

Medicinal potential of gambier extract for recurrent aphthous stomatitis treatment

Nurfitri Amaliah^{1*}, Muhammad Yamin Saud²

ABSTRACT

Recurrent aphthous stomatitis (RAS) remains as one of the most common disorders in the oral cavity. Various treatment options for RAS conditions include topical, systemic, and the use of traditional ingredients that have pharmacological content. One of the plants known to have good pharmacological content for RAS treatment is gambier (*Uncaria Gambier*). Gambier plant extract is known to have various benefits for health, including in the management of RAS due to the active ingredient compounds in the form of anti-inflammatory, antioxidant and antibacterial properties. One of the active compounds possessed by gambier plant extract in the form of catechine is proven to have the ability to reduce inflammation and help to accelerate the healing process in RAS cases.

Keywords: gambier plant, recurrent aphthous stomatitis, treatment

INTRODUCTION

The global interest in plant-derived alternative medicine continues to grow, particularly for its potential in complementing conventional therapies.^{1,2} Many medicinal plants contain bioactive secondary metabolites with antimicrobial, anti-inflammatory, and wound-healing properties.^{3,4} One such plant is *Uncaria gambir* Roxb., or gambier, indigenous to Southeast Asia, especially Indonesia and Malaysia.^{5,6} Traditionally used to treat wounds, ulcers, respiratory conditions, and oral diseases, gambier is rich in catechins and tannins compounds with well-documented antimicrobial and anti-inflammatory effects.^{5,6,8} Recurrent aphthous stomatitis (RAS) is a common inflammatory condition of the oral mucosa marked by painful, recurring ulcers.^{9,10} Current treatment strategies aim to reduce pain, accelerate healing, and prevent recurrence, often through the use of antimicrobial agents.¹¹ While chlorhexidine gluconate is commonly employed, its use can lead to adverse effects such as mucosal irritation and tooth staining.^{10,13} These limitations underscore the need for safer, effective alternatives. Given its bioactive profile, gambier extract presents a promising natural candidate for RAS treatment. By combining efficacy with reduced risk of irritation, gambier may address key limitations of existing therapies. This review explores its pharmacological basis and potential application in the treatment of RAS.

DISCUSSION

Clinical features of RAS

Recurrent aphthous stomatitis (RAS) is the most common disease affecting the oral mucosa, characterized by multiple, round or ovoid canker sores with erythematous halos and grey or yellow floors. These lesions reoccur periodically and are often painful, especially during the initial 4–5 days, interfering with speech and eating. The condition commonly begins in adolescence or early adulthood and affects up to 25% of the global population.¹²⁻¹³

RAS manifests in three clinical forms: minor RAS (MiRAS), major RAS (MaRAS), and herpetiform RAS (HeRAS). MiRAS, which accounts for 80% of cases, presents as small (<5 mm), round ulcers on non-keratinized mucosa and resolves without scarring in 10–14 days.¹² MaRAS affects about 10% of patients

Affiliation

¹School of Dental Medicine, Universitas Ciputra, Surabaya, Indonesia

²Program of Development Study, Graduate School, Universitas Hasanuddin, Makassar, Indonesia

Correspondence

nurfitri.amaliah@ciputra.ac.id

and is characterized by larger lesions that may persist for weeks and heal with scarring.¹³ HeRAS, the rarest form (1.1%), typically presents with multiple, small (2–3 mm), painful ulcers on the floor of the mouth and tongue, with a female predominance.^{12–15}

Although the exact etiology remains unclear, the role of oral microbiota including *Streptococcus*, *Helicobacter pylori*, and viruses like cytomegalovirus is strongly suspected.^{10–17} Additionally, systemic diseases may present with similar ulcers, complicating diagnosis.¹⁶ Due to this ambiguity, no definitive treatment exists, and current approaches focus on symptom management.

Limitations of conventional RAS therapy

Current RAS management strategies aim to alleviate pain, reduce inflammation, and shorten the healing period.¹¹ Chlorhexidine gluconate is a commonly prescribed antiseptic; however, its use is limited by adverse effects such as mucosal irritation and tooth staining.¹³ These limitations highlight the need for alternative agents with improved safety profiles and comparable efficacy.

Phytochemical composition and traditional uses of gambier

Uncaria gambir Roxb., or gambier, is a plant native to Southeast Asia, especially Indonesia and Malaysia, and has traditionally been used to treat wounds, ulcers, digestive disorders, and oral lesions.^{7,18} It is rich in catechins and tannins, bioactive compounds with known antimicrobial, antioxidant, and anti-inflammatory effects.^{5–8}

Indonesia ranks among the top global exporters of gambier, particularly from Sumatra. Two varieties are commonly used: commercial and raw gambier. Studies have shown high catechin content in commercial samples from Payakumbuh (93.94%), Lampung (91.97%), and Padang Panjang (97.99%), identified using Thin Layer Chromatography.²⁰ In contrast, raw gambier extracted from leaves and stems in Riau demonstrated antioxidant activity and catechin content varying with solvent type: 62.18% (ethanol) and 44.85% (ethyl acetate).¹⁸

Preclinical and clinical evidence of gambier's efficacy

Several studies support the potential of gambier extract in promoting wound healing. A study by Thaib et al. (2021) showed that 10% gambier leaf extract cream significantly accelerated burn healing in rabbits within 17 days.²¹ Similarly, Arif et al. (2023) found that 15% extract concentrations were more effective in wound healing on mice compared to lower concentrations.²² These findings indicate dose-dependent efficacy, although differences between 7.5% and 15% were relatively minor—suggesting a potential therapeutic threshold. Clinical research by Dewi et al. (2023) revealed that gambier mucobiadhesive significantly reduced both pain (VAS score) and lesion size in RAS patients.²³ This supports its use in oral ulcer management, although further studies with larger samples and randomized designs are needed for confirmation.

Critical appraisal of current studies

While the existing data are promising, the methodological limitations of several studies warrant attention: a) Small sample sizes (e.g., animal models with limited subjects or short follow-up periods); b) Lack of human trials for wound healing beyond preliminary mucobiadhesive studies; c) Variability in extraction methods, leading to inconsistent catechin concentrations and outcomes; and d) Limited placebo-controlled or blinded trials, which raises concerns about bias.

Future research should employ standardized extraction protocols, involve larger, multi-centered human clinical trials, and compare gambier formulations directly with established agents like chlorhexidine to determine real-world applicability.

Antioxidant

Antioxidants are substances that prevent oxidative damage caused by free radicals, playing a protective role against diseases such as cancer, cardiovascular disorders, and premature aging.²⁷ Increased free radical formation can overwhelm endogenous defenses, necessitating external antioxidant sources, which may be synthetic or natural.²⁸ Due to potential side effects of synthetic antioxidants, natural antioxidants are preferred. Gambier (*Uncaria gambir*) is a notable natural antioxidant source, primarily due to its high phenolic compound content, with catechins being the most significant antioxidant constituents.^{29,30} The antioxidant activity of gambier correlates strongly with its catechin levels.

The main chemical constituents of gambier include catechu tannic acid (20–50%), catechin (7–33%), and pyrocatechol (20–30%).²² Catechins act as natural antioxidants by delaying, attenuating, and inhibiting lipid oxidation.³¹ Generally, natural antioxidants are phenolic or polyphenolic compounds, often flavonoids, which neutralize oxidative stress.³² Widiyarti (2020) evaluated the antioxidant activity of ethyl acetate extracts from dried gambier leaves, reporting significant phenolic content and free radical scavenging capacity.²⁰ Similarly, Nur Sazwi et al. (2015) found gambier exhibited strong antioxidant activity (IC₅₀ 6.4 ± 0.8 ppm via DPPH assay), outperforming other traditional plants, with quinic acid identified as a major bioactive compound.³³

These antioxidant properties are clinically relevant in conditions like Recurrent Aphthous Stomatitis (RAS), where oxidative stress contributes to mucosal damage and inflammation.^{9,10} By neutralizing free radicals, gambier's antioxidants could help mitigate oxidative injury, potentially reducing lesion severity and accelerating healing. However, further clinical studies are needed to confirm these benefits in RAS management.

Antibacterial

Gambier (*Uncaria gambir*) contains abundant flavonoids and alkaloids, bioactive compounds known for their potent antibacterial properties, particularly against oral pathogens involved in recurrent aphthous stomatitis (RAS) pathogenesis. Flavonoids, alkaloids, and terpenoids have been reported to inhibit *Streptococcus mutans*, a key bacteria contributing to oral microbial imbalance and inflammation in RAS.³⁴ Kresnawaty (2020) demonstrated that Gambier ethanol extracts exhibit significant antimicrobial activity, including inhibition of *Escherichia coli* O157:H7, suggesting that ethanol extraction effectively concentrates these antibacterial constituents, unlike water extracts which showed minimal activity.^{35,36}

Further investigations confirmed that ethanol extracts of Gambier possess antibacterial effects against *E. coli* and other Gram-positive and Gram-negative bacteria relevant to oral infections.^{35,37} For instance, microwave-assisted extraction yielded inhibition zones ranging from 12.07 mm to 14.38 mm against *E. coli*, *Salmonella typhimurium*, *Staphylococcus aureus*, and *Bacillus cereus*.³⁷ Musdja (2017) assessed the minimum inhibitory concentrations (MICs) of (+)-catechin, a major Gambier catechin, showing MICs of 5.5 mg/mL, 8 mg/mL, and 8 mg/mL against *Staphylococcus epidermidis*, *S. mutans*, and *S. viridans*, respectively, highlighting its potential to reduce oral bacterial colonization contributing to RAS lesions.^{28,41}

These antibacterial activities suggest that Gambier extracts could play a dual role in RAS management by reducing microbial triggers and modulating local inflammation, which are central to the pathogenesis of RAS ulcers.^{9,10} The ability of Gambier's bioactive compounds to inhibit key oral pathogens may help restore microbial balance, thereby accelerating lesion healing and reducing recurrence.⁴³ Hence, incorporating Gambier-derived antibacterial agents into therapeutic strategies could offer a complementary approach to managing RAS by targeting both microbial and inflammatory components.

Anti-inflammatory

Inflammation is a defensive response of the microcirculation that develops in tissues following trauma, infection, toxic exposure, or autoimmune injury.³⁸ It is a hallmark of several chronic diseases, including rheumatoid arthritis, atherosclerosis, and asthma, all of which are prevalent globally [39]. During inflammation, reactive oxygen species (ROS) and free radicals are released, leading to tissue damage and upregulation of arachidonic acid metabolism into prostaglandins and leukotrienes via cyclooxygenase (COX) and lipoxygenase (LOX) pathways.⁴⁰

In vivo research by Yimam et al. demonstrated that a 1:1 mixture of *Uncaria gambir* leaf and *Morus alba* root bark extracts exhibited significant anti-inflammatory effects, reducing inflammation by 53.7%, 55.3%, and 48.8% at 1, 3, and 5 hours, respectively, at a dose of 300 mg/kg. Moreover, the same extracts exhibited COX-2 and LOX enzyme inhibitory activity in vitro, with IC₅₀ values of 12.4 µg/mL and 13.6 µg/mL, respectively.⁴⁰ However, while promising, these results are based on animal models, and translation to human clinical outcomes—particularly in diseases such as recurrent aphthous stomatitis (RAS) requires caution. The COX-2/LOX pathways are relevant to RAS pathology, but differences in immune regulation and epithelial healing in humans may limit direct extrapolation.

Similarly, Musdja et al. investigated catechin isolates from *Uncaria gambir* using ethyl acetate via the paw edema method, noting that the optimal dose was 100 mg/kg body weight, which inhibited edema by 59.19%.⁴¹ Another study by Yunarto et al. confirmed the anti-inflammatory properties in Wistar rats at doses as low as 5 mg/kg.⁴² These findings reinforce the potential of catechins as anti-inflammatory agents,

but again, a more critical evaluation of dosing, delivery, and metabolic stability in humans is needed. No current trials have assessed catechin bioavailability or mucosal healing in RAS patients.

Expanding on this, polyphenol-rich plant extracts such as those from *Annona muricata*—have been shown to modulate inflammatory responses in macrophages and neutrophils, and improve outcomes in experimental lung injury models by downregulating NF- κ B and oxidative stress pathways.² This suggests a plausible mechanism whereby similar compounds from *Uncaria gambir* may influence innate immune responses in RAS. Furthermore, Ginovyan et al. demonstrated broad-spectrum antimicrobial activity in traditional medicinal plants, reinforcing the dual anti-inflammatory and antimicrobial role that *Uncaria gambir* may play in oral lesions like RAS.¹

Despite encouraging preclinical data, these studies often suffer from limited sample sizes, lack of standardization in extract composition, and absence of human trial validation. Translational research into standardized topical formulations for RAS that target both microbial colonization and mucosal inflammation is warranted. Given the multifactorial nature of RAS—including nutritional, immune, and microbial components monotherapies may be insufficient. Thus, future investigations should emphasize randomized controlled trials, pharmacokinetics, and biomarker-driven efficacy endpoints to determine clinical relevance.

Effect of gambier extract for RAS treatment

The primary goals in managing recurrent aphthous stomatitis (RAS) are to alleviate inflammation and pain, shorten ulcer duration, and prevent recurrences.¹⁵ Medicinal plants have long been employed in traditional medicine for treating a variety of diseases due to their bioactive compounds and relatively low incidence of adverse effects.^{43,44} One such agent is *Uncaria gambir* (gambier), a traditional plant rich in catechins and oxindole alkaloids known for their anti-inflammatory, antimicrobial, and wound-healing activities.^{46,47,55} The pathophysiology of RAS involves mucosal inflammation, with tissue injury triggering the release of inflammatory mediators like prostaglandin E2 (PGE2), histamine, and leukotrienes. These mediators induce vasodilation and increase vascular permeability, leading to classic signs of inflammation redness, swelling, and pain.⁴⁵ Clinical management often includes topical agents due to their localized effect and reduced systemic side effects.¹⁵

Gambier extract has demonstrated promising results in managing RAS symptoms. It reduces pain intensity and promotes ulcer healing.^{15,46} This therapeutic effect is largely attributed to the high concentration of catechins, which exhibit immunomodulatory, antioxidant, and anti-inflammatory properties.^{47,48} Catechins modulate inflammatory pathways by downregulating cytokines such as interleukin-6 (IL-6) and interleukin-8 (IL-8), and suppressing COX-1 and COX-2 enzyme activity.⁴⁸

In addition to its anti-inflammatory effects, gambier extract has shown potent antimicrobial activity. In vitro studies have demonstrated that catechins disrupt bacterial membranes, leading to cell lysis and death, particularly against *Streptococcus mutans* a key pathogen in the oral cavity.^{51,52} These properties are beneficial, as secondary bacterial infections can delay mucosal healing in RAS.⁵⁰ Several experimental and clinical studies have confirmed the wound-healing potential of gambier. In animal models, topical application of gambier significantly enhanced angiogenesis, fibroblast proliferation, and collagen deposition, thereby accelerating wound closure.⁵³⁻⁵⁵ Clinical data suggest that topical gambier reduces the healing time of oral ulcers and gingival wounds through these mechanisms.^{6,56}

Moreover, the antimicrobial potential of gambier aligns with broader literature on traditional medicinal plants. For instance, Ginovyan et al. (2017) found that various plant extracts used in Armenian traditional medicine, including polyphenolic-rich substances, exhibited broad-spectrum antimicrobial activity, further supporting the ethnopharmacological value of gambier.¹ Similarly, Saraiva et al. (2022) confirmed that polyphenols attenuate inflammatory responses in immune cells, adding mechanistic support to their use in inflammatory conditions like RAS.²

Regarding practical application, gambier is most commonly prepared as an ethanolic extract or mucobioadhesive gel for topical use. Dewi et al. (2023) formulated a mucoadhesive gel that significantly reduced pain scores and shortened ulcer healing duration in RAS patients.²³ Safety evaluations have shown that topical formulations are well tolerated, with minimal risk of adverse reactions when used locally.^{6,23} Although human clinical trials are limited, existing in vivo and in vitro evidence suggest gambier is safe and effective when used topically in doses ranging from 1–3% extract concentrations. No significant systemic toxicity has been reported, although further studies are warranted to assess long-term safety, standardization of dosage, and potential drug interactions.

RAS is generally a self-limiting condition, with ulcer healing occurring within 8 to 14 days. The wound healing process encompasses an inflammatory phase (4–6 days), a proliferative phase with re-epithelialization and angiogenesis (4–14 days), and a maturation phase.^{57,58} Gambier extract expedites this process by enhancing re-epithelialization, reducing inflammatory infiltration, and promoting tissue regeneration through angiogenesis and granulation.⁵⁹⁻⁶¹

CONCLUSION

This literature review suggests that gambier extract has considerable potential in the treatment of RAS. Nevertheless, further research and development are required to ascertain its safety and efficacy in order to ensure that the product is safe for public use.

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