

Antineoplastic effects and PAMPA studies of protoberberine derivatives: induce apoptosis activities in acute lymphoid leukemia cells^{*}

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Abstract: In the present study, 15 derivatives of protoberberine (**3–17**) along with berberine (**1**) and jatrorrhizine (**2**) were evaluated for their antineoplastic activities against acute lymphoid leukemia cells (including Reh and Nalm-6 cells) in terms of proliferation inhibition. Compounds **4** (9-bromoethylberberine), **5** (9-chloroethylberberine) and **6** (9-bromopropylberberine) showed most significant inhibitory activities with IC₅₀ values of 0.45, 0.39, and 0.57 μmol/L against Reh cells, while Nalm-6 cells were less sensitive to **4**, **5**, **6**, with IC₅₀ values of 3.6, 4.3 and 1.17 μmol/L, respectively, which were both stronger than that of the lead compound berberine (**1**) and jatrorrhizine (**2**) (> 20 μmol/L, respectively). Furthermore, **4** and **5** could induce apoptosis in acute lymphoid leukemia cells as evidenced by cleavage of PARP in a dose-dependent manner, decrease of procaspase-3, increase of active caspase-3 and increase of the levels of cytochrome *c* in cytoplasm. Moreover, the Reh cells treated with **4** and **5** at the concentration of 0.5 μmol/L for 36 h could significantly lead to the down regulation of β-catenin, and the result demonstrated that the mechanism of the derivatives on tumor were partially involved in the Wnt/β-catenin signal pathway. A PAMPA permeability study of **1**, **4**, **5**, **7** and **11** suggested that side chain substituted derivatives in 9-position could improve the membrane permeability of berberine. It will be helpful for application *in vivo* assay. These findings suggest that these derivatives may be considered for future studies as promising therapeutic candidate for acute lymphoid leukemia.

Key words: protoberberine; derivatives; antineoplastic activities; PAMPA; apoptosis

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原小檗碱衍生物诱导急性淋巴白血病细胞 凋亡活性及 PAMPA 研究

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摘要：测定了 15 个原小檗碱衍生物 (**3-17**) 及小檗碱 (**1**) 和药根碱 (**2**) 抑制急性淋巴白血病细胞 (包括 Reh 和 Nalm-6 细胞) 增殖的活性。其中化合物 **4** (9-溴乙基小檗碱), **5** (9-氯乙基小檗碱) 和 **6** (9-溴丙基小檗碱) 表现出最为突出的抑制活性: 在 Reh 细胞中, IC_{50} 值分别为 0.45、0.39 和 0.57 $\mu\text{mol/L}$; 在 Nalm-6 细胞中, IC_{50} 值分别为 3.6、4.3 和 1.17 $\mu\text{mol/L}$ 。活性均强于先导化合物小檗碱和药根碱 (后两者的 IC_{50} 值均大于 20 $\mu\text{mol/L}$)。此外, 化合物 **4** 和 **5** 能够剂量依赖的通过裂解 PARP 诱导急性淋巴白血病细胞凋亡, 降低 pro-caspase-3 的浓度, 增加活性 caspase-3 水平, 同时提高细胞质中的细胞色素 C 水平。进一步, Reh 细胞用 0.5 $\mu\text{mol/L}$ 的 **4** 和 **5** 处理 36 h, 能够显著下调 β -catenin 蛋白的表达, 以上实验结果证明了这类化合物抑制肿瘤细胞增殖的作用机制可能与 Wnt/ β -catenin 通路相关。化合物 **1**、**4**、**5**、**7** 和 **11** 的 PAMPA 膜渗透实验说明, C-9 位取代的小檗碱衍生物可以提高化合物的细胞膜渗透性。

关键词：原小檗碱; 衍生物; 抗肿瘤活性; PAMPA; 细胞凋亡

Protoberberine alkaloids, such as berberine (**1**) and jatrorrhizine (**2**), possess multiple biological and pharmacological activities with significantly low toxicity, including antimicrobial, anticancer, antioxidation and anti-inflammatory activities^[1-7]. In recent years, there is increasing interest in the anticancer activity and evidence of its antineoplastic nature of berberine. It has been shown that berberine can cause apoptosis through a mitochondria-caspases-dependent pathway in human HepG2 cells^[8]. Erberine-induced apoptosis was also proceeded by increased generation of reactive oxygen species (ROS)^[9]. Other reports showed that berberine had cytotoxic activity in human U937, NIH-3T3, HeLa, L1210, A431 and SCC-4 cancer cells which was associated with activation of caspases^[10-14]. Apoptosis is characterized by a number of well-defined features including cellular morphological change, chromatin condensation, DNA fragmentation, and activation of a family of cystein proteases called caspase^[15]. Impaired apoptosis may be a significant factor in the etiology of such diseases as cancer, autoimmune disorders, and viral infection^[16]. The induction of apoptosis is recognized as an important mechanism of action for an anticancer agent. However, the molecular mechanisms underlying berberine-induced apoptosis are not yet well defined. The low inhibitory activities and sensitive of berberine against cancer cells may be important unfavorable factors for further application and deeply exploring of the antitumor mechanism. On the other hand, its antineoplastic effect *in vitro* and *in vivo* showed that the former is better than the latter^[17]. That is, intestinal absorption of berberine may be difficult that plasma concentration *in vivo* becomes low.

Previous reports have focused the most interests on berberine itself. To our knowledge, there is little research been reported on anticancer activity and mechanism of derivatives of these naturally occurring compounds. Therefore, the structural modification of protoberberine is very necessary in order to improve their antitumor effect and their absorption.

We have shown in our previous study that protoberberine derivatives substituted at the 3- and 9-positions, respectively, exhibit remarkably enhanced DNA-binding affinities^[18]. Thus, in this paper, the compounds selected **1-17** (Fig. 1) for the antitumor activities are involved in some derivatives of protoberberine including 9-substituted berberines and 3- and 9-substituted jatrorrhizines, along with lead compound berberine (**1**) and jatrorrhizine (**2**). Acute Lymphoid leukemia (ALL), usually of B-precursor lymphoblastic origin, is the most frequently occurring cancer in childhood. The antineoplastic activities of compounds against ALL cells were examined on the human B-precursor ALL cell lines Reh and Nalm-6, and the SAR analysis was described. Further induced apoptosis properties and the action mechanism of the derivatives were investigated on Reh cells. Moreover, the PAMPA permeabilities study of selected derivatives was carried on to explore their absorption in present study.

1 Experimental section

1.1 Chemicals and antibodies

All reagents and solvents were of commercial quality. Protoberberine derivatives **1-17** were dissolved in dimethyl sulfoxide (DMSO) at a stock

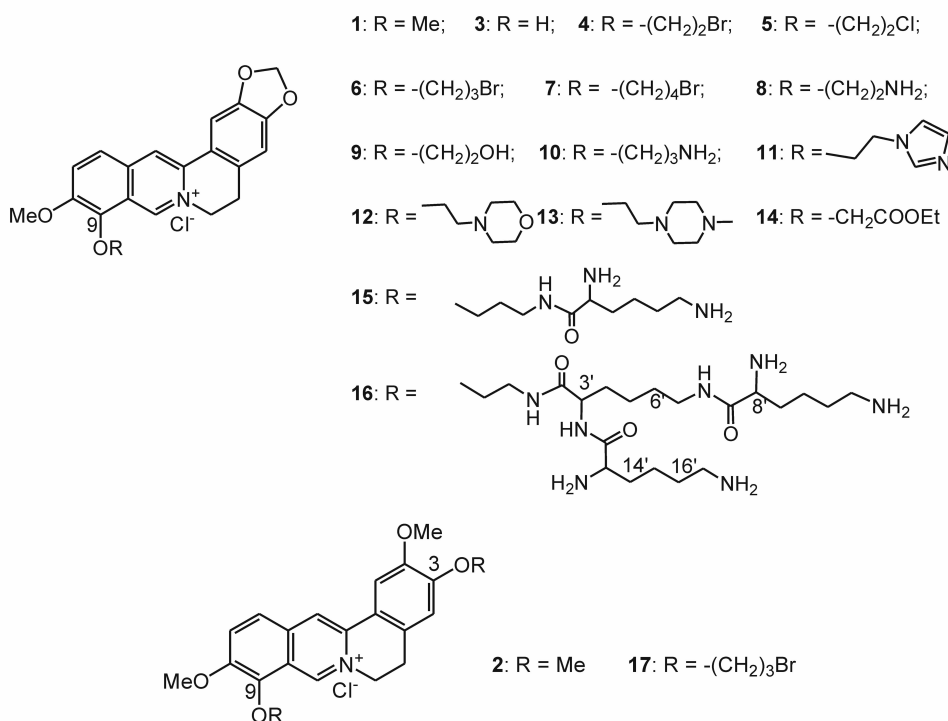


Fig. 1 Structure of compounds 1 ~ 17

concentration of 20 mmol/L and stored in aliquots at $-20\text{ }^\circ\text{C}$. The purity of examined compounds for activities were over 95% using NMR and TLC. Antibodies against poly (ADP-ribose) polymerase (PARP), procaspase-3, β -catenin and cytochrome *c* were purchased from BD Biosciences. Mouse anti-human Tubulin and rabbit anti-human active-caspase-3 and c-myc were purchased from the Sigma-Aldrich.

1.2 Cell culture

Acute lymphoid leukemia Reh and Nalm-6 cells were cultured in RPMI 1640 (Invitrogen) supplemented with $\rho = 10\%$ fetal calf serum (Biological Industries) at $37\text{ }^\circ\text{C}$, $\varphi = 5\%$ CO_2 .

1.3 Cell Viability Assay

Cell viability was determined by the 3-(4,5-dimethyl-2-yl)-5-(3-carboxymethoxyphenyl)-2-(4-sulfophenyl)-2H-tetrazolium (MTS) assay (Cell Titer 96 Aqueous One Solution Cell Proliferation assay, Promega Corp. Shanghai, China). $2 \times 10^5/\text{mL}$ cells in 100 μL were exposed to various concentrations of 4 or 5 for 72 h. Control cells received DMSO with final concentration $< 0.1\%$. Four hours prior to the termination of the drug treatment, MTS was added and cells continued to incubate in the

presence of the MTS. The absorbance density was read on a 96-well plate reader at the 490 nm wavelength. Then the drug concentration resulting in 50% inhibition of cell growth (IC_{50}) was determined [19].

1.4 Western blot analysis

Whole cell lysates for Western blot analysis of PARP, procaspase-3, active-caspase-3, β -catenin, c-myc and tubulin was prepared in radioimmunoprecipitation assay (RIPA) buffer (1 \times PBS, $\varphi = 1\%$ NP-40, $\rho = 0.5\%$ sodium deoxycholate, $\rho = 0.1\%$ sodium dodecyl sulfate) supplemented with freshly added 10 mmol/L β -glycerophosphate, 1 mmol/L sodium orthovanadate, 10 mmol/L NaF, 1 mmol/L phenylmethylsulfonyl fluoride (PMSF), and 1 \times Roche complete Mini protease inhibitor cocktail (Roche, Indianapolis, IN, USA). The cytosolic fraction for cytochrome *c* detection was prepared in digitonin buffer [1 mmol/L PIPES (pH 6.8), $\rho = 0.015\%$ digitonin, 300 mmol/L sucrose, 100 mmol/L NaCl, 3 mmol/L MgCl_2 , 5 mmol/L EDTA, and 1 mmol/L PMSF] [20].

1.5 Statistical analysis

All experiments were carried out at least three times, and data are all expressed in the form of mean \pm error (SE) unless otherwise stated. Statistical analy-

ses were taken on GraphPad Prism 5.0 software (GraphPad Software, San Diego, CA, US). A $P < 0.05$ was considered statistically significant.

1.6 PAMPA permeability studies

PAMPA “sandwiches” were formed from a donor 96-well microlitre plate and matching filter plate coated 15 μL of (a) $\rho = 10\%$ lecithin/dodecane (Egg-PAMPA) or (b) $\rho = 5\%$ hexadecane/dodecane (HDM-PAMPA) dried. The compound solutions were added to the wells (100 μL / well) of the pre-coated filter, and phosphate buffer saline (pH 7.4) was added to the wells (375 μL / well) of the receiver plate, the filter plate was coupled with the receiver plate and the plate couple was incubated in the thermostat at 37 $^{\circ}\text{C}$ for 16 h or 5 h with shaking of 80 r/min. After the incubation, the plates were separated and the solution of samples from each well of both the filter plate and the receiver plate was transferred to tubes, samples were analyzed by HPLC, permeability was calculated using Eq. 1.

$$\lg P_e = \lg \left\{ c \cdot \left[- \ln \frac{[\text{drug}]_a}{[\text{drug}]_d} \right] \right\} \quad (1)$$

where, $c = \frac{V_d \cdot V_a}{(V_d + V_a)A \cdot t}$, V_d is volumn of donor compartment (cm^3); V_a is volumn of the receiver compartments (cm^3). P_e is the overall permeability coefficient. A is effective area of membrane which is equal to pore porosity times the area of membrane. Here, A is 0.28 cm^2 , t is time (s) of sample incubation, $[\text{drug}]_a$ is compound concentration in the receiver plate, $[\text{drug}]_d$ is compound concentration in donor plate. The technical specification is: In Egg-PAMPA, membrane permeability $\lg P_e > -5.0$ is easily permeable; $-5.0 > \lg P_e > -6.0$ is moderately permeable; and $\lg P_e < -6.0$ is difficultly permeable. In HDM-PAMPA, membrane permeability $\lg P_e > -4.0$ is easily permeable; $-4.0 > \lg P_e > -5.0$ is moderately permeable, and $\lg P_e < -5.0$ is difficultly permeable. The HPLC system: The injection volumes were 20 μL and the detector wavelength was set at 345 nm, separation was performed on a chromolith RP-18e analytical column ((4~6) mm \times 100 mm) at 0.8 mL/min at 25 $^{\circ}\text{C}$, Eluent was composed of methanol (HPLC grade, lab-scan. publin, Ireland) - water (Milli-Q grade) ($g = 1, V/V$).

2 Results and discussion

2.1 Protoberberine derivatives (1 - 17) inhibit the growth of Reh and Nalm-6 cells

The human ALL cell lines used in this study were Nalm-6 and Reh, which have been previously characterized as B-precursor ALL cells [21]. ALL Reh and Nalm-6 cells were cultured in RPMI 1640 (Invitrogen) supplemented with 10% fetal calf serum (Biological Industries) at 37 $^{\circ}\text{C}$, $\varphi = 5\%$ CO_2 . All compounds were evaluated for inhibitory activities against all cells (including Reh and Nalm-6 cells). Reh and Nalm-6 cells were incubated for 72 hours with increasing concentrations of 1 - 17, respectively. Cell viability of both cell types was examined by the MTS assay, and IC_{50} values were listed in Table 1. Compounds 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 11 and 17 exhibited potent inhibitory effect against both Reh and Nalm-6 cells. 4, 5, 6 showed most significant inhibitory activities with IC_{50} values of 0.45, 0.39, and 0.57 $\mu\text{mol/L}$ against Reh cells, while Nalm-6 cells were less sensitive to 4, 5, 6, with IC_{50} values of 3.6, 4.3 and 1.17 $\mu\text{mol/L}$, respectively, which are both much stronger than the lead compound berberine (1) and jatrorrhizine (2) ($> 20 \mu\text{mol/L}$). In all case, 9-O-(2'-haloalkyl) berberines 4, 5, 6, 7, 9-O-(2'-aminoethyl) berberine 8 and 9-O-2-(1'-imidazolylethyl) berberine 11 exhibited the notable activities, and other group substituted, like hydroxyethyl group substituted in 9-O-position of berberine 9, the cytotoxicity which is low. There was no obvious difference in activities among compounds 4, 5, 6, 7 when the linked alkyl group chain was ethyl, *n*-propyl or *n*-butyl chain. To different aminoethyl substituted derivatives, the small group substituted amine 8 and aromatic amine 11 may be more helpful for the bioactivities. Compared with lead compound 1 and 2, derivatives substituted at 9-positions were important to inhibitory activities on Reh and Nalm-6 cells, and it means that 3-position of protoberberine maybe not important active site when the activity of 17 is not better than that of 6. However, large functional group in 9-position, like 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, was unfavorable for the activities. Polyamino berberines 15 and 16 with high CT DNA-binding affinities in our previous study have not shown higher activities than compound 8.

Table 1 IC₅₀ values of compounds **1**–**17**
based on 72 – h incubation

Compounds	IC ₅₀ / (μmol · L ⁻¹)	
	REH	NALM – 6
1	>20	>20
2	>20	>20
3	14	18
4	0.45	3.60
5	0.39	4.30
6	0.57	1.17
7	1.22	3.29
8	5.0	– ¹⁾
9	>20	– ¹⁾
10	>20	>20
11	>20	12.5
12	>20	>20
13	>20	>20
14	>20	>20
15	>20	>20
16	>20	>20
17	7.49	9.18

1) not examined

2.2 Compound **4** and **5** inhibit the growth of leukemic Reh and Nalm – 6 cells and induce apoptosis

Cell viability (measured by MTS assay) indicated that **4** and **5** were very effective against the Reh and Nalm – 6 cells (Figure 2; a). Reh cells were more sensitive to **4** and **5**, with IC₅₀ values of 0.457 and 0.39 μmol/L, respectively. While Nalm – 6 cells were less sensitive to **4** and **5**, with IC₅₀ values of 3.6 and 4.3 μmol/L, respectively. To further examine the activity of **4** and **5**, we then counted the dead cells treated with different concentrations of drug with trypan blue. Exposure of Reh cells to **4** and **5** at 1.0 μmol/L at the 48 h induced ~80% of cell death (Figure 2; b). Treatment of Nalm – 6 with 20 μmol/L for 48 h resulted in only ~60% cell death.

In order to examine the ability of **4** and **5** to induce apoptosis, Western blot analysis with whole cell lysates prepared with proper buffers after the Reh and Nalm – 6 cells were treated with different drug concen-

trations for 48 h showed that **4** and **5** induced cleavage of PARP in a dose-dependent manner (Figure 2; c). An decrease of procaspase – 3 and an increase of active caspase – 3 were noted in Reh and Nalm – 6 cells treated with increased concentrations of **4** and **5**. The levels of cytochrome *c* in cytoplasm were increased correspondingly (Figure 2; c). These results suggest that **4** and **5** can induce apoptosis in acute lymphoid leukemia cells.

2.3 Compound **4** and **5** induce the down regulation of β-catenin and c-myc

Wnt/β-catenin signal has been reported to play central roles in kinds of human cancers^[22], the Wnt signal pathway stabilizes the transcription coactivator β-catenin through blocking its phosphorylation-dependent degradation. We have explored whether the Wnt/β-catenin is involved in the effect of the derivatives on ALL cell lines, as shown in the Fig. 3, we can see that the protein level of β-catenin and it downstream target c-myc. The Reh cells treated with **4** and **5** at the concentration of 0.5 μmol/L for 36 h can significantly lead to the down regulation of β-catenin, and c-myc is also down regulate. The effect of **4** and **5** on the Nalm – 6 cells was not shown, the result demonstrated that the mechanism of berberine derivatives on tumor are partially involved in the Wnt/β-catenin signal pathway, while the detailed mechanism still need further exploration.

2.4 PAMPA permeability studies

The parallel artificial membrane permeability assay (PAMPA) is an important way to screen the permeability of new medicines^[23–24]. Using the PAMPA system, we investigated the permeability of **1**, **4**, **5**, **7** and **11**, and Verapami was used as positive control. The obtained results are listed in Table 2. Compared with that of berberine which moderately permeated both EGG-PAMPA and HDM-PAMPA, four examined berberine derivatives could easily permeated EGG-PAMPA and moderately permeated HDM-PAMPA. It meant that there has been a certain improvement in the intestinal absorption of these derivatives and suggested that alkyl chain substituted derivatives of berberine in 9 – position could enhance the membrane permeable ability of berberine.

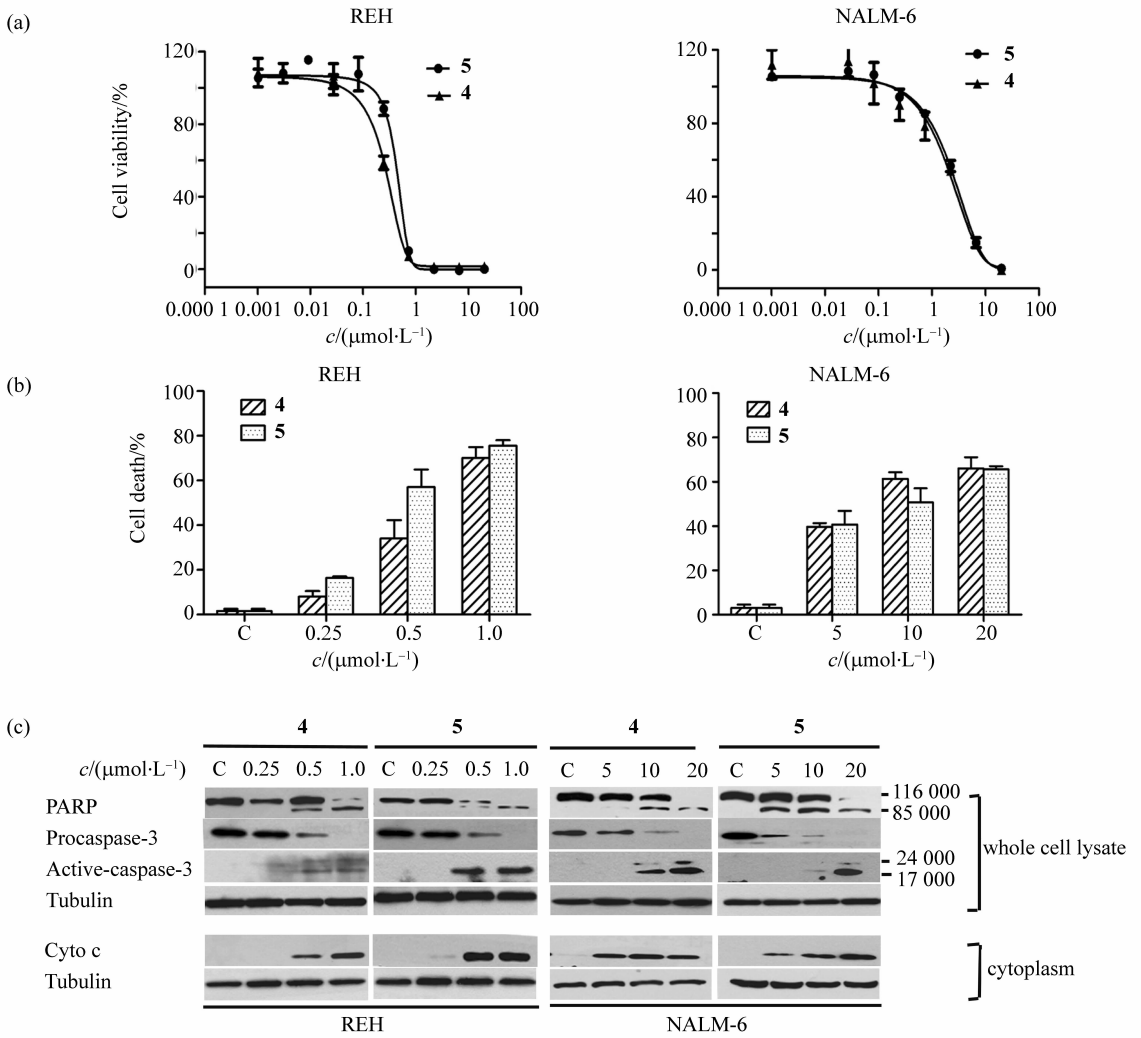


Fig. 2 Compound 4 and 5 induce apoptosis in REH cell and NALM - 6 cell

a: 4 and 5 inhibit proliferation of REH cells and NALM - 6 cells. Cells were exposed to increasing concentration of 4 and 5 respectively for 72 h, and then cell viability was measured by MTS assay and was plotted as percentage cell viability compared with the control. The error bars refer to SE.

b: 4 and 5 induce apoptosis in REH and NALM - 6 cells. REH cells and NALM - 6 cells were incubated with PC 4 or PC 13 at indicated concentration for 48 h. Trypan blue was used to determine the counts of dead cells. All the experiments were carried out 3 times.

c: REH and NALM - 6 cells were treated with the indicated concentrations of 4 and 5 for 48h, whole-cell extracts or cytoplasmic extracts were examined by Western blot analysis with the indicated antibodies.

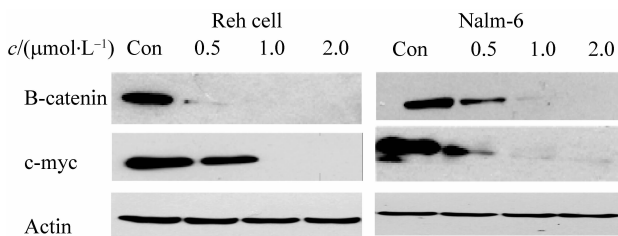


Fig. 3 Compound 4 and 5 induce the downregulation of β -catenin and c-myc

3 Conclusions

In this study, 17 protoberberine and their derivatives have been developed their antitumor activities. Compounds 4, 5, 6 exhibited remarkable inhibitory activities against Reh cells and Nalm - 6 cells, with the IC_{50} value about $0.52 \mu\text{mol}/\text{L}$. The further results suggest that 4 and 5 can induced apoptosis in acute lymphoid leukemia cells and the mechanism are partially involved in the Wnt/ β -catenin signal pathway.

Table 2 Permeability parameters of the studied compounds

Compounds	$\lg P_e$	
	Egg-PAMPA	HDM-PAMPA
4	-4.722 (easily)	-4.223 (moderately)
5	-4.761 (easily)	-4.304 (moderately)
7	-4.728 (easily)	-4.325 (moderately)
11	-4.906 (easily)	-4.381 (moderately)
Verapamil	-5.300 (moderately)	-4.400 (moderately)

PAMPA studies of **4**, **5**, **7** and **11** showed they could easily permeated EGG-PAMPA and moderately permeated HDM-PAMPA. Therefore, these berberine derivatives in this work improve their efficiency in antineoplastic activities and may overcome the shortcomings of low intestinal absorption of protoberberine. In addition, these compounds were easily obtained with the excellent yields. The efforts aiming at exploiting the further biological activities and their action mechanism of protoberberine derivatives are actively continuing in our laboratories.

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