

# Antioxidant Enzymes and Human Diseases

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**Objectives:** To describe the importance of the antioxidant enzymes superoxide dismutase, glutathione peroxidase, and catalase working together in human cells against toxic reactive oxygen species, their relationship with several pathophysiological processes and their possible therapeutic implications.

**Conclusions:** Reactive oxygen species (ROS) are involved in the cell growth, differentiation, progression, and death. Low concentrations of ROS may be beneficial or even indispensable in processes such as intracellular signaling and defense against micro-organisms. Nevertheless, higher amounts of ROS play a role in the aging process as well as in a number of human disease states, including cancer, ischemia, and failures in immunity and endocrine functions. As a safeguard against the accumulation of ROS, several non-enzymatic and enzymatic antioxidant activities exist. Therefore, when oxidative stress arises as a consequence of a pathologic event, a defense system promotes the regulation and expression of these enzymes. Copyright © 1999 The Canadian Society of Clinical Chemists

**KEY WORDS:** antioxidants; catalase; glutathione peroxidase; human diseases; oxidative damage; oxidative stress; reactive oxygen species; superoxide dismutase; therapy.

## Introduction

Aerobic organisms possess antioxidant defense systems that deal with reactive oxygen species (ROS) produced as a consequence of aerobic respiration and substrate oxidation (Figure 1). Small amounts of ROS, including hydroxyl radicals ( $\cdot\text{OH}$ ), superoxide anions ( $\text{O}_2^{\cdot-}$ ) and hydrogen peroxide ( $\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$ ), are constantly generated in aerobic organisms in response to both external and internal stimuli (1–3). Low levels of ROS are indispensable in many biochemical processes, including intracellular messaging in the cell differentiation and cell progression or the arrest of growth, apoptosis (4), immunity (5), and defense against micro-organisms (6,7). In contrast, high doses and/or inadequate removal of ROS result in oxidative stress, which

may cause severe metabolic malfunctions and damage to biological macromolecules (8–10).

The naturally occurring antioxidants in low-density lipoproteins (LDLs) and plasma protect cells from oxidation (11–14). The prevention of lipid peroxidation is an essential process in aerobic organisms, as lipid peroxidation products can cause DNA damage and directly inhibit proteins such as  $\text{Na}^+/\text{K}^+$  ATPases and glutamate transporters (1,11, 12,14). Increased lipid peroxidation and decreased antioxidant protection generate epoxides that may spontaneously react with nucleophilic centers in the cell and thereby covalently bind to DNA, RNA, and protein (5,15). Such a reaction may lead to cytotoxicity, allergy, mutagenicity, and/or carcinogenicity, depending on the properties of the epoxide in question (16). In addition, oxidative events may play an important role in the mechanism of action of ether lipids, and ability to oxidize may contribute to cellular drug sensitivity (17).

Lipid peroxidation can be evaluated by the thiobarbituric acid reactive substances method (TBARS). This method evaluates the oxidative stress assayed for malondialdehyde, the last product of lipid breakdown caused by oxidative stress (18–21).

The enzymatic and non-enzymatic antioxidant defenses include superoxide dismutase (SOD), glutathione peroxidase (GPX), catalase (CAT), ascorbic acid (vitamin C),  $\alpha$ -tocopherol (vitamin E), glutathione (GSH),  $\beta$ -carotene, and vitamin A, which can be evaluated using easy photometric assays (22–26). There is a balance between both the activities and the intracellular levels of these antioxidants that are essential for the survival of organisms and their health (27–33).

## Antioxidant enzymes: properties and biological implications

### SUPEROXIDE DISMUTASE

Superoxide dismutase (EC 1.15.1.1) is the antioxidant enzyme that catalyses the dismutation of the highly reactive superoxide anion to  $\text{O}_2$  and to the

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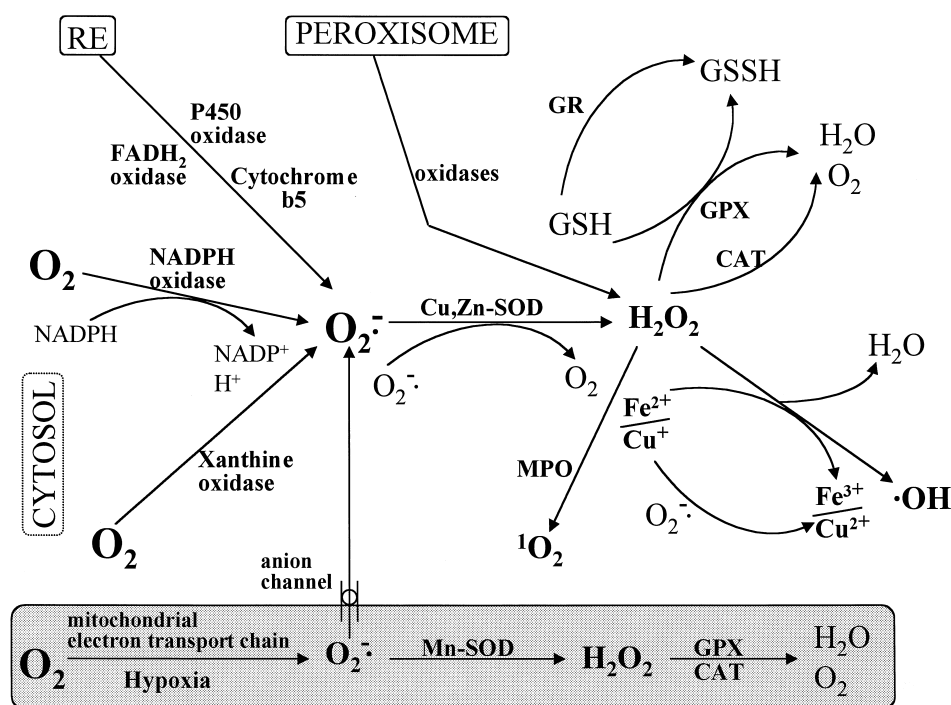
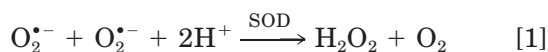


Figure 1 — Generation of reactive oxygen species and the defense mechanisms against damage by active oxygen. During hypoxia superoxide generated may be degraded into the mitochondria by Mn-SOD or, if it reaches the cytosol, by Cu, Zn-SOD. In the endoplasmic reticulum, NADPH-cytochrome P450 reductase can leak electrons onto  $O_2$  generating  $O_2^{\bullet-}$ .  $FADH_2$  and cytochrome  $b_5$  can also contribute to this system. Within peroxisomes, there are enzymes localized that produce  $H_2O_2$  without intermediation of  $O_2^{\bullet-}$ . Contrarily to  $O_2^{\bullet-}$ ,  $H_2O_2$  is able to cross cell membranes and within the cells it can react with  $Fe^{2+}$  or  $Cu^+$  to form hydroxyl radicals via Fenton reaction. GR = glutathione reductase; MPO = myeloperoxidase; RE = endoplasmic reticulum;  $^1O_2$ : singlet oxygen.

less reactive species  $H_2O_2$ . Peroxide can be destroyed by CAT or GPX reactions (34–36).



In humans, there are three forms of SOD: cytosolic Cu/Zn-SOD, mitochondrial Mn-SOD, and extracellular SOD (EC-SOD) (37,38). SOD destroys  $O_2^{\bullet-}$  by successive oxidation and reduction of the transition metal ion at the active site in a Ping Pong type mechanism with remarkably high reaction rates (39). All types of SOD bind single charged anions such as azide and fluoride, but distinct differences have been noted in the susceptibilities of Fe-, Mn- or Cu/Zn-SODs. Cu/Zn-SOD is competitively inhibited by  $N_3^-$ ,  $CN^-$  (40), and by  $F^-$  (41).

Mn-SOD is a homotetramer (96 kDa) containing one manganese atom per subunit that cycles from Mn (III) to Mn (II) and back to Mn (III) during the two step dismutation of superoxide (42). The respiratory chain in mitochondria is a major source of oxygen radicals. Mn-SOD has been shown to be greatly induced and depressed by cytokines, but is only moderately influenced by oxidants (43). Inactivation of recombinant human mitochondrial Mn-SOD by peroxyxynitrite is caused by nitration of a specific tyrosine residue (42,44).

The biological importance of Mn-SOD is demonstrated among others by the following observations: (a) inactivation of Mn-SOD genes in *Escherichia coli* increases mutation frequency when grown under aerobic conditions (45); (b) elimination of the gene in *Saccharomyces cerevisiae* increases its sensitivity to oxygen (46); (c) lack of expression in Mn-SOD knockout mice results in dilated cardiomyopathy and neonatal lethality (47); (d) tumor necrosis factor (TNF) selectively induces Mn-SOD, but not Cu/Zn-SOD, CAT or GPX mRNA in various mouse tissues and cultured cells (48,49); (e) transfection of Mn-SOD cDNA into cultured cells rendered the cells resistant to paraquat, TNF and Adriamycin-induced cytotoxicity, and radiation induced-neoplastic transformation (50); 6) expression of human Mn-SOD genes in transgenic mice protects against oxygen-induced pulmonary injury and Adriamycin-induced cardiac toxicity (51).

Cu/Zn-SOD (SOD-1) is another type of enzymes that has been conserved throughout evolution. These enzymes have two identical subunits of about 32 kDa, although a monomeric structure can be found in a high protein concentration from *E. coli* (52). Each subunit contains a metal cluster, the active site, constituted by a copper and a zinc atom bridged by a histamine residue (53–55).

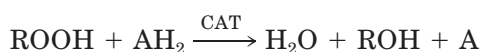
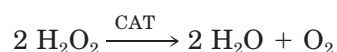
Cu/Zn-SOD is believed to play a major role in the

first line of antioxidant defense. Calves that were fed milk supplemented with 25 ppm Cu and 100 ppm Zn showed a stronger immune response and a higher SOD activity (56). Other recent reports involving SOD knock-outs have revealed that Mn-SOD is essential for life whereas Cu/Zn-SOD is not. Cu/Zn-SOD knock-out mice appear normal and exhibit differences only after traumatic injury, whereas Mn-SOD knockouts do not survive past 3 weeks of age (47). Among various human tissues Mn-SOD contents were roughly one-half as large as the Cu/Zn-SOD contents (57).

Extracellular superoxide dismutase (EC-SOD) is a secretory, tetrameric, copper and zinc containing glycoprotein; with a high affinity for certain glycosaminoglycans such as heparin and heparan sulfate. EC-SOD was found in the interstitial spaces of tissues and also in extracellular fluids, accounting for the majority of the SOD activity in plasma, lymph, and synovial fluid (37,57). EC-SOD is not induced by its substrate or by other oxidants and its regulation in mammalian tissues primarily occurs in a manner coordinated by cytokines, rather than as a response of individual cells to oxidants (58).

#### CATALASE

Catalase (EC 1.11.1.6) is a tetrameric enzyme consisting of four identical tetrahedrally arranged subunits of 60 kDa that contains a single ferriprotoporphyrin group per subunit, and has a molecular mass of about 240 kDa (59). CAT reacts very efficiently with  $H_2O_2$  to form water and molecular oxygen; and with H donors (methanol, ethanol, formic acid, or phenols) with peroxidase activity:

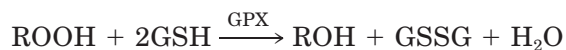


In animals, hydrogen peroxide is detoxified by CAT and by GPX. Catalase protects cells from hydrogen peroxide generated within them. Even though CAT is not essential for some cell types under normal conditions, it plays an important role in the acquisition of tolerance to oxidative stress in the adaptive response of cells. Survival of rats exposed to 100% oxygen was increased when liposomes containing SOD and CAT were injected intravenously before and during the exposure (60). The increased sensitivity of transfected CAT-enriched cells to some drugs and oxidants is attributed to the property of CAT in cells to prevent the drug-induced consumption of  $O_2$  either for destroying  $H_2O_2$  to oxygen or for direct interaction with the drug (61).

#### GLUTATHIONE PEROXIDASE

The selenium-containing peroxidase glutathione peroxidase (EC 1.11.1.19) contains a single seleno-

cysteine (Sec) residue in each of the four identical subunits, which is essential for enzyme activity (62). GPX (80 kDa) catalyses the reduction of hydroperoxides using GSH, thereby protecting mammalian cells against oxidative damage. In fact, glutathione metabolism is one of the most essential antioxidative defense mechanisms (12,15,29,32).



There are five GPX isoenzymes found in mammals. Although their expression is ubiquitous, the levels of each isoform vary depending on the tissue type. Cytosolic and mitochondrial glutathione peroxidase (cGPX or GPX1) reduces fatty acid hydroperoxides and  $H_2O_2$  at the expense of glutathione. GPX1 and the phospholipid hydroperoxide glutathione peroxidase (PHGPX or GPX4) are found in most tissues. GPX4 is located in both the cytosol and the membrane fraction. PHGPX can directly reduce the phospholipid hydroperoxides, fatty acid hydroperoxides, and cholesterol hydroperoxides that are produced in peroxidized membranes and oxidized lipoproteins (63). GPX1 is predominantly present in erythrocytes, kidney, and liver, and GPX4 is highly expressed in renal epithelial cells and testes. Cytosolic GPX2 or GPX-G1, and extracellular GPX3 or GPX-P are poorly detected in most tissues except for the gastrointestinal tract and kidney, respectively. Recently, a new member, GPX5, expressed specifically in mouse epididymis, is interestingly selenium-independent (64).

Although GPX shares the substrate,  $H_2O_2$ , with CAT, it alone can react effectively with lipid and other organic hydroperoxides, being the major source of protection against low levels of oxidant stress.

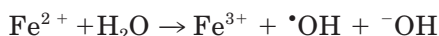
#### Antioxidant enzymes: toward an active oxygen balance

Small deviations from the physiological activity of antioxidant enzymes may have a dramatic effect on the resistance of cells to oxidant-induced damage to the genome and cell killing (65–67). Cellular oxygen radical homeostasis is linked to three different classes of messenger molecules: growth factors, prostaglandins, and nitric oxide. The ability of platelet-derived growth factor (PDGF) to induce prostaglandin E2 (PGE2) release in fibroblasts is abolished when Cu/Zn-SOD or GPX activity is increased by cell transfection. Besides, the increase of nitric oxide synthase induced by PDGF is mediated in part by production of superoxide (68).

Addition of  $H_2O_2$  causes a dose-dependent increase in CAT mRNA in both exponentially growing and confluent cells. Enhancement in the steady-state mRNA levels of GPX and SOD is equally found. In addition, cells of the respiratory tract respond to different oxidant insults by selective induction of the different antioxidant enzymes (69).



Transfection of a human SOD expression vector into murine fibroblast resulted in stable clones producing increased amounts of Cu/Zn-SOD. A significant increase in endogenous GPX activity and a smaller increase in glutathione transferase activity also occurred. Mn-SOD activity was decreased in all clones, while CAT and NADPH reductase activities were not affected (70). Although it seems clear that the Fenton reaction is responsible for DNA damage produced under oxidative stress, superoxide anion behaves as an iron reducing species in the production of 8-oxo-2'-deoxyguanosine, a DNA lesion produced by  $\cdot\text{OH}$  (31). Thus, it is interesting to notice that the need for Fe(II) is dismissed as it is recycled by  $\text{O}_2^{\cdot-}$ . It probably happens when  $\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$ -induced damage is reduced in cells overexpressing SOD (71).



(Fenton reaction)



(Haber-Weiss reaction)

The cellular regulation of free radicals using antioxidant enzymes was proved by several experiments: (a) a SOD-deficient strain and a CAT-deficient strain produced elevated levels of  $\text{O}_2^{\cdot-}$  in *Drosophila* (72). (b) Expression of catalase-peroxidase of *Cyanobacterium synechococcus* in animal cells caused the transfected cells to become more resistant to  $\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$  or paraquat (agents which reduce dioxygen) than the parental cells (73). (c) Overexpression of Cu/Zn-SOD and CAT caused a decrease in the accumulation of 8-hydroxydeoxyguanosine during aging (33). (d) Under conditions of overexpression of SOD and low  $\text{O}_2^{\cdot-}$  levels, down-regulation of this system lead to decreases in antioxidant enzymes (70).

### Reactive oxygen species and human diseases

Reactive oxygen species generated during metabolism can enter into reactions that, when uncontrolled, can affect certain processes leading to clinical manifestations (74,75). Direct effects include peroxidative changes in membranes and other cellular components, including oxidative DNA damage (76). SOD, GPX, and CAT within cells remove superoxide and peroxides before they react with metal catalysis to form more reactive species. Finally, peroxidative chain reactions initiated by reactive species that escaped enzymatic degradation are terminated by chain-breaking antioxidants, including among others water-soluble ascorbate, lipid-soluble vitamin E, and ubiquinone. To optimize performance, oxidative stress must be controlled by supplying known antioxidant nutrients and by minimizing effects of substances that stimulate ROS (77).

An imbalanced production of ROS plays a role in the pathogenesis of a number of human diseases such as ischemia/reperfusion injury, atherosclerosis,

TABLE 1  
Reactive Oxygen Species, Antioxidant Enzymes  
Imbalance and Human Diseases

Human Disease	Key References
Allergy	
Bronchial asthma	(79–83)
Intolerance to aspirin	(84)
Intolerance to foods	(85)
Response to mercury	(86)
Response to other drugs	(87)
Response to other oxidants	(68)
Cancer	
Bladder	(78)
Bowel	(78, 88)
Breast	(7, 78)
Colorectal	(78, 89)
Esophageal	(90)
Kidney	(78, 91)
Leukemia	(58)
Liver	(78, 92)
Lung	(78)
Prostate	(93)
Skin	(94)
Cardiac and vessels injuries	
Atherosclerosis	(30, 95–101)
Ischemia	(31, 102–106)
Genetic and metabolic disorders	
Chronic granulomatous disease	(107)
Diabetes	(108–112)
Down's syndrome	(113, 114)
Infectious diseases	
<i>Helicobacter pylori</i>	(115)
Hepatitis	(116)
HIV	(117)
Influenza virus	(118)
Pneumonia	(119)
Rheumatoid arthritis	(120–122)
Neurodegenerative diseases	
Allergic encephalomyelitis	(123)
Alzheimer's disease	(103, 124–126)
Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis	(54, 127–131)
Huntington's disease	(124)
Parkinson's disease	(125, 126, 132)
Prion disease	(124, 133)
Ophthalmologic problems	
Cataract	(134)
Glaucoma	(135)

neurodegenerative diseases, cancer, and allergy. When antioxidant, free radical scavenging systems are overwhelmed, inflammation, hypersensitivity, and autoimmune conditions may result. Inflammatory cells may also increase DNA damage by activating pro-carcinogens to DNA-damaging species, e.g., neutrophils can activate aromatic amines, aflatoxins, estrogens, phenols and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons by ROS-dependent mechanisms. Much cancer can be considered as a degenerative disease of old age, related to the effects of continuous damage over a life span by toxic oxygen. Thus, tumor promotion can be inhibited in animal models

by the use of agents that can inhibit the phagocyte respiratory burst (78).

ROS have been also implicated in many lung diseases, including acute respiratory syndrome associated with exposure to oxidants, e.g., asbestos, nitrogen dioxide, ozone, paraquat, hyperoxia, carbon tetrachloride, and the anticancer drugs bleomycin and Adriamycin. In addition, oxidative stress, superoxide production and an imbalance in antioxidant enzymes has been related with many other specific pathologies as chronic granulomatous disease, Downs syndrome, diabetic complications, hepatitis, rheumatoid arthritis, *Influenza* virus, ulcer, pneumonia, HIV infection, cataract and glaucoma (Table 1).

## Conclusion

Oxygen species are key participants in damage caused by virus infections (that cause airway epithelial inflammation), progression to cancer (tumor invasion, and metastasis injuring local tissues), neurodegenerative processes (including cell death, motor neuron diseases and axonal injury), and both infarction and brain edema. Therefore, tissues must be protected from this oxidative injury by expression of stress-response genes and genes encoding antioxidant enzymes and activation of other related transcriptional regulatory proteins.

Those abnormalities appeared in the cellular regulation and expression of antioxidant enzymes play a main role in cell division cycle and in the balance of life. This fact shows us the importance of the ROS scavenging and the antioxidant defense system in maintaining normal cellular physiology, facing diseases and promoting immunity. In fact, the regulation of gene expression by means of oxidants, antioxidants and the redox state, has emerged as a novel target that promises therapeutic implications (136).

Thus, further efforts are necessary to fully elucidate the importance of antioxidant enzymes in the therapy of several human disease states.

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