

Free Radicals, Antioxidants in Disease and Health

Lien Ai Pham-Huy¹, Hua He², Chuong Pham-Huyc³

¹ Department of Pharmacy, Lucile Salter Packard Children's Hospital, Stanford University Medical Center, Palo Alto, CA, USA;

² Department of Analytical Chemistry, China Pharmaceutical University, Nanjing, China;.

³ Laboratory of Toxicology, Faculty of Pharmacy, University of Paris 5, Paris, France

Corresponding author: Chuong Pham-Huy, Laboratory of Toxicology, Faculty of Pharmacy, University of Paris 5, 4 avenue de l'Observatoire, 75006 Paris, France. E-mail: phamhuychuong@yahoo.com.

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Free radicals and oxidants play a dual role as both toxic and beneficial compounds, since they can be either harmful or helpful to the body. They are produced either from normal cell metabolisms in situ or from external sources (pollution, cigarette smoke, radiation, medication). When an overload of free radicals cannot gradually be destroyed, their accumulation in the body generates a phenomenon called oxidative stress. This process plays a major part in the development of chronic and degenerative illness such as cancer, autoimmune disorders, aging, cataract, rheumatoid arthritis, cardiovascular and neurodegenerative diseases. The human body has several mechanisms to counteract oxidative stress by producing antioxidants, which are either naturally produced in situ, or externally supplied through foods and/or supplements. This mini-review deals with the taxonomy, the mechanisms of formation and catabolism of the free radicals, it examines their beneficial and deleterious effects on cellular activities, it highlights the potential role of the antioxidants in preventing and repairing damages caused by oxidative stress, and it discusses the antioxidant supplementation in health maintenance.

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