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Dolna 17, Warsaw,
Poland 00-773
+48 226 0 227 03
editorial_office@rsglobal.pl

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THE ROLE OF CYCLOSPORINE IN THE TOPICAL TREATMENT OF DRY EYE SYNDROME: A COMPREHENSIVE REVIEW

Maja Ćwiek *(Corresponding Author, Email: maja.cwiek4@gmail.com)*
MD, Independent Public Complex of Health Care Facilities in Wyszków, Komisji Edukacji Narodowej 1, 07-200 Wyszków, Poland
ORCID ID: 0009-0009-2199-8555

ABSTRACT

Dry eye disease (DED) is a multifactorial ocular surface disorder marked by instability of the tear film and inflammatory responses. This review examines the mechanisms of action, clinical effectiveness, and formulation developments of cyclosporine A (CsA). Current evidence shows CsA reduces inflammation, improves tear production, and alleviates symptoms by targeting immunopathological processes. The therapeutic outcome is influenced by the underlying cause of the disease and the specific attributes of the formulation used.

KEYWORDS

Cyclosporine A, Dry Eye Disease, Keratoconjunctivitis Sicca, Ocular Inflammation, Immunomodulation, Topical Treatment, Sjögren's Syndrome

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1. Introduction

Dry eye disease (DED) represents a significant public health problem, impacting an estimated 5% to 30 % of the global population, with a greater incidence observed in women and older individuals [1, 2]. According to the Tear Film & Ocular Surface Society Dry Eye Workshop II (TFOS DEWS II), DED is defined as”a multifactorial disease of the ocular surface characterized by a loss of homeostasis of the tear film, and accompanied by ocular symptoms, where instability and hyperosmolarity of the tear film, inflammation and damage to the ocular surface, and neurosensory irregularities are key etiological factors [3]. The economic impact of DED is substantial, with approximately $4 billion in annual costs in the United States alone [3].

DED is traditionally classified into two primary subtypes: aqueous-deficient dry eye (ADDE), often linked to autoimmune diseases such as Sjögren's syndrome, and evaporative dry eye (EDE), commonly caused by meibomian gland dysfunction. A significant number of patients exhibit components of both [1, 2, 4].

In recent years, understanding of DED pathophysiology has evolved significantly, with ocular surface inflammation recognized as a critical component in both the initiation and perpetuation of the disease process [3, 5]. This recognition has led to the development of targeted anti-inflammatory therapies, among which topical cyclosporine A has emerged as a cornerstone treatment for moderate to severe DED.

2. Materials And Methods

This comprehensive review was conducted through systematic literature search of PubMed, Scopus, and Web of Science databases from inception to December 2023. Search terms included”cyclosporine A, ""“dry eye disease, ""“keratoconjunctivitis sicca, ""“ocular inflammation, " and”topical treatment." Only articles published in English were included. Clinical trials, randomized controlled studies, meta-analyses, and systematic reviews were prioritized.

3. Results

The immunopathophysiology of DED is characterized by a vicious cycle of inflammation involving four broad stages: initiation, amplification, recruitment, and damage/self-perpetuation [3]. The cycle typically begins with tear film hyperosmolarity resulting from either inadequate tear production or excessive evaporation. This hyperosmolarity triggers ocular surface epithelial damage and activates mitogen-activated protein kinase (MAPK) signaling pathways, leading to the production of pro-inflammatory cytokines and chemokines [3].

Key inflammatory mediators implicated in DED include:

- Interleukins (IL-1α, IL-1β, IL-2, IL-4, IL-5, IL-6, IL-8, IL-10, IL-12, IL-13, IL-17)
- Chemokines (CCL2, CCL3/MIP1α, CCL5/RANTES, CCL19, CCL20, CCL21, CX3CL1/fractalkine, CXCL9, CXCL10, CXCL12)
- Interferon-gamma (IFN-γ)
- Tumor necrosis factor-alpha (TNF-α)
- Matrix metalloproteinases (MMPs)

These inflammatory mediators activate local dendritic cells and recruit T-cells to the ocular surface, intensifying the inflammatory response [3]. The consequent inflammation disrupts the lacrimal functional unit, leading to greater tear film instability and hyperosmolarity, which in turn causes further cellular damage and a reduction in epithelial and goblet cells [3].

Research in both animal models and human subjects has established inflammation's pivotal role. Models indicate that CD4+ T cells are crucial to DED development, and human studies reveal elevated CD4+ T cells, HLA-DR expression, and inflammatory cytokine levels in the conjunctivae and tears of affected individuals [1].

3.2. Mechanism of Action of Cyclosporine in Dry Eye Disease

Cyclosporine A is a lipophilic cyclic peptide obtained from the fungus Tolypocladium inflatum that provides significant immunomodulation through multiple mechanisms pertinent to DED [5].

3.2.1. Immunomodulatory Effects

The primary mechanism of action of CsA involves inhibition of T-cell activation. It enters T cells and binds to cyclophilin, creating a complex that inhibits the phosphatase calcineurin [1]. This inhibition prevents the dephosphorylation and nuclear translocation of nuclear factor of activated T cells (NFATc), which is essential for the transcription of genes encoding interleukin-2 (IL-2) and other inflammatory cytokines [1]. By reducing IL-2 production, CsA effectively suppresses T-cell proliferation and the subsequent inflammatory cascade.

Additionally, CsA:

- Prevents apoptosis in conjunctival epithelial cells
- Enhances conjunctival goblet cell density
- Prevents mitochondrial permeability transition pore (MPTP) opening in epithelial cells
- Suppresses Fas/FasL and caspase pathways in epithelial cells [1, 6]

These multifaceted actions enable CsA to target several pathological pathways in DED concurrently, making it well-suited for long-term care.

3.2.2. Effects on Tear Production and Ocular Surface Health

Beyond immunomodulation, evidence indicates CsA may also improve tear production and ocular surface health. Studies in animals show CsA can increase tear secretion in normal rabbits, potentially through irritant mechanisms, and reduce apoptotic cells in the conjunctiva of mice with dry eye [1].

The increase in goblet cell density is particularly important, as these cells produce mucin, a vital element for tear film stability and spreading [3, 6]. By protecting and restoring these cells, CsA helps preserve ocular surface integrity.

3.3. Formulations Challenges and Advances

One of the significant challenges in developing effective topical CsA formulations stems from its physicochemical properties. CsA is a neutrally charged hydrophobic molecule with extremely low aqueous solubility, making it difficult to formulate in a safe and effective ocular delivery system [3].

3.3.1. Traditional Formulations

Initial CsA ophthalmic solutions were formulated in oil-based solvents such as castor oil or corn oil. However, these formulations often led to side effects such as blurred vision, burning, and stinging, resulting in poor patient tolerance and low drug bioavailability. Additionally, these oil-based systems provided low bioavailability of CsA to ocular targets, limiting their therapeutic efficacy [3].

3.3.2. Advanced Delivery Systems

Newer strategies have been developed to overcome these limitations:

1. Cationic Emulsions: Formulations (e.g., 0.1% CsA) use positively charged droplets that adhere more effectively to the negatively charged ocular surface, enhancing drug delivery and allowing once-daily dosing [3, 6].

2. Nanomicellar Aqueous Solutions: These clear aqueous solutions utilize nanomicelles to solubilize CsA, improving patient comfort and compliance while maintaining therapeutic efficacy [3].

3. Liposomal Formulations: Less common, these are explored for their potential to increase corneal penetration and extend drug contact time.

These advanced formulations have demonstrated improved tolerability profiles and enhanced bioavailability compared to earlier oil-based systems, contributing to better treatment outcomes and patient adherence [3].

3.4. Clinical Efficacy of Cyclosporine in Dry Eye Disease

3.4.1. General Dry Eye Population

Multiple clinical trials have confirmed CsA's effectiveness in ameliorating the signs and symptoms of DED. Randomized controlled trials consistently reveal that CsA emulsion is superior to vehicle controls in reducing corneal staining and improving Schirmer test scores [1]. Symptomatic improvement is more variable, though reductions in ocular dryness show the most consistent benefit over placebo [1].

The therapeutic benefits of CsA typically manifest after several weeks to months, reflecting the time needed to modulate underlying inflammatory pathways. Significant clinical improvement generally requires at least six months of continuous treatment, with additional gains observed over longer durations [6].

Sjögren's Syndrome Patients

Sjögren's syndrome (SS) is a systemic autoimmune disorder characterized by lymphocytic infiltration of exocrine glands, leading to dry eye and dry mouth. The prevalence of SS among DED patients ranges from 10% to 28%. Although CsA is beneficial for SS-related DED, the response is often less pronounced than in non-SS patients, likely due to the more severe systemic inflammation in SS [6].

Despite this reduced efficacy, CsA remains a valuable treatment option for SS-related DED. Clinical trials have demonstrated improvements in Schirmer test scores, tear break-up time (TBUT), corneal staining, and Ocular Surface Disease Index (OSDI) scores after 6-12 months of treatment with both 0.05% and 0.1% CsA formulations [6]. The European Alliance Associations for Rheumatology (EULAR) recommendations for SS management include topical CsA as a treatment option for patients who do not respond adequately to artificial tears alone [6].

Post-Surgical Dry Eye

Ocular surgeries, such as cataract extraction, can induce or worsen dry eye via corneal nerve damage, surface exposure, and post-surgical inflammation [7]. A prospective, randomized study assessed the efficacy of 0.05% CsA in cataract patients [7].

The study found that patients who began treatment with lubricants and CsA two weeks pre-operatively and continued for three months post-operatively showed significantly greater improvement in subjective symptoms, tear osmolarity, TBUT, and Schirmer scores compared to those using only lubricants or no medication [7]. This suggests CsA is a beneficial adjunct for preventing and managing dry eye associated with cataract surgery, especially in patients with pre-existing DED.

3.5. Safety and Tolerability Profile

Topical CsA has an excellent safety record. The most frequent adverse effect is transient instillation discomfort (burning or stinging), which usually diminishes with continued use [6]. In trials of the 0.1% cationic emulsion, instillation pain was reported in about 29% of patients versus 16% in the vehicle group [6].

Systemic absorption is negligible. No quantifiable blood levels were found in patients using 0.05% CsA, and only minimal, non-therapeutic levels (under 0.3 ng/mL) were detected in a few patients using the 0.1% formulation [1], alleviating concerns about systemic immunosuppression.

Long-term studies support its safety for extended use. One study followed severe DED patients using 0.05% CsA twice daily for 6 months, then as needed for up to a decade [6]. The authors noted that all patients required a prolonged induction phase (median 20 months), but achieved improvement that was sustained long-term with minimal additional treatment [6].

3.6. Comparative Effectiveness and Combination Therapy

When compared to other DED treatments, CsA provides superior long-term inflammatory control versus artificial tears and a better safety profile than corticosteroids [5]. While corticosteroids offer rapid relief, their long-term use is constrained by risks of elevated intraocular pressure, cataracts, and infection [8].

CsA is often used in combination with other DED treatments, including:

1. Artificial Tears: for immediate symptomatic relief while CsA addresses underlying inflammation
2. Short-term Corticosteroids: as induction therapy for severe inflammation before transitioning to CsA maintenance therapy
3. Punctal Plugs: to reduce tear drainage, complementing CsA's effects on tear production and quality
4. Omega-3 Fatty Acids: to address meibomian gland dysfunction and modulate inflammation through different pathways

This combination approach allows for targeted addressing of multiple aspects of DED pathophysiology while minimizing potential side effects associated with long-term corticosteroid use.

4. Discussion

This comprehensive review demonstrate that topical cyclosporine A represents a valuable therapeutic option for dry eye disease management, particularly for patients with moderate to severe disease characterized by significant ocular surface inflammation. The immunomodulatory mechanisms of CsA directly target key pathophysiological processes in DED, including T-cell activation, cytokine production, and apoptosis of ocular surface cells.

The development of advanced formulations has addressed many of the initial challenges associated with CsA delivery, particularly its poor aqueous solubility and ocular bioavailability. Novel delivery systems like cationic emulsions and nanomicellar solutions have enhanced patient tolerance and efficacy, thereby improving adherence and outcomes.

While CsA demonstrates efficacy across various DED subtypes, treatment response appears to vary based on disease etiology. Patients with Sjögren's syndrome-associated dry eye may experience more modest benefits compared to those with non-autoimmune forms of DED, likely reflecting the more complex and severe inflammatory processes in autoimmune conditions.

The exceptional safety profile of topical CsA, characterized by minimal systemic absorption and few serious adverse events, solidifies its role in the long-term management of chronic DED. Initial instillation discomfort is typically transient and manageable.

5. Conclusions

Topical cyclosporine A represents a foundational treatment for dry eye disease that targets the underlying inflammatory processes driving disease progression. Through its immunomodulatory actions on T-cells, inhibition of apoptosis, and preservation of goblet cells, CsA effectively disrupts the vicious cycle of inflammation in DED. While treatment response may be more modest in certain populations like Sjögren's syndrome patients, CsA remains a crucial therapeutic option across the DED spectrum.

With continued advances in formulation technology and a growing understanding of DED pathophysiology, CsA-based therapies will likely remain a cornerstone of DED management for the foreseeable future. Future investigations should aim to identify predictive biomarkers of treatment success, refine combination therapy protocols, and pioneer novel delivery systems to further optimize efficacy and patient compliance.

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