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Research Article

“Berberine – Contemporary Clinical Applications And Mechanisms Of Action: A Literature Review”

Maciej Salamon^{1*}, Antoni Jakub Plasota², Mikołaj Karol Olczak³, Michał Piotr Wojszcz-Hadas⁴, Alicja Marciniuk⁵, Iga Milena Zawislak⁶, Michalina Maria Wielgus⁷, Michał Szczupak⁸, Ignacy Gajda⁹, Katarzyna Turniak¹⁰, Urban Stanisław Matyjasik¹¹, Julia Smolarek¹², Zofia Alicja Pojmańska¹³, Damian Konrad Strzelczyk¹⁴

^{1*}St. John Paul II Mazovian Hospital in Siedlce, Księcia Józefa Poniatowskiego 26, 08-110 Siedlce,

<https://orcid.org/0009-0006-3226-6374>, maciejsalamon3@gmail.com

²Medical University of Warsaw, ul. Żwirki i Wigury 61, 02-091 Warsaw, Poland, <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-1789-2094>, antoni.plasota@gmail.com

³St. John Paul II Independent Public Western Specialist Hospital in Grodzisk Mazowiecki, ul. Daleka 11, 05-825 Grodzisk Mazowiecki, Poland, <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-2232-143X>, mikolaj.olczak@gmail.com

⁴Independent Public Clinical Hospital named after Prof. W. Orłowski Center for Postgraduate Medical Education 231 Czerniakowska Street 00-416 Warsaw, <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-1114-9038>, michalwojszcz.wojszcz20@gmail.com

⁵Praga Hospital of the Transfiguration of Our Lord Ltd. Aleja Solidarności 67 03-401 Warsaw, Poland, <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-2736-5336>, alicja.marciniukk@gmail.com

⁶District Medical Center in Grójec ul. Piotra Skargi 10 05-600 Grójec, <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-0314-4256>, zawislakiga@outlook.com

⁷District Medical Center in Grójec ul. Piotra Skargi 10 05-600 Grójec, <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-9670-5375>, michalinaw9@gmail.com

⁸University Clinical Hospital in Białystok ul. M. C. Skłodowskiej 24a, 15-276 Białystok, Poland, <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-5112-6978>, szczupak.michal152@gmail.com

⁹Independent Public Health Care Institution in Siedlce Starowiejska Street 15, 08-110 Siedlce, <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-3035-4008>, ignacygajda3005@gmail.com

¹⁰Medical University of Warsaw, Żwirki I Wigury street 61, 02-091, <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-0323-7780>, katarzynaturniak@interia.pl

¹¹Lower Silesian Oncology Center, Plac Ludwika Hirszfelda 12, 53-413 Wrocław, <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-7111-2541>, Urban.matyjasik2323@gmail.com

¹²Warsaw South Hospital ul. Rotmistrza Witolda Pileckiego 99, 02-781 Warsaw, Poland, <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-8141-218X>, julia.smolarek25@wp.pl

¹³Independent Public Health Care Facility - Complex of Facilities Hospital of the Danish Red Cross 06-200 Maków Mazowiecki St. Wincentego Witos 2, <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-6803-123X>, drzofiaalicja@gmail.com

¹⁴Central Military Medical Clinic “CePeLek”, Independent Public Health Care Institution, Koszykowa Street 78, 00-911 Warsaw, <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-3672-9219>, dami2325@gmail.com

***Corresponding Author:** Maciej Salamon

*St. John Paul II Mazovian Hospital in Siedlce, Księcia Józefa Poniatowskiego 26, 08-110 Siedlce, <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-3226-6374>, maciejsalamon3@gmail.com

***Author of correspondence:** Email: maciejsalamon3@gmail.com

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Natural compounds have been utilized for centuries due to their availability, and those present in plants find application in so-called Traditional Medicine. Among plant secondary metabolites with biological properties, the isoquinoline quaternary alkaloid—berberine (BBR)—possesses a broad range of therapeutic uses for the treatment of numerous diseases [1] This compound is isolated from many medicinal plant species, such as *Hydrastis canadensis*, *Berberis aristata*, *Coptis chinensis*, *Coptis japonica*, *Phellodendron amurense*, and *Phellodendron chinense* Schneid[2], [3] .

Historically, herbs containing berberine, such as *Coptis chinensis*, have been widely used in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) for approximately 2200 years[2] The earliest recorded medical use of *Rhizoma coptidis* containing berberine dates back to A.D. 200 [4]*Shennong's Herbal Classic* notes that this plant is primarily used to prevent or attenuate digestive system disease symptoms, such as abdominal distention, vomiting, diarrhea, and jaundice[2]. In China, berberine remains a common over-the-counter drug used to treat gastrointestinal tract infections [3]Beyond its antimicrobial effects, modern research has highlighted its potential in treating metabolic disorders, including type 2 diabetes (T2D), obesity, and cardiovascular diseases [5]

1.2. Chemistry and Pharmacokinetics of Berberine

Berberine is chemically characterized as a 5,6-dihydro-dibenzoquinolizinium derivative. [1]It has a molecular formula of C₂₀H₁₉NO₅ and a molecular weight of 353.36 [1], [3]. Its chemical structure is distinct from other commonly used hypoglycemic agents, such as sulfonylureas, biguanides, or thiazolidinediones[3] While the chloride or sulfate salts of berberine are clinically used due to better solubility, the compound generally exhibits poor oral bioavailability and pharmacokinetic parameters, which remains a primary challenge in its clinical application[4]

Despite its low bioavailability, berberine exerts potent biological effects, suggesting alternative mechanisms of action beyond direct systemic absorption. Recent studies indicate that the gut microbiome may be a key target for berberine. As a bacteriostatic agent, berberine can alter the gut microbiota composition, which in turn merits metabolic homeostasis[6] For instance, it has been observed to inhibit the biotransformation of microbial bile acids, specifically affecting species such as *Ruminococcus bromii*. To overcome pharmacokinetic limitations and improve efficiency and selectivity,

current research is also focused on developing new formulations and synthesizing berberine derivatives, such as 13-alkyl-substituted or 9-O-substituted derivatives [1], [4]Furthermore, strategies to enhance oral bioavailability include combinatory approaches; for example, the co-administration of berberine with silymarin has been shown to improve bioavailability and reduce gastrointestinal discomfort [3]

1.3. Aim of the Review

Contemporary medicine increasingly investigates berberine as a potential first-line therapeutic agent or a potent oral hypoglycemic agent that may address the limitations of conventional therapies.[3], [5]. It is considered a safe and effective natural product for long-term management of chronic illnesses[2]. The objective of this paper is to summarize the main pharmacological actions of berberine and its molecular mechanisms in the context of cancer, digestive, metabolic, cardiovascular, and neurological diseases [2]

This work aims to conduct a systematic review of the literature evaluating the therapeutic efficacy of berberine alone and in combination therapies. Particular attention will be paid to its proven efficacy in inhibiting cancer cell proliferation and inducing cytotoxicity towards cancer cells[1]Additionally, the review will cover its role in metabolic regulation, specifically its ability to improve obesity and hyperlipidemia by reducing triglycerides (TG), total cholesterol (TC), and low-density lipoprotein (LDL) levels. [5], [7], [8]. By examining evidence from randomized clinical trials and mechanistic studies, this review intends to provide guidance for clinical decision-making and facilitate an understanding of the factors, such as gut microbiota modulation and gene regulation, that influence berberine's therapeutic efficacy [5]

2. Mechanisms of Berberine Action

Berberine (BBR) is recognized as a pleiotropic alkaloid with a "polypharmacological" profile, allowing it to modulate multiple physiological pathways simultaneously. Its therapeutic efficacy in metabolic, oncological, and inflammatory diseases is underpinned by a complex network of molecular targets, ranging from direct enzyme inhibition to the modulation of gut microbiota composition[4].

2.1. Influence on Metabolic Pathways

The metabolic regulation by berberine is largely attributed to its ability to act as an energy sensor and regulator of glucose and lipid homeostasis.

- **AMPK Activation:** A central mechanism of berberine is the activation of AMP-activated protein kinase (AMPK), a master switch for cellular energy metabolism [5], [8]. BBR inhibits the mitochondrial respiratory complex I, which increases the AMP/ATP ratio, thereby stimulating AMPK. This activation promotes catabolic processes such as fatty acid oxidation and glucose uptake while inhibiting anabolic processes like lipogenesis [2]
- **Glucose Metabolism and Gluconeogenesis:** BBR enhances glucose uptake in adipocytes and myotubes via a mechanism distinct from insulin, involving the phosphorylation of AMPK and increased GLUT1 activity [2]. In the liver, BBR suppresses hepatic gluconeogenesis by downregulating key enzymes such as phosphoenolpyruvate carboxykinase (PEPCK) and glucose-6-phosphatase (G6Pase). [8]. It also restricts mitochondrial pyruvate transport by inhibiting mitochondrial pyruvate carrier 1 (MPC1) [2]. Clinical data suggest its hypoglycemic effect is comparable to that of metformin [3]
- **Lipid Metabolism and LDLR Stability:** BBR exerts a unique cholesterol-lowering effect distinct from statins. It upregulates the expression of the low-density lipoprotein receptor (LDLR) by stabilizing its mRNA through the activation of the extracellular signal-regulated kinase (ERK) signaling pathway [2], [3]. This leads to increased clearance of LDL-cholesterol from the blood. [5] Additionally, BBR targets the SREBP-1 pathway to inhibit lipogenesis and downregulates adipogenic transcription factors such as PPAR γ and C/EBP α [2], [4].

2.2. Anti-inflammatory and Immunomodulatory Effects

Berberine exhibits potent anti-inflammatory properties by interfering with key signaling cascades involved in the immune response.

- **NF- κ B and MAPK Inhibition:** BBR suppresses the nuclear factor-kappa B (NF- κ B) pathway, which is crucial for the transcription of pro-inflammatory cytokines [4]. It modifies the Cys179 residue of I κ B α kinase (IKK), thereby inhibiting NF- κ B activation [2]. Furthermore, BBR modulates mitogen-activated protein kinase (MAPK) pathways, including p38 MAPK, ERK1/2, and JNK, leading to a reduction in inflammatory mediators such as TNF- α , IL-6, and COX 2 [4]
- **Inhibition of Cyclooxygenases:** BBR downregulates COX-2 transcription and protein expression, subsequently reducing the production of prostaglandin E2 (PGE2), a mediator of inflammation and tumor progression [1]

2.3. Antioxidant Activity

Oxidative stress is a common denominator in many chronic diseases. BBR enhances the cellular antioxidant defense system.

- **ROS Scavenging and Enzyme Regulation:** BBR neutralizes free radicals and enhances the activity of endogenous antioxidant enzymes, such as superoxide

dismutase (SOD) and glutathione peroxidase (GSH-px) [8]

- **Nrf2 Pathway:** In hepatocellular carcinoma cells, BBR has been shown to enhance radiosensitivity via the Nrf2 pathway, a master regulator of antioxidative responses [4]. However, in cancer cells, BBR can paradoxically induce reactive oxygen species (ROS) generation to trigger apoptosis and mitochondrial dysfunction, demonstrating a cell-type-dependent mechanism [2]

2.4. Effect on Gut Microbiota

Given its low oral bioavailability, the interaction between BBR and the gut microbiota is considered a primary mechanism for its systemic metabolic effects [8].

- **Modulation of Microbial Composition:** BBR acts as a bacteriostatic agent, altering the gut microbiome structure by reducing diversity and enriching beneficial bacteria such as *Bacteroides*, *Blautia*, and *Akkermansia* [7]
- **Inhibition of Bile Acid Transformation:** A specific mechanism identified in type 2 diabetes involves the inhibition of *Ruminococcus bromii*. BBR suppresses the 7 α /beta -dehydroxylation activity of this bacterium, thereby reducing the biotransformation of primary bile acids into secondary bile acids like deoxycholic acid (DCA). This reduction in DCA levels leads to decreased intestinal FXR signaling, contributing to improved glycemic control [7]
- **Gut Barrier Integrity:** BBR protects intestinal barrier function by preventing the disruption of tight junction proteins (e.g., occludin, claudin-1) induced by pro-inflammatory cytokines like TNF- α [2].

2.5. Anticancer Mechanisms

BBR exerts multi-targeted anticancer effects, influencing cell cycle progression, apoptosis, and metastasis.

- **Cell Cycle Arrest:** BBR induces cell cycle arrest at the G0/G1 or G2/M phases, depending on the cell type and dosage, by regulating cyclins (e.g., Cyclin D1, B1) and cyclin-dependent kinases (CDKs) [1], [4].
- **Induction of Apoptosis:** BBR triggers apoptosis via the mitochondrial pathway by altering the Bcl-2/Bax ratio, causing the loss of mitochondrial membrane potential and the release of cytochrome c [1]. It also activates caspases (caspase-3, -8, -9) and promotes PARP cleavage [2].
- **DNA Interaction and Telomerase Inhibition:** BBR can bind directly to DNA, forming complexes that induce double-strand breaks. Notably, it inhibits telomerase activity by interacting with the G-quadruplex structures of telomeric DNA, thereby limiting the replicative potential of cancer cells [1], [2].
- **Inhibition of Metastasis:** BBR suppresses tumor invasion and metastasis by downregulating matrix metalloproteinases (MMP-2 and MMP-9) and inhibiting the epithelial-to-mesenchymal transition (EMT) through the TGF- β 1 signaling pathway [4].

3. Contemporary Clinical Applications of Berberine

Berberine is an isoquinoline alkaloid extracted from traditional Chinese medicinal herbs such as *Coptis chinensis* and *Phellodendron amurense* [9]. While historically used for its antimicrobial and anti-inflammatory properties, contemporary research has highlighted its therapeutic potential across a spectrum of disorders, ranging from metabolic syndromes to neurodegenerative conditions [10], [11].

3.1. Metabolic and Cardiovascular Diseases

• Type 2 Diabetes Mellitus:

○ Reduction of fasting glucose levels and HbA1c:

Clinical trials and meta-analyses indicate that berberine significantly reduces fasting plasma glucose (FPG) and glycosylated hemoglobin HbA1c levels [5]. In animal models of type 2 diabetes (db/db mice), berberine treatment effectively reduced blood glucose and HbA1c levels, comparable to the effects of metformin.[12] In patients with type 2 diabetes, berberine has been shown to lower fasting and post-load plasma glucose [10].

○ **Improvement of insulin sensitivity:** Berberine ameliorates insulin resistance, as evidenced by a reduction in the homeostasis model assessment of insulin resistance (HOMA-IR) index [5]. Mechanisms include the regulation of insulin receptor substrate 1 (IRS-1) and the upregulation of GLUT4 expression, which facilitates glucose uptake[13]. Additionally, berberine protects pancreatic β -cells from oxidative stress and improves insulin secretion [13].

• Dyslipidemia (Lipid Disorders):

○ Lowering levels of Total Cholesterol, LDL-C, and Triglycerides:

Berberine acts as a lipid-lowering agent, significantly reducing levels of triglycerides (TG), total cholesterol (TC), and low-density lipoprotein cholesterol (LDL-C) while increasing high-density lipoprotein (HDL) levels [5], [10]. It is considered a potential alternative for patients intolerant to statins [5].

○ **Mechanism of action:** A primary mechanism involves the stabilization of low-density lipoprotein receptor (LDLR) mRNA, prolonging its half-life and increasing hepatic LDLR expression, which enhances the clearance of plasma LDL [5], [10].

• Obesity and Metabolic Syndrome:

○ **Effect on body weight and anthropometric parameters:** Berberine has been shown to reduce body weight and food intake in obese diabetic mice [12]. Clinical data suggest it can induce mild weight loss and improve body composition by redistributing adipose tissue [6], [10].

○ **Reduction of insulin resistance:** By activating AMP-activated protein kinase (AMPK), berberine reduces fat production, improves insulin sensitivity, and promotes glucose transport, thereby shifting metabolism from accumulation to decomposition [5].

3.2. Gastroenterology

• Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) and Diarrhea:

○ **Alleviation of symptoms:** Berberine is widely used to treat infectious and non-infectious diarrhea. A systematic review indicated that berberine, alone or in combination with antibiotics or montmorillonite,

significantly improves clinical cure rates and shortens the duration of diarrhea in both adults and children. It has also been shown to improve stool frequency and fecal traits [14].

• Inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBD):

○ **Potential role in modulating inflammation:** In models of Ulcerative Colitis (UC), berberine ameliorates disease severity by restoring the mucosal barrier homeostasis and inhibiting inflammatory cell infiltration. It maintains the residence and function of enteric glial cells (EGCs), which are crucial for epithelial integrity. Berberine suppresses the production of pro-inflammatory cytokines such as TNF-alpha, IFN-gamma, and IL-17A, and downregulates chemokine receptors like CCR6 [15].

○ **Regulation of Gut Microbiota:** Berberine modulates the gut microbiome by increasing short-chain fatty acid (SCFA)-producing bacteria (e.g., *Butyricimonas*, *Ruminococcus*) and reducing opportunistic pathogens, which contributes to repairing the intestinal barrier and suppressing inflammation [12].

• Helicobacter pylori Eradication:

○ **Adjunctive therapy:** While specific eradication data is less prominent in the provided text, berberine possesses broad-spectrum antimicrobial activity against bacteria including *Vibrio cholera* and *Escherichia coli* [11], [14].

3.3. Oncology

• Anti-cancer activity:

○ **In vitro and in vivo models:** Berberine exhibits anti-cancer properties, including the induction of apoptosis and inhibition of proliferation²³. In ovarian cancer models, combining berberine with cisplatin resulted in a stronger anti-cancer effect by downregulating Bcl-2 and upregulating Bax expression²⁴. Furthermore, berberine suppresses colitis-associated colorectal cancer development by inhibiting EGFR signaling pathways [9].

3.4. Other Potential Applications

• Neurodegenerative diseases:

○ **Alzheimer's Disease (AD):** Berberine acts as a neuroprotective agent by inhibiting the production of amyloid-beta plaques and the hyperphosphorylation of tau protein. It also serves as an acetylcholinesterase (AChE) inhibitor, potentially alleviating cholinergic deficiency. Additionally, it mitigates neuroinflammation and oxidative stress in the brain [11], [16].

○ **Parkinson's Disease:** Berberine has been reported to prevent nigrostriatal dopaminergic neuronal loss and suppress hippocampal apoptosis in models of Parkinson's disease [11].

• Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS):

○ **Metabolic and Reproductive Improvements:** Berberine improves insulin resistance in theca cells and increases the expression of GLUT4 in ovaries. It induces a redistribution of adipose tissue, reducing visceral fat mass. Clinically, it improves the ovulation rate per cycle

and is associated with higher live birth rates. It is considered safe for use in premenopausal women attempting to conceive [6], [17].

• **Bacterial and fungal infections:**

○ **Antimicrobial effects:** Berberine has broad-spectrum antibiotic activity against various organisms, including *Shigella*, *Pseudomonas*, and fungi. It is effective in treating intestinal bacterial infections and demonstrates potential against fungal pathogens [11], [14]. Here is the draft of the chapter section "Safety and Clinical Aspects" based on the provided source documents.

4. Safety and Clinical Aspects

4.1. Adverse Effects

Berberine is generally considered a safe botanical compound with a favorable safety profile, particularly when administered orally [6]. Clinical studies and meta-analyses have indicated that it is clinically safe and well-tolerated by the human body with few adverse reactions reported [5]. However, the toxicity of berberine is highly dependent on the route of administration; while oral administration is safe, intravenous (IV) or intraperitoneal (IP) injections can be toxic [16]. For instance, the median lethal dose (LD₅₀) of berberine in mice via the oral route is >20.8 g/kg, whereas it is significantly lower for IV (9.04 mg/kg) and IP (57.6 mg/kg) administration [18].

The most commonly reported side effects are gastrointestinal (GI) in nature. In clinical trials involving patients with type 2 diabetes treated with 500 mg of berberine three times daily, approximately 34.5% of patients reported GI side effects. These symptoms include constipation, diarrhea, abdominal pain, flatulence, nausea, vomiting, and a bitter taste in the mouth. Gastrointestinal side effects such as diarrhea are generally transient and mild [6]. However, in animal models (cats), high oral doses (100 mg/kg) have been reported to cause vomiting and hemorrhagic inflammatory conditions in the intestine.

Beyond GI issues, there are specific clinical concerns regarding cardiovascular and hematological safety. Berberine should be used with caution in hypervagotonic patients due to its potential to induce bradycardia and its antiarrhythmic properties, which could become proarrhythmic. It has also been observed to inhibit the hERG potassium channel, which can induce cardiotoxicity. Additionally, hemolysis has been observed in isolated red blood cells from patients with glucose-6-phosphate dehydrogenase (G6PD) deficiency during in vitro treatment with *Rhizoma coptidis* extract. Furthermore, berberine may show phototoxicity and genotoxicity, as evidenced by cell death and DNA damage in human keratinocytes exposed to UV-A radiation [18]. Hypoglycemia is also noted as a potential risk considering its glucose-lowering effects [17]. Conversely, in reproductive toxicity studies, berberine showed a good safety profile with no fetal abnormalities observed in treated groups compared to letrozole [18].

4.2. Drug Interactions

Berberine interacts with several metabolic enzymes and transporters, leading to potential drug-drug interactions. A primary mechanism involves the cytochrome P450 (CYP450) system. Repeated administration of berberine has been shown to inhibit the activities of CYP2D6, CYP2C9, and CYP3A4 enzymes in humans [16]. This inhibition can significantly alter the pharmacokinetics of co-administered drugs. For example, berberine increases the oral bioavailability and blood concentration of cyclosporine A by inhibiting CYP3A4, thereby decreasing its metabolism in the intestine and liver [16], [18].

In addition to CYP enzymes, berberine interacts with P-glycoprotein (P-gp), an efflux transporter. Berberine acts as a substrate and an inhibitor of P-gp. While P-gp pumps interfere with the absorption of berberine by effluxing it back into the intestine, berberine's inhibition of intestinal P-gp can enhance the bioavailability of other P-gp substrates, such as digoxin and cyclosporine A [16]. Co-administration with P-gp inhibitors, such as silymarin, has been shown to significantly increase the absorption of berberine itself [17], [18].

4.3. Dosage and Formulations

In clinical practice, the total daily dose of berberine typically ranges from 0.2 g to 1.0 g, with a maximum recommended dose of not more than 1.5 g per day. Common dosing protocols in clinical trials include 500 mg administered two or three times a day. Other studies have used dosages such as 588 mg twice daily or up to 1.5 g daily [6]. In animal studies, dosages of 100–200 mg/kg are frequently used to observe therapeutic effects [17].

Despite its therapeutic potential, the clinical application of berberine is limited by its poor pharmacokinetic profile. The oral bioavailability of berberine is reported to be extremely low, often less than 1% [16]. This is attributed to poor intestinal absorption, self-aggregation in the gastrointestinal tract, extensive first-pass metabolism in the liver, and P-gp mediated efflux [19]. To overcome these limitations, various novel formulations and delivery systems have been developed:

- **Nanoparticles:** Encapsulation of berberine in nanoparticles, such as chitosan-coated, lipid-based, or polymeric nanoparticles, has been shown to significantly enhance its bioavailability and therapeutic efficacy. For instance, berberine-loaded PEG-lipid-PLGA nanoparticles demonstrated a 343% increase in oral bioavailability compared to raw berberine [13].
- **Nanocrystals:** Brij-S20-modified nanocrystal formulations have shown a relative bioavailability of over 400% compared to pure berberine [18].
- **Microspheres:** Chitosan-coated alginate/gelatin microspheres have exhibited 1.5-fold higher bioavailability than commercial tablets [18].
- **Absorption Enhancers:** Co-administration with sodium caprate can enhance absorption by reversibly widening the gaps between intestinal cells [18].
- **Structural Derivatives:** Novel derivatives, such as dihydroberberine and oxyberberine, have been

synthesized to improve anti-inflammatory effects and bioavailability [9].

5. Discussion

5.1. Summary of Key Clinical Evidence The therapeutic potential of berberine has been extensively evaluated across a spectrum of pathological conditions, ranging from metabolic and reproductive disorders to neurological and inflammatory diseases. The strength of evidence varies across these applications, with the most robust data supporting its metabolic benefits.

In the context of metabolic disorders, systematic reviews and meta-analyses of randomized clinical trials (RCTs) confirm that berberine treatment alone significantly improves lipid and glucose profiles. Specifically, it reduces levels of triglycerides (TG), total cholesterol (TC), low-density lipoprotein (LDL), fasting plasma glucose (FPG), and homeostasis model assessment-insulin resistance (HOMA-IR), while increasing high-density lipoprotein (HDL) [5]. Furthermore, berberine has demonstrated significant efficacy in reducing body weight, body mass index (BMI), waist circumference, and C-reactive protein (CRP) levels, suggesting an indirect role in improving clinical symptoms of metabolic syndrome [20].

Regarding reproductive health, particularly Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS), berberine has emerged as a promising therapeutic agent. Evidence indicates that berberine can redistribute adipose tissue, reducing visceral fat mass even in the absence of weight loss, and improve insulin sensitivity comparable to metformin. In animal models, berberine reversed the increase in cystic follicles and the decrease in corpus luteum, potentially by upregulating the expression of LHCGR and CYP19A1. Clinically, it is associated with higher live birth rates compared to metformin and placebo in women undergoing IVF treatment [6].

In the field of neurology and psychiatry, berberine exhibits neuroprotective and antidepressant properties. In chronic restraint stress (CRS) models, berberine effectively ameliorated depression-like symptoms and restored levels of neurotransmitters such as serotonin (5-HT) and norepinephrine (NE). Its mechanism appears to involve the regulation of the PI3K/AKT/CREB/BDNF signaling pathway, which suppresses neuroinflammation and apoptosis [18]. Additionally, in Alzheimer's disease models, berberine has been shown to restrain the deposition of amyloid plaques and neurofibrillary tangles (NFTs) while inhibiting acetylcholinesterase (AChE) activity [11].

Furthermore, berberine demonstrates immunomodulatory effects in autoimmune diseases. In rheumatoid arthritis (RA), it suppresses synovial inflammation and bone destruction by inhibiting the proliferation of fibroblast-like synoviocytes (FLS) and modulating the Th17/Treg balance [21]. In ulcerative colitis (UC), berberine restores the mucosal barrier homeostasis and maintains the residence of enteric glial cells (EGCs), thereby attenuating inflammatory infiltration [15].

5.2. Limitations and Challenges Despite the promising therapeutic applications, the clinical utility of berberine

is significantly hindered by pharmacokinetic and methodological limitations.

• **Low Bioavailability:** The most critical limitation is the extremely low oral bioavailability of berberine, reported to be less than 1% [16]. This is attributed to poor intestinal absorption, self-aggregation in the gastrointestinal tract, extensive first-pass metabolism in the liver, and efflux by P-glycoprotein (P-gp) pumps. Consequently, plasma concentrations remain low after oral administration, which may limit its systemic efficacy compared to intravenous routes, although the latter carries higher toxicity risks [18].

• **Lack of Standardization:** There is a notable lack of standardization across clinical studies regarding study design and dosage. Meta-analyses have highlighted high heterogeneity in trials, driven by variations in treatment duration, patient demographics, and the specific formulations of berberine used [20]. For instance, while dosages often range from 0.2 g to 1.0 g per day, there is no global consensus on the optimal dosage for long-term therapy to maximize efficacy while minimizing adverse effects [17], [18].

• **Safety Concerns:** While berberine is generally considered safe, adverse effects, particularly gastrointestinal issues such as diarrhea, constipation, and abdominal pain, are frequently reported (approx. 34.5% in some diabetes trials) [18]. More serious concerns include potential cardiotoxicity due to hERG potassium channel inhibition and the risk of bradycardia in hypervagotonic patients. Additionally, berberine inhibits cytochrome P450 enzymes (e.g., CYP2D6, CYP3A4), which can lead to drug-drug interactions, altering the pharmacokinetics of co-administered medications like cyclosporine A [16]. Long-term safety data remains insufficient, necessitating further rigorous toxicological assessments [6].

5.3. Future Perspectives To overcome current limitations and enhance the therapeutic value of berberine, future research should focus on advanced delivery systems, combinatorial therapies, and structural modifications.

• **Novel Delivery Systems:** Nanotechnology offers a promising avenue to improve bioavailability. Formulations such as lipid-based nanoparticles, chitosan-coated nanocarriers, and micelles have demonstrated significantly enhanced absorption and brain-targeting capabilities. For example, Brij-S20-modified nanocrystals showed a relative bioavailability of over 400% compared to pure berberine [18]. Nose-to-brain drug delivery systems are also being explored to bypass the blood-brain barrier for treating central nervous system disorders [16].

• **Combinations:** Co-administration with bioavailability enhancers, such as sodium caprate or P-gp inhibitors (e.g., silymarin), has been shown to improve absorption. Synergistic effects have also been observed when berberine is combined with conventional drugs; for instance, combining berberine with atorvastatin improved outcomes in acute ischemic stroke patients, and combinations with cisplatin showed stronger anti-cancer effects. Furthermore, combining

berberine with probiotics like *Bifidobacterium* may enhance its hypoglycemic effects and regulate gut microbiota [16], [22].

• **Structural Derivatives:** The development of berberine derivatives, such as dihydroberberine and oxyberberine, represents a strategic approach to improve anti-inflammatory potency and pharmacokinetic profiles [9], [18]. Structure-activity relationship (SAR) studies suggest that modifications at specific carbon positions can enhance antibacterial, anticancer, and lipid-lowering activities [18].

Future investigations should also prioritize large-scale, multicenter clinical trials to validate these findings and establish standardized therapeutic protocols [22]. Further exploration of the "gut-brain" and "gut-joint" axes may reveal new mechanisms by which berberine modulates systemic health via microbiota regulation [23].

6. Conclusions

The comprehensive review of the available literature establishes berberine as a versatile isoquinoline alkaloid with a remarkable polypharmacological profile [18]. Its therapeutic efficacy spans a wide array of pathological conditions, positioning it as a significant candidate for the management of metabolic, reproductive, neurological, and inflammatory disorders [6], [21].

In the domain of metabolic health, berberine has demonstrated robust efficacy in regulating glucose and lipid metabolism. Meta-analyses of randomized clinical trials confirm its ability to significantly reduce triglycerides (TG), total cholesterol (TC), low-density lipoprotein (LDL), fasting plasma glucose (FPG), and insulin resistance (HOMA-IR) [5]. Furthermore, it has shown effectiveness in reducing anthropometric indices such as body weight, body mass index (BMI), and waist circumference, often serving as a viable alternative for patients intolerant to statins [20]. Mechanistically, these effects are largely attributed to the activation of AMP-activated protein kinase (AMPK), which regulates energy metabolism and suppresses lipogenesis [6].

Regarding reproductive medicine, particularly Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS), berberine has emerged as a safe and effective agent for improving fertility outcomes [17]. It enhances ovulation rates, improves endometrial receptivity, and increases live birth rates compared to placebo and metformin. Its ability to redistribute adipose tissue and reduce visceral fat mass without necessarily inducing weight loss further highlights its unique metabolic benefits in this population [6].

Berberine also exhibits significant neuroprotective potential, capable of crossing the blood-brain barrier to mitigate neurodegenerative and psychiatric disorders [4]. It exerts antidepressant effects by modulating the PI3K/AKT/CREB/BDNF signaling pathway and alleviating neuroinflammation [18]. In Alzheimer's disease models, berberine inhibits acetylcholinesterase (AChE) activity and restrains the deposition of amyloid plaques and neurofibrillary tangles [11], [16].

Furthermore, berberine demonstrates immunomodulatory effects in autoimmune diseases. In

rheumatoid arthritis (RA), it suppresses synovial inflammation and bone destruction by inhibiting the proliferation of fibroblast-like synoviocytes (FLS) and modulating the Th17/Treg balance [21]. In ulcerative colitis (UC), berberine restores the mucosal barrier homeostasis and maintains the residence of enteric glial cells (EGCs), thereby attenuating inflammatory infiltration [15].

Despite these promising findings, the clinical utility of berberine is currently limited by its poor pharmacokinetic properties, specifically its extremely low oral bioavailability (<1%) due to poor intestinal absorption and rapid metabolism [16], [18]. While generally well-tolerated with a favorable safety profile, gastrointestinal side effects are common, and potential drug interactions via CYP450 inhibition require careful management [6]. Future research must prioritize the development of novel delivery systems, such as nanoparticles and nanocrystals, to overcome bioavailability barriers and fully unlock the therapeutic potential of this compound [8], [18].

Disclosure

Author's contribution

Conceptualization: Maciej Salamon, Ignacy Gajda

Methodology: Iga Milena Zawislak, Michalina Maria Wielgus, Julia Smolarek

Software: Urban Stanisław Matyjasik, Maciej Salamon, Ignacy Gajda

Formal analysis: Antoni Jakub Plasota, Julia Smolarek, Michalina Maria Wielgus, Iga Milena Zawislak,

Investigation: Mikołaj Karol Olczak, Michał Piotr Wojszcz-Hadas, Michał Szczupak

Writing – rough preparation: Maciej Salamon, Alicja Marciniuk, Urban Stanisław Matyjasik, Zofia Alicja Pojmańska, Damian Konrad Strzelczyk

Writing – review and editing: Antoni Jakub Plasota, Mikołaj Karol Olczak

Supervision: Michał Piotr Wojszcz-Hadas, Michał Szczupak, Katarzyna Turniak

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