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VIROSCOPE®, an ethanolic extract of medicinal plants produced in Lomé, Togo, demonstrated excellent anti-inflammatory and immune cell proliferation activities

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Abstract

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimated that at least 80% of the world's population finds its main, if not exclusive, therapeutic source in plants. Inflammation and associated diseases have been reported to be a great threat to public health, as evidenced by the deadly cytokine storms observed during the latest COVID-19 pandemic. Several phytomedicines with excellent anti-inflammatory and immunostimulatory activities have been reported worldwide. Thus, this study evaluated the *in vitro* cytotoxicity, immune cell proliferation and immunosuppressive activities of a phytomedicine "VIROSCOPE®" produced by Viroscope SARL-U in Lomé, Togo. Cytotoxicity was assessed using the Propidium Iodide Membrane Integrity Test and interpreted according to NF EN ISO 10993-5. The immune cell proliferation property was assessed by evaluating the expression of the proliferating cell nuclear antigen (PCNA) in white blood cells by flow cytometry. Evaluation of IL-6 and TNF α production by Sandwich ELISA was used to evaluate the immunosuppressive and immunostimulatory properties of VIROSCOPE®. VIROSCOPE® demonstrated slight and mild cytotoxicity, depending on the dose. In addition, VIROSCOPE® induced excellent *in vitro* immune cell proliferation and showed excellent anti-inflammatory activity. All these immunomodulatory activities were dose-dependent, calling for strict compliance with the dosage. Further *in vitro* studies, animal model tests, and clinical trials are needed to elucidate all the therapeutic activities of VIROSCOPE® and to improve its formulation.

Keywords: VIROSCOPE®, Phytotherapy, anti-inflammatory, cytotoxicity, immune cell proliferation

1. Introduction

Phytotherapy is the science of treating and preventing diseases using medicinal plants and herbal products. Recently, the World Health Organization (WHO) estimated that at least 80% of the world's population finds plants as their main, if not exclusive, therapeutic source ^[1].

In fact, since prehistoric times, in ancient Mesopotamia, ancient China, ancient India, ancient Egypt, ancient Greece, ancient Rome, Arabia and Persia, plants had always been used successfully to treat all kinds of diseases ^[2, 3].

Phytomedicines contain phytocomplexes, which are complexes of active molecules with specific biological activities. The biological activity of a phytocomplex is generally stronger than the sum of the activities of the individual active molecules, and the presence of substances with no specific activity can have a significant synergistic effect ^[4, 5].

Inflammation and associated diseases have been reported to be a great threat to public health, as evidenced by the deadly cytokine storms often observed in influenza and COVID-19 ^[6-9]. Pro-inflammatory cytokines are mainly produced by activated macrophages and participate in the positive regulation of inflammatory reactions. Interleukin-1 β (IL-1 β), interleukin-6 (IL-6), and tumor necrosis factor- α (TNF- α) are major pro-inflammatory cytokines involved in the pathological pain process ^[10]. Additionally, many degenerative disorders and chronic health conditions including arthritis, diabetes, obesity, cancer, and cardiovascular diseases are associated with the emergence of a low-grade inflammatory state. Phytomedicines are good immunosuppressive and immunomodulatory candidates. Indeed, phytochemicals often act via regulatory molecular mechanisms that synergize anti-inflammatory pathways, such as increased production of anti-inflammatory cytokines or interference with inflammatory pathways by reducing the production of pro-inflammatory cytokine modulators ^[11-14].

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Leukocyte proliferation is the first step towards achieving an adequate immune response. However, many health conditions and viral infections, such as HIV and HCV infections, cause severe leukopenia and patients with severe leukopenia become fertile grounds for all types of secondary infections. Several conventional medications for severe leukopenia are effective but are also very expensive and cause many side effects. Therefore, identifying alternative medications is necessary. Several phytomedicines have demonstrated immune cell proliferation potential in the treatment of severe leukopenia [15-17].

Despite these past exploits and the promising future that herbal medicine seems to offer, some issues must be addressed. First, the preparation processes for each phytomedicine and traditional plant-based product must be standardized. Additionally, every traditional herbal medicine must undergo *in vitro* quality control testing, animal model testing, and clinical trials to prove their effectiveness, adjust their dosages, and address possible toxicity issues [18-20].

Thus, this study aimed to evaluate the *in vitro* cytotoxicity, immune cell proliferation and immunosuppressive properties of the phytomedicine "VIROSCOPE®" produced by Viroscope SARL-U in Lomé, Togo.

1.1 Presentation of VIROSCOPE®

VIROSCOPE® is an ethanolic extract of medicinal plants produced by Viroscope SARL-U, Lomé, Togo, and is a dark yellow liquid with a medium consistency. VIROSCOPE® is prepared using *Sodabi* (a traditionally distilled palm wine with a total alcohol content of 42%) as solvent. Ethanol is the main alcohol found in *Sodabi*, with a proportion of 99%v/v. After preparation, VIROSCOPE® has a final alcohol content of 30%. VIROSCOPE® is administered orally. The dosage of VIROSCOPE® for an adult human over 18 years of age is 40 ml twice a day (morning and evening), whereas the dosage of VIROSCOPE® for a human aged between 7 and 18 years is 20 ml twice a day (morning and evening), and the dosage for a child aged between 3 and 8 years is 05 ml twice a day (morning and evening). VIROSCOPE® is prohibited for children under three years of age and is authorized for pregnant and breastfeeding women. Previous studies had detected the presence of phytochemical groups present in VIROSCOPE® (polyphenols, hydrolyzable tannins, flavonoids, alkaloids and saponosides) and characterized rutin (195.37 ± 6.01 mg/g of dry extract) and gallic acid (121.31 ± 2.49 mg/g of dry extract). Additionally, other previous studies of VIROSCOPE® have characterized minerals, including calcium (8216 ± 1 mg/kg), magnesium (10389 ± 1 mg/kg), iron (83 ± 1 mg/kg), and zinc (19 ± 1 mg/kg).

2. Materials and methods

2.1 Assessment of cytotoxicity

The method used involved direct contact with the cell culture on a microplate at 37°C under CO₂ for 24 h. Membrane integrity was assessed by flow cytometry using propidium iodide (PI). Human peripheral blood white cells were used, and the cell mortality rate was determined for the positive control, negative control, and VIROSCOPE®. The doses of VIROSCOPE® 40 ml, 20 ml and 5 ml were tested, and each sample was tested twice. The interpretation of the cytotoxicity evaluation was according to NF EN ISO 10993-5 "Biological evaluation of medical devices - Part 5: test concerning *in vitro* cytotoxicity".

2.2 Evaluation of immune cell proliferation

The method used was direct contact with cell culture on a microplate at 37°C under CO₂ for 24 h. Human peripheral white blood cells were used, and the expression of the proliferating cell nuclear antigen (PCNA) in negative control, positive control and cells sensitized with VIROSCOPE® were evaluated by flow cytometry. The doses of VIROSCOPE® 40 ml, 20 ml and 5 ml were tested, and each sample was tested twice.

2.3 Evaluation of immune stimulating properties

The method used was direct contact with cell culture on a microplate at 37°C under CO₂ for 24 h. The technique used was the evaluation of the production of IL-6 and TNF α by Sandwich ELISA for the positive control, negative control and VIROSCOPE®. The doses of VIROSCOPE® 40 ml, 20 ml and 5 ml were tested, and each sample was tested four times.

2.4 Evaluation of immunosuppressive properties

The method used was direct contact with cell culture on a microplate at 37°C under CO₂ for 24 h. The technique used was the evaluation of the production of IL-6 and TNF α by Sandwich ELISA for the negative control, positive control and (Positive control+ VIROSCOPE®). The doses of VIROSCOPE® (40 ml VIROSCOPE® + positive control), (20 ml VIROSCOPE® + positive control), and (5 ml VIROSCOPE® + positive control) were tested, and each sample was tested four times.

3. Results

3.1 Evaluation of VIROSCOPE® cytotoxicity

The cytotoxicity of VIROSCOPE® was dose-dependent and the cytotoxicity decreased with decreasing doses. Thus, according to NF EN ISO 10993-5, a VIROSCOPE® dose of 40 ml had mild cytotoxicity (class 2 product), whereas the doses of 20 ml and 5 ml had both slight cytotoxicity (class 1 product) (Table 1 and Figure 1).

Table 1: Results of the evaluation of VIROSCOPE® Cytotoxicity

Test	Negative control (%)	Positive control (%)	VIROSCOPE® (%)		
			Dose of 40 ml	Dose of 20 ml	Dose of 5 ml
Test N°1	3.31	88.87	30.42	23.60	20.63
Test N°2	3.00	81.36	11.80	7.92	6.79
Mean	3.16	85.12	21.11	15.76	13.71

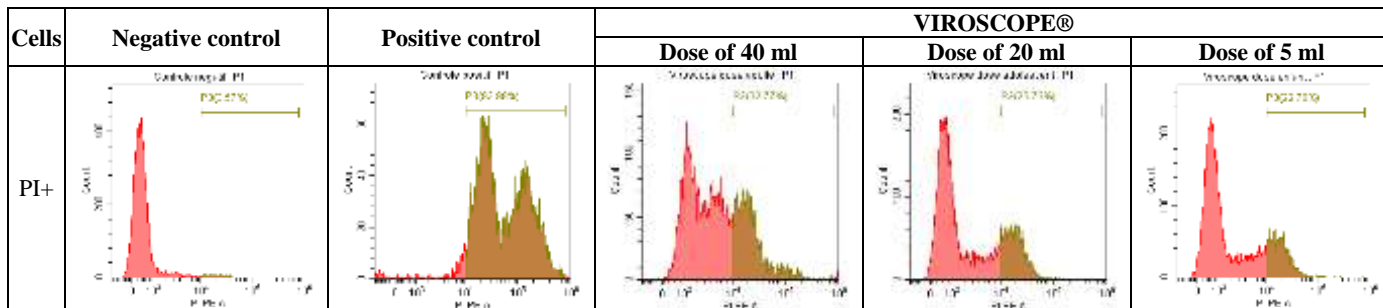


Fig 1: Illustration of cytotoxicity assessment. PI, propidium iodide

3.2 Evaluation of immune cell proliferation

The proliferation of immune cells induced by VIROSCOPE® was dose-dependent. Indeed, the 40 ml dose induced excellent proliferation of immune cells, even exceeding the results obtained for the positive control. However, doses of 20 ml and 5 ml did not induce any significant proliferation of immune cells (Table 2 and Figure 2).

Table 2: Results of the evaluation of immune cell proliferation

PCNA-producing cells	Negative control (%)	Positive control (%)	VIROSCOPE® (%)		
			Dose of 40 ml	Dose of 20 ml	Dose of 5 ml
Test N°1	65.86	70.57	78.34	64.63	60.31
Test N°2	73.97	75.56	80.80	77.31	67.60
Mean	69.92	73.07	79.57	70.97	63.96

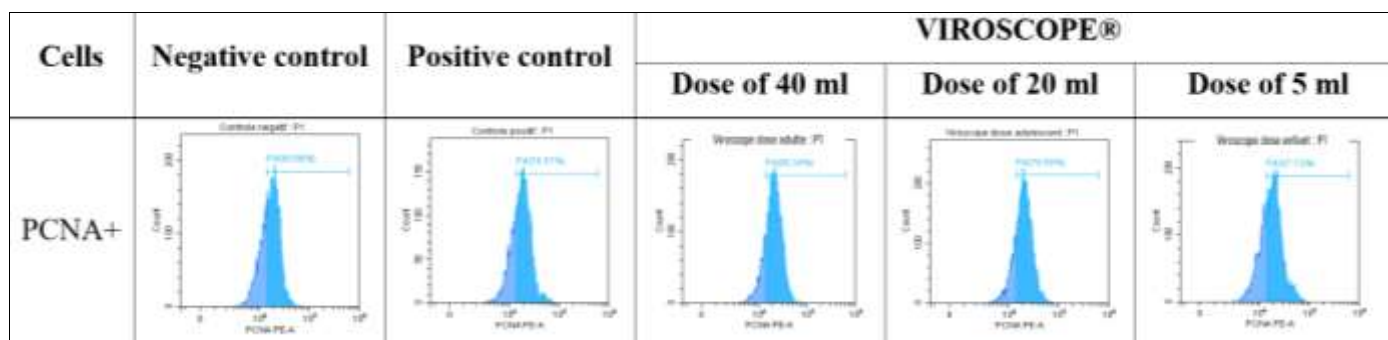


Fig 2: Illustration of immune cell proliferation assessment

3.3 Evaluation of immunostimulatory properties of VIROSCOPE®

The induction of the production of the pro-inflammatory cytokines TNF α and IL-6 by VIROSCOPE® was dose-

dependent. Thus, the 40 ml dose of VIROSCOPE® did not induce a production of pro-inflammatory cytokines, whereas the doses of 20 ml and 5 ml induced low production of pro-inflammatory cytokines (Tables 3 and 4).

Table 3: Results of the evaluation of immunostimulatory properties of VIROSCOPE® (1)

Test	TNF α (pg/ml)				
	Negative control	Positive control	VIROSCOPE®		
			Dose of 40 ml	Dose of 20 ml	Dose of 5 ml
Test N°1	28.55	798.27	0	76.60	75.50
Test N°2	11.25	799.84	0	93.22	96.62
Test N°3	0	789.20	0	155.53	147.57
Test N°4	0	611.25	0	194.57	207.80
Mean	9.95	749.64	0	129.98	131.87

Table 4: Results of the evaluation of immunostimulatory properties of VIROSCOPE® (2)

Test	IL-6 (pg/ml)				
	Negative control	Positive control	VIROSCOPE®		
			Dose of 40 ml	Dose of 20 ml	Dose of 5 ml
Test N°1	11.11	1285.78	0	14.29	15.43
Test N°2	9.23	1300.20	0	5.02	55.14
Test N°3	13.81	1218.74	5.56	9.99	11.09
Test N°4	15.50	899.98	9.07	6.43	85.38
Mean	12.41	1176.17	3.66	8.93	41.76

3.4 Evaluation of the immunosuppressive properties of VIROSCOPE®

The immunosuppressive (anti-inflammatory) activity of VIROSCOPE® was dose-dependent. Thus, the 40 ml dose of VIROSCOPE® suppressed the production of TNF α and

significantly reduced the production of IL-6 in an inflammatory environment. Doses of 20 ml and 5 ml induced only a very slight suppression of the production of the pro-inflammatory cytokines TNF α and IL-6 (Tables 5 and 6).

Table 5: Results of the evaluation of the immunosuppressive properties of VIROSCOPE® (1)

Test	TNF α (pg/ml)				
	Negative control	Positive control (S)	S + VIROSCOPE®		
			Dose of 40 ml	Dose of 20 ml	Dose of 5 ml
Test N°1	28.55	798.27	0	795.81	833.84
Test N°2	11.25	799.84	0	729.91	729.18
Test N°3	0	789.20	0	587.97	593.32
Test N°4	0	611.25	0	591.40	605.29
Mean	9.95	749.64	0	676.27	690.41

Table 6: Results of the evaluation of the immunosuppressive properties of VIROSCOPE® (2)

Test	IL-6 (pg/ml)				
	Negative control	Positive control (S)	S + VIROSCOPE®		
			Dose of 40 ml	Dose of 20 ml	Dose of 5 ml
Test N°1	11.11	1285.78	58.03	1218.54	1288.40
Test N°2	9.23	1300.20	67.77	1241.85	1269.60
Test N°3	13.81	1218.74	271.21	1129.91	1080.49
Test N°4	15.50	899.98	268.72	1071.84	1216.89
Mean	12.41	1176.17	166.44	1165.53	1213.85

4. Discussions

This study aimed to evaluate the *in vitro* cytotoxicity, immune cell proliferation, immunostimulatory and immunosuppressive properties of the phytomedicine “VIROSCOPE®” produced by Viroscope SARL-U in Lomé, Togo.

According to the classification criteria of the NF EN ISO 10993-5, VIROSCOPE® would have mild toxicity at a dose of 40 ml twice a day (morning and evening), and slight cytotoxicity at Dose of 20 ml and 5 ml twice a day (morning and evening). This is encouraging and ensures the safe consumption of the phytomedicine VIROSCOPE®.

According to the results obtained, VIROSCOPE® (40 ml of dose) induced excellent proliferation of immune cells. Therefore, VIROSCOPE® could be a good alternative for the prevention and treatment of immunodepression. This is in agreement with the active ingredients found in VIROSCOPE®. Indeed, the phytomedicine VIROSCOPE® contains saponosides, which are known for their immune cell proliferation properties [21–24]. However, the use of 20 ml and 5 ml produced very low immune cell proliferation. Therefore, it is imperative that immune depressed patients respect the dose of VIROSCOPE® of 40 ml twice a day (morning and evening) for optimum immune cell proliferation.

The immunosuppressive properties of VIROSCOPE® were evaluated by measuring the production of pro-inflammatory cytokines IL-6 and TNF α in an inflammatory environment. VIROSCOPE® significantly reduced the production of the pro-inflammatory cytokines IL-6 and TNF α . The phytomedicine VIROSCOPE® would be an excellent candidate for treating diseases associated with acute and chronic inflammation, and could be useful to quench cytokine storms often observed in diseases such as COVID-19 and influenza. This is consistent with the active ingredients found in VIROSCOPE®. Indeed, rutin and gallic acid, abundantly found in VIROSCOPE®, have been reported as powerful anti-inflammatory agents [25–29]. In addition, the anti-inflammatory activity of VIROSCOPE® was dose dependent. Therefore, it is necessary to maintain the dose of 40 ml twice daily for optimal anti-inflammatory activity.

In addition to its anti-inflammatory activity, VIROSCOPE® also induces a low immunostimulatory activity at dose of 20 ml and 5ml by inducing the production of the pro-inflammatory cytokines IL-6 and TNF α . Therefore, VIROSCOPE® would have dose-dependent

immunomodulatory properties and the dose of VIROSCOPE® to drink will depend on the desired effect. Rutin and gallic acid (two major active ingredients found in VIROSCOPE®) have already been reported to have immunomodulatory activity [26, 30, 31].

5. Conclusion

VIROSCOPE®, a phytomedicine produced by Viroscope SARL-U, Lomé, Togo, demonstrated slight and mild cytotoxicity, excellent *in vitro* immune cell proliferation, and excellent anti-inflammatory activity. All of these activities were dose-dependent, calling for strict compliance with the dosage. Further *in vitro* studies, animal models, and clinical trials are needed to elucidate all the therapeutic activities of VIROSCOPE® and improve its formulation.

6. Perspectives

Two perspectives emerged at the end of this study.

- Evaluate the anti-diabetic, anti-oxidant, anti-microbial, and anti-cancer properties of VIROSCOPE®. Infact, as rutin and gallic acid (the major active ingredients of VIROSCOPE®) are known to have anti-diabetic, anti-oxidant, anti-microbial, and anti-cancer therapeutic activities, it would be interesting to evaluate the effects of VIROSCOPE® on diabetes, multidrug-resistant bacteria, and cancer processes.
- Clinical trials for immune cell proliferation and anti-inflammatory properties of VIROSCOPE®.

7. Conflict of interests

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

8. Funding

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