-cold phosphate-buffered saline (pH 7.4) under sterile conditions. The isolated aortas were placed in ice-cold Krebs' solution, washed three times in phosphate-buffered saline, and cut into segments of 1 cm long using a scalpel. Four aortic rings were obtained from each rat. The aortic rings were incubated in 24-well plate with physiological salt solution (2 ml per well) in the presence of 1 μM acetylcholine (plus 1 μM neostigmine, an anti-cholinesterase), formononetin (10 μM, 100 μM and 1 mM) or saline (served as control) under an atmosphere of 5% CO₂ and 95% O₂ at 37°C. After 2-h incubation, each segment was blotted dry and weighed and immediately stored at -80°C for NO synthase (NOS) activity assay or in liquid nitrogen for RNA and protein extraction.

2.4. NO content in culture medium and NOS activity of aortic rings

After 2 h of incubation, the medium (2 ml) of each well was collected in micro-centrifuge tubes and dried by vacuum freeze-drying. The pellets collected were redissolved in distilled water (300 μl). Nitric oxide content present in the medium was determined according to the Griess methods [21], and nitrite concentrations were determined at 550 nm using the standard solutions of sodium nitrite.

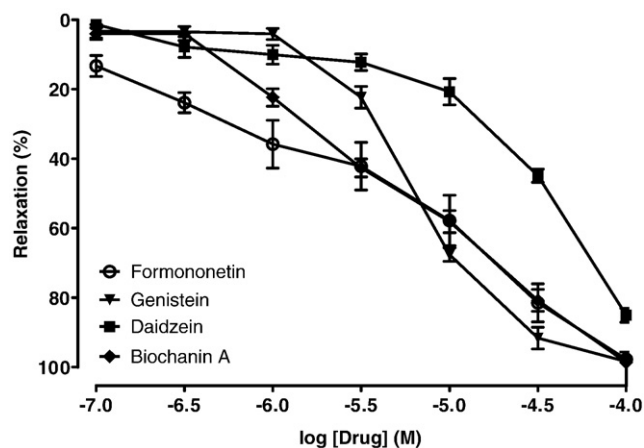


Fig. 2. Cumulative concentration-response curves of formononetin (○), genistein (▼), daidzein (■) and biochanin A (◆) in phenylephrine (1 mM) precontracted rat isolated thoracic aorta (endothelium intact). Data are expressed as means±S.E.M. (n=5–6).

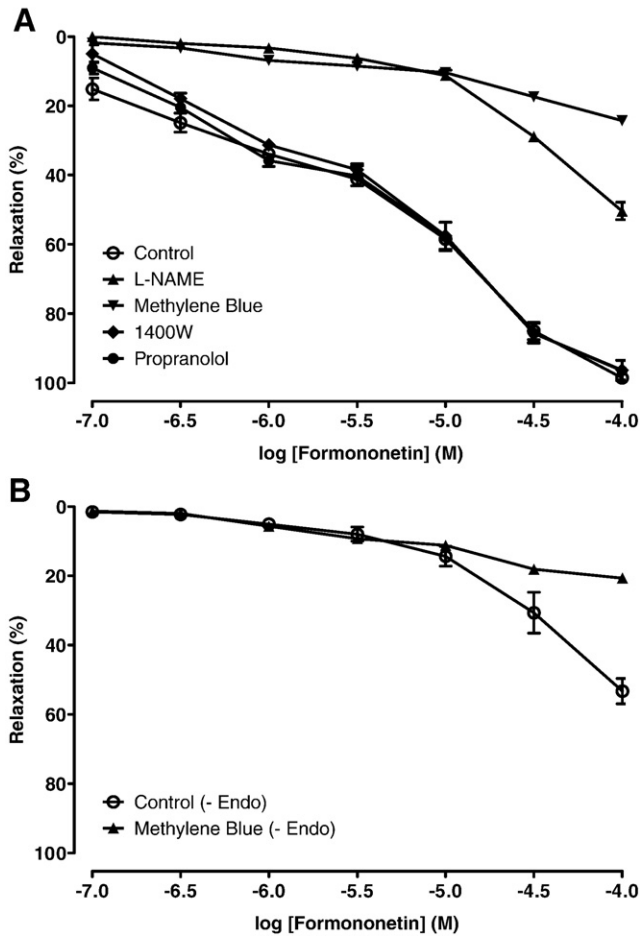


Fig. 3. (A). Effects of L-NAME (100 mM, ▲), methylene blue (10 μM, ▼), W1400 (1 μM, ◆) and propranolol (1 μM, ●) on formononetin-induced relaxation (control, ○) of phenylephrine precontracted rat isolated aorta (endothelium intact). (B) Effects of methylene blue (10 μM, ▲) on formononetin-induced relaxation (control, ○) of phenylephrine precontracted rat isolated aorta (endothelium denuded) (-Endo). Data are expressed as means±S.E.M. (n=5–6).

The NOS activity of isolated aorta was measured as described previously [22]. The frozen sample of aorta (weight=0.03–0.04 g) was homogenized in ice-cold saline [final concentration 10% (w/v)] and centrifuged (3000 rpm, 10 min). The supernatant collected was used for the determinations of total NOS (tNOS) and iNOS activities using kits following the instructions of manufactory. The protein content was evaluated according to Bradford methods. eNOS Activity was estimated (to measure the color change of reagent at 530 nm) as the difference between tNOS and iNOS. It is based on the fact that eNOS is a Ca²⁺-dependent isoform whereas iNOS is a Ca²⁺-independent isoform. Thus, the activity of iNOS was estimated in the presence of eNOS inhibitor (L-NAME) plus EGTA (2 mM, a Ca²⁺ chelator) [22]. The NOS activities measured were expressed in U/mg protein.

2.5. Isolation and Quantification of mRNA

To determine the gene expression levels, total RNA was isolated from aorta using TRIzol reagent (Molecular Research Center, Cincinnati, OH, USA). The RevertAid 1st Strand cDNA synthesis system for reverse transcriptase-polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR) (MBI Fermentas) with oligo(dT)₁₈ was used to obtain the cDNA (in 20 μl of RT-reaction mixture). Total reaction mixture (20 μl) containing 3 μl of the RT-reaction mixture and 0.2 μM of each primer set (Table 1) was prepared to determine eNOS mRNA expression using real time RT-PCR procedures [ABI PRISM 7000 Sequence Detection System with quantitative PCR SuperMix kit (Invitrogen)]. Expression levels of cDNA were compared to internal standard glyceraldehydes 3-phosphate dehydrogenase (GAPDH), a housekeeping gene, to correct for differences in the RNA quantity of samples used. The real-time PCR reaction procedures are as follows: 50°C for 2 min (uracil DNA glycosylase [UDG] incubation), 95°C for 10 min (UDG inactivation and DNA polymerase activation), then 40 PCR cycles which consisted of denaturation for 15 s at 95°C, annealing and extension for 60 s at 53°C. The second derivative maximum (log linear phase) for each amplification curve was determined using the GAPDH standard curve to calculate the amount of product generated. Each real-time RT-PCR reaction

was performed in triplicate. The expression levels of mRNA were expressed as the ratios of mRNA expression of NOS enzyme to that of GAPDH.

2.6. Western immunoblot analysis of phospho-eNOS and eNOS protein expression on thoracic aortas

To determine the protein expression levels, thoracic aortas from different treatment groups were homogenized in the presence of protease inhibitors to obtain extracts of proteins. Protein concentrations were determined using BCA (bicinchoninic

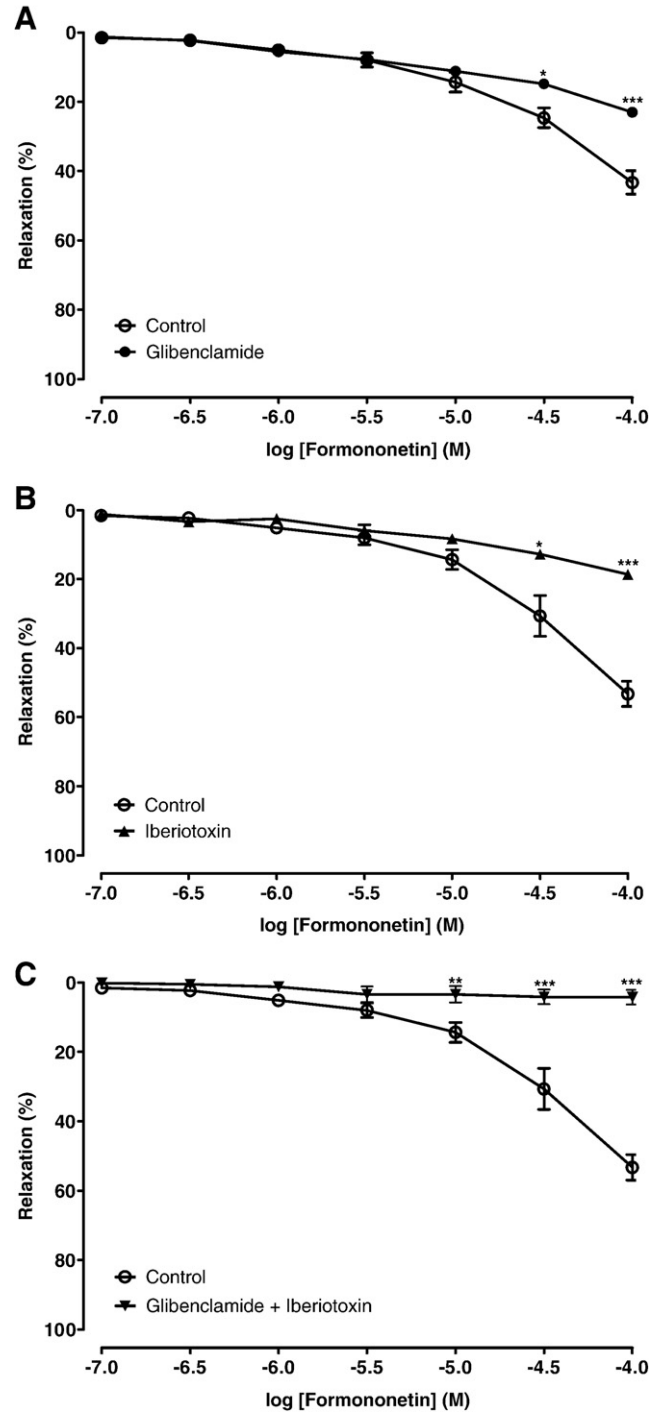


Fig. 4. Effects of (A) glibenclamide (3 mM, ●), (B) iberiotoxin (100 nM, ▲) and (C) a combination of glibenclamide (3 μM) plus iberiotoxin (100 nM) (▼) on formononetin-induced relaxation (control, ○) of phenylephrine precontracted rat isolated aorta (endothelium denuded). Data are expressed as means±S.E.M. (n=5–6). *P<0.05, **P<0.01 and ***P<0.001 compared to controls (○).

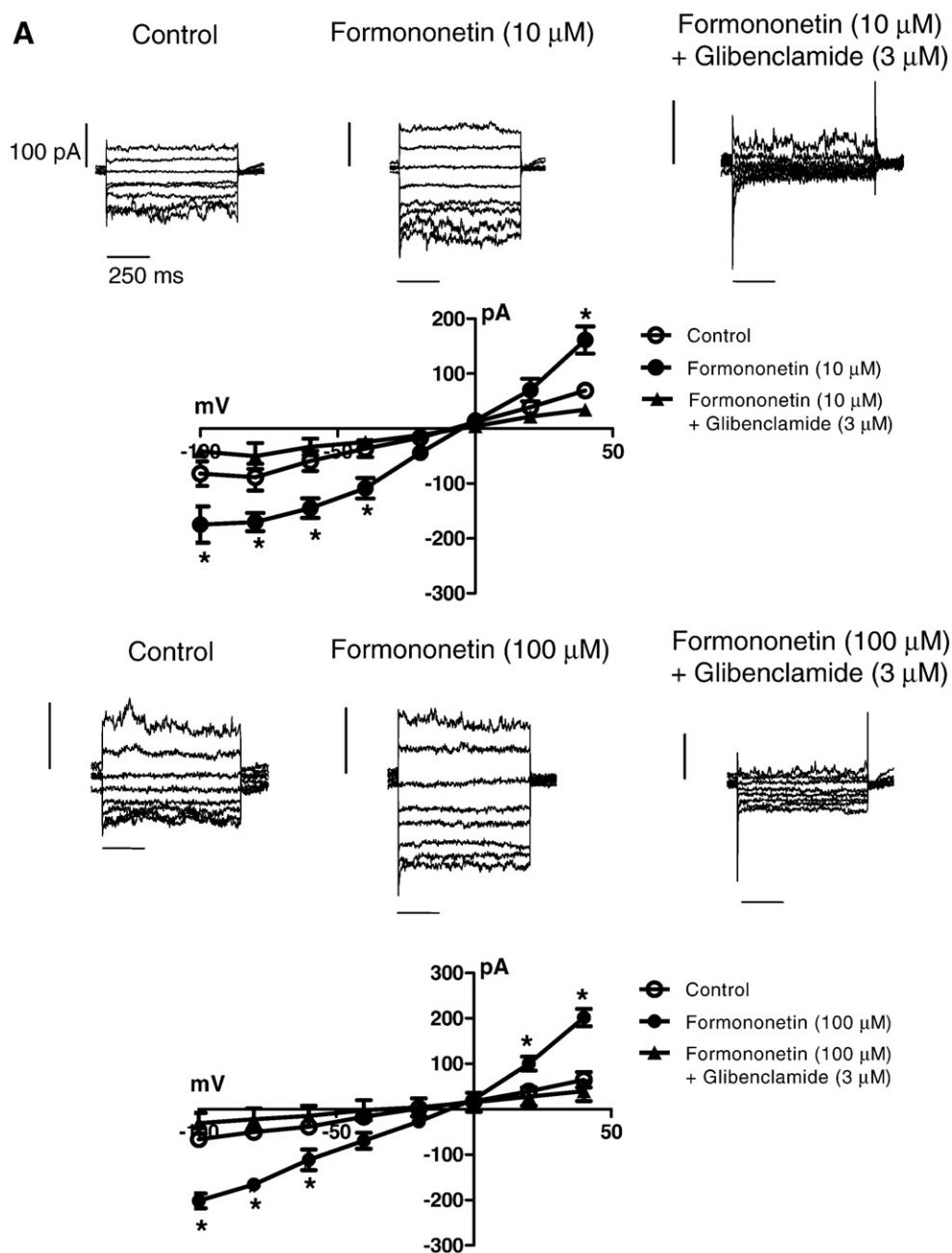


Fig. 5. Effects of formononetin on K_{ATP} channels (A) and BK_{Ca} (B) channels of rat aortic smooth muscle cells. (A) Insets show representative whole-cell K_{ATP} channels elicited with test potentials of -100 to $+40$ mV (a 20 -mV increment for a 600 -ms duration, 0.1 Hz) from a holding potential of -60 mV. Calibration bars: 100 pA and 250 ms. Pipette solution contained 100 nM ATP. Summary of the effects of glibenclamide (3 μ M), formononetin (10 μ M and 100 μ M) (with and without glibenclamide 3 μ M) on the current-voltage relationship of the whole-cell K_{ATP} channels of rat aortic smooth muscle cells. (B) Insets show representative whole-cell BK_{Ca} channels elicited with test potentials of -80 to $+80$ mV (a 20 -mV increment for a 500 -ms duration, 0.1 Hz) from a holding potential of -60 mV. Calibration bars: 400 pA and 250 ms. Pipette solution contained ~ 400 nM Ca^{2+} . Summary of the effects of iberiotoxin (100 nM), formononetin (10 μ M, 100 μ M and 1 mM) (with and without iberiotoxin 100 nM) on the current-voltage relationship of the whole-cell BK_{Ca} channels of rat aortic smooth muscle cells. Data are expressed as means \pm S.E.M. ($n=6$). * $P<0.05$ versus control.

acid) protein assay kit (Pierce, Rockford, IL, USA). Samples (25 μ g of protein per lane) were loaded onto a 10% sodium dodecyl sulfate-polyacrylamide electrophoresis gel. After electrophoresis (180 V, 60 min), the separated proteins were transferred (12 mA, 45 min) to polyvinylidene difluoride membrane (PerkinElmer Life Sciences, Boston, MA, USA). Nonspecific sites were blocked with 5% nonfat dry milk for 120 min, and the blots were then incubated with anti-phospho-eNOS^{Ser1177} antibody (Upstate, Lake, Placid, NY, USA) overnight at $4^{\circ}C$. Antirabbit HRP-conjugated IgG, $1:1,000$ (Bio-Rad, Hercules, CA, USA) was used to detect the binding of its correspondent antibody. Membranes were stripped and reblotted with anti-eNOS antibody, $1:10,000$ (Sigma-Aldrich, St. Louis, MO, USA) to verify an equal loading of protein in each lane. The protein expression was detected with Western Lightning Chemiluminescence Reagent Plus (PerkinElmer Life Sciences) and quantified using Scion Image (version 1.64) programme (National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, MD, USA).

2.7. Isolation of aortic smooth muscle cells and patch-clamp electrophysiology

Rat aorta (endothelium denuded) smooth muscle cells were enzymatically dissociated (using collagenase and papain) with methods as reported previously by our group [23–25] for single-cell patch-clamp electrophysiology experiments. Solutions (external bathing solutions and pipette solutions) and voltage protocols used for whole-cell recordings of BK_{Ca} and K_{ATP} channels were similar to our previous reports [24,25].

2.8. Statistical analysis

Data are expressed as means \pm S.E.M., and n denotes the number of replications for each data point. Relaxation was expressed as the percentage of the contraction elicited

B

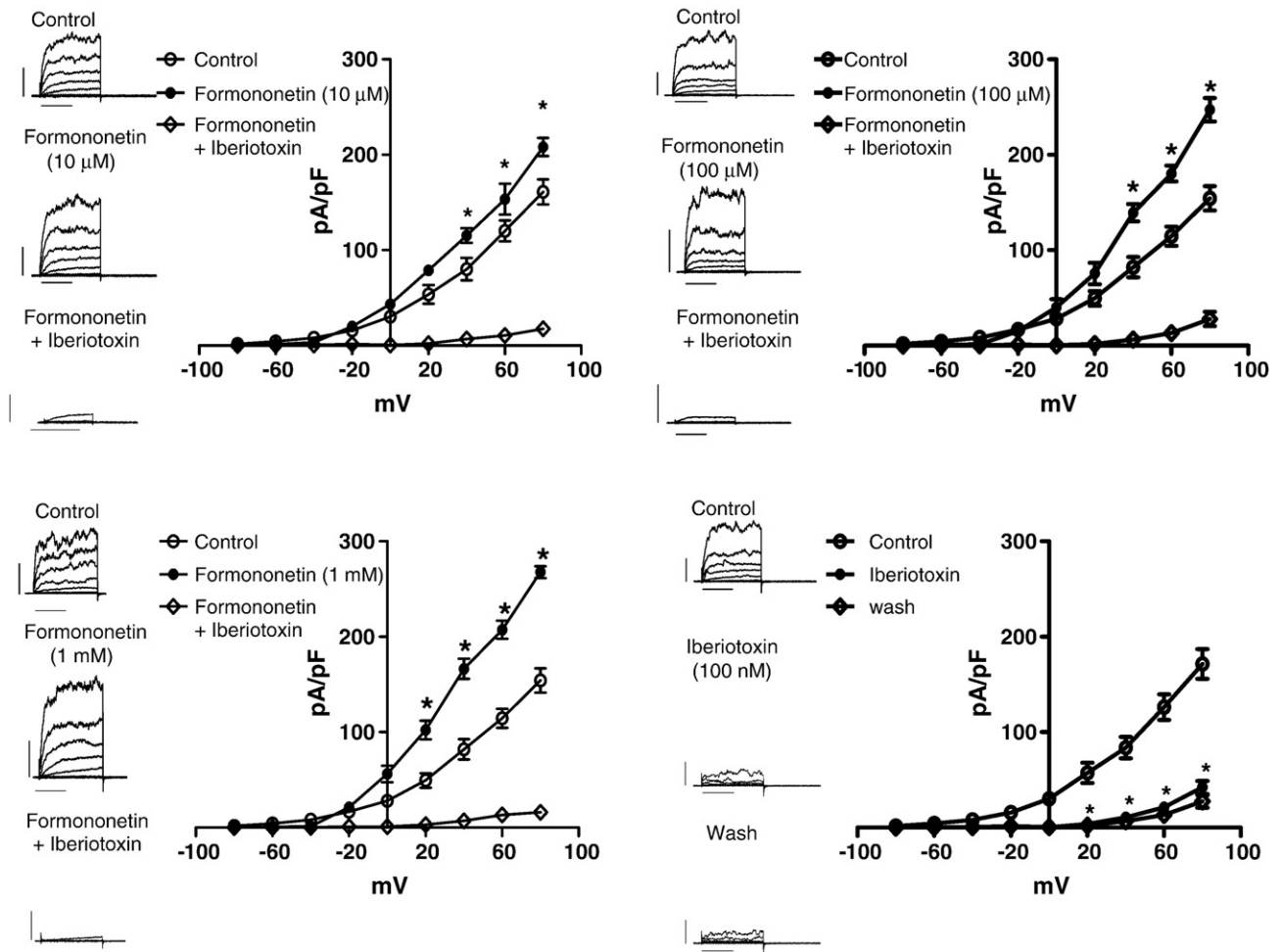


Fig. 5. (continued)

by phenylephrine. GraphPad Prism 4.02 (San Diego, CA, USA) was used to fit sigmoidal curves and to determine the maximum relaxation effect. After validation of each parameter for homogeneity of variance, differences between groups were assessed by one-way analysis of variance using SPSS (Version 15) software package for Windows (Chicago, IL, USA). Post hoc testing was performed for intergroup comparisons using the least significance difference test.

3. Results

3.1. Relaxation of rat aorta by formononetin

After the phenylephrine (1 μM)-induced contraction reached a sustained/steady-state condition, cumulative application of formononetin (0.1–100 μM) caused a concentration-dependent relaxation and a maximum relaxation of $98.50 \pm 1.50\%$ was observed in endothelium-intact preparation. Other phytoestrogens (genistein, daidzein and biochanin A) were evaluated and compared. Similar to formononetin, cumulative administration of these compounds caused a concentration-dependent relaxation of phenylephrine-precontracted aorta ($n=5-6$) (Fig. 2). Genistein ($\leq 10 \mu\text{M}$) elicited a smaller magnitude of relaxation compared to formononetin whereas biochanin A ($>1 \mu\text{M}$) induced a similar degree of relaxation as produced by formononetin (Fig. 2). In contrast, daidzein was the least potent one in causing aortic relaxation

(Fig. 2). L-NAME (100 μM, a common eNOS inhibitor) and methylene blue (10 μM, an inhibitor of guanylate cyclase), but not 1400W (1 μM, a selective iNOS inhibitor) or propranolol (1 μM, a nonselective β-adrenoceptor blocker), markedly suppressed formononetin-induced relaxation in endothelium-intact preparations (Fig. 3A).

In endothelium-denuded preparations, formononetin (over the same concentration range) elicited a lesser degree of relaxation and a maximum relaxation of $53.28 \pm 3.70\%$ was observed ($n=5-6$) (Fig. 3B). Methylene blue (10 μM) attenuated, but not abolished, formononetin-elicited relaxation in endothelium-denuded preparations ($n=5-6$) (Fig. 3B). However, ICI 182,780 (10 μM, an ER antagonist), mifepristone (10 μM, a progesterone receptor antagonist) and propranolol (1 μM, a nonselective β-adrenoceptor antagonist) failed to alter formononetin-induced relaxation observed in both endothelium-intact and endothelium-denuded preparations ($n=5-6$) (data not shown). In time-matched controls, there was no apparent change in phenylephrine-induced active tone of both endothelium-intact and endothelium-denuded preparations (data not shown). In endothelium-denuded preparations under resting tension, cumulative application of phenylephrine (10 nM–10 μM) caused a concentration-dependent contraction and prazosin (10 μM, an α₁-adrenoceptor blocker), but not formononetin (0.01, 0.1 and 1 mM), suppressed phenylephrine-induced contraction ($n=5-6$) (data not shown).

3.2. Role of K^+ channels activation in formononetin-induced relaxation of endothelium-denuded preparations

In endothelium-denuded preparations, glibenclamide [3 μ M, an adenosine triphosphate (ATP)-sensitive K^+ (K_{ATP}) channel blocker] markedly suppressed formononetin-mediated relaxation ($n=5$) (Fig. 4A). A higher concentration of glibenclamide (10 μ M) was examined, but the phenylephrine-induced active tone was not sustained ($n=6$) (data not shown). Thus, effects of glibenclamide (10 μ M) on formononetin-elicited relaxation could not be determined accurately. Similar to glibenclamide, iberiotoxin [100 nM, a potent and highly selective Ca^{2+} -activated K^+ (BK_{Ca}) channel blocker] markedly reduced the magnitude of formononetin-induced relaxation in endothelium-denuded preparations ($n=5$) (Fig. 4B). A combination of glibenclamide (3 μ M) plus iberiotoxin (100 nM) completely abolished formononetin-induced relaxation in endothelium-denuded preparations ($n=5$) (Fig. 4C). Application of glibenclamide, iberiotoxin and a combination of glibenclamide plus iberiotoxin did not alter the resting tension of the preparations ($n=5-6$) (data not shown).

In single aortic smooth muscle cells, formononetin (10 and 100 μ M) activated, in a concentration-dependent manner, the basal K_{ATP} channel openings ($n=6$) (Fig. 5A), which were eradicated by glibenclamide (3 μ M) ($n=6$) (Fig. 5A). In addition, formononetin (10 μ M, 100 μ M and 1 mM) activated, in a concentration-dependent manner, the basal BK_{Ca} channels ($n=6$) (Fig. 5B), which were sensitive to iberiotoxin (100 nM) ($n=6$) (Fig. 5B).

3.4. Determination of NO production

To further investigate the effects of formononetin on NO release from aortic endothelial cells, isolated aortic rings were treated with different concentrations of formononetin, and acetylcholine (1 μ M) was used as the reference for comparison. Before the addition of acetylcholine, no detectable levels of NO could be measured even after 2-h incubation. Immediately after acetylcholine (1 μ M) [with neostigmine (10 μ M, an inhibitor of cholinesterase [26])] was added, NO production was increased, and it reached 88.8 ± 6.44 μ M NO per gram of aortic ring (Control in Fig. 6) at the end of the incubation period. Similar to acetylcholine, formononetin (10 μ M, 100 μ M and 1 mM) caused a significant and concentration-dependent increase in NO release. The increase in NO production caused by formononetin (10 μ M, 100 μ M and 1 mM) were higher than that by acetylcholine (1 μ M) by 2.5 % ($P>.05$), 14.5 % ($P<.05$) and 17.2 % ($P<.001$), respectively ($n=4$) (Fig. 6).

3.5. Determination of NOS activity

Formononetin (10 μ M, 100 μ M and 1 mM) markedly increased NOS (presumably eNOS) activity by 31.5% (3.56 ± 0.41 U/mg protein, $P>.05$), 65.6% (4.49 ± 0.34 U/mg protein, $P<.05$) and 70.8% (4.63 ± 1.28 U/mg protein, $P<.05$), respectively ($n=5$) (Fig. 7). In the absence of $[Ca^{2+}]_o$ (presumably representing iNOS activity), formononetin has no measurable effects on NOS activity ($n=5$) (Fig. 7).

3.6. Determination of eNOS mRNA and protein expression

Formononetin (10 μ M, 100 μ M and 1 mM) up-regulated eNOS mRNA expression, and a significant increase of eNOS mRNA expression of 1.26 ± 0.17 (92.5 %) and 1.60 ± 0.27 (142.9 %) was observed in the presence of 100 μ M and 1 mM formononetin, respectively ($n=5$) (Fig. 8A). In addition, formononetin (10 μ M, 100 μ M and 1 mM) caused a concentration-dependent enhancement of phospho-eNOS^{Ser1177} protein expression with no apparent change in total eNOS expression ($n=5$) (Fig. 8B).

4. Discussion

The present study demonstrates, for the first time, that formononetin (a phytoestrogen) elicited a concentration-dependent relaxation of rat precontracted thoracic aortic rings through both endothelium-dependent and endothelium-independent mechanisms. Our results (using pharmacological/chemical and molecular biology approaches) illustrate that the endothelium-dependent component of formononetin-induced relaxation, similar to other NO/endothelium-related vasorelaxants, is associated with an increase in NO release which is due to an enhanced eNOS mRNA expression, protein expression of p-eNOS^{Ser1177} (phosphorylated/activated form of eNOS) as well as an increase of eNOS activity. However, our results revealed that acetylcholine managed to cause “a comparable magnitude” of NO release at a much lower concentration (i.e., 1 μ M). These results therefore suggest that despite the fact that formononetin caused NO generation from endothelial cells of rat aorta, it is less potent than acetylcholine.

Other phytoestrogens tested in this study (genistein, daidzein and biochanin A), which shared a similar chemical structure to formononetin also elicited a concentration-dependent relaxation of endothelium-intact aorta with a “similar” relaxation profile. It is important to point out that daidzein (a metabolite of formononetin formed in vivo) was ~10-fold less potent than formononetin in producing relaxation. The discrepancy in relaxation responses of formononetin and daidzein observed in this study is unknown. It is tempting to speculate that consumption of herbs, e.g., red clove and *Astragalus mongholicus* Bunge which contain a high content of formononetin [27,28] may provide greater beneficial effects (e.g., vasorelaxation) to the cardiovascular systems.

The presence of L-NAME (a common eNOS inhibitor) and methylene blue (a guanylate cyclase inhibitor) mimicked the effects of mechanical removal of endothelium, and an attenuation of relaxation caused by formononetin was observed. In fact, a careful examination of the concentration-response curves of formononetin revealed that methylene blue (10 μ M) caused a greater degree of reduction, compared to L-NAME, of formononetin-induced relaxation of endothelium-intact preparations (will be discussed below). Nonetheless, our results clearly demonstrate that formononetin caused a NO-/endothelium-/guanylate cyclase-dependent relaxation. The possible involvement of other NOS isoform such as the iNOS was

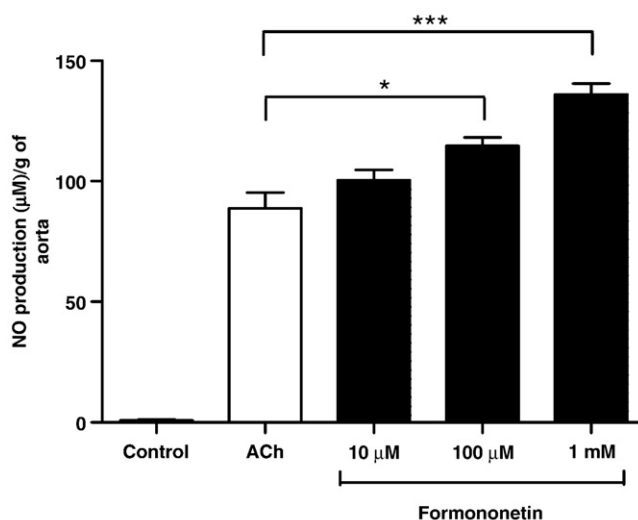


Fig. 6. Determination of NO production (mM/g of aorta), in vitro, from rat isolated aortas (endothelium intact) in response to ACh (1 μ M) and formononetin (10 μ M, 100 μ M, 1 mM). Data are expressed as means \pm S.E.M. ($n=4$). * $P<.05$ and *** $P<.001$ versus ACh.

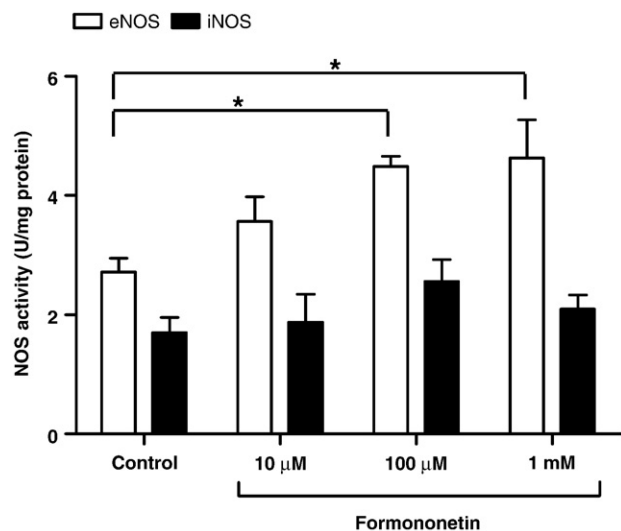


Fig. 7. Determination of eNOS and iNOS activities of rat isolated aorta (endothelium intact) in response to formononetin (10 μM, 100 μM, 1 mM). Data are expressed as means ± S.E.M. ($n=5$). * $P<0.05$ versus control.

considered. However, our results illustrate that iNOS probably plays no role in the enhanced NO release upon the challenge of formononetin as there was no mRNA and protein expression of iNOS could be detected in our preparations in response to formononetin and acetylcholine challenge (data not shown). In addition, no significant change in NOS activity caused by formononetin was detected in the absence of $[Ca^{2+}]_o$. Thus, our results suggest that the Ca^{2+} -dependent NOS isoform (i.e., eNOS) but not the Ca^{2+} -independent isoform (i.e., iNOS) is responsible for formononetin-induced NO release from endothelial cells. In line with these observations, 1400W (a highly selective iNOS inhibitor) [29] failed to alter formononetin-induced endothelium-dependent relaxation.

In addition to the involvement of NO/eNOS cascade of endothelial cells, the relaxation response of formononetin reduced after the removal of the influence of NO/endothelium (although the magnitude of relaxation was smaller compared to that observed in endothelium-intact preparations) suggesting that formononetin caused an endothelium-independent relaxation. As mentioned above, methylene blue (a soluble guanylate cyclase inhibitor), glibenclamide (a K_{ATP} channel inhibitor) and iberiotoxin (a potent BK_{Ca} channel blocker), but not L-NAME, attenuated formononetin-induced relaxation of endothelium-denuded preparations. Interestingly, a combination of glibenclamide and iberiotoxin abolished formononetin-elicited endothelium-independent relaxation. Thus, our results demonstrate that the endothelium-independent component of formononetin-induced relaxation involved the activation of guanylate cyclase as well as the opening of K_{ATP} and BK_{Ca} channels. To strengthen our conclusion on the type(s) of ion channels involved in formononetin-induced endothelium-independent relaxation, BK_{Ca} and K_{ATP} channels gatings of single cells of aorta were measured. Our novel results reveal that formononetin activated glibenclamide-sensitive K_{ATP} and iberiotoxin-sensitive BK_{Ca} channels which are responsible for the endothelium-independent component of formononetin-induced relaxation.

As illustrated in Fig. 1, formononetin is a phytoestrogen but the failure of ICI 182,780 [10 μM, an ER ($ER\alpha/ER\beta$) antagonist] and mifepristone (10 μM, a progesterone receptor antagonist) in altering formononetin-induced vasorelaxation argued against the contribution of ER and progesterone receptor activation. The possible participation of α and β -adrenoceptors on formononetin-induced aortic relaxation was considered. Our results however suggest that

neither α_1 - nor β_2 -adrenoceptors were involved as the presence of prazosin and propranolol did not modify phenylephrine-induced contraction and formononetin-evoked relaxation, respectively.

In conclusion, our novel results demonstrate, for the first time, that formononetin (a phytoestrogen) possesses endothelium-/NO-dependent and endothelium-independent relaxation effects. The endothelium-independent component of formononetin-induced relaxation is associated with the activation of both K_{ATP} and BK_{Ca} channels of the vascular tissues. Thus, our results suggest that consumption of herbs containing formononetin (which is devoid of estrogen/progesterone receptors activation) may provide beneficial effects to the cardiovascular systems of postmenopausal women.

Acknowledgments

We are grateful to assistance provided by technicians of State Key Laboratory of Chinese Medicine and Molecular Pharmacology, Department of Applied Biology and Chemical Technology, Hong

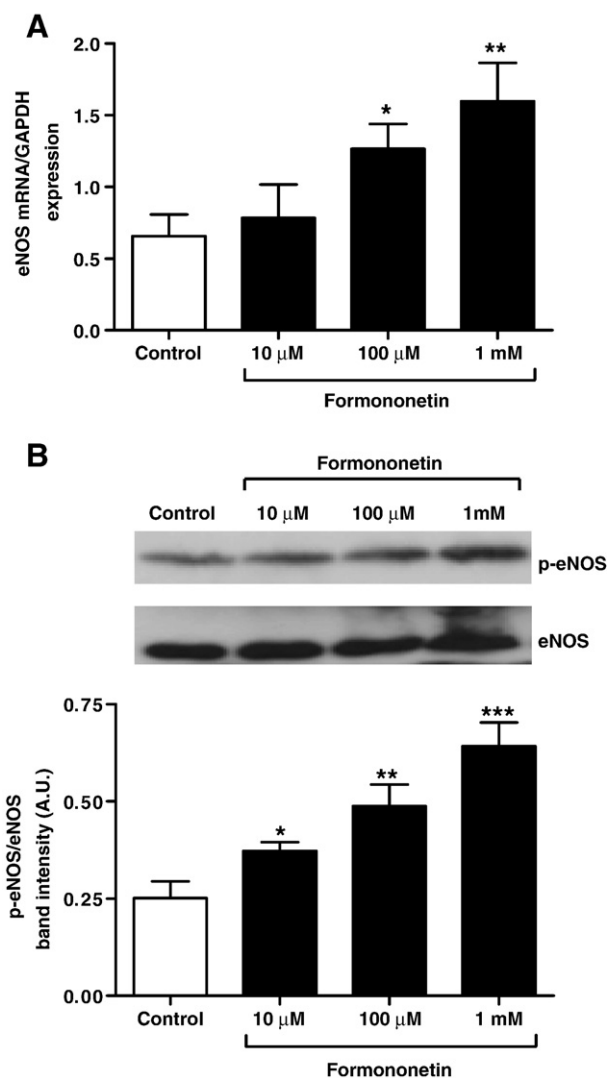


Fig. 8. (A) Effects of formononetin (10 μM, 100 μM, 1 mM) on eNOS mRNA expression (eNOS mRNA/GAPDH) of rat isolated aorta (endothelium intact) determined by real-time PCR analysis. Data are expressed as means ± S.E.M. ($n=5$). * $P<0.05$ and ** $P<0.01$ versus control. (B) Effects of formononetin (10 μM, 100 μM, 1 mM) on phospho-eNOS (Ser 1177) protein and total eNOS protein expression of rat isolated aorta (endothelium intact). Data are expressed as means ± S.E.M. ($n=5$). * $P<0.05$, ** $P<0.01$ and *** $P<0.001$ versus control.

Kong Polytechnic University (Hong Kong SAR, PR China). This project was supported by a research grant of the “Shenzhen Virtual University Park,” Shenzhen Government (PR China), the Niche Area Research Grant of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Direct Grants for Research (The Chinese University of Hong Kong) (Reference No.: 2401149; Project code: 2041231; 2401296), and the RGC Earmarked Grants of Hong Kong SAR (Ref. #: 4107/01M; 4166/02M, project code: 2140565). Mr. Sai-Wang Seto and Ms. Alice L.S. Au are recipients of the post-graduate studentship of the Department of Pharmacology (The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong SAR). Proofreading of the manuscript by Mr. Ho-Yeung Lam is also acknowledged.

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