Xylitol: bitter cardiovascular data for a successful sweetener

Juerg H. Beer 1,2* and Meret Allemann 1

1Center for Molecular Cardiology, Laboratory for Platelet Research, University of Zurich, Zurich, Switzerland; and 2Department of Internal Medicine, Thrombosis/Haemostasis Unit, Cantonal Hospital of Baden, CH-5404, Switzerland

This editorial refers to ‘Xylitol is prothrombotic and associated with cardiovascular risk’, by M. Witkowski et al., https://doi.org/10.1093/eurheartj/ehae244.

Graphical Abstract

Mechanisms of xylitol induced enhanced platelet activity and thrombus formation

Results from human cohorts and interventions

Observational cohorts

Discovery and validation

Endogenous Xylitol

Exogeneous Xylitol

Glucose-6-phosphate → L-Xylulose → Xylitol

Exogeneous Xylitol

ADP + TRAP

In vitro

Increased platelet reactivity and adhesion

Increased aggregation and thrombus formation

Carotid thrombosis model

Possible mechanisms

Increased receptor ligand affinity and binding?

Other receptors involved?

Direct xylitol binding onto membrane proteins?

Altered glycosylation?

Actin binding

Ca²⁺ signaling

Interventional study

Plasma levels

Endogeneous xylitol (30g)

0.5-34 μM

134-569 μM

MACE

Atherosclerosis

Cardiovascular effects of Xylitol: data from observational cohorts, interventions and mechanisms of enhanced platelet activity

The opinions expressed in this article are not necessarily those of the Editors of the European Heart Journal or of the European Society of Cardiology.

* Corresponding author. Tel: +41 56 486 2502, Cell: +41 79 218 08 58. Email: hansjuerg.beer@ksb.ch, www.ksb.ch, www.cmc.uzh.ch

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For many years the scientific community and the general population alike were convinced that artificial sweeteners were beneficial because they reduce excessive sugar intake, and hence reduce induced calories, particularly from soft drinks, thus reducing weight gain and—as implicitly argued—cardiovascular risk. A recent statement of the WHO released in May 2023 recommends against the use of non-sugar sweeteners (NSS) to control body weight or to reduce the risk of non-communicable diseases.\(^1\) The report suggests that ‘there may be potential undesirable effects from long-term use of NSS, such as an increased risk of type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, and mortality in adults’ and is referring to a recent systematic review.\(^2\) However, the recommendation does not apply to low-calorie sugars and sugar alcohols (polyols), which are sugar derivatives containing calories and are therefore not considered NSS.

These polyols, hydrogenated carbohydrates, i.e. sugar alcohols, include sorbitol, xylitol, lactitol, mannitol, erythritol and maltitol and they come with a variety of names (bulk sweeteners, sugar replacers, sometimes also (and incorrectly) named ‘sugar-free sweeteners’), and are often termed ‘natural’ and implicitly harmless resp. beneficial, because they can be extracted from berries, oats, birch, sugar cane bagasse and corn husk. Specifically, the sweetness of xylitol is similar to sucrose but calories per gram are lower (2.4 kcal/g or 9 kJ/g vs. 4 kcal/g or 17 kJ/g for typical sugars) and the FDA recognizes them as safe (‘GRAS’, meaning ‘generally recognized as safe’). Xylitol is also called E967 in the EU and it is approved as a food additive here as well. Xylitol is known to be produced endogenously, but today it is in use because they can be extracted from berries, oats, birch, sugar cane bagasse and corn husk. Specifically, the sweetness of xylitol is similar to sucrose but calories per gram are lower (2.4 kcal/g or 9 kJ/g vs. 4 kcal/g or 17 kJ/g for typical sugars) and the FDA recognizes them as safe (‘GRAS’, meaning ‘generally recognized as safe’). Xylitol is also called E967 in the EU and it is approved as a food additive here as well. Xylitol is known to be produced endogenously, but today it is use because they can be extracted from berries, oats, birch, sugar cane bagasse and corn husk.

Collectively, the data send a warning sign that xylitol may have platelet-activation-mediated prothrombotic effects and may precipitate (pre-existing?) clinical cardiovascular disease as shown by this 3-year observation time; a possibly similar effect is also induced by other sugar alcohols such as erythritol, as was convincingly shown by the same group earlier.\(^11\) Unfortunately, these sugars are indeed frequently used in the patient group at risk with obesity and diabetes.

The study raises many mechanistic questions for further interesting analyses. Is the observed effect receptor-mediated? The fact that multiple agonists show a similar enhanced pattern with xylitol makes this somewhat less likely. Can aspirin or specific receptor blockades of P2Y12, GPIIb/IIIa, GPIb/IX, GPVI, PAR-1, Clec, etc., alone or in combination, reduce/inhibit the effects? The glycosylation profile could provide interesting answers: Platelet receptors—particularly GPIbalpha—are heavily glycosylated. Xylitol and sugar alcohols are known to affect enzymatic and non-enzymatic glycosylation, as has been shown with collagen,\(^9\) and it appears likely to happen with platelet glycoprotein receptors as well and with their ligands (von Willebrand factor, fibronogen, collagen, etc.), with relevant functional consequences. Typical glycosylation and deglycosylation patterns were shown earlier, e.g. with (isolated) GPIb with important structure/function consequences of collapsed GPIbalpha and altered platelet function,\(^12\) Modified glycosylation may affect platelet clearance and increase production, resulting in a younger and hyper-responsive platelet population. Typically altered glycosylation of von Willebrand factor is well known to alter receptor–ligand affinity and function.\(^13\)

As the observed effects may appear rapidly after exogenous challenges, could there be a direct membrane and charge effect that is operative, i.e. by molecular on-docking, and could it then lead directly to receptor affinity and functional changes? Interestingly, this seems to be the case; indeed, xylitol has been shown to spontaneously bind to proteins, to induce conformational changes and to alter function, as nicely demonstrated in the case of carboxypeptidase A with altered enzyme activity (raised Vmax) induced by spontaneous xylitol binding.\(^14\) Typical binding occurred at tryptophane residues.

No inflammatory responses or sex differences were observed by the authors. However, what about other potential subgroups at risk, e.g. patients with low transaldolase activity who are then exposed to very high levels of sugar alcohols due to individually slower metabolism/clearance? Are they more prone to a particular cardiac risk as has been shown for patients with liver disease? Xylitol is mainly cardiovascular complications associated with endogenous and exogenous xylitol, namely major adverse cardiovascular events (MACE); first demonstrated in two carefully studied, large, independent patient cohorts (discovery and derivation cohort) with the use of metabolomics and stable-isotope-dilution LC-MS/MS method. The 3-year endpoints MACE and stroke were statistically significant and clinically relevant, positively associated with higher fasting levels of xylitol. Then, the authors went on to show that xylitol increased platelet reactivity in vitro and ex vivo to classical low-dose aggregation with adenosine diphosphate (ADP), Thrombin Receptor Activation Peptide (TRAP) and collagen. Further, an increased adhesion under flow, an augmented activation of GPIIb/IIIa and expression of p-selectin was observed using flow cytometry after addition of xylitol. Alongside this, increased calcium mobilization, increased platelet-leucocyte aggregates and shortened occlusion times in the mouse carotid thrombosis model were demonstrated. Finally, 10 human volunteers showed upon an oral challenge of 30 g of xylitol (as usually ingested by a portion of soft drink with the artificial sweetener) a clearly increased platelet reactivity as early as 30 min thereafter, strongly suggesting causality.

editorial
metabolized/oxidized in the liver and there are multiple active metabolites including the phosphorylated form D-xylulose-5-phosphate, which may influence the nuclear transport and activates protein phosphatase 2A.\textsuperscript{15}

The data and a myriad of questions collectively call for a closer look by the authorities and researchers alike at sugar alcohol sweeteners as a cardiovascular hazard. Confirmatory studies, longer exposure analyses and elucidations of mechanisms will have to confirm these not-so-clear skies for the widespread use of sugar alcohols.

\section*{Declarations}

\section*{Disclosure of Interest}

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\section*{References}


