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EFFECT OF CARROT AND WHEAT GERM OIL SUPPLEMENTATION ON ANTIOXIDANT STATUS OF RATS EXPOSED TO BENZENE

Zeinab A. Saleh[1], Khadiga S. Ibrahim[2], Abdel-Razik H. Farrag[3], Eman E. Shaban[2]

[1]Food Science and Nutrition Department, [2]Environmental and Occupational Medicine Department, [3]Pathology Department; National Research Centre, Dokki, Cairo, Egypt

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Benzene is an aromatic hydrocarbon. It gives rise to the production of oxygen radicals or reactive oxygen species (ROS), which are the means of the metabolic activation of benzene and are the source of its toxicity. This study was conducted to assess the ability of some food stuffs such as carrot and wheat germ oil to protect against benzene toxicity. Experiments were carried out on albino rats injected with benzene (0.5 mL/kg body weight ip) and given diet supplemented with carrot and wheat germ oil. The dietary consumption and growth rate were measured. Several biochemical parameters representing antioxidant status were followed. The results showed that food intake and body weight gain of rats injected with benzene were significantly lower than these of control rats. Plasma malondialdehyde was increased and the levels of vitamins A & E and the activity of the antioxidant enzymes were decreased in rats injected with benzene. Supplementation with carrot and wheat germ oil caused a significant decrease in plasma malondialdehyde and a significant increase in the level of vitamins and the antioxidant enzymes. The histopathological examination of the liver tissues of animals injected with benzene showed different lesions but supplementation with carrot and wheat germ oil caused an improvement in liver as compared with the benzene group. This study indicates that the toxic effect of benzene exposure can be partially corrected by food ingredients such as carrot and wheat germ oil. It is recommended to be given to individuals who are exposed to environments polluted with benzene.

INTRODUCTION

Many environmental pollutants can cause oxidative damage to the biological systems. Benzene is an environmental pollutant absorbed and oxidized in the liver after its inhalation, oral or dermal exposure. Long term animal studies have shown that benzene causes tumors at multiple sites in mice and rats [Huff *et al*., 1989].

The major determinations of benzene toxicity have suggested that this solvent gives rise to the production of oxygen radical or ROS [Parke, 1996].

Natural antioxidants such as vitamin E, A, β-carotene and vitamin C play a key role in promoting defense mechanism against oxidative stress [Halliwell *et al*., 1992; Frei, 1994]. To minimize the damaging effect of ROS, it is important to promote the function of the enzymatic and nonenzymatic regulating system present in the body. Glutathione peroxidase (GSH-Px), superoxide dismutase (SOD) and catalase (CAT) are among the enzymes that play a critical role for depriving the cell from these ROS [Urso & Clarkson, 2003; Valko *et al*., 2006].

Numerous studies support the view that diets rich in fruits and vegetables may protect against various diseases, especially cardiovascular diseases (CVD) and cancers [Potter & Steinmetz, 1996; Riboli *et al*., 1996; McDermott, 2000].

This study was carried out to evaluate the potential role of some foodstuffs that are rich in antioxidants, such as carrot and wheat germ oil, on the antioxidant vitamins, antioxidant enzymes activity, lipid peroxide levels and protection of cells against oxidative damage in rats due to benzene toxicity.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The ingredients used in the present investigation are: dry skimmed milk (vitamins-free) obtained from Misr Dairy Company, Egypt, wheat germ oil (WGO, vitamin E concentration 148 mg per 100 mL of oil) obtained from Mobaco Company, Egypt; and carrot, purchased from the local market.

Treatment of carrot samples

Carrot samples were washed in cold water, crashed, and lyophilized, then ground to obtain suitable fine powder. Three samples were used for the determination of carotenoids using HPLC method according to Epler *et al*. [1993].

Animals

Forty male Sprague Dawley rats (average body weight of 194 g), bred at the Central Animal House of the National Research Center, Dokki, Giza, Egypt, were used in the study. After an initial 24-h acclimatization period, all rats were given a standard diet for 1 week. The animals were kept through the experimental period (9 weeks) under good ventilation and hygienic conditions, experimental diets and water were fed *ad-libitum*. Body weights were measured weekly, food intake was

Author's address for correspondence: Khadiga Salah, Environmental & Occupational Medicine Department, National Research Centre, 12311 – El-Tahrir Str., Dokki, Cairo, Egypt; fax: (+202) 337 09 31; e-mail: khadigasalah@yahoo.com

measured twice weekly and examined each day for general condition. At the end of the experiment, feed efficiency ratio of the different diets was calculated as the gain in body weight (g)/ feed intake (g) [Smith & Circle, 1971].

The experimental protocol was approved by the Animal Ethics Committee of the National Research Center, Cairo.

Diets

The experimental diets have the same caloric density containing 2620 kcal/kg, 14% protein, 10% fat. Vitamins and minerals were adequate according to the American Institute of Nutrition [Reeves *et al.*, 1993] (Table 1). Diets supplemented with either carrot or wheat germ oil were given to rats three days before the first benzene injection.

Experimental design

The animals were randomly divided into four groups of 10 rats each, having a mean body weight within 194±15 gm. The animals were housed individually in stainless steel cages and benzene was injected intraperitoneally three times a week at a dose of 0.5 mL per kg body weight in corn oil (100 µL/ animal) according to Ahmad *et al*. [1994].

Group 1: Control rats were fed on the basal diet.

Group 2: Rats were treated with benzene and fed on the basal diet.

Group 3: Rats were treated with benzene and fed on the diet supplemented with 3% of lyophilized carrot powder containing about 5 times the recommended requirement of vitamin A.

Group 4: Rats were treated with benzene and fed on the diet supplemented with 10% of wheat germ oil (WGO) which contains α-tocopherol about 10 times the recommended requirement.

The experimental period lasted 9 weeks during which the rats were weighed weekly. At the end of the experimental period, the animals were fasted over night and blood samples were collected in heparinized tubes under slight diethyl ether anesthesia by open heart puncture. The collected blood was divided into 2 portions. The first one was used immediately for the estimation of hemoglobin concentration (Hb) by the cyanmethemoglobin method according to Eagle Hemoglobin procedure [Van Kampen & Zijlstra, 1961]. Hematocrit percent (Hct%) was measured, reduced glutathione (GSH) concentration was determined by the method of Beutler *et al*. [1963] and glutathione peroxidase (GSHPx) was determined using Kit provided by WAK-CHEMIE Medical GMBH, Germany, according to Ammerman *et al*. [1980].

TABLE 1. Composition of the experimental diets fed to rats over the 9-week study period.

Diet component (%)	Diet 1 & 2	Diet 3	Diet 4
Skimmed milk	35	35	35
Sucrose	10	10	10
Wheat germ oil	---	---	10
Sunflower oil*	10	10	---
Cellulose	5	4	5
AIN-93 mineral mixture	3.5	3.5	3.5
AIN-93 vitamin mixture	1	1	1
Choline bitartrate	0.25	0.25	0.25
L-Cystine	0.18	0.18	0.18
Lyophilized carrot	---	3	----
Starch	35.1	33.1	35.1

*concentration of vitamin E was 50 mg/100 g oil.

The second portion of blood was centrifuged at (1500 ×g) for 15 min to obtain total blood plasma. The plasma was then aliquoted and stored at -20°C for two days until used for the analysis. Plasma malondialdehyde (MDA) was estimated according to Satoh [1978]. Iron and total iron binding capacity (TIBC) and ferritin were determined using the commercial kit provided by Biodiagnostic, Cairo, Egypt. Vitamin A and β-carotene were determined with colorimetric method according to Neeld & Pearson [1963]. Vitamin E was estimated using the method of Desia & Machilin [1985]. The erythrocytes were washed three times in cold normal saline (0.9% Na Cl). The heamolysate was used for the assay of catalase (CAT) according to Beers & Sizer, [1952] and superoxide dismutase (SOD) using kit provided by WAK-CHEMIE Medical GMBH, Germany [Arthur & Boyne, 1985].

Histopathological examination of liver tissues

Liver, spleen and kidneys were separated anatomically after anesthetizing the rats by diethyl ether, rapidly washed in saline solution to remove the blood and then weighed. The liver specimens were removed rapidly, fixed in 10% neutral buffered formalin for 24 h, then processed up to paraffin blocks. Next, 6 µm thick sections were prepared and stained with hematoxylin and eosin [Drury & Wallington, 1980] for histopathological studies.

Statistical analysis

Results are expressed as means ± standard errors of means (SEM). Comparison between the means was accomplished using a one-way ANOVA, followed by Duncan Multiple Range Tests for all variables [Duncan, 1955]. Differences between groups were considered significant at $p<0.05$.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the present study, it was found that HPLC analysis of lyophilized carrot revealed that 100 g of carrot contained α-carotene (13.0 mg); β-carotene (31.3 mg) equivalent to 22.68 mg vitamin A (equal to 75600 IU). Since one kg diet requires 4000 IU vitamin A, we added 30 g of lyophilized carrot which provided 5.67 times the requirement.

The results showed that food intake and gain in body weight of rats injected with benzene were significantly lower than these of control rats (Table 2). Many animal studies reported that exposure to organic solvent reduced food intake and body weight gain in mice [Dempster *et al.*, 1984] and in rats [Moròn *et al*., 2004; Saillenfait *et al*., 2006], they reported that this effect may be due to the loss of appetite. Diet supplemented with either carrot or wheat germ oil improved the food consumption, body weight gain and food efficiency ratio in rats injected with benzene. This shows that these supplements are able to improve the condition of benzene toxicity.

TABLE 2. Food intake (g), body weight gain (g), and feed efficiency ratio (FER) of control rats, benzene treated and supplemented groups.

Parameters \ Groups	Control a	Benzene b	Benzene + Carrot	Benzene + WGO*
Feed intake (g)	1285±14.28	1146±14.15	1176±9.48	1179±15.30
Pa<		0.000	0.000	0.000
Pb<			0.137	0.103
Body weight gain (g)	114.7±3.77	68.0±3.89	75.2±3.43	75.6±3.99
Pa<		0.000	0.000	0.000
Pb<			0.158	0.136
FER	0.089±0.003	0.060±0.004	0.064±0.003	0.064±0.004
Pa<		0.000	0.000	0.000
Pb<			0.310	0.269

*WGO – wheat germ oil.

Rats injected with benzene, showed a significant increase in the liver weights of the benzene group compared to control group ($p<0.05$), (Table 3). This should be considered as a liver specific change that cannot be ascribed to reduction of body weight only [Bar, 1999]. Heijne *et al.* [2005] reported that the increased expression of drug metabolism enzymes in the liver might be the most important reason for the relative increase of the liver weight. It was observed a decrease of kidney and spleen weights. These findings are in line with a previous work [Yamamura *et al.*, 1999]. Rats given supplemented diets showed a significant decrease in the liver weight and relatively an increase in the weight of kidney and spleen (Table 3).

Lower values of Hb, Hct, iron and ferritin were reported in rats exposed to benzene (Table 4). There have been numerous studies of benzene-induced hematotoxicity [Ahmad *et al*., 1994; d'Azevedo *et al.*, 1996; Escorcia *et al*., 1997; Qu *et al*., 2002]. However, rats received diet supplemented with each of carrot or wheat germ oil showed a significant increase in these parameters. The level of plasma TIBC was higher in benzene group than the control ($p<0.001$). The supplemented diets corrected this parameter compared to the benzene group. Carrot is a valuable source of carotenoids [Alasalvar *et al*., 2001], which provide rats with vitamin A. Many studies showed a positive effect of vitamin A supplementation on Fe

TABLE 3. Weights of liver, spleen, and kidney of control rats, benzene treated and supplemented groups.

Parameters \ Groups	Control a	Benzene b	Benzene + Carrot	Benzene + WGO*
Liver (g)	7.883±0.263	8.760±0.264	7.720±0.293	7.715±0.328
Pa<		0.034	0. 688	0. 678
Pb<			0.013	0.012
Spleen (g)	1.188±0.048	0.843±0.015	0.931±0.031	0.959±0.031
Pa<		0.000	0.000	0.000
Pb<			0.063	0.017
Kidneys (g)	0.9004±0.0326	0.8095±0.0250	0.8829±0.0184	0.8911±0.0230
Pa<		0.017	0.637	0.802
Pb<			0.052	0.031

*WGO – wheat germ oil.

TABLE 4. Levels of hemoglobin (g/dL), hematocrit (Hct%), iron (μg/dL), ferritn (μg/L) and TIPC (μg/dL) of control rats, benzene treated and supplemented groups.

Parameters \ Groups	Control a	Benzene b	Benzene + Carrot	Benzene + WGO
Hemoglobin (g/dL)	14.02±0.242	12.85±0.297	14.01±0.179	13.92±0.172
Pa<		.000	0.0.974	0.746
Pb<			0.000	0.001
Hematocrit (Hct%)	44.0±1.116	39.6±1.455	43.7±0.87	43.5±1.057
Pa<		0.005	0.844	0.744
Pb<			0.009	0.013
Iron (μg/dL)	108.9±2.613	92.7±3.53	103.1±2.506	101.8±2.00
Pa<		0.000	0.120	0.058
Pb<			0.007	0.017
Ferritin (μg/L)	85.84±6.54	52.24±4.60	69.09±3.44	60.62±4.76
Pa<		0.000	0.014	0.000
Pb<			0.014	0.211
TIPC (μg/dL)	258±2.83	347±3.90	282±5.82	292±7.19
Pa<		0.000	0.008	0.000
Pb<			0.000	0.000

*WGO – wheat germ oil.

status in humans and animal models [Garci´a-Casal *et al*., 1998; Roodenburg *et al*., 1996]. Also carrot contains vitamin C, which has been shown to enhance Fe uptake in humans and in cell culture models [Sandberg, 2002; Engle-Stone *et al.*, 2005]. Wheat germ oil when given in combination with benzene at an appropriate dose, increases the antioxidant potential of the animals and decreases the toxic effect of benzene.

Rats injected with benzene showed an increase in MDA levels ($p<0.01$) accompanied with a decrease in the levels of scavenging enzymes SOD, catalase, glutathione peroxidase (GSH-Px) and GSH concentration as compared to the control group (Table 5). The data are similar to those from other reports which indicated that benzene administration increased the level of MDA in albino rats [Pandya *et al*., 1990; Ahmad *et al.*, 1994]. Also Chen [1992] observed that in the workers exposed to benzene the content of serum MDA increased and the activities of erythrocyte SOD and erythrocyte GSH-Px were decreased. Our results showed that rats fed the diet supplemented with carrot or wheat germ oilalong with benzene had a reduction in the level of MDA ($p<0.01$), whilst their GSH concentration and the SOD, GSH-Px, CAT activity were improved (Table 5). These results are in agreement with findings of Nicolle *et al.* [2003] who noticed a significant decrease in the urinary excretion of thiobarbituric acid reactive substances (TBARS) and reduced TBARS levels in the heart after feeding rats on carrot diet. Carrot contains carotenoids and other antioxidants such as vitamin E, vitamin C and phenolics such as *p*-coumaric, chlorogenic and caffeic acids [Alasalvar *et al*., 2001]. Antioxidants such as vitamin C, tocopherols, carotenoids and polyphenols are able to quench free radicals, together with the endogenous systems of defense. The strong antioxidant properties of β-carotene have been proven in several studies [Diplock, 1991; Lomnitski *et al*., 1993].

Wheat germ oil is unique among dietary supplements, it is highly rich in the most biologically active forms of naturally occurring vitamin E and mixed tocopherols [Sies & Stahl, 1995]. Vitamin E acts as an inhibitor of oxidative processes in body tissues, it protects the unsaturated fat in the body from oxidation. It has been reported that oral administration of wheat germ oil efficiently saturates the body of rats with vitamin E and inhibits oxidation [Paranich *et al*., 2000]. These data were in agreement with many other reports [Ynal *et al*., 1998; Bansal *et al*., 2005; Yousef *et al*., 2006]. Thus vitamin E can be given as a nutritional supplement to reduce oxidative stress.

Plasma vitamins A and E were significantly decreased in the benzene-injected group compared with the controls (Table 6). However carrot supplementation caused a 22.41% elevation in vitamin A level and 14.8% in vitamin E compared to the benzene group. This is parallel to the finding of Nicolle *et al.* [2003] who noticed that vitamin E level in the plasma of rats was increased after feeding carrot diet. β-Carotene was not detected in the plasma of rats after administration of diet supplemented with carrot. Rats are not able to absorb intact β-carotene, hence very little or even no intact β-carotene is taken up into the circulation [Ribaya-Mercado *el al*., 1989]. It has been reported that most of the absorbed vitamin A was

TABLE 5. Levels of malondialdehyde (MDA, nmol/mL), reduced glutathione (GSH) (μmol/gHb), glutathione peroxidase (GSH-Px) (u/L Hb), catalase (ku/g Hb), and superoxide dismutase (SOD) (U/g Hb) of control rats, benzene treated and supplemented groups.

Parameters \ Groups		Control a	Benzene b	Benzene + Carrot	Benzene + WGO*
MDA (nmol/ml)		4.62±0.217	6.82±0.14	5.22±0.231	5.08± 0.207
	Pa<		0.001	0.047	0.124
	Pb<			0.001	0.001
Reduced glutathione (μmol/gHb)		31.08±0.874	24.91±0.968	31.10±0.815	33.99±0.971
	Pa<		0.000	0.993	0.033
	Pb<			0.001	0.001
GSH-Px (U/L Hb)		4198±148.3	3762±169.5	4479±160.5	4643±144.9
	Pa<		0.082	0.259	0.076
	Pb<			0.005	0.001
Catalase (ku/g Hb)		58.04±1.15	50.38±1.81	59.29±2.11	64.23±3.30
	Pa<		0.014	0.677	0.044
	Pb<			0.004	0.001
SOD (U/g Hb)		735.6±30.09	629.6±27.77	745.5±27.95	751.7±36.17
	Pa<		0.018	0.820	0.713
	Pb<			0.010	0.007

*WGO – wheat germ oil.

TABLE 6. Levels of vitamin A (μg/dL) and vitamin E (mg/dL) of control rats and those treated with benzene and supplemented groups.

Parameters \ Groups		Control a	Benzene b	Benzene + Carrot	Benzene + WGO
Vitamin A (μg/dL)		31.51±1.07	25.97±0.95	31.79±1.28	30.11±0.86
	Pa<		0.001	0.851	0.360
	Pb<			0.000	0.008
Vitamin E (mg/dL)		1.10±0.05	0.81±0.031	0.93±0.027	0.99±0.038
	Pa<		0.000	0.004	0.056
	Pb<			0.033	0.002

obtained from that produced by cleavage of β-carotene in the intestinal mucosa [Krinsky *el al*., 1990].

Supplementation with wheat germ oil (WGO) corrected the drop in plasma vitamin A that occurred due to the treatment with benzene. It also provided the most biologically active forms of naturally occurring vitamin E and β-carotene [Krishnamurty *et al*., 1982]. The value reported for vitamin A (30.11 μg/dL) was near to the control (31.51 μg/dL). Also there was a significant improvement noticed in the level of vitamin E in the group given the supplemented diets compared to the benzene group. Our results are consistent with the findings of Ynal *et al*. [1998] who found that the plasma α-tocopherol levels in benzene plus α-tocopherol group of Wistar albino rats were significantly higher than in the control and benzene group.

The microscopic examination of control liver of rats showed the common characteristics lobular organization. Each lobule is formed of cords of hepatocytes radiating towards a central vein. The hepatic lobules are separated by loose connective tissues at certain angles of the portal triad including branches of the portal vein, hepatic vein and bile duct (Figure 1).

Examination of liver sections of rats receiving benzene showed periportal necrosis of the hepatocytes near the portal areas. The specimens showed also dilated and congested portal vessels as well as mild areas of inflammatory cell infiltration especially in the vicinity of the portal veins and near the bile ductules. Some cells exhibited necrosis together with pyknosis of some nuclei. Slight haemorrhage was also noticed. Besides dilated sinusoids and the interlobular connective tissue showed marked thickening (Figure 2). These results are in agreement with several results after exposure to benzene or its derivatives in mice [Szymanska, 1998], in rats [Madej *et al*., 1987] and in workers exposed to benzene [Cotrim *et al*., 2004]. The resulting effect was due to the production of elevated amounts of oxidation products and conjugated dienes, which caused deleterious effects on the membranous components of hepatocytes.

Daily administration of carrot equivalent to 5 times the vitamin A requirement along with benzene has shown that the liver appears more or less like normal except for single

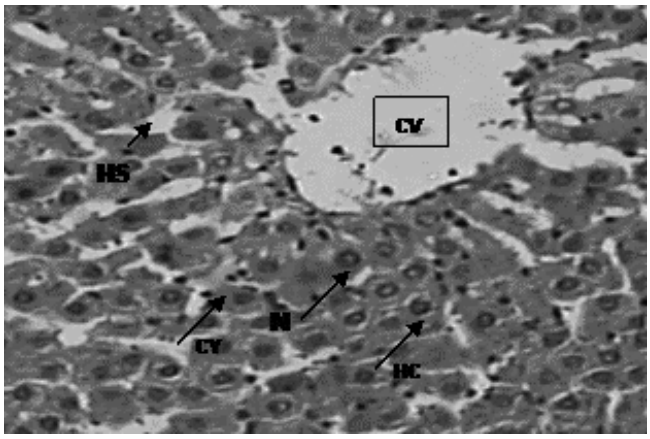

FIGURE 1. A photomicrograph of the section of control liver showing the architecture of a hepatic lobule. The central vein (CV) surrounded by the hepatocytes (HC) with strongly eosinophilic granulated cytoplasm (CY) and distinct nuclei (N). Between the strands of hepatocytes there are shown the hepatic sinusoids (HS), (H & E stain-X 300).

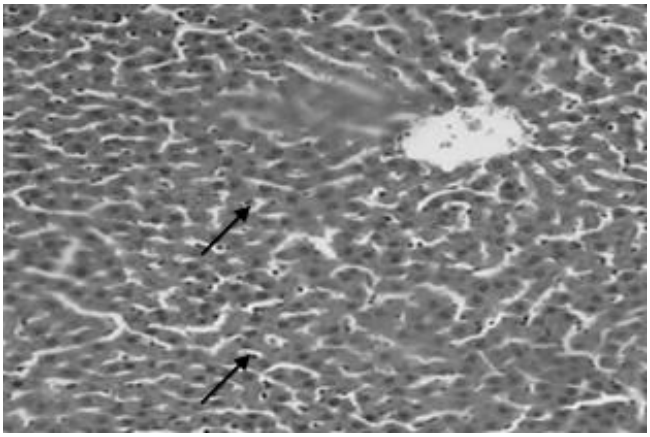

FIGURE 3. A photomicrograph of the section of liver of rat injected with benzene and supplemented with lyophilized carrot shows that the structure appears more or less like normal except single cell necrosis (arrows), (H & E stain-X 300).

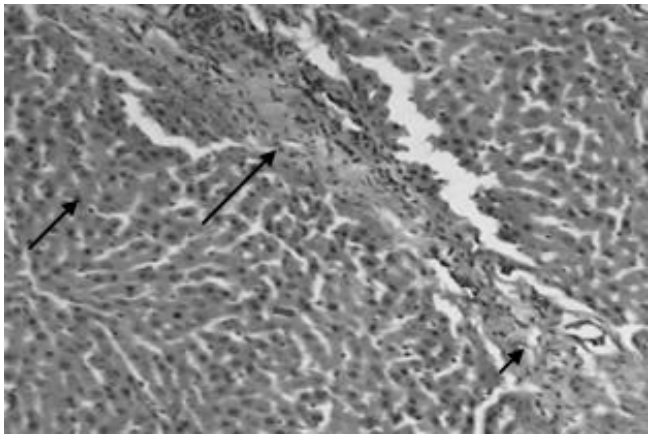

FIGURE 2. A photomicrograph of the section of liver of rat injected with benzene showing focal necrosis (arrows), inflammatory infiltration, thickening of the interlobular connective tissue (long arrow) and the dilated and congested portal vein (arrow head), (H & E stain-X 300).

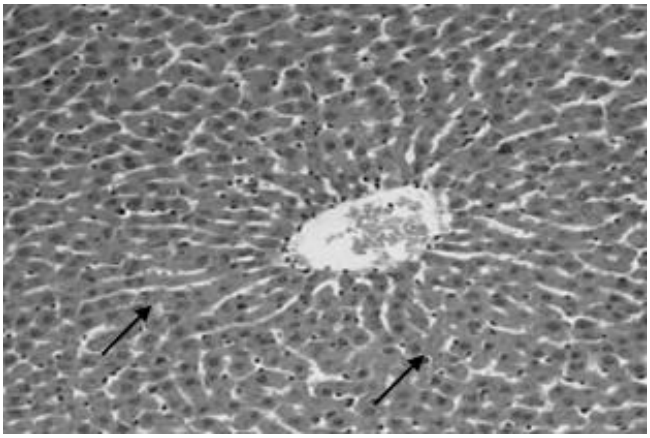

FIGURE 4. A photomicrograph of the section of liver of rat injected with benzene and supplemented with wheat germ oil shows that the structure appears more or less like normal except single cell necrosis (arrows), (H & E stain-X 300).

cells necrosis (Figure 3). This is similar to the finding by Nicolle *et al.* [2004] who reported that carrot ingestion led to the improvement of the antioxidant status in mice.

The histology of liver of rat given benzene and supplemented with WGO shows little necrosis and some inflammatory cells (Figure 4), which indicates that the cellular recovery process was taking place but was not complete during the experimental period. It was shown that oral administration of wheat germ oil efficiently saturated the body with vitamin E and led to inhibition of peroxidation in rats [Paranich *et al.*, 2000]. The magnitude of the effects of WGO may not appear large but the experiments clearly indicate the beneficial role of the WGO.

CONCLUSIONS

It is concluded from this work that benzene exposure results in varying degrees of oxidative stress with some tissue specific changes. So, the present study highlights the protective role of some foodstuffs, such as carrot and wheat germ oil (WGO), in reducing the degree of oxidative stress induced by the environmental pollutants like organic solvents such as benzene.

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