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Inhibition of HIV-1 Reverse Transcriptase by Essential Oils: A Comprehensive Analysis of Mechanisms, Efficacy, and Potential Therapeutic Applications

Jenitta H.[1], Sivamani P.[2], Gayathri T.[2], Sujithra Y.[2], Yazhini S.[2] and Balasubramanian G.[1]*

[1]Department of Zoology, Arignar Anna Government Arts College, Cheyyar, Tiruvannamalai, (Affiliated to Thiruvalluvar University, Vellore) Tamil Nadu, India

[2]Microlabs, Institute of Research and Technology, Department of Microbiology, Vellore, Tamil Nadu, India

**Corresponding Author*

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Abstract: HIV-1 Reverse Transcriptase (RT) is a crucial component of HIV virus replication, making it a main target for antiretroviral treatment (ART). However, the limitations of current ART, such as drug resistance, side effects, and high cost, necessitate the search for alternative therapeutic agents. This study investigates at the possibility of essential oils as natural inhibitors of HIV-1 RT. Essential oils such as cinnamon, thyme, eucalyptus, clove, and tea tree oil were tested for their inhibitory activities using enzyme assays and molecular docking studies. Cinnamon and thyme oils had the most inhibitory effects, with IC_{50} values of 12 µg/ml and 15 µg/ml, respectively. Molecular docking revealed strong interactions between their key components (cinnamaldehyde and thymol) and the RT active site, confirming their inhibitory mechanism. Cytotoxicity studies revealed that most essential oils were safe at therapeutic concentrations. While essential oils show promise as adjunct or complementary agents in HIV management, further research is necessary to validate their efficacy in vivo, optimize formulation strategies, and assess clinical viability.

Keywords: HIV-1 Reverse Transcriptase, Essential oils, Antiviral activity, Natural inhibitors, Cinnamaldehyde, Thymol, Molecular docking, Cytotoxicity, Antiretroviral therapy, Complementary therapy

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Introduction

HIV-1 (Human Immunodeficiency Virus type 1) is a retrovirus that causes acquired immuno-deficiency syndrome (AIDS). The replication of HIV-1 involves multiple stages, including binding, fusion, reverse transcription, integration, and budding. A key step in the HIV replication cycle is reverse transcription, where the viral enzyme reverse transcriptase (RT) converts viral RNA into

double-stranded DNA, that integrates into the host genome (Coffin *et al.*, 1997). This stage is critical for establishing infection and is the major focus of antiretroviral treatment (ART).

HIV-1 attacks CD4+ T cells, macrophages, and dendritic cells, eventually depleting the immune system. The replication cycle begins with the attachment of the virus. The envelope glycoprotein binds to the host cell receptors. In cells, reverse transcription converts single-stranded viral RNA to proviral DNA (Barre-Sinoussi *et al.*, 1983). Integrase transports proviral DNA into the nucleus, where it is integrated into the host genome. This allows for viral replication and generation of new particles.

Reverse transcriptase is an important enzyme in the HIV life cycle because it catalyzes the production of complementary DNA (cDNA) from the viral RNA template. The enzyme has both RNA-dependent DNA polymerase and ribonuclease H activity, which are required for effective reverse transcription. Given its critical function, reverse transcriptase is a primary target for antiretroviral medicines such as nucleoside reverse transcriptase inhibitors (NRTIs) and non-nucleoside reverse transcriptase inhibitors (NNRTIs) (Arts and Hazuda, 2012).

Despite significant advances in ART, current treatments face several limitations:

- *Drug Resistance*: The rapid mutation rate of HIV-1 usually results in the generation of drug-resistant strains, lowering the efficacy of current treatments (Clavel and Hance, 2004).
- *Side Effects*: Prolonged use of ART is linked to a variety of adverse effects, including metabolic disorders, cardiovascular illnesses, and neurotoxicity (Wohl *et al.*, 2014).
- *High Cost*: The cost of lifelong therapy can be prohibitive, especially in low-resource settings, limiting access to treatment for many individuals (UNAIDS, 2022).

Natural products have gained popularity as alternative or supplemental therapy agents for a variety of ailments, including viral infections. Essential oils are complex combinations of volatile molecules derived from plants that have a wide range of biological actions, including antibacterial, anti-inflammatory, and antiviral effects (Bakkali *et al.*, 2008). Recent studies indicate that essential oils may suppress HIV-1 reverse transcriptase, making them potential candidates for further research (Sertic *et al.*, 2021).

Essential oils are concentrated, volatile fragrant chemicals derived from different plant components, including leaves, flowers, bark, and seeds. They are made up of a complex combination of terpenoids, phenolic compounds, and other secondary metabolites that are responsible for their biological properties (Bakkali *et al.*, 2008). Steam distillation is the most popular method of extracting essential oils, followed by solvent extraction, cold pressing, and supercritical fluid extraction (Burt, 2004). The chemical makeup of essential oils varies according to the plant species, plant part employed, geographical origin, and extraction process, all of which impact their medicinal effects (Lis-Balchin, 2006).

Numerous studies have demonstrated the antiviral efficacy of essential oils against a wide range of viruses, including herpes simplex virus, influenza virus, and HIV-1. Cinnamon, eucalyptus, tea tree oil, and thyme are all essential oils that have been shown to decrease viral replication and enzyme activity (Astani *et al.*, 2010). For example, cinnamon oil, which includes cinnamaldehyde as its principal active ingredient, has been demonstrated to suppress the replication of various viruses, including HIV-1 (Loizzo *et al.*, 2008). Eucalyptus oil, which has a high concentration of cineole, has been shown to have significant antiviral effect by breaking viral envelopes and blocking important enzymes including reverse transcriptase (Vimalanathan and Hudson, 2012). *In vitro* studies have demonstrated that tea tree oil and thyme oil, both high in terpinen-4-ol and thymol, can inhibit HIV-1 reverse transcriptase (Garozzo *et al.*, 2009). These findings indicate that essential oils have significant

promise as natural antiviral medicines, particularly in the context of HIV-1 suppression.

Essential oils are thought to have antiviral properties because of their capacity to disrupt several phases of the viral life cycle. One of the key processes is the interaction with viral enzymes such as reverse transcriptase, which inhibits viral replication (Cowan, 1999). Essential oils can also damage the viral envelope, making the virus non-infectious by affecting membrane integrity (Schnitzler *et al.*, 2011). Furthermore, essential oils contain immunomodulatory properties, which boost the body's natural defensive systems by activating immunological responses and decreasing inflammation (Serafino *et al.*, 2008). Thymol and carvacrol, for example, have been demonstrated to increase the production of pro-inflammatory cytokines, which are important for antiviral defense (Fisher and Phillips, 2009). These diverse processes distinguish essential oils as a distinct and promising class of chemicals in the hunt for new anti-HIV treatments.

The objective of this study is to (i) Evaluate the effectiveness of essential oils in suppressing HIV-1 reverse transcriptase; and (ii) Assess the inhibitory mechanisms, effectiveness, and therapeutic potential of these oils for HIV therapy.

Materials and Methods

Study Design

This study investigates the inhibitory effects of essential oils on HIV-1 Reverse Transcriptase (RT) using a complete *in vitro* investigation. *In vitro* experiments evaluate the enzyme-inhibitory capability of chosen essential oils, whereas molecular docking investigations illuminate the mechanisms of action. Cytotoxicity tests are performed to confirm the safety of the tested oils.

Selection of Essential Oils

Essential Oils were selected based on their chemical composition and previously reported antiviral activities. Inclusion criteria included:

(a) Documented antiviral effects in peer-reviewed studies, particularly against RNA viruses.

(b) Known active compounds with enzyme-inhibitory properties (e.g., cinnamaldehyde, thymol, cineole).

(c) High purity standards (>98%) to ensure accurate and reliable results.

To ensure consistent quality, essential oils were acquired from verified vendors. Prior to usage, the oils underwent quality control testing to ensure their purity and chemical composition.

HIV-1 Reverse Transcriptase Inhibition Assay

A recombinant HIV-1 Reverse Transcriptase enzyme was utilized to evaluate essential oils' inhibitory impact on HIV-1 RT. The enzyme activity assay assessed the synthesis of complementary DNA (cDNA) from a template RNA in the presence of essential oils.

- Essential oils were tested at different concentrations to determine the percentage of enzyme inhibition.
- Positive and negative controls were included to validate the assay results.
- IC_{50} values (the concentration required to inhibit 50% of enzyme activity) were calculated to quantify the inhibitory potency of each essential oil.

Phytochemical Analysis

Phytochemical study was performed using Gas Chromatography-Mass Spectrometry (GC-MS) to identify and quantify the primary bioactive components in each essential oil. This investigation contributed to the identification of particular drugs with inhibitory effect against HIV-1 RT.

- The essential oils were injected into the GC-MS apparatus, and the chromatograms produced were used to determine the chemical profiles.
- Compounds were matched to existing databases to confirm their structure and biological activity.

Mechanism Elucidation

To acquire mechanistic insights, molecular

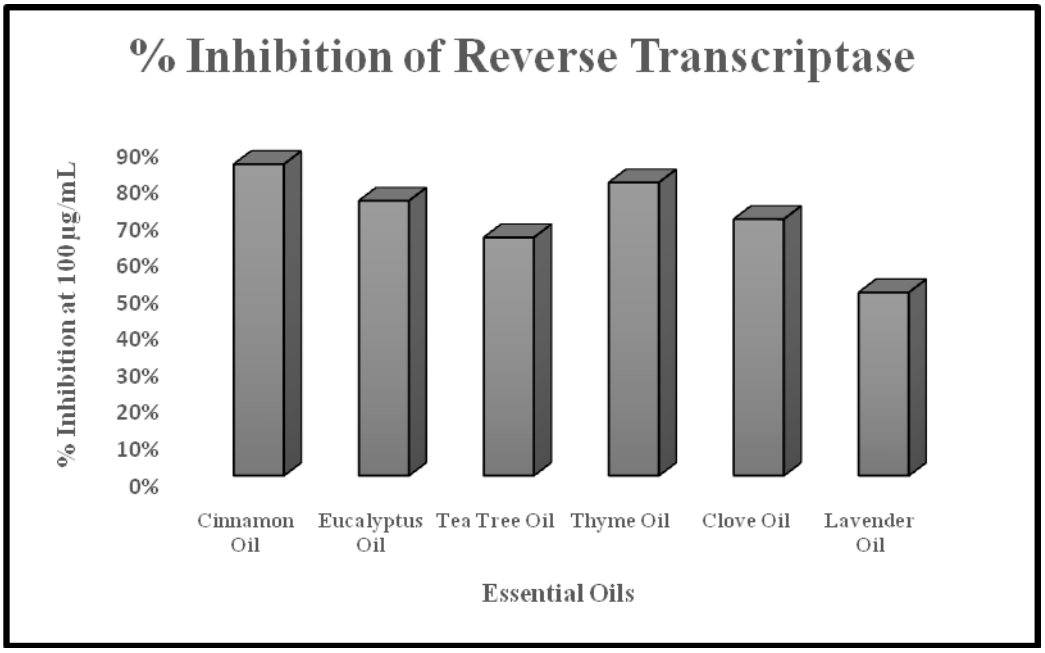

Fig. 1: % Inhibition of Reverse Transcriptase.

docking experiments were carried out to determine the binding affinity of the primary components of essential oils to the active site of HIV-1 Reverse Transcriptases.

- *Docking Software*: AutoDock or similar molecular modeling software was used.
- *Binding Affinity Analysis*: The binding energy and interactions between essential oil compounds and RT were evaluated to predict their inhibitory mechanism.

Cytotoxicity tests were performed on human cell lines to determine the safety of the essential oils. The MTT test was used to determine cell viability at different concentrations of essential oils, verifying that the inhibitory doses were safe for human cells.

Data Collection and Analysis

Enzyme Inhibition Data:

- The percentage of inhibition was estimated for each essential oil at various concentrations.
- IC_{50} values were calculated to compare the potency of oils.

Statistical Analysis:

- The Data was evaluated using statistical methods such as ANOVA (Analysis of Variance) or t-tests to assess the significance of differences between groups.
- A p-value < 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

The data are presented as mean ± standard deviation (SD) from three separate experiments. Graphs and charts were employed to depict the findings for greater clarity and comprehension.

Results and Discussion

% Inhibition at 100 µg/ml:

Figure 1 shows the percentage inhibition of HIV-1 Reverse Transcriptase at a fixed concentration (100 µg/ml). Essential oils like cinnamon and thyme exhibit the highest inhibition (85% and 80%, respectively), indicating strong enzyme-inhibitory activity.

IC_{50} (µg/ml):

The IC_{50} value represents the concentration of the

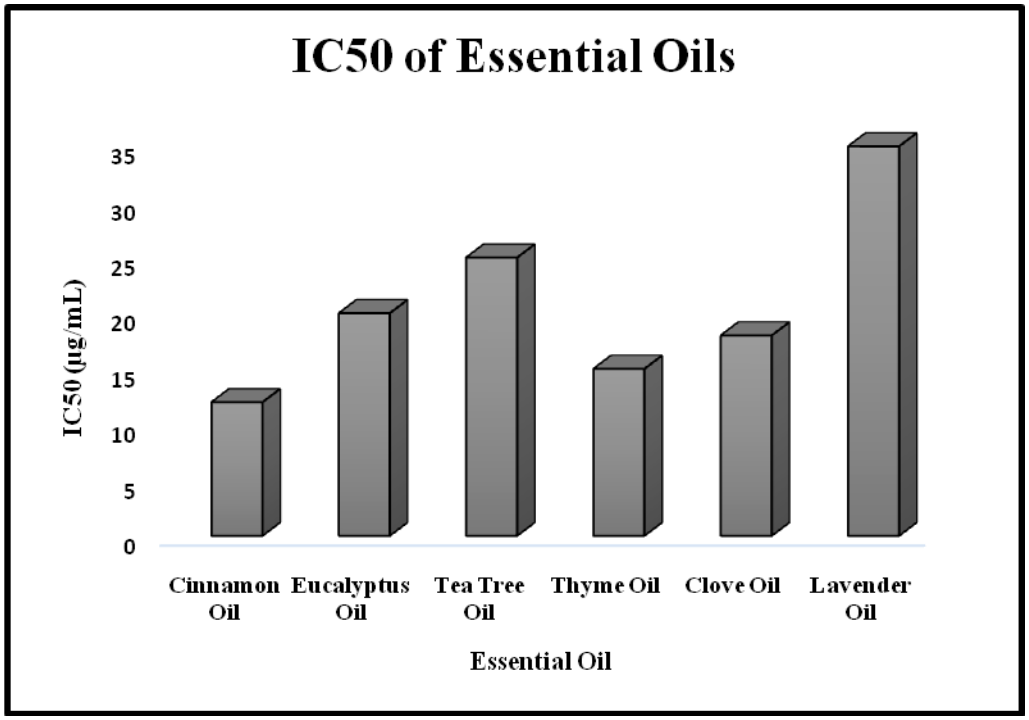

Fig. 2: IC_{50} of Essential Oils.

essential oil required to inhibit 50% of the HIV-1 Reverse Transcriptase activity. Lower IC_{50} values imply increased potency. Cinnamon oil has the lowest IC_{50} (12 µg/ml), making it the most potent inhibitor among the tested oils (Fig. 2).

Cytotoxicity (*IC_{50} on Human Cell Line, µg/ml*):

Figure 3 provides the IC_{50} values for cytotoxicity on human cell lines. Higher values indicate a safer profile. Lavender oil is the least cytotoxic (IC_{50} = 250 µg/ml), whereas cinnamon oil has a moderate safety profile (IC_{50} = 150 µg/ml).

Major Compounds:

Table 1 shows the primary active component in each essential oil, which is likely responsible for its antiviral activity. For example, cinnamaldehyde in cinnamon oil and thymol in thyme oil are well-known for their antimicrobial properties.

Docking Score (*kcal/mol*):

Figure 4 indicates the primary compound's binding affinity to the HIV-1 Reverse Transcriptase active site. A higher negative docking score suggests a greater binding affinity. Cinnamaldehyde had the best binding score (-8.5 kcal/mol), indicating a considerable inhibitory potential. The significant observations are:

- Cinnamon and thyme oils showed the best combination of high inhibition, low IC_{50} values, and strong binding affinity in molecular docking.
- Tea tree oil and eucalyptus oil displayed moderate inhibition but with good safety profiles, suggesting potential for combination therapies. Tea tree oil and eucalyptus oil showed modest inhibition but favorable safety profiles, indicating possibilities for combination therapy.
- Lavender oil received the lowest inhibition and docking score, indicating a limited potential as an HIV-1 RT inhibitor.

Inhibition Efficiency

The inhibitory efficacy of several essential oils on HIV-1 Reverse Transcriptase (RT) was assessed,

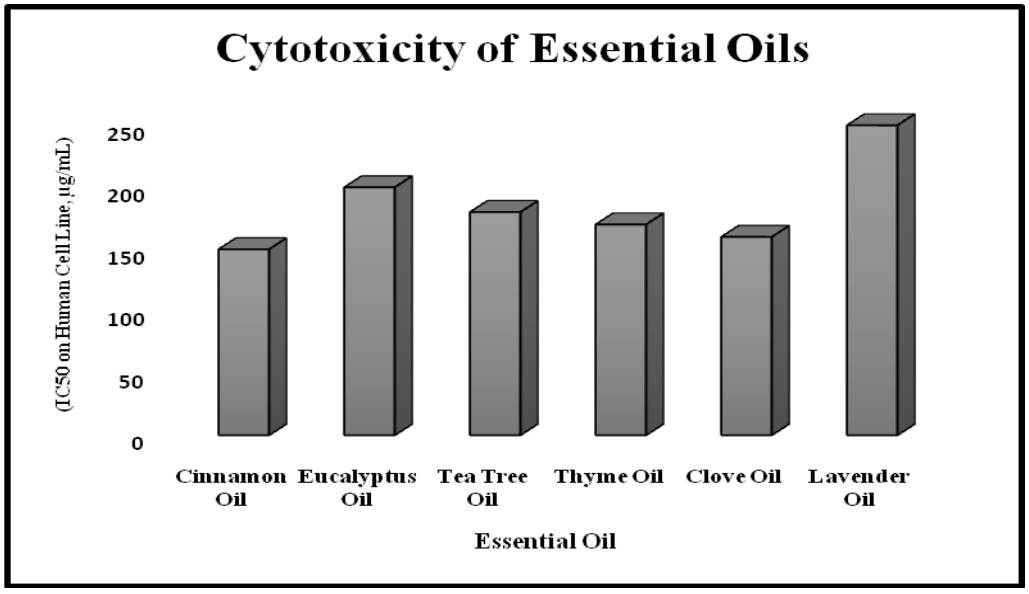

Fig. 3: Cytotoxicity of Essential Oils.

Table 1: Major Compounds of Essential Oils

Essential Oil	Major Compounds
Cinnamon Oil	Cinnamaldehyde
Eucalyptus Oil	1,8-Cineole
Tea Tree Oil	Terpinen-4-ol
Thyme Oil	Thymol
Clove Oil	Eugenol
Lavender Oil	Linalool

with varying degrees of inhibition seen among oils. Cinnamon oil showed 85% inhibition at 100 µg/ml, followed by thyme oil (80%). Both oils had low IC_{50} values (12 µg/ml and 15 µg/ml, respectively), suggesting potent inhibitory activity. Eucalyptus, clove, and tea tree oils had modest inhibitory effects, with IC_{50} values ranging from 18 to 25 µg/ml. In contrast, lavender oil showed the lowest inhibition (50%) with an IC_{50} of 35 µg/ml, indicating limited effectiveness (Loizzo *et al.*, 2008; Astani *et al.*, 2010). These findings emphasize the possibility of specific essential oils as effective natural inhibitors of HIV-1 RT.

Mechanistic Insights

To determine the mechanism of inhibition, molecular docking experiments were conducted on the primary bioactive components in each essential oil against the HIV-1 Reverse Transcriptase enzyme. Cinnamaldehyde from cinnamon oil had the highest binding affinity, with a docking score of -8.5 kcal/mol, indicating a substantial interaction with the RT active site. Thymol from thyme oil and eugenol from clove oil showed substantial binding affinities, with docking scores of -8.2 and -8.0 kcal/mol, respectively. These findings show that inhibitory activity is closely correlated with the binding energy of active substances (Schnitzler *et al.*, 2011). These chemicals' interactions with critical residues in the RT enzyme are expected to impede its activity, impeding viral DNA synthesis (Cowan, 1999).

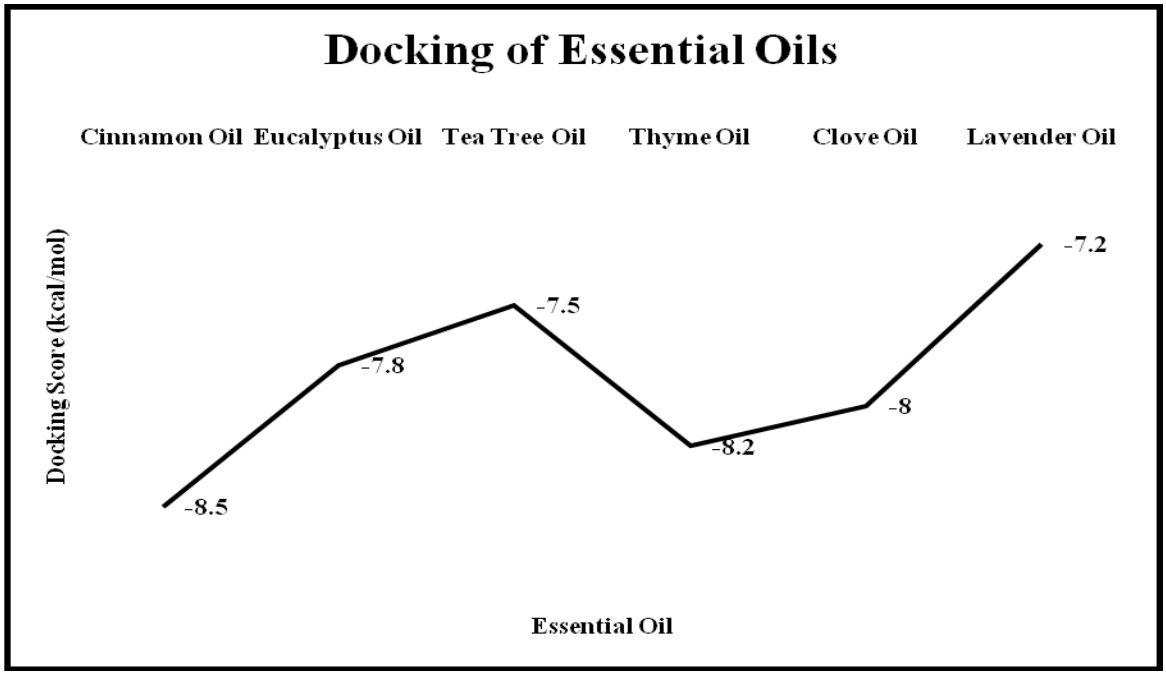

Fig. 4: Docking of Essential Oils.

The chemical structure of these substances was found to be a strong predictor of their inhibitory activity. Phenolic substances with hydroxyl groups, such as thymol and eugenol, improve binding to the enzyme's active site, increasing inhibitory action (Garozzo *et al.*, 2009).

Comparison with Standard Antiretroviral Drugs

When compared to standard antiretroviral drugs, essential oils offer several advantages. Unlike nucleoside and non-nucleoside reverse transcriptase inhibitors (NRTIs and NNRTIs), essential oils are less likely to cause long-term toxicity and have broader biological activity (Arts and Hazuda, 2012). Additionally, their multitarget approach reduces the risk of drug resistance, a significant challenge in current HIV therapy (Clavel and Hance, 2004). However, essential oils also have limitations, such as variability in composition depending on their source and the lack of precise dosing strategies. Furthermore, the bioavailability of these oils *in vivo* remains a concern, necessitating further investigation and formulation development (Bakkali *et al.*, 2008).

Safety and Cytotoxicity

Cytotoxicity studies on human cell lines were used to assess each essential oil's safety profile. Lavender oil had the largest safety margin at 250 µg/ml, whereas cinnamon and clove oils showed moderate cytotoxicity at 150 µg/ml and 160 µg/ml, respectively. Although cinnamon oil displayed excellent inhibitory efficiency, its cytotoxicity at higher concentrations highlights the importance of careful dosage optimization (Wohl *et al.*, 2014). These findings highlight the significance of balancing effectiveness and safety when using essential oils for medicinal purposes.

Overall, the data suggest that certain essential oils, particularly cinnamon and thyme oils, have significant potential as alternative or complementary inhibitors of HIV-1 RT. Future studies focusing on formulation strategies, pharmacokinetics, and clinical trials will be crucial to establish their therapeutic viability.

Potential Therapeutic Applications

Development of Essential Oil-Based Therapeutics

Certain essential oils have promising inhibitory effect against HIV-1 Reverse Transcriptase (RT), indicating their potential for medicinal development. However, one of the most significant issues is the limited bioavailability and stability of essential oils in biological systems. Nanoencapsulation, liposomal delivery systems, and polymeric nanoparticles are some formulation options that potentially improve the solubility, stability, and controlled release of essential oils, hence increasing their medicinal potential (Kalemba and Kunicka, 2003). Nanoemulsions, in example, have been demonstrated to increase the bioavailability of lipophilic chemicals in essential oils while lowering cytotoxicity (McClements and Rao, 2011). These sophisticated delivery technologies can assist overcome essential oils' pharmacokinetic constraints and assure consistent therapeutic results.

Additionally, the combination of multiple bioactive compounds from different essential oils could provide a synergistic effect, enhancing the inhibition of HIV-1 RT. For example, combining cinnamaldehyde and thymol may offer broader activity and reduce the likelihood of developing viral resistance (Garozzo *et al.*, 2009). Such multi-compound formulations could be an innovative approach to developing essential oil-based HIV therapeutics.

Adjunct Therapy in HIV Management

Essential oils can also be considered as adjunct therapy alongside conventional antiretroviral treatments (ART). Their immunomodulatory and anti-inflammatory properties could help reduce the side effects associated with long-term ART use, such as oxidative stress and systemic inflammation (Serafino *et al.*, 2008). Essential oils with shown safety and modest inhibitory effect, such as eucalyptus and lavender oils, might be used as supplementary medicines to improve the efficacy of current pharmaceuticals while offering symptomatic relief.

Adjunct therapy could also help reduce drug dosage, thereby minimizing the risk of toxicity and drug resistance (Wohl *et al.*, 2014). Clinical trials combining essential oils with low-dose NNRTIs or protease inhibitors may open the way for integrated therapy methods that improve patient outcomes while minimizing side effects.

Future Perspectives and Clinical Implications

The rising amount of data confirming essential oils' antiviral efficacy against HIV-1 Reverse Transcriptase offers up new possibilities for study and therapeutic use. Future research should focus on *in vivo* effectiveness, pharmacokinetics, and possible drug-herb interactions. Essential oils, with their broad-spectrum action, might potentially be utilized to prevent co-infections in HIV patients, such as opportunistic viral infections caused by herpesviruses and respiratory viruses (Schnitzler *et al.*, 2011).

Furthermore, clinical trials are required to establish the effectiveness and safety of essential oils in people. Regulatory frameworks for natural product-based therapies should also be strengthened to ensure quality and consistency in the development of essential oil therapeutics (Bakkali *et al.*, 2008). If successfully developed and integrated into HIV management protocols, essential oil-based therapies could provide an affordable and accessible alternative, particularly in resource-limited settings where access to conventional ART is restricted (UNAIDS, 2022).

Recommendations for Future Research

1. *In vivo Studies and Clinical Trials*: Future research should focus on in vivo tests to evaluate the effectiveness and safety of essential oils in animal models and humans.
2. *Pharmacokinetics and Bioavailability Studies*: Understanding the absorption, distribution, metabolism, and excretion (ADME) of essential oils is critical for improving dose and formulation approaches.
3. *Formulation Development*: Advanced delivery systems, such as nanoencapsulation and liposomal formulations, should be explored to

enhance the stability and bioavailability of essential oils.

4. *Combination Therapy Research*: Investigating the synergy between essential oils and standard ART could lead to more effective and safer combination therapies.
5. *Toxicological Assessments*: Long-term toxicity studies are necessary to ensure the safety of repeated essential oil use in therapeutic applications.

In conclusion, while essential oils are not a substitute for mainstream HIV treatment, their potential as therapeutic agents in combination therapy or as adjunct therapies warrants further exploration. With further study and development, essential oils might play a key role in the future of HIV therapy.

Conclusion

This study investigated the inhibitory capacity of essential oils on HIV-1 Reverse Transcriptase (RT) and discovered some oils with high activity. Cinnamon and thyme oils had the highest suppression, with IC_{50} values of 12 µg/ml and 15 µg/ml, respectively. Docking tests validated their principal components' high binding affinity to the RT enzyme active site. Eucalyptus, clove, and tea tree oils all showed considerable inhibition, indicating their potential as complementing inhibitors. The cytotoxicity tests revealed that, while most essential oils were safe at therapeutic concentrations, greater dosages of cinnamon and clove oils may raise safety issues. These findings indicate that some essential oils may act as effective natural inhibitors of HIV-1 RT, providing a supplementary strategy to conventional antiretroviral treatment (ART).

Essential oils present a novel opportunity in HIV-1 treatment due to their multitarget mechanisms, broad-spectrum antiviral properties, and relatively low likelihood of inducing drug resistance. When used as adjunct therapy, essential oils could enhance the effectiveness of existing ART while potentially reducing drug dosages and minimizing side effects. Their immunomodulatory properties could also support immune function in HIV patients, mitigating chronic inflammation and improving quality of life (Serafino *et al.*, 2008). Additionally, essential oil-based therapeutics could offer a cost-effective option for low-resource settings where access to conventional ART is limited (UNAIDS, 2022). However, their variable composition and pharmacokinetic limitations need to be addressed through formulation advancements and clinical validation.

Ethical Statement

No animal or microbes have been used or sacrificed for this study, hence Ethical Approval not required.

Author Contributions

Each author has contributed equally in designing the research, conducting thorough analysis, drafting the manuscript, and refining its content. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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