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<td>Author(s)</td>
<td>Takemoto, Kenji; Hatano, Etsuro; Iwaisako, Keiko; Takeiri, Masatoshi; Noma, Naruto; Ohmae, Saori; Toriguchi, Kan; Tanabe, Kazutaka; Tanaka, Hirokazu; Seo, Satoru; Taura, Kojiro; Machida, Keigo; Takeda, Norihiko; Saji, Shigehira; Uemoto, Shinji; Asagiri, Masataka</td>
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<tr>
<td>Citation</td>
<td>FEBS Open Bio (2014), 4: 777-787</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issue Date</td>
<td>2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>URL</td>
<td><a href="http://hdl.handle.net/2433/191145">http://hdl.handle.net/2433/191145</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Type</td>
<td>Journal Article</td>
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Kyoto University
Necrostatin-1 protects against reactive oxygen species (ROS)-induced hepatotoxicity in acetaminophen-induced acute liver failure

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Article info

Article history:
Received 30 April 2014
Revised 29 August 2014
Accepted 30 August 2014

Keywords:
Hepatocytes
Acetaminophen
Acute liver failure
RIPK-dependent necrosis
Necroptosis
Reactive oxygen species

Abstract

Excessive acetaminophen (APAP) use is one of the most common causes of acute liver failure. Various types of cell death in the damaged liver are linked to APAP-induced hepatotoxicity, and, of these, necrotic cell death of hepatocytes has been shown to be involved in disease pathogenesis. Until recently, necrosis was considered to be a random and unregulated form of cell death; however, recent studies have identified a previously unknown form of programmed necrosis called receptor-interacting protein kinase (RIPK)-dependent necrosis (or necroptosis), which is controlled by the kinases RIPK1 and RIPK3. Although RIPK-dependent necrosis has been implicated in a variety of disease states, including atherosclerosis, myocardial organ damage, stroke, ischemia–reperfusion injury, pancreatitis, and inflammatory bowel disease. However its involvement in APAP-induced hepatocyte necrosis remains elusive. Here, we showed that RIPK1 phosphorylation, which is a hallmark of RIPK-dependent necrosis, was induced by APAP, and the expression pattern of RIPK1 and RIPK3 in the liver overlapped with that of CYP2E1, whose activity around the central vein area has been demonstrated to be critical for the development of APAP-induced hepatic injury. Moreover, a RIPK1 inhibitor ameliorated APAP-induced hepatotoxicity in an animal model, which was underscored by significant suppression of the release of hepatic enzymes and cytokine expression levels. RIPK1 inhibition decreased reactive oxygen species levels produced in APAP-injured hepatocytes, whereas CYP2E1 expression and the depletion rate of total glutathione were unaffected. Of note, RIPK1 inhibition also conferred resistance to oxidative stress in hepatocytes. These data collectively demonstrated a RIPK-dependent necrotic mechanism operates in the APAP-injured liver and inhibition of this pathway may be beneficial for APAP-induced fulminant hepatic failure.

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1. Introduction

Acetaminophen, or N-acetyl-para-aminophenol (APAP), is the most widely used analgesic and antipyretic [1]. The use of APAP is safe at therapeutic doses, but high doses can lead to acute liver failure (ALF). In 1998, 28% of all ALF cases in the United States were attributed to APAP overdose, which increased to 51% in 2003 [2]. Furthermore, the percentage was much higher in the United Kingdom, where 57% of ALF cases were attributed to APAP use from 1999 to 2008 [3]. The toxicity of APAP is ascribed to N-acetyl-p-benzoquinone imine (NAPQI), a highly reactive metabolite of APAP, which reacts with glutathione (GSH) and leads to a profound depletion of hepatocellular GSH [4], resulting in mitochondrial...
were frozen immediately in liquid nitrogen for further use, and the remaining portions were fixed in 10% neutral buffered formalin for microscopic analysis. The Animal Research Committee of Kyoto University approved the animal protocol, and all experiments were conducted in accordance with the Guidelines for the Care and Use of Laboratory Animals promulgated by the National Institutes of Health.

2.2. Immunohistochemical analysis

Formalin-fixed, paraffin-embedded sections were cut into a thickness of 4 μm and mounted on Matsunami adhesive silane-coated glass slides (Matsunami Glass, Osaka, Japan). After deparaffinization and rehydration, the slides were autoclaved in 10 mM citrate buffer for 20 min to retrieve the antigens. Then, endogenous peroxidase was quenched with 0.3% hydrogen peroxide (H₂O₂) in methanol at room temperature for 10 min. After blocking, the sections were incubated at 4 °C overnight with the following primary diluted antibodies: anti-CYP2E1 (dilution; 1:500; Abcam, Cambridge, UK), anti-RIPK1 (dilution; 1:200; Santa Cruz Biotechnology, Dallas, TX, USA), and anti-RIPK3 (dilution; 1:300; Imgenex, San Diego, CA, USA). Subsequently, the sections were incubated with peroxidase-labeled polymer conjugated secondary antibody (Dako Japan, Tokyo, Japan) for 30 min at room temperature. Immunoreactivity was detected with a diaminobenzidine substrate kit (Dako Japan), and the sections were counterstained with hematoxylin. ImageJ imaging analysis software (National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, MD, USA) was used to quantitate the percentage of necrotic area. Field images at ×100 magnification were selected at random from different individuals. The percentage of necrosis was determined by measuring the total dimension of the field and comparing it with the dimension of the necrotic area.

2.3. Measurement of inflammatory and regenerative cytokines

The frozen mouse liver tissues were homogenized using the FastPrep-24 tissue homogenizer (MP Biomedicals Japan, Tokyo, Japan) with 2.0 mm zirconia beads for 1 min while cooling. Bio-Plex multiplex system (Bio-Rad Laboratories, Hercules, CA, USA) was used in conjunction with the Bio-Plex 200 (Bio-Rad Laboratories) to measure inflammatory mediators, according to the manufacturer’s directions. Data were analyzed using Bio-Plex Manager 6.1 software (Bio-Rad Laboratories).

2.4. Isolation and culture of primary mouse hepatocytes

Primary hepatocytes were isolated from C57BL/6 mice as described previously [18] and cultured on a collagen-coated plastic dish in Williams’ medium E (Life Technologies, Carlsbad, CA, USA) containing 10% fetal bovine serum (FBS), 2 mM l-glutamine, 100 U/ml penicillin, and 100 μg/ml streptomycin at 37 °C in a humidified atmosphere of 5% CO₂. The medium was replaced with serum-free Williams' medium E, including the vehicle (0.05% DMSO) or each of the tested Nec-1 concentrations 3 h after plating. An hour later, the cells were treated with 10 mM APAP (Sigma–Aldrich) and incubated for an additional 18 h. The APAP incubation period was relatively short after isolation, because cultured hepatocytes have less CYP2E1 and are less sensitive to APAP with time [19].

2.5. Cell death assay

Cell death was assayed by measuring LDH in the supernatant using the Cytotoxicity Detection Kit Plus (Roche Diagnostics GmbH, Mannheim, Germany). Then, the cells were incubated for 60–120 min with 2-(2-methoxy-4-nitrophenyl)-3-(4-nitrophenyl)-5-(2,4-disulphophenyl)-2H-tetrazolium (WST-8; Dojindo Laboratories, Kumamoto, Japan) reagent supplemented in culture
media prior to absorbance readings at 450 nm with an iMark
Microplate Absorbance Reader (Bio-Rad Laboratories). Thereafter,
the cells were stained with Hoechst 33342 (Dojindo Laboratories)
and propidium iodide (PI; Dojindo Laboratories). PI-positive cells
were considered as dead cells.

2.6. Total GSH measurements

GSH levels in cultured hepatocytes treated with or without
APAP were determined using the Total Glutathione Quantification
Kit (Dojindo Laboratories), according to the manufacturer’s
instructions. Each GSH value was expressed as a ratio of the control
value.

2.7. ROS measurements

ROS content was quantified using the fluorescent dye 5-(and-
6)-chloromethyl-2,7’-dichlorodihydrofluorescein diacetate, acetyl
ester (CM-H2DCFDA) (Life Technologies) as described previously
[20]. Hepatocytes were isolated from C57BL/6 mice and cultured in
96-well black plates with transparent bottoms in Williams’
medium E, including the vehicle (0.05% DMSO), or each of the tested
Nec-1 concentrations for 1 h. Then, 10 mM APAP diluted in
serum-free media was added, and the incubation was continued for
an additional 6 h. The hepatocytes were subsequently loaded
with CM-H2DCFDA (10 μM) in phenol red and serum-free
media for 30 min at 37 °C. The cells were then rinsed twice with
Williams’ medium E without phenol red. CM-H2DCFDA fluores-
cence was detected at excitation and emission wavelengths of
490 nm and 520 nm, respectively. ROS formation was measured
over a time period of 60 min using a FlexStation 3 microplate
reader (Molecular Devices, Sunnyvale, CA, USA). Hepatic ROS gen-
eration was detected microscopically using the MitoSOX Red Mitochondrial Superoxide Indicator (Life Technologies), which
selectively targets superoxide production in mitochondria, accord-
ing to the manufacturer’s instructions.

2.8. Protein blotting

Frozen liver tissue or cultured hepatocytes were homogenized in
RIPA buffer (Cell Signaling Technology, Danvers, MA, USA) con-
taining benzylsulfonyl fluoride (Tokyo Chemical Industry, Tokyo,
Japan), Halt protease inhibitor cocktail (Pierce Biotechnology,
Rockford, IL, USA), and PhosSTOP phosphatase inhibitor cocktail
(Roche Diagnostics GmbH) or in a buffer containing 20 mM Tris–
HCl, 150 mM NaCl, 1% NP-40, 1% sodium deoxycholate, and Halt
protease inhibitor cocktail. Aliquots of hepatocyte extracts were
fractionated by electrophoresis on a 7.5% or 10% sodium dodecyl
sulfate (SDS) polyacrylamide gel (Bio-Rad Laboratories). In some
cases, phosphate-affinity gel electrophoresis was performed using
gels containing 8.5% acrylamide, 50 mM Tris, and 25 mM acryl-
amide-pendant Phos-tag ligand (NARD Institute, Ltd., Amagasaki,
Japan) [21], and an equal aliquot was incubated for 30 min at
30 °C with or without 400 U l-PP (New England Biolabs Inc., Ips-
wich, MA, USA) prior to electrophoresis. The proteins were trans-
ferred onto polyvinylidene fluoride membranes (Bio-Rad Laboratories), blocked with Blocking One blocking solution (Na-
calai Tesque Ltd., Kyoto, Japan), and incubated at 4 °C overnight with anti-CYP2E1 (dilution, 1:1000), anti-RIPI (dilution, 1:1000; Cell
Signaling Technology), and anti-β-actin (dilution, 1:1000; Sigma–Aldrich). The membranes were washed and incubated with
horseradish peroxidase-conjugated secondary antibodies. Chemi-
luminescence was detected using Clarity Western ECL substrate
(Bio-Rad Laboratories), the membranes were subjected to direct
densitometric analysis, and images were captured using a charge-coupled device camera system (LAS-4000 mini; Fujifilm, Tokyo, Japan). Band intensity was quantified using ImageJ software and normalized with respect to β-actin levels as an internal control.

2.9. Cell death induction by an exogenous ROS inducer

To evaluate the effects of ROS on RIPK1-inhibited hepatocytes,
the medium was replaced with serum-free Williams’ medium
E, including the vehicle (0.05% DMSO), or each of the tested
Nec-1 concentrations. After 1 h, H2O2 (30% v/v; Wako Pure
Chemical Industries, Osaka, Japan) or the nitric oxide (NO) donor
S-nitroso-N-acetyl-ω-penicillamine (SNAP; Sigma–Aldrich),
which was diluted to a final concentration of 250 μM and
2 mM in serum-free Williams’ medium E, was added, and the
cells were incubated for 6 h. Thereafter, cell death assays were
performed.

2.10. 2,2’-Azino-bis (3-ethylbenzothiazoline)-6-sulfonic acid (ABTS)
free radical decolorization assay

This spectrophotometric decolorization assay, which is widely
used for the assessment of antioxidant activity, measures the loss of
color when an antioxidant is added to the blue–green chromo-
phore ABTS radical cation (ABTS·+). The radical scavenging
capacity of a sample was previously determined [22] with some modifications. In brief, ABTS (Wako Pure Chemical Industries)
was dissolved in UltraPure Distilled Water (Life Technologies)
to a concentration of 7 mM. The ABTS radical cation (ABTS·+) was
produced by reacting ABTS stock solution at a final concen-
tration of 2.45 mM potassium persulfate and allowing the mix-
ture to stand in the dark at room temperature for 12–16 h before use. Because ABTS and potassium persulfate react stoi-
chiometrically at a ratio of 1:0.5, this will result in incomplete
oxidation of the ABTS. Oxidation of the ABTS commenced imme-
diately, but the absorbance was not maximal and stable until
more than 6 h had elapsed. The radical was stable in this form
for more than two days when stored in the dark at room temper-
ature. The ABTS·+ solution was diluted with UltraPure Distilled
Water or ethanol to an absorbance of 0.70–0.80 at 734 nm. After
the addition of 100 μL diluted ABTS·+ solution to 20 μL of
necrostatin-1, Inactive control (Calbiochem), which is an inactive
analogue of Nec-1, or L(+)-Ascorbic Acid (Wako Pure Chemical
Industries), absorbance (734 nm) was measured at exactly
4 min after initial mixing using a FlexStation 3 microplate reader
(Molecular Devices).

2.11. Concanavalin A-induced hepatitis

Concanavalin A (Sigma–Aldrich) was dissolved in pyrogen-free
normal saline solution at a concentration of 2.0 mg/mL and
injected intravenously at a dose of 20 mg/kg body weight to induce
hepatitis, as previously described [23].

2.12. Quantitative real-time reverse transcription polymerase chain
reaction (qPCR)

Total RNA of mouse liver was isolated and transcribed into
cDNA using the RNeasy Plus Mini Kit (Qiagen, Hilden, Germany)
and Superscript III reverse transcriptase (Life Technologies) accord-
ing to the manufacturer’s instructions. qPCR was performed using
THUNDERBIRD SYBR qPCR Mix (Toyobo, Osaka, Japan) on a Light-
Cycler 480 (Roche Diagnostics GmbH). The normalization of rela-
tive expression was calculated by the comparative Ct (2–DDCt)
method with 18s gene expression. The primer sequences used
were as follows: TNF, forward 5′-AGGGTCTGGGCCATAGAACT-3′, reverse 5′-CCACCACGCTCTTCTGTCTAC-3′; Heme Oxygenase-1, forward 5′-CACAGATGGCGCTACTTCGTC-3′, reverse 5′-GTGAAGACCCACTGGAGGAG-3′; 18s, forward 5′-AGTCCCTGCCCTTTGTAC-3′, reverse 5′-CGATCCGAGGGCCTCACTA-3′.

2.13. Statistical analyses

Results are presented as means ± standard errors of the mean. The two groups were compared using the unpaired Student’s t test and analysis of variance, where appropriate. Multiple groups were
compared by one-way analysis of variance using the Tukey's multiple comparison test or the Kruskal–Wallis test followed by Dunn's multiple comparisons. A probability ($P$) value $<0.05$ was considered statistically significant. All statistical analyses were performed using GraphPad Prism version 5.0 software (GraphPad Software, Inc., La Jolla, CA, USA).
Liver samples were harvested before or 1 h and 6 h after administration. Total RNA was prepared at each indicated time point and subjected to quantitative RT-PCR.

3. Results

3.1. APAP-induced hepatotoxicity is associated with RIPK1 activation

Initially, we confirmed the time-dependent development of APAP-induced liver damage in C57BL/6 mice with a single dose of APAP (800 mg/kg, intraperitoneal injection, n = 3 per time point) or concanavalin A (20 mg/kg, intravenous injection, n = 4 per time point) to induce hepatic injury. Liver samples were harvested before or 1 h and 6 h after administration. Total RNA was prepared at each indicated time point and subjected to quantitative RT-PCR. Error bars show standard error of the mean.

3.2. Nec-1 protects against APAP-induced hepatic injury in vivo

To clearly demonstrate the involvement of RIPK1-dependent necrosis in APAP-induced hepatotoxicity, we utilized a murine model of APAP-induced ALF. Hepatic injury was induced by intraperitoneal injection of APAP. Mice that were administered DMSO as a vehicle showed severe hepatic injury, as assessed histologically by hematoxylin and eosin staining (Fig. 2A). We observed increased numbers of swollen hepatocytes around the central vein (Fig. 2A), and severe hemorrhage was visible in the perinecrotic area (Fig. 2A). However, mice treated with Nec-1 showed mild injury, and the necrotic area was localized only to the pericentral vein area (Fig. 2A and B). These results were confirmed by serum transaminase and LDH levels, i.e., Nec-1 showed a significant protective effect against APAP-induced hepatic injury (Fig. 2C). Without administration of APAP, no significant difference was observed between hepatocytes treated either with the vehicle alone or 50 μM Nec-1 alone (data not shown). Nec-1 significantly decreased the production of the inflammatory and regenerative cytokines IL-1β, IL-10, CXCL1, and basic FGF as compared with the vehicle (Fig. 2D). Although, no significant difference was detected in IL-6 concentrations, a tendency towards decreased expression was observed (Fig. 2D). TNF induction, which is a virulence determinant of concanavalin A- and LPS/n-galactosamine-induced hepatitis [23,26–28], was not observed in our experimental ALF settings, i.e., the liver samples were harvested within 6 h after APAP administration (Fig. 3A). However, heme oxygenase-1, which is known to be induced by APAP, was observed even in the early phase of liver injury [29] (Fig. 3B), which is in agreement with previous reports that showed APAP-induction of TNF only occurred in the later phase and not in the acute phase [30,31].

Altogether, these results clearly demonstrated that RIPK1-specific agent Nec-1 has a protective effect against APAP-induced hepatotoxicity and that APAP-induced cell death is due, at least partly, to RIPK-dependent necrosis.

3.3. Nec-1 inhibits ROS production and suppresses mitochondrial dysfunction in APAP-damaged hepatocytes

To investigate the mechanism of how RIPK1 inhibition protects hepatocytes from APAP-induced regulated necrosis, we isolated primary hepatocytes and performed cell-based in vitro assays. In agreement with our in vivo findings, RIPK1-phosphorylation also increased in APAP-treated hepatocytes in a time-dependent manner (Figs. 1B and 4A). Nec-1 protected primary hepatocytes from APAP-induced cytotoxicity in a dose-dependent manner, as shown by the reduction of LDH in the supernatant (Fig. 4B) and by increased cell viability (Fig. 4C). The protective effect of Nec-1 against APAP-induced cell death was also observed microscopically, as assessed by staining with the membrane-impermeant fluorescent molecule PI to evaluate cell death and the membrane-permeant fluorescent dye Hoechst 33342 to stain cell nuclei (Fig. 4D).

Next, we compared CYP2E1 expression levels to determine whether the Nec-1 protective effect against hepatic injury resulted from altered APAP metabolism. Therefore, we could not detect any significant differences in CYP2E1 expression levels between Nec-1- and vehicle-treated hepatocytes during APAP-induced hepatocyte death (0–6 h post APAP-treatment) (Fig. 4E and F). In addition, we examined the total GSH to assess the detoxification status of the cells, because highly reactive NAPQI is detoxified primarily by GSH conjugation. Nevertheless, total GSH levels in APAP-injured hepatocytes decreased with time regardless of Nec-1 treatment (Fig. 4G).

After GSH depletion, it is considered that NAPQI becomes hepatotoxic by binding to cellular macromolecules, which leads to cellular organ damage including mitochondrial dysfunction through ROS generation [32]. Therefore, we examined the effect of Nec-1 on intracellular ROS induction by APAP and found that Nec-1 suppressed the cellular ROS levels in APAP-treated hepatocytes to levels similar to those in APAP-untreated hepatocytes (Fig. 4H). Similarly, Nec-1 suppressed the mitochondrial ROS induction in APAP-treated hepatocytes, as determined using MitoSOX Red, whereas mitochondrial ROS were strongly induced in APAP-damaged hepatocytes treated with the vehicle alone (Fig. 4I).
Fig. 4. Nec-1 inhibits ROS production and suppresses mitochondrial dysfunction in acetaminophen (APAP)-damaged hepatocytes without affecting CYP2E1 and cellular GSH levels. (A) APAP-induced activation of RIPK1. SDS–PAGE of RIPK1 and phospho-RIPK1 in cultured mouse hepatocytes with or without iPP is shown. (B) Effect of Nec-1 on APAP-induced LDH release (18 h after APAP treatment, n = 6). (C) Effect of Nec-1 on APAP-induced hepatocyte death (18 h after APAP treatment, n = 6). (D) Microscopical analysis of hepatocytes with or without Nec-1 (6 h after APAP treatment). (E) SDS–PAGE of CYP2E1 expression (F) Densitometric analysis of (E) (n = 3). (G) APAP-induced depletion of cellular GSH levels in primary hepatocytes with 25 µM and 50 µM Nec-1 or the vehicle. Data are expressed as percent of non-APAP-treated controls (n = 3). (H) The redox-sensitive dye CM-H2DCFDA (10 µM) was loaded for 30 min. Fluorescent signals were quantified continuously for 60 min (n = 8). (I) Cells were loaded with MitoSOX (2.5 µM) for 6 h and live images were captured. Pictures are representative of three different experiments. *P < 0.05, **P < 0.01, ***P < 0.001.
These findings raise the possibility that Nec-1 protects against APAP-induced hepatocyte injury by suppressing the intracellular burden of ROS formation, including mitochondrial superoxide production, without affecting CYP2E1 expression or depleting GSH.

3.4. RIPK1 inhibition confers hepatocytes resistance to oxidative stress

Extensive mitochondrial GSH depletion is associated with a significant increase in H$_2$O$_2$ released from stressed mitochondria [33].

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![Graphs and images](https://example.com/graphs.png)
Peroxynitrite (ONOO\(^{-}\)), which is formed by the reaction of nitric oxide (NO) with superoxide, is detoxified by GSH during APAP-induced hepatotoxicity \[34\]. These oxidizing agents produced in living cells and/or leaked from dead cells not only damage organs intracellularly, but may also affect neighboring cells extracellularly \[35,36\]. Therefore, we attempted to test whether RIPK1 inhibition influenced hepatocyte response to exogenous oxidative stress. We treated mouse hepatocytes with \(\text{H}_2\text{O}_2\) or SNAP, which serves as a NO donor. Low SNAP concentrations provide protection from cell death in various cell types, including hepatocytes \[37–39\]; however, at higher concentrations, SNAP is highly toxic \[39–42\]. Thus, we used SNAP in a concentration range that was toxic to hepatocytes (data not shown) and found a dose-dependent protective effect of Nec-1 against exogenous oxidative stress in cell viability and LDH-release assays (Fig. 5A, B, D and E). A microscopic analysis confirmed that RIPK1 inhibition by Nec-1 protected the primary hepatocytes from exogenous oxidizing agents (Fig. 5C and F). However, there was no antioxidant activity in Nec-1 compared with \((+)-\text{Ascorbic Acid, which is an antioxidant well-known as Vitamin C, as determined by an ABTS free-radical decolorization assay (Fig. 5G and H) [14], we found that Nec-1-treated hepatocytes acquired resistance to oxidative stress. This resistance mechanism remains to be elucidated; however, the resistance would be beneficial to further protect against APAP-induced liver damage, because extracellular ROS increase in response to initial hepatocyte cell death \[35,36\], and those ROS together with inflammatory cytokines lead to secondary hepaticocyte damage \[44\] (Figs. 5 and 6).

APAP-induced cell death is predominantly necrotic [6]. Our results clearly demonstrated that APAP-induced necrosis includes, if not all, regulated forms of necrosis that are a druggable target of RIPK1 inhibitors (Fig. 6). Nec-1 has a short half-life span [45], but demonstrated efficacy against APAP-induced ALF. Thus, the development of inhibitors with better pharmacokinetic properties may pave the way for therapeutic intervention of human APAP-induced ALF, for which efficient treatment is truly required.

4. Discussion

Our results demonstrate that RIPK1-dependent necrosis is involved in the pathological manifestation of APAP-induced acute liver damage. Indeed, RIPK1 inhibition by Nec-1 showed a protective effect against APAP-induced hepatocyte injury both in vivo and in vitro. The in vitro studies revealed that RIPK1 inhibition reduces APAP-induced ROS production, which is one of the main causes of APAP-induced hepatocyte damage (Fig. 5) [43], whereas CYP2E1 expression and APAP-induced GSH exhaustion were unaffected (Fig. 4E–G). A pathological examination of the liver before and after APAP injury demonstrated co-localization of RIPK1 with RIPK3 and CYP2E1 in hepatocytes around the central vein area (Fig. 1D), which is the most vulnerable area for APAP-induced hepatocyte injury [25], also supporting the notion that RIPK-dependent mechanisms operate in APAP liver injury. Furthermore, although Nec-1 has no antioxidant activity (Fig. 4G and H) [14], we found that Nec-1-treated hepatocytes acquired resistance to oxidative stress. This resistance mechanism remains to be elucidated; however, the resistance would be beneficial to further protect against APAP-induced liver damage, because extracellular ROS increase in response to initial hepatocyte cell death [35,36], and those ROS together with inflammatory cytokines lead to secondary hepaticoyte damage [44] (Figs. 5 and 6).

**Author contributions**

Conflicts of interest

M.A. receives a grant from Innovation Center for Immunoregulation and Therapeutics (AK Project). However, the study was designed, conducted, analyzed, and reported independently of the funding. No other potential conflict of interest relevant to this article was reported.

Acknowledgments

We are grateful to Dr. Yuji Takemoto and Dr. Takeshi Watanabe for their continuous support and fruitful discussion. This work was supported in part by a grant from the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (K.I., N.T., S.U., and M.A.); a Grant-in-Aid for Young Scientists (M.A.) and a Grant-in-Aid for Challenging Exploratory Research (M.A.) from Japan Society for the Promotion of Science; and a grant from the Kanea Foundation for the Promotion of Medical Science (M.A.).

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