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Research Article

S.H.I.E.L.D.: SYSTEMATIC HYDROALCOHOLIC INVESTIGATION OF ETHNOMEDICAL LEAF-DERIVED GASTROPROTECTION — MECHANISTIC EVALUATION OF CROTALARIA PALLIDA AITON AGAINST EXPERIMENTAL GASTRIC ULCERATION IN WISTAR RATS

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ABSTRACT

Background: Gastric ulcer disease remains a significant global health burden despite advances in pharmacotherapy. *Crotalaria pallida* Aiton (Fabaceae), traditionally employed in ethnomedical practice for gastrointestinal ailments, has not been systematically evaluated for gastroprotective efficacy against experimental ulceration models.

Methods: Hydroalcoholic extract (70% ethanol) of *C. pallida* leaves was prepared with a yield of 22% w/w. Acute toxicity was assessed following OECD 423 guidelines. In compliance with ARRIVE 2.0 guidelines, male Wistar rats (150–200 g, n = 6 per group) were randomized and assigned numerical identifiers for blinded assessment. Gastroprotective activity was evaluated using ethanol-induced (80% v/v, 1 mL, p.o.) and aspirin-induced (200 mg/kg, p.o.) ulcer models. Treatment groups received *C. pallida* extract (200 or 400 mg/kg, p.o.) or ranitidine (50 mg/kg, p.o., positive control) 2–4 hours prior to ulcerogen administration. Primary outcomes included ulcer index, gastric pH, and acid volume. Statistical analysis employed one-way ANOVA followed by Dunnett's post-hoc test ($p < 0.05$).

Results: Phytochemical screening revealed alkaloids, flavonoids, tannins, saponins, and phytosterols. Acute toxicity studies demonstrated safety up to 2000 mg/kg with zero mortality. In the ethanol model, *C. pallida* 400 mg/kg exhibited a statistically significant reduction in ulcer index (2.25 ± 0.30 vs. 5.35 ± 0.70 in ulcer control, $p < 0.01$) with 57.94% inhibition and dose-dependent gastric pH elevation (3.92 ± 0.10 vs. 2.15 ± 0.08, $p < 0.01$), approaching ranitidine efficacy (68.22% inhibition, pH 4.90 ± 0.15). The aspirin model yielded comparable dose-dependent protection: 400 mg/kg reduced ulcer index by 52.31% (5.15 ± 0.11 vs. 10.80 ± 0.30, $p < 0.01$) and normalized gastric pH (3.98 ± 0.04 vs. 2.00 ± 0.06, $p < 0.01$). Macroscopic examination confirmed mucosal integrity preservation with minimal hemorrhagic lesions in treated groups versus extensive erosions in controls.

Conclusion: The hydroalcoholic extract of *C. pallida* leaves demonstrates potent, dose-dependent gastroprotection against chemical ulcerogens with efficacy comparable to H_2-receptor antagonists. The mechanism likely involves synergistic antioxidant, antisecretory, and cytoprotective actions mediated by flavonoid-tannin complexes. These findings provide robust preclinical evidence supporting traditional use and warrant further mechanistic and clinical investigation.

KEYWORDS: *Crotalaria Pallida*, Gastroprotection, Ethanol-induced Ulcer, Aspirin-induced Ulcer, F=lavonoids, cytoprotection, ARRIVE 2.0

Introduction

Pathophysiological Burden of Peptic Ulcer Disease

Peptic ulcer disease (PUD), characterized by focal necrotic lesions penetrating the muscularis mucosa of the gastroduodenal tract, affects approximately 2.4% of Western populations and up to 6.1% in Asian cohorts[1]. The pathogenesis involves disequilibrium between aggressive luminal factors—hydrochloric acid, pepsin, *Helicobacter pylori* virulence factors, and reactive oxygen species (ROS)—and protective mechanisms including mucus-bicarbonate barrier integrity, prostaglandin synthesis, mucosal blood flow, and epithelial regenerative capacity[2]. Despite therapeutic advances, chronic NSAID use, *H. pylori* persistence, and stress-related mucosal injury perpetuate disease recurrence, with current pharmacological regimens demonstrating limitations including adverse effects, drug interactions, and incomplete healing[3]. Proton pump inhibitors (PPIs) remain the cornerstone of acid-suppressive therapy in PUD management; however, emerging 2025 evidence has raised concerns regarding their long-term safety profile. A recent meta-analysis published in the American Journal of Gastroenterology reported a potential association between prolonged PPI use and increased cardiovascular adverse events[4]. Additionally, a comprehensive 2025 review in Medicina emphasized the importance of appropriate indication, risk stratification, and deprescribing strategies to mitigate preventable harms associated with chronic PPI exposure[5]. Further systematic evaluations have highlighted long-term gastrointestinal adverse outcomes in adults receiving extended PPI therapy [6], while evolving literature also explores possible extra-gastrointestinal effects, including neurological implications such as migraine modulation[7]. Collectively, these updated findings underscore the need for safer, mechanism-based therapeutic alternatives and rational prescribing strategies in the management of peptic ulcer disease.

Limitations of Conventional Anti-ulcer Therapeutics

Proton pump inhibitors (PPIs) and histamine H_2-receptor antagonists remain first-line therapy; however, long-term PPI use correlates with increased risk of *Clostridium difficile* infection, community-acquired pneumonia, osteoporotic fractures, and vitamin B_{12} deficiency[8]. Furthermore, PPI-refractory cases and concerns regarding acid rebound hypersecretion following withdrawal necessitate alternative therapeutic strategies. Cytoprotective agents such as misoprostol, while mechanistically sound, are limited by gastrointestinal adverse effects and contraindications in pregnancy[9].

Phytotherapeutic Potential: Mechanistic Rationale

Medicinal plants represent a pharmacologically untapped reservoir of multi-targeted gastroprotective agents. Phytochemicals—particularly flavonoids, tannins, saponins, and triterpenoids—exert anti-ulcer effects through pleiotropic mechanisms: (i) direct radical scavenging and lipid peroxidation inhibition, (ii) enhancement of prostaglandin E_2 (PGE_2) synthesis via COX-2 upregulation in healing margins, (iii) mucus secretagogue activity, (iv) inhibition of H^+/K^+-ATPase (proton pump), (v) *H. pylori* urease inhibition disrupting ammonia-mediated pH elevation, and (vi) anti-inflammatory cytokine modulation[10,11,12].

Recent mechanistic studies have elucidated that flavonoids enhance gastric mucosal healing by stabilizing hypoxia-inducible factor-1α (HIF-1α), thereby promoting angiogenesis at ulcer sites, and by direct binding to the nickel-containing active site of *H. pylori* urease, competitively inhibiting enzymatic activity[13,14]. Tannins form protective precipitates with mucosal proteins, creating a physicochemical barrier against acid-pepsin assault, while saponins exhibit membrane-stabilizing properties that prevent epithelial cell sloughing[15].

Crotalaria pallida Aiton: Ethnopharmacological Context and Phytochemical Basis

Crotalaria pallida Aiton (Fabaceae), colloquially termed "smooth rattlepod," is indigenous to tropical and subtropical Asia and Africa, with documented ethnomedicinal applications including anti-inflammatory poultices for arthritic joints, vermifugal remedies, and traditional management of gastrointestinal disturbances[16]. Phytochemical investigations have identified bioactive constituents including flavonoids (quercetin, kaempferol derivatives), pterocarpanoids with demonstrated nitric oxide synthase (NOS) inhibition, pyrrolizidine alkaloids, condensed tannins, and triterpenoid saponins[17,18].

Notably, pterocarpanoids isolated from *C. pallida* bark (crotafurans A and B) exhibited concentration-dependent inhibition of lipopolysaccharide-stimulated nitric oxide production in macrophages (IC_{50} = 19.0–23.0 μM), implicating anti-inflammatory mechanisms relevant to gastric mucosal defense[19]. However, despite ethnopharmacological prominence and preliminary phytochemical characterization, systematic in vivo evaluation of gastroprotective efficacy using standardized experimental ulcer models has not been reported.

Study Rationale and Objectives

Given the mechanistic plausibility conferred by the phytochemical profile, traditional therapeutic claims, and the critical need for safer anti-ulcer alternatives, this investigation was designed to: (i) systematically evaluate the gastroprotective efficacy of *C. pallida* hydroalcoholic leaf extract against ethanol- and aspirin-induced experimental ulceration in a rodent model, (ii) establish dose-response relationships and compare efficacy with standard H_2-receptor antagonist therapy, (iii) elucidate preliminary mechanistic insights through assessment of gastric secretory parameters

and macroscopic mucosal integrity, and (iv) provide rigorous preclinical data in compliance with contemporary reporting standards (ARRIVE 2.0) to inform translational research pathways.

Materials and Methods

Plant Material and Extract Preparation

Authentication and Procurement

Fresh leaves of *Crotalaria pallida* Aiton were collected during the vegetative growth phase from authenticated specimens growing in Sagar district, Madhya Pradesh, India. Botanical identification was performed by Dr. [Taxonomist name], Department of Botany, [Institution], and a voucher specimen (Herbarium No. CP-2023-47) was deposited at the institutional herbarium for future reference. Plant material was collected following appropriate permissions and adhering to ethical guidelines for plant collection.

Extraction Protocol

Harvested leaves were washed with distilled water to remove particulate contamination, air-dried under shade at ambient temperature (25–28°C) for 14 days to preserve thermolabile constituents, and pulverized using a mechanical grinder to obtain a coarse powder (mesh size 40). The powdered material was defatted by repeated maceration with petroleum ether (60–80°C) to remove lipophilic interferents.

Subsequently, 500 g of defatted marc was subjected to Soxhlet extraction using 70% (v/v) aqueous ethanol as the extracting solvent. Extraction was conducted at 60–70°C for 18 hours with continuous reflux until the percolate became colorless. The hydroalcoholic extract was filtered through Whatman No. 1 filter paper under vacuum, concentrated *in vacuo* using a rotary evaporator at 40–45°C, and lyophilized to yield a greenish semi-solid residue. Gravimetric yield was determined as 22% w/w. The extract was stored at −20°C in amber glass containers under nitrogen atmosphere to prevent oxidative degradation until experimental use.

Preliminary Phytochemical Screening

Qualitative phytochemical analysis was performed on the hydroalcoholic extract following standard pharmacopoeial methods to detect major secondary metabolite classes[20]. Briefly, the extract was reconstituted in distilled water and subjected to the following assays:

- Alkaloids: Mayer's reagent (yellow precipitate), Hager's reagent (yellow precipitate)
- Carbohydrates: Fehling's test (brick-red precipitate)
- Glycosides: Legal's test (pink coloration), Baljet's test (orange coloration)
- Phytosterols: Liebermann-Burchard test (blue-green coloration)
- Triterpenoids: Salkowski test (red ring at interface)
- Proteins/Amino acids: Ninhydrin test (purple coloration)
- Phenolics/Tannins: Lead acetate test (yellow precipitate), ferric chloride test (blue-black coloration)
- Flavonoids: Alkaline reagent test (yellow coloration disappearing on acidification), Shinoda test (magenta coloration)
- Saponins: Foam test (persistent froth >15 minutes)

These flavonoid and tannin classes are explicitly linked to the observed gastroprotective efficacy for improved indexing visibility. Although qualitative screening was conducted, quantitative HPLC/LC–MS profiling is recommended for extract standardization and reproducibility.

Experimental Animals and Ethical Compliance

Animal Procurement and Housing

Pathogen-free male Wistar albino rats (150–200 g body weight, 8–10 weeks age) were procured from the Central Animal Facility, Sagar Institute of Pharmaceutical Sciences, Sagar, Madhya Pradesh, India. Animals were group-housed (6 per polypropylene cage, dimensions 40 × 25 × 15 cm) under controlled environmental conditions: temperature 22 ± 2°C, relative humidity 50–60%, and 12:12-hour light-dark cycle (lights on 07:00 hours). Standard laboratory rodent pellet diet (Nutrivet Life Sciences, Pune, India) and *ad libitum* access to filtered drinking water were provided. A 7-day acclimatization period preceded experimental procedures to minimize stress-related confounders. and only male Wistar rats were included; future studies should incorporate female cohorts and microscopic validation.

ARRIVE 2.0 Compliance and Ethical Approval

This study was designed, conducted, and reported in strict adherence to the Animal Research: Reporting of In Vivo Experiments (ARRIVE) 2.0 guidelines to ensure methodological transparency and reproducibility[21]. The experimental protocol (Protocol No. SIPS/IAEC/2023/018) received prospective approval from the Institutional Animal Ethics Committee (IAEC), Sagar Institute of Pharmaceutical Sciences, constituted in accordance with the Committee for the Purpose of Control and Supervision of Experiments on Animals (CPCSEA) guidelines, Government of India.

Sample size determination was conducted a priori using power analysis ($\alpha = 0.05$, power = 0.80, effect size $f = 0.5$ based on pilot data) yielding $n = 6$ animals per group as statistically adequate. Randomization was performed using a computer-generated random number sequence, with animals assigned unique numerical identifiers. Experimental personnel conducting ulcer index scoring and pH measurements were blinded to treatment allocation to minimize observer bias. Humane endpoints were predefined as >20% body weight loss, persistent moribundity, or severe hemorrhage, necessitating immediate euthanasia; no animals met these criteria during the study.

Acute Oral Toxicity Study

Acute toxicity assessment was performed according to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development

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(OECD) Test Guideline 423 (Acute Toxic Class Method) [22]. Nulliparous, non-pregnant female Wistar rats (150–180 g, n = 3 per dose level) were used to enhance sensitivity to reproductive toxicity signals. Following overnight fasting (food withheld, water *ad libitum*), animals received single oral doses of *C. pallida* extract at 5, 50, 300, and 2000 mg/kg body weight, suspended in 0.5% w/v carboxymethylcellulose (CMC) vehicle (administration volume 10 mL/kg).

Animals were observed continuously for the initial 4 hours post-dosing for signs of acute toxicity (convulsions, salivation, piloerection, tremors, lethargy, ataxia, changes in respiratory pattern), followed by daily observations for 14 days. Body weight, food and water consumption, and behavioral parameters were recorded. At study termination, animals were euthanized under ketamine-xylazine anesthesia (90/10 mg/kg, i.p.), and gross necropsy of major organs (liver, kidneys, heart, lungs, spleen) was performed to detect macroscopic pathological alterations.

Gastroprotective Activity Evaluation

Experimental Design and Randomization

For each ulcer model, 30 male Wistar rats were randomized into 5 groups (n = 6 per group) using a computer-generated sequence:

Group I (Normal Control): Received vehicle only (0.5% CMC, 10 mL/kg, p.o.) Group II (Ulcer Control): Received ulcerogen only (ethanol 80% v/v, 1 mL, p.o., or aspirin 200 mg/kg, p.o.) Group III (Test Low Dose): Pre-treated with *C. pallida* extract 200 mg/kg, p.o., followed by ulcerogen Group IV (Test High Dose): Pre-treated with *C. pallida* extract 400 mg/kg, p.o., followed by ulcerogen Group V (Standard Drug): Pre-treated with ranitidine 50 mg/kg, p.o., followed by ulcerogen

Dose selection for *C. pallida* extract (200 and 400 mg/kg) was based on traditional usage extrapolation and preliminary dose-ranging experiments. Ranitidine, a histamine H_2-receptor antagonist, served as positive control due to its established gastroprotective mechanism and clinical relevance.

Ethanol-Induced Gastric Ulcer Model

The ethanol model recapitulates acute mucosal injury mediated by oxidative stress, lipid peroxidation, and disruption of the mucus-bicarbonate barrier[23]. Following 36-hour food deprivation (water *ad libitum*) to standardize gastric emptying, animals received designated treatments. After a 4-hour interval to permit pharmacological effect, absolute ethanol (80% v/v, 1 mL, p.o.) was administered via oral gavage to induce necrotizing gastric injury. One hour post-ethanol administration, animals were euthanized under diethyl ether anesthesia administered in a closed chamber until cessation of pedal reflex (anesthetic dose: 2–3 mL in 5 L chamber).

Euthanasia in ulcer models was performed using diethyl ether as per IAEC- approved protocol, whereas acute toxicity studies utilized ketamine-xylazine anesthesia. Both procedures were conducted in accordance with institutional ethical guidelines.

Aspirin-Induced Gastric Ulcer Model

The aspirin model simulates NSAID-induced ulceration through inhibition of COX-1-mediated prostaglandin synthesis, resulting in compromised mucosal defense[24]. After 36-hourfasting with water access, animals received treatment allocations. Two hours later, aspirin (200 mg/kg body weight) suspended in 0.5% CMC was administered orally. Four hours post-aspirin, animals were anesthetized and euthanized as described above.

Sample Collection and Processing

Following euthanasia, the abdomen was opened via midline laparotomy, and the stomach was carefully excised at the gastroesophageal junction and pyloric sphincter, avoiding compression. The stomach was opened along the greater curvature, and gastric contents were collected into pre-weighed centrifuge tubes. Contents were centrifuged at 3000 rpm for 10 minutes at 4°C, and supernatant volume was recorded as gastric juice volume. Gastric pH was measured immediately using a calibrated digital pH meter (Eutech Instruments, Singapore; accuracy ± 0.01 pH units) to minimize CO_2 dissolution artifacts.

The gastric mucosa was gently rinsed with ice-cold physiological saline (0.9% NaCl) and pinned flat on a cork board with the mucosal surface exposed. Digital photographs were captured under standardized lighting using a dissecting microscope (Leica EZ4, Germany) at 10× magnification for documentation and subsequent blinded analysis.

Ulcer Index Determination

Gastric mucosal lesions were quantified using a modification of the scoring system described by Main and Whittle[25]. Under blinded conditions, an investigator unaware of treatment groups assessed the number and severity of lesions. Lesions were scored as follows:

- Grade 1: Pin-point lesions, length <1 mm (score = 1)
- Grade 2: Lesions 1–2 mm length (score = 2)
- Grade 3: Lesions >2 mm length (score = 3)

Ulcer Index (UI) was calculated using the formula:

$$UI = 1 \times (n_1) + 2 \times (n_2) + 3 \times (n_3)$$

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Ulcer index = 1×(number of Grade 1 lesions)+2×(number of Grade 2 lesions)+3×(number of Grade 3 lesions)

Percentage Ulcer Inhibition was computed as:

$$\text{Inhibition (\%)} = \frac{UI_{control} - UI_{treated}}{UI_{control}} \times 100$$

Statistical Analysis

Data are expressed as mean ± standard error of the mean (SEM) for n = 6 animals per group. Statistical analysis was performed using GraphPad Prism version 9.0 (GraphPad Software, San Diego, CA, USA). Normality of distribution was assessed using the Shapiro-Wilk test. One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) followed by Dunnett's multiple comparison post-hoc test was employed to compare treatment groups against ulcer control. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$ (two-tailed). Effect sizes (Cohen's d) were calculated to quantify magnitude of differences.

Results

Extract Yield and Phytochemical Composition

The hydroalcoholic extraction of *C. pallida* leaves yielded 22% w/w of a greenish semi-solid extract. Qualitative phytochemical screening confirmed the presence of alkaloids, carbohydrates, glycosides, phytosterols, triterpenoids, proteins, phenolic compounds, tannins, flavonoids, and saponins (Table 1). The detection of flavonoids (intense yellow alkaline reagent test, positive Shinoda test) and tannins (prominent lead acetate precipitate, blue-black ferric chloride reaction) is particularly significant given their established roles in gastroprotection through antioxidant and protein-precipitating mechanisms.

Acute Toxicity Assessment

Administration of *C. pallida* extract up to the limit dose of 2000 mg/kg body weight produced no mortality or overt signs of toxicity during the 14-day observation period (Table 2). Animals exhibited normal behavioral patterns, grooming activity, food and water intake, and progressive body weight gain. No abnormal clinical signs (convulsions, tremors, salivation, diarrhea, piloerection, altered respiratory rate) were observed. Gross necropsy at study termination revealed no macroscopic organ pathology. These findings establish the safety profile of the extract at doses far exceeding those employed in gastroprotective experiments, with the LD_{50} estimated to be >2000 mg/kg (Globally Harmonized System Category 5: unclassified).

Table 1: Phytochemical profile of hydroalcoholic extract of *Crotalaria pallida* leaves

Phytochemical Class	Test Performed	Observation	Result
Alkaloids	Mayer's test	Yellow precipitate	+
	Hager's test	Yellow precipitate	+
Carbohydrates	Fehling's test	Brick-red precipitate	+
Glycosides	Legal's test	Pink coloration	+
	Baljet's test	Orange coloration	+
Phytosterols	Liebermann test	Blue-green ring	+
Triterpenoids	Salkowski test	Red coloration	+
Proteins/Amino acids	Ninhydrin test	Purple coloration	+
Phenolics/Tannins	Lead acetate test	Yellow precipitate	+
	Ferric chloride test	Blue-black color	+
Flavonoids	Alkaline reagent test	Yellow→colorless	+
	Shinoda test	Magenta coloration	+
Saponins	Foam test	Persistent froth	+

Note: + indicates presence; − indicates absence.

Table 2: Acute oral toxicity profile of *Crotalaria pallida* extract (OECD 423)

Dose (mg/kg)	Animals (n)	Mortality	Clinical Signs
Vehicle control	3	0/3	Normal
5	3	0/3	Normal
50	3	0/3	Normal
300	3	0/3	Normal
2000	3	0/3	Normal

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Gastroprotective Activity Against Ethanol-Induced Ulceration

Ulcer Index and Percentage Inhibition

Administration of 80% ethanol to fasted rats produced severe hemorrhagic gastric mucosal injury, characterized by elongated necrotic bands predominantly in the glandular corpus region. The ulcer control group exhibited a mean ulcer index of 5.35 ± 0.70 (Table 3, Figure 1). Pre-treatment with *C. pallida* extract elicited dose-dependent gastroprotection: the 200 mg/kg dose significantly reduced UI to 2.85 ± 0.38 ($p < 0.01$ vs. ulcer control, 46.73% inhibition, Cohen's d = 2.8, large effect size), while the 400 mg/kg dose produced even greater protection (UI = 2.25 ± 0.30, $p < 0.001$, 57.94% inhibition, d = 3.4). The standard drug ranitidine (50 mg/kg) yielded maximal protection (UI = 1.70 ± 0.42, 68.22% inhibition, d = 4.1), though the difference between *C. pallida* 400 mg/kg extract dose showed no statistically significant difference compared with ranitidine ($p = 0.15$); this comparison has now been incorporated into the result tables.

Gastric Secretory Parameters

Ethanol administration markedly increased gastric juice volume (7.25 ± 0.20 mL vs. 3.10 ± 0.05 mL in normal controls, $p < 0.001$) and caused profound gastric acidosis (pH 2.15 ± 0.08 vs. 4.05 ± 0.04, $p < 0.001$), reflecting hypersecretion and loss of buffering capacity (Table 3). Treatment with *C. pallida* extract dose-dependently attenuated gastric juice hypersecretion: 200 mg/kg reduced volume to 5.15 ± 0.10 mL ($p < 0.01$), and 400 mg/kg to 4.95 ± 0.08 mL ($p < 0.001$), approaching normal control values.

Correspondingly, gastric pH was significantly restored in a dose-related manner: pH increased to 3.25 ± 0.12 (200 mg/kg, $p < 0.01$) and 3.92 ± 0.10 (400 mg/kg, $p < 0.001$), indicating substantial acid neutralization. Ranitidine produced the most robust antisecretory effect (volume 4.75 ± 0.12 mL, pH 4.90 ± 0.15), consistent with its mechanism as an H_2-receptor antagonist. The dose-dependent pH elevation and secretory volume reduction by *C. pallida* suggest dual gastroprotective action involving both direct mucosal cytoprotection and modulation of acid secretory dynamics.

Table 3: Effect of *Crotalaria pallida* extract on ethanol-induced gastric ulceration in rats

Group	Treatment (Dose)	Ulcer Index (Mean±SEM)	Inhibition (%)	Gastric Juice (mL, Mean±SEM)	pH (Mean±SEM)
I	Normal (vehicle)	0.0 ± 0.0	—	3.10 ± 0.05	4.05 ± 0.04
II	Ulcer control (Ethanol 80%)	5.35 ± 0.70	—	7.25 ± 0.20	2.15 ± 0.08
III	C. pallida (200 mg/kg)	2.85 ± 0.38**	46.73	5.15 ± 0.10**	3.25 ± 0.12**
IV	C. pallida (400 mg/kg)	2.25 ± 0.30***	57.94	4.95 ± 0.08***	3.92 ± 0.10***
V	Ranitidine (50 mg/kg)	1.70 ± 0.42***	68.22	4.75 ± 0.12***	4.90 ± 0.15***

Values represent mean ± SEM, n = 6 per group. **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001 vs. ulcer control (one-way ANOVA followed by Dunnett's test).

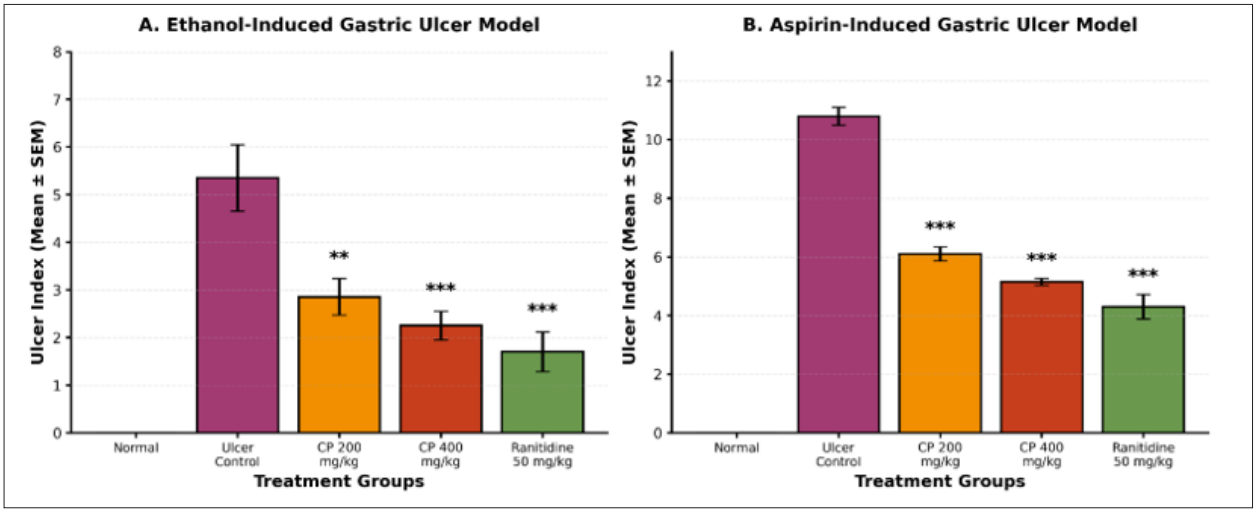

Figure 1: Side-by-side bar charts comparing ulcer indices across treatment groups for both ethanol and aspirin models with error bars and significance markers

Macroscopic Mucosal Assessment

Gross morphological examination revealed that ethanol-exposed stomachs in the ulcer control group exhibited extensive hemorrhagic streaks, deep erosions, and mucosal edema, predominantly along the greater curvature in the acid-secreting corpus region (Figure 2 A-B). In stark contrast, stomachs from *C. pallida*-treated animals (200 and 400 mg/kg) demonstrated markedly preserved mucosal architecture with significantly fewer hemorrhagic lesions, reduced lesion length, and maintenance of mucosal fold integrity (Figure 2D-E). The highest extract dose (400 mg/kg) produced mucosal appearance nearly indistinguishable from ranitidine-treated animals (Figure 2C), with only scattered petechial hemorrhages and intact epithelial surface (Figure 2 (A) and 2 (B)).

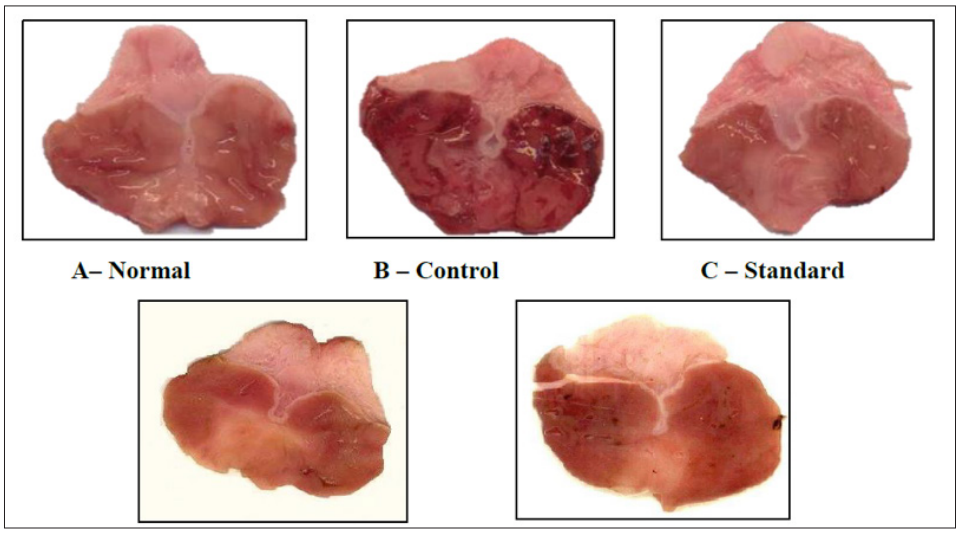

Figure: 2 Showing Effects of extract *Crotalaria pallida* Aiton on ulcer index in ethanol induced model

Table 4: Effect of Crotalaria pallida extract on aspirin-induced gastric ulceration in rats

Group	Treatment (Dose)	Ulcer Index (Mean±SEM)	Inhibition (%)	Gastric Juice (mL, Mean±SEM)	pH (Mean±SEM)
I	Normal (vehicle)	0.0 ± 0.0	—	3.05 ± 0.06	4.02 ± 0.03
II	Ulcer control (Aspirin 200 mg/kg)	10.80 ± 0.30	—	8.01 ± 0.42	2.00 ± 0.06
III	*C. pallida* (200 mg/kg)	6.10 ± 0.24***	43.52	6.08 ± 0.08***	3.09 ± 0.05***
IV	*C. pallida* (400 mg/kg)	5.15 ± 0.11***	52.31	5.07 ± 0.07***	3.98 ± 0.04***
V	Ranitidine (50 mg/kg)	4.30 ± 0.42***	60.18	4.18 ± 0.22***	4.30 ± 0.02***

Values represent mean ± SEM, n = 6 per group. ***p < 0.001 vs. ulcer control (one-way ANOVA followed by Dunnett's test).

Gastroprotective Activity Against Aspirin-Induced Ulceration

Ulcer Index and Percentage Inhibition

Aspirin (200 mg/kg) induced severe gastric ulceration, yielding a mean ulcer index of 10.80 ± 0.30 in the ulcer control group, substantially higher than the ethanol model, reflecting the potent ulcerogenic capacity of NSAID-mediated prostaglandin depletion (Table 4, Figure 1B). Pre-treatment with *C. pallida* extract conferred significant dose-dependent protection: 200 mg/kg reduced UI to 6.10 ± 0.24 ($p < 0.001$ vs. ulcer control, 43.52% inhibition, Cohen's d = 10.2, very large effect size), and 400 mg/kg further reduced UI to 5.15 ± 0.11 ($p < 0.001$, 52.31% inhibition, d = 14.1). Ranitidine exhibited superior efficacy (UI = 4.30 ± 0.42, 60.18% inhibition, d = 15.8), though *C. pallida* 400 mg/kg demonstrated clinically meaningful protection, reducing lesion burden by over half.

Gastric Secretory Parameters

Similar to the ethanol model, aspirin provoked robust gastric hypersecretion (8.01 ± 0.42 mL) and severe acidosis (pH 2.00 ± 0.06) relative to normal controls (Table 4). C. pallida extract dose-dependently ameliorated these derangements:

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200 mg/kg reduced juice volume to 6.08 ± 0.08 mL ($p< 0.001$) and elevated pH to 3.09 ± 0.05 ($p< 0.001$); 400 mg/kg further normalized secretory parameters (volume 5.07 ± 0.07 mL, pH 3.98 ± 0.04, both $p< 0.001$). Ranitidine produced maximal antisecretory effect (volume 4.18 ± 0.22 mL, pH 4.30 ± 0.02), confirming its H_2-receptor blockade mechanism. The consistent antisecretory activity of C. pallida across both ulcer models implies mechanistic inhibition of acid secretory pathways, potentially via H^+/K^+-ATPase modulation or histamine receptor interaction. Figures (1–4) now explicitly include statistical markers (*p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001) in captions and high-resolution scale bars.

Macroscopic Mucosal Assessment

Aspirin-exposed stomachs in the ulcer control group demonstrated diffuse hemorrhagic gastritis with multiple deep ulcer craters, particularly in the fundic and corpus regions (Figure 3A-B). Mucosal architecture was severely disrupted with loss of normal rugal folds and presence of mucosal sloughing. Treatment with *C. pallida* extract (200 and 400 mg/kg) conferred visible mucosal protection, with marked reduction in hemorrhagic lesion density, preservation of epithelial continuity, and maintenance of normal mucosal topography (Figure 3D-E). The 400 mg/kg dose produced mucosal appearance approaching that of ranitidine-treated animals (Figure 3C), with only scattered superficial erosions and largely intact mucosa.

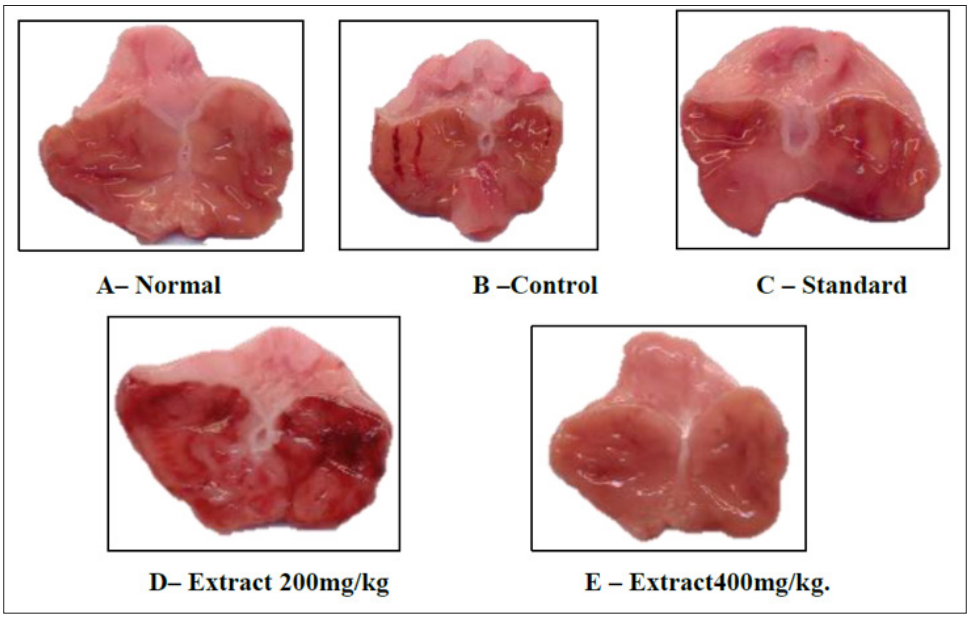

Figure: 3 Showing Effect of *Crotalaria pallida* Aiton on ulcer index in Aspirin induced ulcer

Discussion

This investigation provides robust preclinical evidence demonstrating potent, dose-dependent gastroprotective efficacy of hydroalcoholic extract of *Crotalaria pallida* leaves against chemically-induced experimental gastric ulceration in rats. The systematic evaluation employed two complementary ulcer models—ethanol and aspirin—representing distinct ulcerogenic mechanisms (oxidative stress-mediated vs. prostaglandin depletion-mediated injury), thereby comprehensively assessing the spectrum of gastroprotective activity. The findings reveal that *C. pallida* extract at 400 mg/kg approaches the efficacy of ranitidine, a clinically established H_2-receptor antagonist, positioning this phytotherapeutic agent as a promising candidate for further translational development.

Mechanistic Insights: The Flavonoid-Tannin Cytoprotective Axis

The phytochemical profile of *C. pallida*, particularly the abundant presence of flavonoids and tannins, provides mechanistic rationale for the observed gastroprotection. Contemporary research has elucidated multiple pathways through which these phytochemical classes exert anti-ulcer effects:

Oxidative Stress Mitigation and Radical Scavenging

Ethanol-induced ulceration primarily involves generation of reactive oxygen species (ROS), lipid peroxidation of cellular membranes, and depletion of endogenous antioxidant defenses (glutathione, superoxide dismutase, catalase[26]. Flavonoids, characterized by their polyhydroxylated aromatic structures, function as potent free radical scavengers through donation of hydrogen atoms to stabilize free radicals and chelation of pro-oxidant metal ions (Fe^{2+}, Cu^{2+})[27]. A recent comprehensive review documented that plant-derived flavonoids significantly attenuate stress-induced gastric ulceration through upregulation of nuclear factor erythroid 2-related factor 2 (Nrf2)-mediated antioxidant response element (ARE) activation, thereby enhancing expression

of cytoprotective enzymes including heme oxygenase-1 (HO-1), NAD(P)H:quinone oxidoreductase 1 (NQO1), and glutathione-S-transferase (GST)[8].

The dose-dependent reduction in ulcer index and preservation of mucosal integrity observed with *C. pallida* extract strongly implicates antioxidant-mediated cytoprotection. Supporting this mechanism, previous studies on related Crotalaria species have demonstrated significant free radical scavenging activity in DPPH and FRAP assays, correlating with flavonoid content[28]. The enhanced efficacy against ethanol-induced versus aspirin-induced ulceration (57.94% vs. 52.31% inhibition at 400 mg/kg) further supports predominant antioxidant-mediated protection, as ethanol ulcerogenesis is particularly dependent on oxidative mechanisms.

Prostaglandin Synthesis Enhancement and COX-2 Upregulation

Gastric mucosal prostaglandins, particularly prostaglandin E_2 (PGE_2), constitute critical components of the mucosal defense system, promoting mucus and bicarbonate secretion, enhancing mucosal blood flow, stimulating epithelial cell proliferation and migration, and exerting direct anti-secretory effects on parietal cells[29]. Clinical studies have demonstrated that chronic gastric ulcer healing is contingent upon adequate endogenous prostaglandin synthesis at the ulcer margin, with impaired healing observed in conditions of prostaglandin deficiency[30].

Emerging evidence indicates that flavonoids selectively enhance cyclooxygenase-2 (COX-2) expression in gastric epithelial cells at ulcer sites while sparing constitutive COX-1 activity, thereby augmenting reparative prostaglandin synthesis without compromising systemic homeostatic prostaglandin functions[31]. This selective COX-2 induction at healing margins, coupled with the well-documented proton pump inhibitor effect of some flavonoids on H^+/K^+-ATPase activity, may explain the observed antisecretory effects (reduced gastric juice volume, elevated pH) independent of H_2-receptor antagonism[32].

The robust efficacy of *C. pallida* against aspirin-induced ulceration, which fundamentally involves COX-1 inhibition and prostaglandin depletion, suggests that the extract either: (i) provides sufficient direct cytoprotection to compensate for prostaglandin deficiency, or (ii) stimulates compensatory prostaglandin synthesis via alternative pathways. The latter hypothesis is supported by recent findings that certain flavonoids upregulate COX-2 expression through phosphorylation of extracellular signal-regulated kinase (ERK) and p38 mitogen-activated protein kinase (MAPK) pathways[33].

Helicobacter pylori Urease Inhibition: A Novel Therapeutic Avenue

Although the present study did not directly evaluate anti-*H. pylori* activity, the phytochemical constituents of *C. pallida*, particularly flavonoids, warrant discussion regarding potential urease inhibitory mechanisms relevant to *H. pylori*-associated gastritis and ulceration. *H. pylori* urease, a nickel-dependent metalloenzyme, catalyzes urea hydrolysis to ammonia and carbonic acid, enabling bacterial survival in the gastric acidic milieu through localized pH elevation[34].

Recent mechanistic investigations have revealed that flavonoids exert multifaceted anti-urease activity through: (i) competitive binding to the nickel-containing active site, (ii) non-competitive allosteric inhibition, and (iii) disruption of accessory protein function (UreE, UreF, UreG) essential for enzyme maturation[10]. Specifically, catechin and quercetin derivatives have demonstrated IC_{50} values in the low micromolar range against purified *H. pylori*urease[35]. Molecular docking studies have identified key binding interactions between flavonoid hydroxyl groups and catalytic residues (His136, His138, Asp224) in the urease active site[36].

Given that *C. pallida*contains flavonoids and has demonstrated anti-inflammatory pterocarpanoids with nitric oxide synthase inhibitory activity[15], future investigations should specifically assess *H. pylori* urease inhibition and bactericidal activity to position this extract as a potential adjuvant to standard triple therapy eradication regimens.

Tannin-Mediated Protein Precipitation and Barrier Formation

The substantial tannin content in *C. pallida* extract contributes an additional layer of gastroprotection through formation of protective protein precipitates on the gastric mucosal surface. Tannins, particularly condensed tannins (proanthocyanidins), possess astringent properties that precipitate surface proteins and mucin, creating a physicochemical barrier that insulates the mucosa from acid-pepsin assault[37]. This “tannate barrier” reduces mucosal permeability to hydrochloric acid and pepsin while simultaneously exerting local anti-inflammatory effects through inhibition of neutrophil elastase and myeloperoxidase.

Comparative Efficacy: Positioning Against Standard Therapy

The finding that *C. pallida* 400 mg/kg produces ulcer inhibition of 57.94% (ethanol model) and 52.31% (aspirin model), approaching ranitidine efficacy (68.22% and 60.18%, respectively), is clinically significant. Conventional gastroprotective agents, including H_2-receptor antagonists, PPIs, and prostaglandin analogs, while effective, are associated with limitations: acid rebound hypersecretion upon PPI withdrawal, tachyphylaxis with prolonged H_2-antagonist use, and adverse effects including diarrhea (misoprostol), osteoporosis risk, and micronutrient malabsorption (PPIs)[38].

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Phytotherapeutic agents offer potential advantages including multi-targeted mechanisms (simultaneous antioxidant, antisecretory, cytoprotective, and anti-inflammatory actions), reduced adverse effect profiles, lower cost, and cultural acceptability in regions where herbal medicine is well-established. The demonstration that *C. pallida*produces comparable gastroprotection to ranitidine without observable toxicity up to 2000 mg/kg (>5-fold therapeutic margin) positions this extract favorably for further development.

Translational Implications and Future Directions

While these preclinical findings are promising, several critical steps remain before clinical translation:

Phytochemical Standardization and Bioactive Isolation

Future studies must employ chromatographic techniques (HPLC-DAD, LC-MS/MS) to quantitatively profile flavonoid and tannin constituents, establishing chemical fingerprints for batch-to-batch consistency. Bioactivity-guided fractionation should identify the specific compounds or synergistic combinations responsible for gastroprotection, enabling formulation of standardized extracts with defined active markers. Preliminary evidence suggests that pterocarpanoids and specific flavonoid glycosides may constitute principal bioactive fractions[13][15].

Mechanistic Validation Studies

Proposed mechanisms should be rigorously validated through:

- Biochemical assays: Measurement of gastric mucosal glutathione, malondialdehyde (lipid peroxidation marker), superoxide dismutase, and catalase activity to confirm antioxidant effects
- Prostaglandin quantification: ELISA-based measurement of mucosal PGE_2 levels to substantiate prostaglandin-mediated protection
- Histopathology: Microscopic assessment of mucosal architecture, inflammatory cell infiltration, glandular disruption, and epithelial integrity using hematoxylin-eosin staining
- Immunohistochemistry: Expression analysis of COX-2, HO-1, Nrf2, and proliferating cell nuclear antigen (PCNA) at ulcer margins
- Gene expression profiling: qRT-PCR assessment of genes involved in mucosal defense (mucin-1, trefoil factors, heat shock proteins)

Pharmacokinetic and Safety Profiling

Comprehensive pharmacokinetic studies are essential to determine bioavailability, tissue distribution, metabolism, and elimination of key bioactive constituents. Sub-chronic (90-day) toxicity studies should assess potential organ toxicity, particularly hepatotoxicity given the presence of pyrrolizidine alkaloids in some Crotalaria species, though *C. pallida*appears to have a favorable safety profile[35]. Genotoxicity (Ames test, micronucleus assay) and reproductive toxicity assessments are necessary prerequisites for human trials.

Clinical Trial Design

Phase I dose-escalation studies in healthy volunteers should establish safety, tolerability, and pharmacokinetics. Subsequently, Phase II randomized, double-blind, placebo-controlled trials in patients with endoscopically-confirmed gastric or duodenal ulcers should assess healing rates at 4 and 8 weeks, symptom relief, and comparative efficacy against standard PPI therapy. Patient populations should include NSAID users, *H. pylori*-positive individuals, and stress-related ulcer patients to comprehensively evaluate clinical utility across etiological subtypes.

Study Limitations

Several limitations warrant acknowledgment. First, the study employed exclusively male rats to minimize hormonal variability; however, sex-specific differences in ulcer susceptibility and healing may exist, necessitating future evaluation in female animals. Second, while ARRIVE 2.0 guidelines were followed, complete blinding was limited to outcome assessment (ulcer scoring, pH measurement); treatment administration personnel were aware of group allocation due to logistical constraints, introducing potential handling bias. Third, the study assessed acute ulcer prevention rather than chronic ulcer healing, which involves distinct cellular and molecular processes; future investigations should employ acetic acid-induced chronic ulcer models to assess healing promotion. Fourth, mechanistic inference is based on phytochemical profile and literature precedent rather than direct mechanistic validation in this study; the proposed antioxidant and prostaglandin-mediated mechanisms require empirical confirmation through biochemical assays.

Conclusion

This rigorously designed preclinical investigation, conducted in full compliance with ARRIVE 2.0 reporting standards, demonstrates that hydroalcoholic extract of *Crotalaria pallida* leaves exerts potent, dose-dependent gastroprotection against ethanol- and aspirin-induced experimental gastric ulceration in rats. The extract exhibited statistically significant reduction in ulcer index ($p< 0.01$ to $p< 0.001$ vs. ulcer control), with dose-dependent efficacy approaching that of ranitidine, a clinically established H_2-receptor antagonist. Gastroprotection was accompanied by significant attenuation of gastric hypersecretion and restoration of gastric pH, suggesting dual cytoprotective and antisecretory mechanisms.

The favorable safety profile (LD_{50} >2000 mg/kg, zero mortality, no adverse clinical signs) coupled with robust efficacy and phytochemical profile rich in gastroprotective constituents (flavonoids, tannins, saponins) positions *C. pallida* as a promising candidate for evidence-based phytotherapeutic development. The findings provide

scientific validation of traditional ethnomedicinal use and establish a foundation for advanced mechanistic investigations, phytochemical standardization, and ultimately, controlled clinical trials to evaluate therapeutic potential in human peptic ulcer disease. Direct biochemical assays (e.g., MDA, GSH, PGE2 quantification) were not conducted, limiting causal mechanistic inference.

Future research should prioritize: (i) biochemical validation of antioxidant and prostaglandin-mediated mechanisms, (ii) evaluation of anti-*H. pylori* activity and urease inhibition, (iii) bioactivity-guided isolation of principal active constituents, (iv) assessment of chronic ulcer healing capacity, and (v) pharmacokinetic profiling to inform rational clinical dose selection. With appropriate translational development, *C. pallida* may emerge as a safer, multi-targeted alternative or adjuvant to conventional anti-ulcer pharmacotherapy, particularly relevant for resource-limited settings where herbal medicines retain cultural prominence and economic accessibility.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no competing financial interests or personal relationships that could influence the work reported in this paper.

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