

Review Article

Modulating xanthine oxidase activity: A promising therapeutic strategy to reduce the severity and associated inflammatory reactions in malaria infection

Mukhtar Gambo Lawal^{1,2}, Abdullahi Sama'ila^{2,3}, Rusliza Basir^{2*}

¹Department of Microbiology, Faculty of Natural & Applied Sciences, Umaru Musa Yar'adua University, Katsina, Nigeria, ²Department of Human Anatomy, Pharmacology Unit, Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 Serdang, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia, ³Department of Pharmacology, College of Health Sciences, Umaru Musa Yar'adua University, Katsina, Nigeria,

*For correspondence: **Email:** rusliza@upm.edu.my; **Tel:** +60-12-4747459; **ORCID:** <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3363-6630>

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Abstract

Malaria is a severe and often fatal disease that affects millions of people each year. More than fifty percent of human population worldwide is at risk of malaria. While antimalarial therapy is targeted at parasite elimination, the pathogenesis of malaria infection is particularly oxidative and inflammatory, involving the generation of reactive oxygen species (ROS). Xanthine oxidase (XO) is believed to be a potent source of ROS during malaria infection. ROS generated by this enzyme are a major contributor to oxidative stress and inflammation development. Consequently, free radical production and oxidative stress are responsible for the numerous complications in severe malaria. Therefore, effective treatment of the disease will require, in addition to the elimination of the parasite, a mechanism that reduces severe oxidative stress and inflammatory reactions associated with the disease. The pathophysiologic role of this enzyme is thus a potential target in malaria infection. Inhibition of XO activity is clinically effective in treating many inflammatory diseases, such as gout and prevention of cardiovascular disorders, therefore making this enzyme an attractive candidate for treating malaria inflammation. The present review focuses on the role of XO in malaria pathogenesis and the potential of enzyme inhibition as a therapeutic strategy to mitigate the severe inflammatory responses during malaria infection. Ultimately, the severity, complications and death associated with the disease are ameliorated by reducing the intensity of the inflammatory reactions during malaria infection.

Keywords: Malaria, Oxidative stress, Inflammation, Xanthine oxidase, Inhibition

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INTRODUCTION

Malaria is an infectious disease caused by species of the genus *Plasmodium*. It is the most devastating parasitic disease that affects humans [1]. An increasing percentage of people worldwide are at risk of contracting malaria, making the disease a severe public health concern. The global malaria burden has

continued to increase over the last 2 years. At present, there is an estimated disease burden of 263 million cases and an estimated malaria death toll of 597,000 in 83 malaria-endemic countries [2]. The WHO African region carries the highest malaria burden, with children under 5 accounting for about 76 % of deaths in the region [2].

The pathogenesis of malaria infection involves the build-up of free radicals, particularly reactive oxygen and nitrogen species [3]. Generation of free radicals and subsequent development of oxidative stress have recently been shown to be responsible for the numerous complications in severe malaria [4]. Up-regulation of host oxidative enzymes, such as xanthine oxidase, during plasmodium infection generates ROS, which are major contributors in triggering oxidative stress and inflammation experienced during a malaria episode. In addition, XO in malaria has the ability to induce pro-inflammatory cytokines production in macrophages and dendritic cells [5].

Despite intensive attempts to control the disease, malaria continues to be a significant public health challenge throughout the world. The widespread antimalarial drug resistance [6] and associated side effects of existing antimalarials cause a major setback in attempts to eradicate the disease [7]. It is pertinent to note that resistance to the first-line treatment regimen has also become a serious problem for malaria control [8]. Currently, there is rising resistance to artemisinin-based combination therapy [9], and the problem has worsened due to the lack of effective, readily available vaccines [10] as well as ineffective vector management [9,11]. In addition, imported malaria is becoming a serious barrier to the efforts of some countries to eliminate the disease [12].

These prevailing challenges necessitate the quest for new, innovative and effective antimalarial treatment approaches, which may include new medications with different pharmacological targets. Xanthine oxidase has been implicated as one of the potent triggers of inflammation during malaria, with resultant progression to severe pathologies and complications. Accordingly, this study attempts to demonstrate that modulating the enzyme activity is a promising therapeutic strategy to reduce the severity and the associated inflammatory reactions during malaria infection. It could be a novel treatment approach for the management of malaria and eventually reduce the severity and mortality associated with the disease.

Collation of data on XO-induced oxidative stress in malaria

A search method that focused primarily on the most recent updates on malaria pathogenesis and identifying new drug targets was used to conduct this review. Data were collated by searching online literature databases such as Web of Science, NIH (National Library of

Medicine), PubMed and Google Scholar. "Malaria case report updates", "malaria pathogenesis", "oxidative stress and inflammation in malaria", "xanthine oxidase", "inhibition of xanthine oxidase for disease management", "adjuvants", and a few more related search terms were the main research terms. To gather the most relevant and recent information, this review primarily included studies published from 2018 to date.

Oxidative stress and malaria

Malaria is a highly oxidative and inflammatory disease [5]. Oxidative stress has been shown to induce inflammation through ROS activation of NF- κ B with subsequent release of inflammatory cytokines [13]. Previous studies have demonstrated that malaria infection induces inflammasome and caspase 1 activation [14] and this finding further revealed that ROS act as an effective signal for activation of inflammasomes in macrophages [5].

The pathophysiology of malaria infection is linked to oxidative stress, which generates ROS such as hydrogen peroxide (H_2O_2), superoxide anions (O_2^-), hydroxyl radicals (OH), and hydroxide ions (OH^-) [15,16]. During the blood phase of malaria infection, various sources contribute to oxidative stress. These include haem generated from direct infection of red blood cells by the *Plasmodium* parasite and degradation of haemoglobin. Additionally, the host's immune response to infection plays a role, as it involves upregulation of oxidative enzymes and phagocytic oxidative burst. A study has shown that antimalarial drugs, including chloroquine, amodiaquine and artemisinin such as dihydroartemisinin and artesunate, also contribute to the oxidative stress in malaria as a result of their mode of action, which involves the generation of ROS and subsequently leads to the oxidative killing of the *plasmodium* parasites [5].

Numerous studies have explained how oxidative stress plays a part in the pathophysiology of malaria. Several researchers have reported elevated levels of oxidative stress in malaria patients with *P. falciparum* and *P. vivax* infections [17]. Higher levels of malondialdehyde (MDA), a very important biomarker of oxidative stress, were reported among paediatric patients with complicated malaria [18]. Similar observations of increased oxidative stress, as indicated by high MDA levels, were seen in patients with *Plasmodium falciparum* malaria infection [19,20]. Moreover, severe malaria was linked to increased oxidative stress among

paediatric patients with *P. falciparum* infection [21].

Malaria infection is often associated with serious complications, especially when immediate diagnosis and effective therapy are not provided [22]. Reactive oxygen species produced during malaria infection elicit oxidative damage and inflict cellular damage on vital organs [22]. A more recent study also implicates oxidative stress as being responsible for the numerous complications in severe malaria [4]. A variety of manifestations, such as anaemia, thrombocytopenia, acute respiratory distress syndrome, pulmonary oedema, and hepatic and renal dysfunctions, are among the severe malaria complications [23]. Other severe manifestations include cerebral malaria [24], placental malaria, metabolic syndromes and hypoglycaemia [25]. It is pertinent to note that oxidative stress and the associated severe inflammatory responses accompanying malaria infection contribute to the significant morbidity and mortality associated with the disease. Blatt *et al* [26] reported oxidative stress as the cause of death in African children with severe malaria. A further study implicates oxidative stress-induced inflammation as the cause of multiple organ damage, leading to a high number of deaths in children and pregnant women worldwide [27].

Given the important involvement of oxidative stress in the pathogenesis of malaria and the implication of XO in the generation of ROS during malaria infection, this enzyme could be a key target for treating oxidative stress and inflammatory responses in malaria. Evidence from previous studies indicates that modulation of XO activity has proven to be clinically effective for the treatment of numerous inflammatory disorders, including gout [28,29], therefore making it an attractive candidate for tackling severe oxidative stress and inflammation in malaria infection.

Role of xanthine oxidase in the pathophysiology of malaria

The expression of XO and its activity have been shown to play paradoxical roles in many disease conditions. Free radicals generated from XO activity have a significant role in the innate immune system. It has been demonstrated that they have cytotoxic effects and induce apoptosis in some cancer cells [30]. On the other hand, XO-derived ROS contributes to cancer development [31]. Additionally, xanthine dehydrogenase gene expression was associated

with decreased survival in lung adenocarcinoma patients [32].

Moreover, the enzyme activity has been associated with pro- and anti-inflammatory effects in many diseases. According to a recent study, excessive XO enzyme activity causes increased ROS levels, leading to oxidative damage [33] and subsequent development of oxidative stress as well as chronic inflammation [34]. Results from these studies suggest involvement of xanthine oxidase in several pathological conditions such as metabolic syndrome, endothelial dysfunctions and cardiovascular diseases [35-38]. Moreover, XO activity has been associated with the development of ischemia-reperfusion injury [39], haemolytic diseases and chronic inflammation [29]. In a more recent study, XO has been shown to exhibit pathological roles in cardiovascular diseases, heart failure, hypertension and atherosclerosis [33]. Findings by Ty *et al* [15] implicate XO as a host-derived source of inflammation in malaria. In another study, Iwalokun *et al* [16] reported elevated XO levels in paediatric patients with asymptomatic and symptomatic *P. falciparum* malaria. Moreover, a higher level of the enzyme was reported in *P. knowlesi* infection [40].

Reactive oxygen species (ROS) generated by xanthine oxidase have been shown to elicit a strong cytokine response in primary human monocyte-derived macrophages, resulting in the release of the inflammatory cytokine IL-1 β as well as chemokines IL-8, CCL5 and CCL2 [15]. More evidently, higher levels of enzyme activity were seen to be correlated with inflammatory cytokines in malaria patients [15]. Furthermore, recent research has indicated that xanthine oxidase serves as a significant source of ROS, which leads to the activation of inflammasomes in macrophages (Figure 1) [41]. The enzyme also contributes to inflammation in malaria by promoting dendritic cell maturation and inducing cytokine release (Figure 1). In addition, xanthine oxidase-derived ROS causes parasite-triggered cytokine secretion and CD80 surface expression in dendritic cells [42].

During malaria infection, uric acid is produced due to the action of XO on hypoxanthine. Although uric acid plays an important physiological role, contributing to more than half of the blood plasma's antioxidant capability in humans [43], it also exhibits a pathological role. Evidence indicates that uric acid activates immune cells and stimulates the production of inflammatory cytokines during malaria infection [44]. This dual role underscores the complex

involvement of uric acid in both physiological defence mechanisms and pathological processes associated with malaria [44]. Uric acid from *Plasmodium*-infected erythrocytes stimulates the secretion of tumour necrosis factor in dendritic cells [45]. Additionally, uric acid levels have been shown to increase in malaria patients with greater disease severity [44], suggesting that its elevated levels may contribute to the disease's pathophysiology [43].

Potential role of XO inhibition as a drug target for malaria

Inhibition of xanthine oxidase activity is targeted at reducing ROS and uric acid generation, thereby preventing the development of oxidative stress and the associated oxidative damage. Remarkably, several pharmacological XO inhibitors have been widely described; among these is allopurinol [46], a drug that has been in

use for a long time. Other potent XO inhibitors include febuxostat and topiroxostat [47,48]. Furthermore, potent inhibitory activity against XO has been exhibited by natural compounds, including extracts from plants [49]. Higher inhibition of XO was displayed by the flavonoids kaempferol, quercetin and isorhamnetin compared to the conventional drug allopurinol [50]. Suppression of XO activity has been a successful treatment approach for several diseases [51]. The enzyme has been a crucial target for the therapy of hyperuricaemia and gout [46]. In addition, the development of XO inhibitors has resulted in important advances in the treatment of oxidative damage, neurological disorders and neuropsychiatric conditions as well as in the management of reperfusion injury [52].

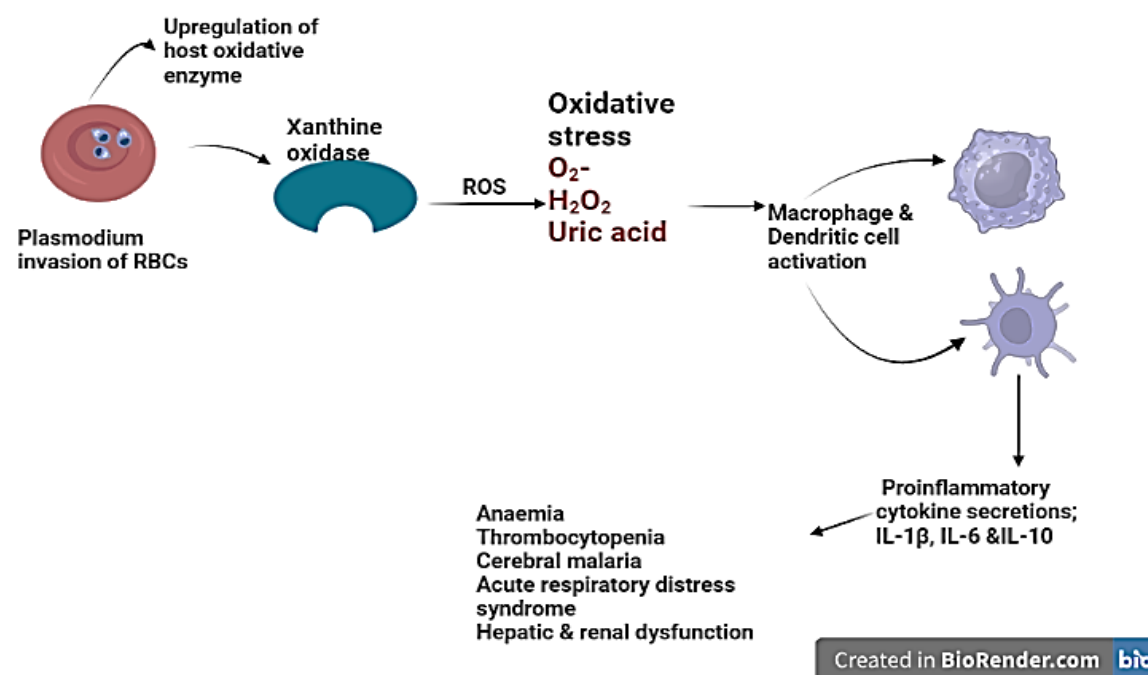


Figure 1: Pathogenic involvement of Xanthine oxidase in oxidative stress and malaria

Table 1: Studies demonstrating xanthine oxidase inhibition in malaria

Type of extract	Plant	Effect on XO	Reference
Methanol extract	<i>Achillea filipendulina</i>	Significant XO inhibitory activity IC ₅₀ value=12.87 µg/mL	[53]
Methanol extract	<i>Alcea glabrata</i>	Significant XO inhibitory activity IC ₅₀ value=0.37±0.12 mg/mL	[54]
2-aminoanthraquinone	Synthetic	57.45% inhibitory effect IC ₅₀ value=81.57 µM	[55]
Acacetin	<i>Potentilla evestita</i>	11.92±0.01 µM	[56]
Chrysin		73.74±0.02 µM	

Umbelliferon

97.12±0.01 µM

Inhibition of XO may provide a potential therapeutic intervention for malaria, similar to its success in treating other inflammatory disease conditions. Since malaria has been well recognized as an oxidative and inflammatory disease, therefore, effective treatment of the disease will require, in addition to the elimination of the parasite, a mechanism that reduces severe oxidative stress and inflammatory reactions associated with the disease. As seen in the treatment of other disease conditions in which XO inhibition has been successful, inhibition of the enzyme activity may offer a potential therapeutic intervention for malaria. Therapy that restores and sustains oxidative equilibrium in patients with malaria may help avert the fatal consequences associated with the disease [5]. Findings from previous studies suggest that inhibiting ROS generation could represent a potential adjuvant therapeutic strategy and that targeting XO may be beneficial for adjunctive therapy in malaria [3]. It is important to note that, while a few studies have explored inhibition of xanthine oxidase (XO) activity for addressing severe oxidative-related inflammatory responses in malaria, most have only demonstrated enzyme suppression *in vitro*, as shown in Table 1. Further research, including both *in vivo* and *in silico* studies identifying effective targeted inhibitors against XO activity in malaria, is recommended.

CONCLUSION

The fight against malaria is crucial for global public health; however, it has always posed challenges. Therefore, the search for novel therapeutic approaches is necessary, potentially identifying new drug targets. The enzyme, xanthine oxidase, appears to be a promising therapeutic target in malaria since the severity and complications associated with the disease are driven by xanthine oxidase-produced ROS that cause oxidative stress and consequently lead to excessive inflammatory reactions. Thus, modulating its activity is a promising therapeutic strategy for alleviating the severity of inflammatory responses associated with the disease, minimizing the adverse effects and improving patient outcomes. Further research is necessary to confirm the effectiveness of XO inhibition in the management of malaria, and in essence, to identify and develop effective targeted inhibitors against XO activity.

DECLARATIONS

Acknowledgement

None.

Ethical approval

None provided.

Use of Artificial intelligence/Large language models

We also declare that we did not use Generative artificial intelligence (AI) and AI-assisted technologies in writing the manuscript.

Availability of data and materials

The datasets used and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Conflict of interest

No conflict of interest is associated with this work.

Contribution of authors

We declare that this work was done by the author(s) named in this article, and all liabilities pertaining to claims relating to the content of this article will be borne by the authors. Mukhtar Gambo Lawal - conceptualized the study, performed literature search and drafted the manuscript; Abdullahi Samaila - Reviewed and edited the manuscript; Rusliza Basir - Made critical revision and contributed to the final version of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final copy of the manuscript for publication.

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