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Short Communication

Toxicological Profiling and Safety Assessment of Novel Synthetic Cannabinoids in Rodent Models

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DESCRIPTION

The emergence of novel Synthetic Cannabinoids (SCs) as recreational drugs poses a growing public health challenge due to their unpredictable pharmacological effects and toxicological profiles. Unlike phytocannabinoids such as Δ9-tetrahydrocannabinol, synthetic cannabinoids are often full agonists at cannabinoid receptors and exhibit significantly greater potency, which increases the risk of severe adverse outcomes including neurotoxicity, cardiotoxicity, and fatal overdose. Despite their increasing detection in forensic cases and emergency settings, comprehensive toxicological data on these compounds remain limited. This study aims to assess the acute and sub-chronic toxicity of select novel SCs using rodent models, focusing on behavioral, biochemical, histopathological, and molecular endpoints to evaluate their safety margins and potential for clinical harm.

Rodent models were administered these compounds at low, moderate, and high doses via intraperitoneal injection for both acute and sub-chronic (14-day repeated dose) studies. Control groups received saline or vehicle solution. Behavioral assessments including open field tests, rotarod performance, and catalepsy scoring were conducted to evaluate central nervous system effects. Additionally, blood samples were analyzed for liver and kidney function markers, while tissues were harvested post-euthanasia for histopathological evaluation and gene expression studies focused on inflammation, oxidative stress, and apoptosis pathways.

Histopathological findings supported these observations, with liver sections showing centrilobular necrosis, steatosis, and inflammatory infiltration. Kidney tissues exhibited glomerular atrophy and tubular degeneration in mid- to high-dose groups. Brain tissue analysis revealed neuronal cell loss in the hippocampus and cerebellum, particularly in animals treated with suggesting a neurotoxic potential not typically observed with natural cannabinoids. Immunohistochemistry confirmed increased expression of pro-inflammatory cytokines in hepatic and cerebral tissues, indicating systemic inflammatory responses triggered by SC exposure. At the molecular level, qPCR and Western blot analysis demonstrated upregulation of oxidative stress markers including Nrf2 and HO-1, along with increased expression of pro-apoptotic proteins Bax and caspase-3 in brain and liver tissues. These findings highlight the involvement of oxidative damage and apoptotic mechanisms in SC-induced toxicity. Interestingly, although less potent in acute CNS depression, caused pronounced hepatic toxicity over repeated dosing, underscoring the need to consider compound-specific organ targeting in toxicological assessments.

Pharmacokinetic profiling showed rapid plasma clearance and high volume of distribution for all three compounds, consistent with their lipophilic nature and tissue accumulation potential. However, inter-compound variability in metabolic stability suggests differing pathways of biotransformation and potential for drug-drug interactions, especially in polypharmacy scenarios or in individuals with hepatic enzyme polymorphisms.

CONCLUSION

The toxicological profiling of novel synthetic cannabinoids in rodent models indicates a significant risk of acute and sub-chronic toxicity affecting multiple organ systems, particularly the central nervous system, liver, and kidneys. These compounds exhibit higher potency and narrower therapeutic indices compared to natural cannabinoids, thereby increasing the likelihood of adverse effects even at relatively low exposure levels. The findings of this study emphasize the urgent need for regulatory control, toxicovigilance, and further mechanistic research to inform public health policies and clinical management of SC-related toxicity. Moreover, given the evolving nature of the synthetic cannabinoid market, continued surveillance and *in vivo* testing are essential to stay ahead of emerging compounds and understand their pharmacological and toxicological implications.

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