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**Treatment of proteins with dietary polyphenols lowers the formation of AGEs and
AGEs-induced toxicity**

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Abstract

The advanced glycation endproducts (AGEs) are a group of harmful compounds produced either endogenously or during thermal food processing. Once absorbed by humans via food intake, AGEs can cause oxidative cell damage and contribute to pathological development of various diseases. The AGEs-inhibitory activity of dietary polyphenols *in vitro* has been extensively reported before, but the current study is pioneering in examining the antiglycation activity of five selected dietary polyphenols (phloretin, naringenin, epicatechin, chlorogenic acid, and rosmarinic acid) during thermal protein glycation process. When added into the glucose-casein glycation model heated at 120 °C for 2 hrs, these polyphenols were capable of inhibiting the formation of both total fluorescent AGEs and nonfluorescent carboxymethyllysine (CML). The thermal stability and transformation of polyphenols is likely an important factor affecting their antioxidant activity and inhibitory efficacy of reactive carbonyl species formation. Treatment with epicatechin would not only lower AGEs formation but AGEs-induced cytotoxicity and oxidative stress to human retinal pigment epithelial (ARPE-19) cells.

1. Introduction

The advanced glycation endproducts (AGEs) are a group of compounds produced in the advanced stage of protein glycation reactions, including both fluorescent products such as pentosidine and nonfluorescent products like carboxymethyllysine (CML). Formation of AGEs have been reported both *in vivo* via metabolism and *in vitro* from heating sugar and protein, and the latter accounts for the extraneous source of dietary AGEs ingested by humans in a wide variety of foodstuffs, such as meat, milk products and bakery products.¹ Compared with endogenous formation occurring in physiological conditions at 37 °C, formation of AGEs during food processing is usually at a much higher temperature. As indicated by a recent survey, the amount of AGEs in processed foods depends on the parameters of thermal treatments, including temperature, time and moisture. Among different cooking methods, broiling (225 °C) and frying (177 °C) showed highest AGEs formation capacity, followed by roasting (177 °C) and boiling (100 °C).¹ It is also interesting to know that in saccharide-lysine model systems, microwave-heating method had higher CML formation capacity than water-heating and drying oven-heating methods.²

About 10% of consumed dietary AGEs are absorbed by humans and correlate with circulating and tissue levels of AGEs.³ The ability of AGEs to form cross-links with intracellular proteins, receptors and extracellular matrix components will lead to structural and functional modifications of these molecules.^{4,5} Meantime, AGEs promote the cellular oxidative stress and damage.⁶ The associations between AGEs with pathological development of diabetic complications, renal failure, atherosclerosis, Alzheimer's disease,

23 arthritis, and chronic heart failure have been well documented.^{7,8} Hence, the strategies to
24 reduce the dietary AGEs formation during thermal food processing and alleviate their toxicity
25 will be of clinical importance to human health.

26

27 Polyphenols are reputable antioxidants and given their natural origins, they are regarded as
28 functional food ingredients safer than synthetic compounds. As the advanced stage of protein
29 glycation reactions is facilitated by free radicals, polyphenols have been investigated on their
30 inhibitory effects on the AGEs formation. Compared with experiments carried out in
31 simulated physiological conditions, there are scarce investigations on the antiglycation effects
32 of polyphenols in thermal protein glycation models. As examples, in protein glycation model
33 composed of fructose and soy glycinin or bovine serum albumin (BSA) incubated at 60 °C
34 for 60 mins, ferulic acid reduced fluorescent AGEs and CML formation by nearly 90% and
35 85%, respectively.⁹ Addition of ferulic acid to sponge cake baked at 190 °C for 30 mins also
36 significantly lowered the level of CML.¹⁰ Grape seed extract rich in phenolic compounds
37 could reduce CML in baked bread dose-dependently.¹¹ The ability of polyphenols to inhibit
38 the AGEs formation would possibly be affected by factors such as heating time and
39 temperature. For example, rutin is a potent inhibitor toward AGEs formation from glucose
40 and BSA incubated at 37 °C, but no inhibition of CML was observed in the baked sponge
41 cake model possibly due to thermal instability of rutin.¹⁰ Therefore, it's essential to explore
42 the antiglycation activity of polyphenols in thermal models so as to find out ways to
43 minimize the levels of AGEs in heat-treated foods.

44

45 The current study established a thermal protein glycation model composed of glucose and
46 casein heated at 120 °C for 2 hrs to mimic the real thermal food processing conditions. Five
47 selected types of dietary polyphenols were added to the model system and their impacts on
48 the formation of reactive carbonyls, fluorescent AGEs and nonfluorescent CML were
49 examined. Finally, the effects of polyphenol-fortified protein glycation products on cell
50 proliferation and oxidative status were explored in human retinal pigment epithelial
51 (ARPE-19) cells.

52 **2. Materials and methods**

53 **2.1 Reagents and chemicals**

54 Epicatechin was purchased from Biopurify Phytochemicals Ltd. (Chengdu, China). Phloretin,
55 naringenin, chlorogenic acid, rosmarinic acid, glucose, casein, disodium hydrogen phosphate,
56 sodium dihydrogen phosphate, sodium sulfite, sodium hydroxide, sodium carbonate, sodium
57 bicarbonate, TNBS (2,4,6-trinitrobenzenesulfonic acid), NBT (nitro blue tetrazolium), OPD
58 (*o*-phenylenediamine), quinoxaline, 2-methylquinoxaline, tween-20, p-nitrophenyl phosphate
59 substrate, HEPES (4-(2-hydroxyethyl) piperazine-1-ethanesulfonic acid), and DCFH-DA
60 (dichloro-dihydro-fluorescein diacetate) were all purchased from Sigma-Aldrich (St. Louis,
61 MO, USA). Rabbit polyclonal antibody to carboxymethyllysine and alkaline phosphatase
62 conjugated goat polyclonal antibody to rabbit IgG were purchased from Abcam (Cambridge,
63 UK). The ARPE-19 cell line was kindly provided by Dr. Amy Lo (Eye Institute, The
64 University of Hong Kong). Low glucose DMEM (Dulbecco's Modified Eagle medium) and
65 Ham's F-12 nutrient mix, FBS fetal bovine serum, penicillin-streptomycin solution, trypsin,
66 PBS (phosphate buffered saline) were obtained from Invitrogen (Grand island, NY, USA).

67 CCK-8 (cell counting kit-8) was purchased from Dojindo China Co., Ltd. (Shanghai, China).
68 All solvents and acids used were of analytical or HPLC grade and were obtained from BDH
69 Laboratory Supplies (Poole, UK).

70 **2.2 Thermal protein glycation model**

71 2 mL of solution containing 3.2% casein and 400 mM D-glucose in 0.1 M sodium phosphate
72 buffer (pH=7 or 10) was aliquoted to each 14-mL screw cap septum vials (Thermo scientific,
73 IL, USA). Dietary polyphenols (phloretin, naringenin, epicatechin, chlorogenic acid,
74 rosmarinic acid) were added to the reaction mixture at a concentration of 10 mM. The
75 solutions were then subject to heating at 120 °C in silicone oil bath for 2 hrs. After heating,
76 the samples were immediately removed from oil bath and cooled in ice-water before further
77 analysis.

78 **2.3 Measurement of free amino group content and fructosamine**

79 The free amino group content was measured by TNBS method.¹² 125 µL properly diluted
80 sample solution was thoroughly mixed with 2 mL of 0.2125 M phosphate buffer (pH=8.2)
81 and 1 mL of 0.01% TNBS solution. The solutions were then incubated in 50 °C water bath
82 for 30 mins in dark. 2 mL of 0.1 M sodium sulfite was used as stopping solution. The
83 solutions were cooled at room temperature for 15 mins before taken absorbance at 420 nm.
84 The blank was prepared in the same manner as the samples except that Milli-Q water was
85 used in place of 0.01% TNBS. Free amino group content was expressed in terms of L-leucine.
86

87 The fructosamine was measured by spectrophotometric method.¹³ The sample solutions were
88 properly diluted and 0.2 mL of diluted solution was reacted with 0.8 mL of 300 µM NBT

89 reagent in 100 mM sodium carbonate buffer (pH=10.3) at room temperature for 15 mins. The
90 amount of fructosamine was indicated by reading absorbance at 530 nm using a
91 spectrophotometer (UV-1206, Shimadzu, Japan).

92 **2.4 Determination of glyoxal (GO) and methylglyoxal (MGO)**

93 The two typical representatives of reactive carbonyls, GO and MGO, were quantified by the
94 derivatization HPLC/DAD method.¹⁴ Derivatization was conducted by mixing 300 μ L of
95 sample with 300 μ L of methanol and 200 μ L of 10 mM OPD and afterwards incubating the
96 solutions for 3 hrs at 70 °C in an oven. After cooling to room temperature, 200 μ L of acetic
97 acid was mixed with the derivatized mixture. The samples were then filtered by 0.45 μ m
98 membrane before subject to HPLC/DAD analysis. After derivatization with OPD, GO and
99 MGO could be measured as quinoxaline (Q) and 2-methylquinoxaline (2-MQ) detectable by
100 UV absorbance at 315 nm correspondingly. The analysis was performed on a Shimadzu
101 HPLC system which is composed of a separation module (LC-20AT), an autosampler
102 (SIL-20A), a degasser (DGU-20A3), and a photodiode array detector (SPD-M20A).
103 Separation was conducted on an ACE C18 column (5 μ m, 250 \times 4.6 mm, Advanced
104 Chromatography Technologies, Aberdeen, U.K.). Elution was performed with a mixture of A:
105 0.5% (v/v) acetic acid in water and B: methanol and gradient flow was as followed: 0 min, 16%
106 B; 2 min, 16% B; 22 min, 32% B; 37 min, 80% B; 42 min, 80% B; 43 min, 16% B; 53 min,
107 16% B. Flow rate was 0.8 mL/min and injection volume equaled to 10 μ L. Quantitative
108 interpolation was facilitated by calibration curves constructed by Q and 2-MQ standards.

109 **2.5 Measurement of total fluorescent AGEs and nonfluorescent CML**

110 100 μ L of sample solution was pipetted to each well of 96-well plate and fluorescent AGEs

111 were indicated by fluorescence reading with excitation wavelength of 355/40 nm and
112 emission wavelength of 405/10 nm (Victor X4 Multilabel Plate Reader, PerkinElmer, USA).

113 ¹⁵

114

115 CML was analyzed by enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA). ¹⁵ The sample solution
116 was properly diluted in 50 mM of sodium carbonate buffer (pH=9.5-9.7) and 100 μ L of
117 diluted solution was loaded to each well of 96-well polystyrene plate. Antigen coating lasted
118 overnight at 4 °C. After coating, wells were washed by 200 μ L of washing solution (1 \times PBS
119 with 0.05% tween-20) for 3 times. Blocking was achieved by adding 300 μ L of 0.5% gelatin
120 solution and incubating for 2 hrs at 37 °C. The wells were washed 3 times by 200 μ L of
121 washing solution before adding 100 μ L of 500 times diluted rabbit polyclonal antibody to
122 CML and incubating for 1 hr at 37 °C. After washing 3 times with 200 μ L of washing
123 solution, 100 μ L of 1000 times diluted alkaline phosphatase conjugated goat polyclonal
124 antibody to rabbit IgG was loaded to each well and the plate was incubated for 1 hr at 37 °C.
125 Subsequent to a final washing step, 100 μ L p-nitrophenyl phosphate substrate solution was
126 added to each well. Incubation lasted 15 mins at room temperature in dark and absorbance
127 was read at 405 nm by a Multilabel Plate Reader (Victor X4, PerkinElmer, USA).

128 **2.6 Cell culture**

129 The ARPE-19 cells were cultured in 15 mL (75 cm² flask) low glucose DMEM/F12 medium
130 containing 10% FBS and 1% penicillin/streptomycin. The cell culture was maintained in a
131 humidified incubator at 37 °C, 5% CO₂. Cells were subcultured when they reached over 80%
132 confluence. Cell density was estimated by a haemocytometer.

133 **2.7 Assessment of cell proliferation**

134 The cell proliferation was assessed by CCK-8. Cells were seeded in wells of 96-well plates.
135 After cell attachment, the medium was removed and cells were exposed to different
136 concentrations of normal or epicatechin-fortified protein glycation solution prepared at pH=7
137 for 24, 48 and 72 hrs respectively. After treatment, the medium was disposed and cells were
138 washed for 3 times by 1× PBS. 100 μL 10% CCK-8 was aliquoted to each well and
139 incubation lasted for 1-4 hrs at 37 °C. Finally, the absorbance at 450 nm was determined by a
140 micro-plate reader (Bio-Rad, CA, USA).

141 **2.8 Measurement of intracellular reactive oxygen species (ROS)**

142 The amount of intracellular ROS was determined by the fluorescent products of DCFH-DA.
143 ¹⁶ Cells were seeded in wells of black 96-well plates. After cell attachment, the medium was
144 removed and cells were incubated in different concentrations of normal or
145 epicatechin-fortified protein glycation solution prepared at pH=7 for 24 hrs. After treatment,
146 the medium was disposed and cells were washed for 3 times by 1× PBS. 100 μL of 25 μM
147 DCFH-DA was aliquoted to each well and incubation lasted for 30 mins at 37 °C. The
148 formation of fluorescent products induced by ROS was indicated by fluorescence reading
149 with excitation wavelength of 485 nm and emission wavelength of 535 nm (Victor X4
150 Multilabel Plate Reader, PerkinElmer, USA).

151 **2.9 Statistical analysis**

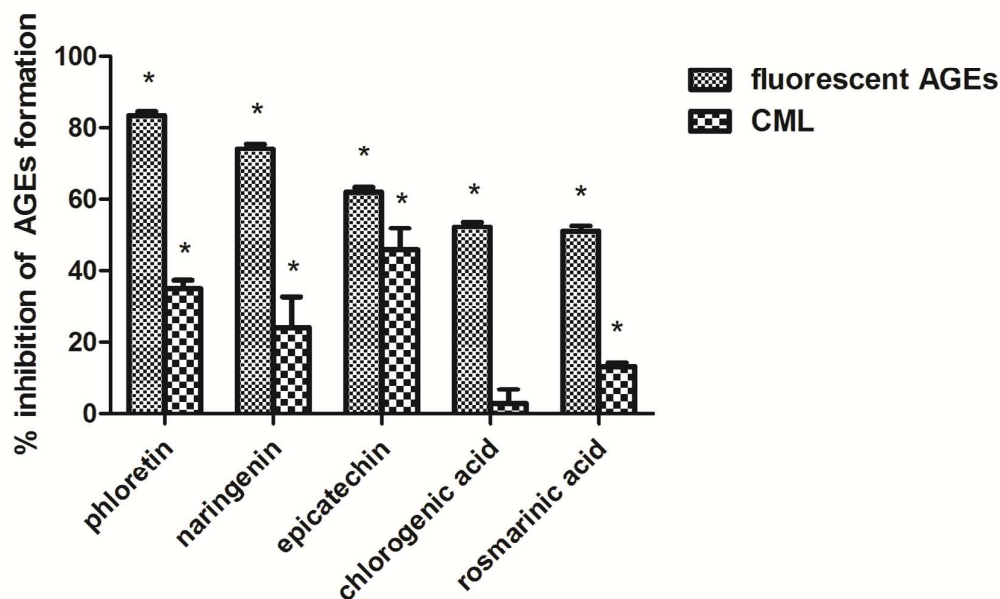
152 Statistical analyses were carried out by Graphpad Prism 5 software package (GraphPad
153 Software, Inc., La Jolla, CA, USA). Data are expressed as the mean ± standard error of
154 triplicate determinations and differences with P<0.05 were considered to be statistically

155 significant.

156 **3. Results and discussion**

157 **3.1 Impacts of polyphenols on the formation of AGEs**

158 Previous studies have indicated that a variety of plant extracts were capable of inhibiting the
159 formation of AGEs from sugar and protein co-incubated in the simulated physiological
160 conditions and the antiglycation activities were found to be positively correlated with the
161 total phenolic content, suggesting that the dietary polyphenols were likely the primary
162 antiglycation agents in the extract.^{13, 17-22} However, the results obtained in these *in vitro*
163 studies could not be relied on to deduce the antiglycation potential of dietary polyphenols in
164 thermal conditions, and there were examples that polyphenols' antiglycation activity was lost
165 possibly attributable to thermally-induced structural decomposition.¹⁰ Current study
166 attempted to fill the gap of polyphenols' thermal antiglycation properties and results
167 demonstrated that in thermal glucose-casein glycation model, all tested polyphenols exhibited
168 over 50% inhibition on the production of fluorescent AGEs at neutral pH and phloretin and
169 naringenin were the most potent inhibitors among tested categories with over 70% inhibition
170 (Fig. 1). The inhibitory activities on CML formation were generally weaker than four out of
171 five polyphenols reduced CML level by 13% to 45% at neutral pH (Fig. 1). The order of
172 phenolics' antiglycation activity followed the same pattern at alkaline pH but the inhibition
173 rate was generally lower (data not shown).



174

175 **Fig. 1** Inhibitory effects of polyphenols on the formation of total fluorescent AGEs and CML
 176 in the thermal casein glycation model at pH=7. Bars with an asterisk indicate significant
 177 difference from control ($P < 0.05$).

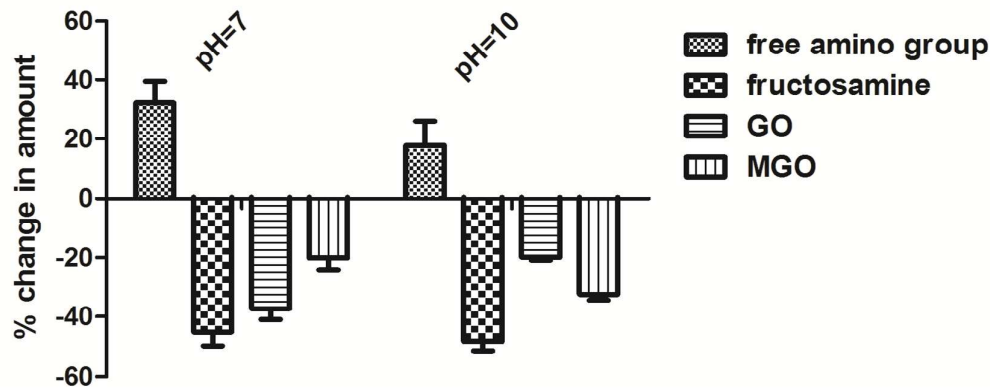
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179 Free radical scavenging is one of the most recognizable antiglycation mechanisms. In our
 180 study, only weak to moderate correlation could be established between the free radical
 181 scavenging capacity of polyphenols and their inhibitory activity of AGEs formation,
 182 suggesting that the antiglycation activity of tested polyphenols under thermal treatment may
 183 depend on factors other than antioxidative capacity, such as the solubility and thermal
 184 stability of phenolics in the model system.¹⁰ Compared with physiological conditions,
 185 polyphenols were subject to much more severe structural degradation under thermal
 186 conditions and alkaline pH may be associated with further decrease in thermal stability.
 187 Taking epicatechin as an example, we have previously reported that heating the polyphenol
 188 alone at 120 °C for 2 hrs led to a great reduction in its antioxidant capacity, probably due to

189 loss of the particular structure carrying antioxidant capacity.²³ For phloretin and naringenin,
190 decrease in the antioxidant capacity could also be induced by thermal reaction between
191 polyphenols and Maillard reaction intermediates (e.g. sugar fragments).²³ Moreover, the
192 temperature rise may introduce alterations in the reactivity of polyphenols towards protein
193 glycation intermediates.²⁴

194 **3.2 Impacts of polyphenols on the formation of glycation intermediates**

195 The α -dicarbonyl compounds are important protein glycation intermediates. They are
196 generated via sugar autoxidation or thermal degradation of Schiff base or Amadori
197 rearrangement products. GO and MGO are two representative reactive carbonyls leading to
198 formation of AGEs.^{9, 14} The levels of GO and MGO were quantified as 11.7 and 9.3 $\mu\text{g/mL}$
199 at pH=7 while the values were 19.2 and 23.5 $\mu\text{g/mL}$ at pH=10. The production of
200 α -dicarbonyls was promoted at alkaline pH, which condition may favor the oxidation of
201 Amadori products.²⁵ Previously published reports suggested that phloretin and epicatechin
202 were capable of trapping these two reactive carbonyls under simulated physiological
203 conditions.^{26, 27} However, the results collected in this study suggest that phloretin and
204 epicatechin could not lower the content of MGO or GO in this thermal model, possibly
205 because their active binding sites for the carbonyls were lost by thermal degradation or
206 interaction with other reaction fragments.^{23, 24} Chlorogenic acid was the only phenolic
207 compound that can reduce both GO and MGO levels in our reaction model system (Fig. 2).



208

209 **Fig. 2** The impacts of chlorogenic acid on the amounts of free amino group, fructosamine,
 210 GO and MGO in the thermal casein glycation model.

211

212 In order to gain more information on the mechanism of chlorogenic acid's inhibitory activity

213 against α -dicarbonyls formation, the amount of free amino group and early-stage

214 fructosamine were quantified. Gradual decrease in the free amino group content is a

215 noticeable phenomenon as Maillard reaction proceeds,^{12, 28} which reflects covalent

216 attachment of sugar and the so-called "glycation" process. Phloretin and epicatechin did not

217 significantly influence the free amino group content of the protein glycation solution whilst

218 chlorogenic acid-fortified solution contained a significantly higher quantity of free amino

219 group (Fig. 2). Chlorogenic acid addition was further found to reduce the amount of

220 early-stage fructosamine (Fig. 2). Reduction in the degree of blocking of free amino groups

221 suggests a lower level of Schiff base formation from glucose incorporation onto casein, and

222 therefore decrease in the quantity of the rearrangement product of Schiff base – fructoamine.

223 On the basis of the above findings, the capability of reducing the amount of Schiff base and

224 fructosamine, which are precursors of α -dicarbonyls, may partially explain chlorogenic acid's

225 inhibition of α -dicarbonyls formation. The polyphenols' role in the early stage of protein

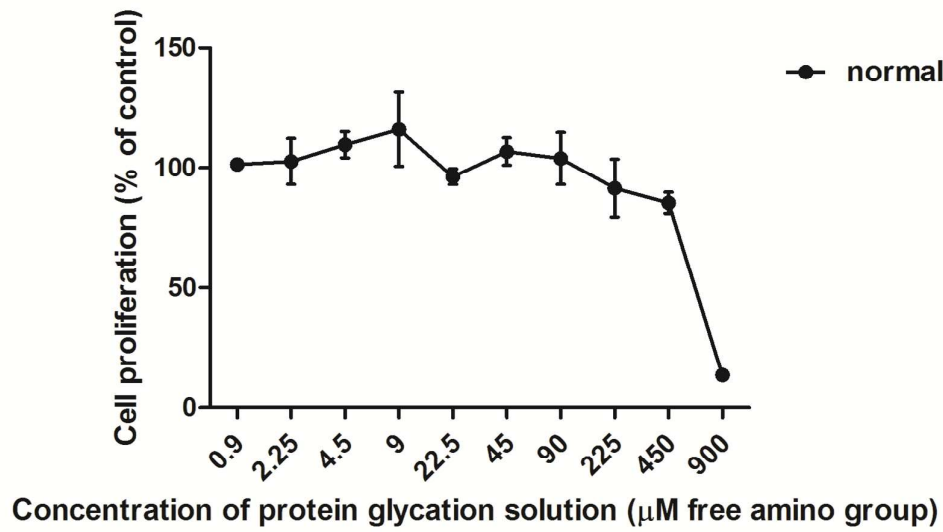
226 glycation may be further investigated in the context of phospholipids glycation, which is also
227 an important process in foods and *in vivo*.^{29, 30}

228 **3.3 The protection of epicatechin fortification against cell damage induced by glycation** 229 **products**

230 Based on previous discussions, epicatechin fortification during thermal casein glycation
231 process led to significantly reduced amount of both fluorescent AGEs and CML in the final
232 protein glycation solution. It remained to be seen whether epicatechin fortification could
233 alleviate the oxidative damage of the fortified glycation products in cells accordingly.
234 ARPE-19 cells were selected for investigation because early studies have demonstrated that
235 exogenous AGEs were correlated with pathological development of diabetic retinopathy.¹⁶
236 The content of free amino group expressed in term of μM of L-leucine was used in Fig. 3 and
237 the following discussions to indicate the concentration of protein glycation solution that cells
238 were exposed to. The free amino group content in original normal protein glycation solution
239 prepared at pH=7 was around 9 mM and as mentioned above, epicatechin fortification had no
240 effect on the free amino group content. In agreement to early observation,³¹ exposure to
241 normal protein glycation solution for 24 hrs showed no impact on the proliferation of
242 ARPE-19 cells when the content of free amino group was not higher than 225 μM (Fig. 3A).
243 There's no significant difference on the proliferative rates of cells treated by normal or
244 epicatechin-fortified protein glycation solution. The cytotoxicity of protein glycation solution
245 at higher concentrations (free amino group content equaled 450 or 900 μM), however, was
246 significantly lowered by epicatechin fortification, as justified by higher cell viability (Fig.3B).
247 The protective effect of epicatechin fortification against the cytotoxicity induced by high

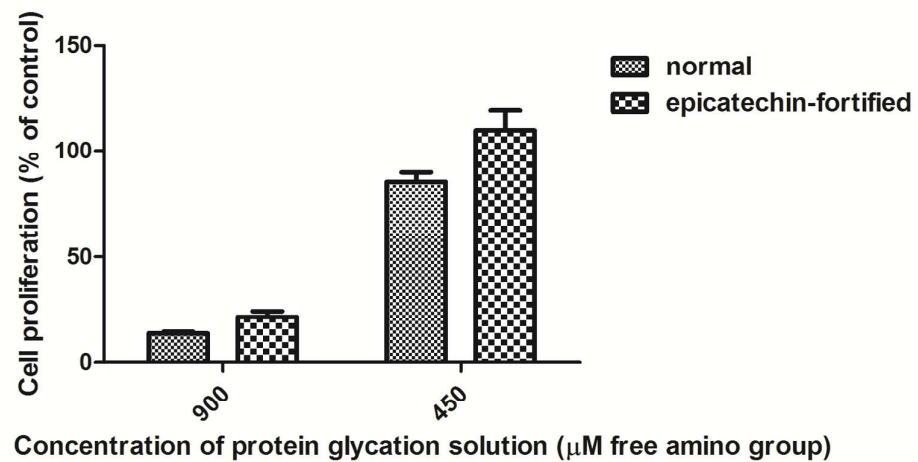
248 concentrations of protein glycation solution was consistently observed when the exposure
249 time was elongated to 48 and 72 hrs (data not shown).

250 (A)



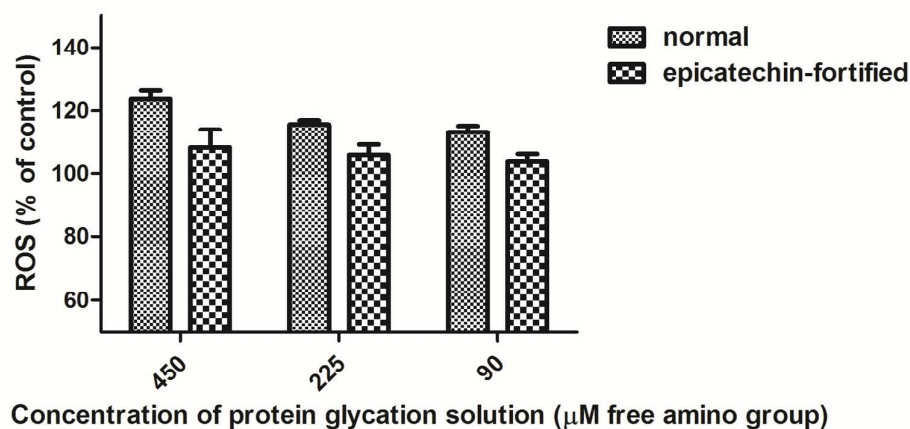
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252 (B)



253

254 (C)



255

256 **Fig. 3** (A) Proliferation of ARPE-19 cells after 24 hrs exposure to normal protein glycation

257 solution; (B) Cell viability comparison after 24 hrs exposure to either normal or

258 epicatechin-fortified protein glycation solution; (C) Intracellular ROS comparison after

259 24 hrs exposure to either normal or epicatechin-fortified protein glycation solution. The

260 concentration of solution was expressed in term of free amino group content.

261

262 Cultured in the protein glycation solution diluted in the medium, ARPE-19 cells were

263 exposed to AGEs, which are among recognizable factors promoting cell apoptosis via

264 inducing oxidative stress and inflammation.³² As shown in Fig. 3C, there were about 13-20%

265 increases in the intracellular ROS after cell exposure to normal protein glycation solution

266 (free amino group content equaled 90 to 450 µM) for 24 hrs whereas exposure to

267 epicatechin-fortified protein glycation solution of same concentrations resulted in around 10%

268 less in oxidative stress. Hence, it's suggested that epicatechin fortification during thermal

269 casein glycation process reduced the amount of AGEs in the fortified solution and therefore

270 alleviated the AGEs-mediated oxidative damage to cells. Remaining epicatechin and its

271 thermal reaction products possessing antioxidative capacity in the fortified protein glycation

272 solution may also clear the free radicals, increase cell's antioxidant ability and therefore
273 promote the cell viability.

274 **4. Conclusions**

275 In this paper, the antiglycation activity of five selected dietary polyphenols in thermal protein
276 glycation process was discussed. Further to AGEs-inhibitory potential in simulated
277 physiological conditions, polyphenols were found to be capable of reducing AGEs formation
278 under thermal conditions. The thermal stability and transformation of polyphenols is likely an
279 important factor affecting their antioxidant activity and inhibitory efficacy of reactive
280 carbonyl species formation. Therefore, the antiglycation potential of polyphenols during
281 thermal processing may quite differ from that shown in physiological conditions. Finally,
282 polyphenol fortification during thermal protein glycation process could be a promising way to
283 alleviate the toxicity and oxidative stress brought by AGEs to ARPE-19 cells.

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