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Opinion Article

Pharmacological Therapy in Non-Alcoholic Fatty Liver Disease

Juan Ampuero*

Department of Clinical Medicine, Miguel Hernández University, San Juan de Alicante, Spain

DESCRIPTION

Non-Alcoholic Fatty Liver Disease (NAFLD) has emerged as the most common chronic liver condition worldwide, closely linked to the global rise in obesity, type 2 diabetes and metabolic syndrome. Characterized by excessive fat accumulation in the liver without significant alcohol consumption, NAFLD surrounds a spectrum of liver disorders ranging from simple steatosis (fatty liver) to Non-Alcoholic Steatohepatitis (NASH), which can progress to fibrosis, cirrhosis and even hepatocellular carcinoma. While lifestyle modifications, such as diet and exercise, remain the fundamental of management, pharmacological therapy has gained increasing attention as an adjunct or alternative for individuals with advanced or high-risk NAFLD.

The pathogenesis of NAFLD is complex and multifactorial, involving insulin resistance, oxidative stress, lipid metabolism dysregulation, inflammation and gut microbiota alterations. This complexity establishes the need for multifaceted pharmacological approaches targeting various mechanisms. One of the primary therapeutic goals in NAFLD is improving insulin sensitivity, as insulin resistance plays a central role in fat accumulation and inflammation within the liver. Metformin, a widely used antidiabetic agent, has shown potential in improving insulin sensitivity and reducing liver fat content in some studies, though its direct impact on liver fibrosis remains uncertain. Similarly, newer insulin-sensitizing agents, such as thiazolidinediones (e.g., pioglitazone), have demonstrated efficacy in reducing hepatic fat, inflammation and fibrosis, particularly in patients with NASH, though concerns about side effects, including weight gain and fluid retention, may limit their use.

Another therapeutic target in NAFLD is oxidative stress and inflammation, which drive the progression from simple steatosis to NASH and fibrosis. Vitamin E, a potent antioxidant, has shown beneficial effects in improving liver histology in non-diabetic patients with NASH. By reducing oxidative damage, vitamin E helps attenuate the inflammatory cascade that contributes to liver injury. However, long-term safety concerns, including a potential increased risk of prostate cancer, necessitate careful patient selection. Other agents, such as pentoxifylline, which inhibits pro-inflammatory cytokines like Tumor Necrosis Factor-alpha (TNF-α), have also been studied, although their effectiveness remains less well-established compared to other interventions.

Given the central role of lipid metabolism dysregulation in NAFLD, therapies targeting dyslipidemia have gained traction. Statins, primarily used for managing cardiovascular risk, have been shown to be safe and effective in reducing cardiovascular morbidity and mortality in NAFLD patients, who are at heightened risk of atherosclerotic cardiovascular disease. While statins may not directly reverse liver fat or fibrosis, their cardiovascular benefits make them a critical component of NAFLD management. Emerging lipid-lowering agents, such as Peroxisome Proliferator-Activated Receptor (PPAR) agonists, have shown potential in reducing liver fat, inflammation and fibrosis by modulating lipid metabolism, insulin sensitivity and inflammation simultaneously.

Bile acid-based therapies have also gained attention for their potential in NAFLD. Obeticholic acid, a Farnesoid X Receptor (FXR) agonist, has shown potential in improving liver fibrosis and reducing inflammation in NASH patients. By modulating bile acid synthesis and signaling pathways, FXR agonists help regulate lipid and glucose metabolism, reduce inflammation and improve gut-liver axis interactions. However, side effects such as pruritus and potential increases in low-density lipoprotein cholesterol require close monitoring during treatment.

The gut microbiota, increasingly recognized as a lead in NAFLD pathogenesis, suggests another target for therapy. Probiotics, prebiotics and synbiotics have been described for their ability to modulate gut microbiota composition, reduce gut permeability and decrease systemic inflammation. Although these interventions have shown some potential in reducing liver fat and inflammation in early studies, more strong clinical trials are needed to establish their efficacy and safety in NAFLD management.

Correspondence to: Juan Ampuero, Department of Clinical Medicine, Miguel Hernández University, San Juan de Alicante, Spain, E-mail: ampuero.juan43@gmail.com

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Novel therapeutic agents targeting specific pathways in NAFLD are currently under investigation. Fibroblast Growth Factor (FGF) analogs, such as FGF21 and FGF19, have shown encouraging results in preclinical and early clinical studies by improving liver fat, inflammation and fibrosis through effects on glucose and lipid metabolism. Similarly, Sodium-Glucose Cotransporter-2 (SGLT2) inhibitors, primarily used for diabetes management, have demonstrated potential in reducing liver fat and improving metabolic parameters in NAFLD patients. These innovative therapies represent a new frontier in the pharmacological management of NAFLD.

Despite these advancements, several challenges remain in the development and implementation of pharmacological therapies for NAFLD. The heterogeneity of the disease, ranging from simple steatosis to advanced fibrosis, complicates the design of clinical trials and the identification of appropriate treatment endpoints. Additionally, many of the currently available therapies focus on improving liver-related outcomes without adequately addressing the broader metabolic and cardiovascular risks associated with NAFLD. Given the high prevalence of NAFLD and its association with systemic metabolic dysfunction, future therapies must adopt a more comprehensive approach, targeting both liver-specific and systemic metabolic pathways.

Pharmacological therapy in NAFLD is a rapidly evolving field, suggesting for individuals who fail to achieve adequate disease control through lifestyle modifications alone. While current options such as insulin-sensitizing agents, antioxidants and bile acid-based therapies have shown varying degrees of success, ongoing research into novel targets and combination therapies holds potential for more effective and personalized treatments. As our understanding of NAFLD pathogenesis deepens, pharmacological interventions are likely to play an increasingly important role in mitigating the burden of this widespread and multifaceted disease.