Theoretical insight into the antioxidant properties of melatonin and derivatives†

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Density functional theory calculations on melatonin, metabolites and synthetic derivatives thereof, and a range of other biological antioxidant molecules are presented, with a view to understanding the antioxidant ability of these molecules. After testing of the necessary calculations, we show that melatonin lies close to vitamin E on a donor–acceptor map, indicating that it should be an excellent electron donor but a poor acceptor. The neutral radical metabolite of melatonin is predicted to be an even better donor, whereas other metabolites and synthetic derivatives should retain antioxidant ability but are less powerful than the parent. QSAR models of antioxidant activity, measured in two different assays, are presented. We show that octanol–water partition coefficient is an excellent predictor of activity in lipophilic media, while properties related to electron donor/acceptor power give good fits against activity in aqueous media.

Introduction

Melatonin (N-acetyl-5-methoxytryptamine) is a naturally occurring molecule, biosynthesized from the precursor amino acid tryptophan, primarily by the pineal gland of vertebrates.1 Melatonin has been extensively reported as a potent antioxidant, both in vitro2,3 and in vivo.4–6 Much of its effectiveness in vivo may be attributed to the cascade of melatonin antioxidant metabolites produced.6,7 Unlike most small-molecule biological antioxidants such as vitamin C (ascorbic acid), α-tocopherol (vitamin E), lipoic acid etc., melatonin does not redox-cycle. It undergoes molecular rearrangement, effectively removing the free electron from the system – a so-called suicidal antioxidant (Fig. 1). Each of these products of rearrangement is also a potent antioxidant in its own right.2,8,9 Furthermore, most of these processes involve more than one reactive oxygen species (ROS) per step, so that one melatonin molecule could scavenge up to 10 radical species before the final metabolite is eliminated form the body.10 Additionally, the relative position of melatonin and its metabolites in the antioxidant “pecking order” (electrochemical potential) may contribute greatly to its utility in biological systems.11

Melatonin is finding great utility in preventing diseases related to oxidative damage including cancer12 and neurodegenerative diseases13,14 as well as its well known role in treatment for reducing insomnia, jet lag, migraine, headache, etc.15,16 It is being widely investigated for a large number of other diseases in a large number of clinical trials.17 In addition, consumption of tropical fruits containing melatonin has been shown to reduce antioxidant levels in humans.5,18

The antioxidant radical scavenging properties of melatonin and its metabolites cyclic-3-hydroxymelatonin (cyclic-3OHM),8 N(1)-acetyl-N(2)-formyl-5-methoxykynuramine (AMK), N(1)-acetyl-5-methoxykynuramine (AMK)7 and 6-hydroxymelatonin (6-OHmel)19 occurs mainly via the one electron transfer process.8,20,21 The first ionization potential (IP) and the electron affinity (EA) are properties of a system that allow measurement of its propensity to donate or accept one electron. The best antioxidants present low IP values, because the lower the IP, the easier the electron abstraction, and vice versa for EA and electron acceptance (antioxidant).

Gazquez et al.21 have presented an elegant model to explain relative scavenging activity and antioxidant power of compounds using these two properties. Quantum chemical density functional theory (DFT) calculations can be used to obtain accurate ionization potentials, electron affinities, electron donating, and electroaccepting power indexes (with respect to internal standards, such as fluorine and sodium atoms). These values can then be used to construct a donor acceptor map (DAM), indicating whether molecules are good electron donors or acceptors. The DAM is a powerful representation of these key properties, helping to reveal the antiradical capacity of any substance and allowing qualitative comparison between substances, alongside quantitative measures obtained from experiment or theory. Previous DAM studies have included linear polyene-conjugated molecules,23 carotenoids,24 a large series of carotenoids,25 carotenoids, melatonin and vitamins,26 and psittacofulvins and anthocyanins.27

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Vitamin E or α-tocopherol has been described the “last line of defense” in a multicomponent endogenous antioxidant system. It appears that under conditions of stress, depletion of cellular ascorbic acid occurs first, followed by glutathione, then α-tocopherol, resulting in initiation of lipid peroxidation. When glutathione is depleted, ascorbic acid plays a vital role in maintaining cellular α-tocopherol levels and survival of the cell. One might expect that melatonin should be depleted after α-tocopherol, particularly in membranes, as it is higher in the electrochemical series at 700 mV compared to 500 mV for α-tocopherol. Melatonin may therefore truly be the last line of defense against oxidative damage.

Several melatonin derivatives that were substituted on the indole nitrogen (Fig. 2) have been previously reported for in vitro antioxidant effects and anti-inflammatory activities. Their synthesis and characterization is described in this ref. The aim of this study was to investigate the antioxidant radical scavenging properties of melatonin and its metabolites cyclic-3OHM, AFMK, AMK and 6-hydroxymelatonin, and several N-indole substituted derivatives via the one electron transfer process, using a donor–acceptor map. Other classical antioxidants and vitamins are modeled for comparison. QSAR relationships of some N-indole substituted derivatives between in vitro antioxidant properties experimentally measured by lipid peroxidation of rat brain homogenate using thio-barbituric acid reacting substances (TBARS IC50) and Oxygen Radical Absorbance Capacity Assay (ORAC) data, and a number of derived electronic properties e.g. HOMO/LUMO energies, donor and acceptor power (Rd, Ra), hardness, electronegativity and log P were investigated. The ORAC assay is based on the scavenging of peroxyl radicals generated by 2,2′-azobis (2-methylpropionamidine) dihydrochloride (AAPH) in aqueous media, which prevent the degradation of the fluorescein probe and, consequently, prevent the loss of fluorescence of the probe. The antioxidant activity was calculated from the integrated area under the fluorescence curve (AUC) for each antioxidant.

Methods

B3LYP/DFT as implemented in Gaussian09-RevC.01 software was used for all IP and EA calculations with complete optimizations, without symmetry constraints. Geometries were first minimized in Molecular Operating Environment MOE. Calculations were performed on the ARCCA/Raven Supercomputer at Cardiff University. Both vertical IE and EA, where energies for the cation and anion were computed at the optimized geometry of the ground state (single point), and relaxed (adiabatic) IE and EA for optimized cation and anion geometries were calculated. Harmonic frequency analysis was used to verify optimized minima using Molden.

To determine the accuracy of DFT for predicting IP/EA of indoleamines, calculations in gas phase using different basis sets...
were compared to previously reported photoelectron spectroscopy measurements. IP and bond-dissociation energies for many antioxidant systems do not follow the same trends in gas and solution phases, such that major differences with respect to vacuum are found as when water computations are performed. On the basis of the computed BDE and IP values, to more realistically model antioxidant activity in vivo, calculations were therefore performed using the polarizable continuum model (PCM water) i.e. placing the solute in a cavity within the solvent reaction field.

The validity of using B3LYP for calculating EA has been raised, due to most DFT functionals (including B3LYP) being incapable of binding the whole excess electron. This may not be revealed when using standard basis sets, even with multiple diffuse functions, since they artificially constrain the electron density to remain near the nuclei. The error due to this constraint depends on the magnitude of the EA, which could render trends in EA unreliable, especially for low EAs. Thus a range-separated DFT method, CAM-B3LYP, was used to investigate the problem of fractional EA. A positive energy for the HOMO of an anion species is an easy diagnostic for the fractional EA problem.

The melatonin molecule contains three freely rotatable bonds in its imidazole side chain. To investigate the effect of conformation, MOE was used to select a range of typical conformers via stochastic search of rotatable bonds, using the MMFF94 forcefield. 10,000 conformers were generated then sorted into clusters based on dihedral angles of the freely rotatable bonds. Vertical IP and EA of the lowest energy conformers from each cluster were then calculated, following geometry optimization of the neutral molecule. No significant changes in geometry on DFT optimization were noted, indicating that conformers remained in their local energy minima.

Donor–acceptor maps were calculated following the method of Martinez et al., using the same experimental values of IE and EA for sodium of 5.140 and 0.540 eV and for fluorine of 17.540 and 3.400 eV respectively, taken from the literature. This set reference points on the map of antioxidant systems. This may not gate the problem of fractional EA. A positive energy for the HOMO of an anion species is an easy diagnostic for the fractional EA problem.

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Results and discussion

DFT predictions of gas phase IP and EA for different basis sets (Fig. 3) compared favorably with the previously reported.
Effects of conformation of melatonin on calculated IP and EA in PCM (water) are shown in Table 2. Values of IP and EA calculated in PCM are quite different from those in gas phase due to the effects of solvent polarization. However, conformation changes resulted in less than 1.3% difference in IP and 8.4% difference in EA values in the PCM model. This is not unsurprising, as removal or addition of an electron to the neutral molecule would be expected to affect the extensively delocalized rigid indole moiety only, such that the conformation of the imidazole side chain would have little impact on these processes. Therefore, subsequent DFT calculations reported below use the global energy minimum conformation found from the stochastic search.

Donor acceptor map

Electron acceptance ($R_a$) and electron donation ($R_d$) indexes were calculated from IP and EA, using fluorine and sodium as references as previously described in the methods section. The donor acceptor for melatonin, its metabolites and some classical antioxidants is shown in Fig. 4.

The donor/acceptor maps shows melatonin to be a very good electron donor, along with its metabolites 6-hydroxymelatonin and cyclic-3-hydroxymelatonin and the melatoninyl neutral radical, and several classical antioxidants such as vitamin E ($\alpha$-tocopherol), epigallocatechin gallate (ECGC), resveratrol, xanthurenic acid and quercetin (a typical flavenoid). Other melatonin metabolites (AFMK, AMK) and melatonin derivatives showed weaker electron donor strength, similar to other classical antioxidants such as vitamin A, vitamin C, beta-carotene and $\alpha$-lipoic acid. The 4-nitro derivative of melatonin is not shown on the DAM and appears off the top right quadrant at $R_a = 4.35$ and $R_d = 5.62$, being a much poorer electron donor and better electron acceptor than melatonin, due to its strongly withdrawing nitro group. Interestingly, the melatoninyl neutral radical that results from a 1-electron 1-proton donation from melatonin is an even more powerful electron donor than melatonin itself.

These results are supported by a large number of experimental observations where melatonin acts as a direct scavenger of free radicals with the ability to detoxify both reactive oxygen and reactive nitrogen species, and indirectly by

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MOE conformer</th>
<th>Vertical IP/eV</th>
<th>Vertical EA/eV</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20.573446</td>
<td>5.544</td>
<td>-0.886</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.573452</td>
<td>5.603</td>
<td>-0.739</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21.250622</td>
<td>5.538</td>
<td>-0.879</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21.250629</td>
<td>5.338</td>
<td>-0.879</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21.694929</td>
<td>5.429</td>
<td>-0.947</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21.694931</td>
<td>5.429</td>
<td>-0.947</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21.724112</td>
<td>5.443</td>
<td>-0.952</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>5.5036</td>
<td>-0.8898</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S.D.</td>
<td>0.0694</td>
<td>0.0745</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2** Vertical IP and EA of selected conformers of melatonin at B3LYP/6-31+G* PCM (water)
increasing the activity of the antioxidative defense systems. Researchers have reported that the peroxyl radical scavenger ability of melatonin is better than of α-tocopherol, vitamin C and reduced glutathione (GSH), and more potent than xanthurenic acid, resveratrol, EGCG, vitamin C and α-lipoic acid in inhibiting •OH-induced oxidative DNA damage generated by oxygen-derived free radicals from Fenton reaction.

Melatonin has been demonstrated to reduce the formation of 8-hydroxy-2′-deoxyguanosine, a product of damaged DNA repair, 60 to 70 times more effectively than ascorbate or α-tocopherol.

It should be noted that most other dietary antioxidants lie outside the scale of this donor–acceptor map, towards the top right quadrant, including carotenoids, psittacofulvins and anthocyanins, flavonoids and polyphenols. These tend to be electron acceptors rather than electron donors i.e. antireductants.

### Lipophilicity of antioxidant species

Log P values for melatonin and its metabolites and some classical antioxidants were calculated and compared to literature values where available (Table 3). The compounds may be classified into roughly three groups – highly lipophilic compounds (log P > 6) like α-tocopherol, vitamin A and beta-carotene that mainly protect lipid membranes; vitamin C that is very hydrophilic (log P < –3) and mainly protects aqueous cellular and tissue environments; and the “melatonin type” com-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Antioxidant</th>
<th>ACD</th>
<th>Marvin weighted</th>
<th>MolKa</th>
<th>Literature values</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beta-carotene (vitamin E)</td>
<td>15.51 ± 0.43</td>
<td>11.12</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>14.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>α-Tocopherol</td>
<td>10.66 ± 0.28</td>
<td>8.94</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>10.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vitamin A (retinol)</td>
<td>6.84 ± 0.33</td>
<td>6.07</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>4.69–6.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alpha-lipoic acid</td>
<td>2.16 ± 0.29</td>
<td>2.11</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melatonin</td>
<td>0.96 ± 0.44</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melatoninyl neutral radical</td>
<td>0.02 ± 0.83</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AFMK</td>
<td>0.82 ± 0.52</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AMK</td>
<td>0.65 ± 0.49</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tryptophan</td>
<td>0.87 ± 0.31</td>
<td>1.51</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>1.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-Naphthoyl-melatonin</td>
<td>2.73 ± 0.46</td>
<td>3.31</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-Benzoyl-melatonin</td>
<td>1.5 ± 0.46</td>
<td>2.32</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cyclic-3OHmel</td>
<td>−0.64 ± 0.89</td>
<td>−0.21</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acetyl-melatonin</td>
<td>1.00 ± 0.87</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vitamin C</td>
<td>−3.26 ± 0.56</td>
<td>−1.98</td>
<td>−3.4</td>
<td>−1.85</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 3** Calculated and experimental log P values

**Fig. 4** Donor–acceptor map of melatonin and its metabolites, and other classical antioxidants.
pounds that may be considered “amphiphilic” (log P between −1 and 2). This latter group should be active antioxidants in all cellular (cytosol and membrane) and tissues environments, and may be important in regenerating some of the other redox-cycling antioxidants like α-tocopherol, and mediating antioxidant reactions at aqueous-lipid membrane interfaces.\textsuperscript{52} Melatonin has been shown to have strong synergistic effects with α-tocopherol and vitamin C.\textsuperscript{49,53}

TBARS pIC\textsubscript{50} results were correlated with a number of derived electronic properties e.g. HOMO/LUMO energies, donor and acceptor power (\(R_d, R_a\)), hardness, electronegativity and log P, and results are shown in Table 4. Only lipophilicity (log P) correlated well, correlation with other molecular properties (donor/acceptor power, electronegativity and LUMO was poorer, with low or no correlation with hardness, HOMO and HOMO/LUMO energy difference. This may be because of the nature of the brain homogenate lipid peroxidation assay, where solubility of the antioxidant in the lipid domain is the dominant factor contributing to radical scavenging. The hydrophobicity of the antioxidant may also be an important criterion for passive transport into cells across the hydrophobic phospholipid bilayer of the cellular membranes. Furthermore, the single electron transfer mechanism for direct radical scavenging of melatonin, although the most favourable mechanism in aqueous solution, is not favourable in aprotic solvents e.g. benzene, where hydrogen atom transfer/proton coupled electron transfer or radical adduct formation are favoured.\textsuperscript{29}

By contrast, for the ORAC assay, which was performed in aqueous medium, all molecular parameters correlated highly with the ORAC AUC except for log P (Table 4), as has been observed previously with indoleamines where antioxidant potency was measured for lipid peroxidation using a conjugated dienes assay\textsuperscript{60} and in phenolic compounds.\textsuperscript{61}

Some QSAR correlation plots are shown in Fig. 5, and all correlation plots are shown in the ESI.\textsuperscript{†}

![QSAR correlation plots](image)

**Fig. 5** QSAR correlation plots of some calculated molecular parameters and TBARS or ORAC antioxidant activity.
Conclusions

The electron donor power of melatonin and its metabolites demonstrated in this theoretical study support the experimental evidence that melatonin is a powerful biological antioxidant and radical scavenger. Our computational studies, presented above, shed light on this important biological property. We have shown that the B3LYP DFT method, along with the 6-31+G(d) basis set, satisfactorily reproduces experimental gas phase ionization potential and electron affinity, while larger basis sets do not improve performance. Importantly, calculated properties are not dependent on molecular conformation, such that data derived from a single conformation should be sufficient to capture all relevant aspects of this molecule.

This method has therefore been used to map out the donor–acceptor power of melatonin, its metabolites, some synthetic derivatives and a range of classical antioxidants. This approach clearly shows that melatonin lies in the range of good electron donors and bad electron acceptors, with similar power to vitamin E. Interestingly, the first neutral, radical metabolite of melatonin is an even better donor than the parent molecule, which will have important implications for the overall biology of the cascade process by which melatonin mops up ROS. Other metabolites, as well as most synthetic derivatives, remain in the range where substantial antioxidant ability should be expected, but a 4-nitro derivative lies well outside this region.

QSAR investigation indicates the ability of melatonin derivatives to protect against lipid peroxidation of brain homogenate strongly correlated with their lipophilicity (log \(P\)) but only weakly to other molecular properties related to donor/acceptor ability (donor/acceptor power, electronegativity, hardness, HOMO, LUMO, HOMO-LUMO energies). By contrast, these molecular parameters correlate strongly with ORAC antioxidant power measured in aqueous phase.

The range of lipophilicity of melatonin and its metabolites (log \(P\) between \(-1\) and \(2\)) may explain the large number of antioxidant arenas where melatonin seems to play a role in protecting against ROS damage; they lie between the traditional membrane protectors (\(\alpha\)-tocopherol, vitamin A and carotenoids) and hydrophilic compounds (vitamin C, lipoic-acid) and aqueous antioxidant enzymes.

Acknowledgements

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References
