

# Plasmapheresis as an Adjunctive Therapy for Yellow Phosphorus Poisoning: A Case Report

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## ABSTRACT

Yellow Phosphorus (YP) poisoning is an infrequent, yet severe medical condition characterised by multi-systemic toxicity. The ingestion or inhalation of YP can lead to gastrointestinal irritation, hepatic injury, and Acute Liver Failure (ALF). Plasmapheresis, a therapeutic intervention involving the removal and replacement of plasma components, is a potential adjunctive treatment for YP poisoning. This case report aims to explore the mechanistic rationale, clinical efficacy, and safety considerations of plasmapheresis in the management of this toxicological emergency. Here, a 16-year-old female reported to the Emergency Department (ED), having consumed 1-2 g of Ratol poison at two different times of the day. She came to the hospital on day 4 post-consumption. On admission, the patient was jaundiced and Arterial Blood Gas (ABG) analysis was suggestive of respiratory alkalosis with hypokalemia. Treatment focused on fluid therapy, vitamin K therapy, and N-Acetyl Cysteine (NAC). She developed angioedema and urticaria with no airway compromise, in response to intravenous NAC. A diagnosis of acute liver injury secondary to YP poisoning was made. Close monitoring of liver function and coagulation parameters, and bleeding complications was done. Plasmapheresis was considered as NAC reinitiating was not feasible due to potential anaphylaxis. The patient responded well to the treatment and was discharged on day 7 of hospitalisation.

**Keywords:** Acute liver injury, N-acetyl cysteine, Ratol poison

## CASE REPORT

A 16-year-old female presented to the Emergency Department (ED) after ingesting 1-2 g paste of undiluted Ratol poison (Zinc Phosphide containing 3% YP) twice within the same day (Total of 2-4g). She developed diffuse abdominal pain, profuse vomiting, and constipation on day 2. Her initial management at a local hospital involved conservative treatment with intravenous fluids, vitamin K, and N-Acetyl-Cysteine (NAC). Investigations revealed abnormal Liver Function Test (LFT) (transaminitis) and coagulation profile abnormalities on day 3. Due to deteriorating LFT and coagulation profile [Table/Fig-1], she was referred to the hospital (day four post-consumption). Upon admission, the patient was haemodynamically stable, febrile and jaundiced. Systemic Examination including Central Nervous System (CNS) examination was normal. Stat Blood glucose values were normal, Arterial Blood Gas (ABG) analysis was suggestive of respiratory alkalosis with hypokalemia [Table/Fig-2].

Other routine investigations like Electrocardiogram (ECG), Chest X-Ray (CXR), Screening ECHO and Ultrasonography (USG) of the abdomen were normal. Treatment continued along similar principles, focusing on fluid therapy, vitamin K, and NAC.

Additionally, prophylactic antibiotics and anti-encephalopathy measures (Syrup Lactulose TID and Tab Rifaximin BD) were initiated. However, she developed angioedema and urticaria (no airway compromise) in response to intravenous NAC, which resolved with hydrocortisone, pheniramine maleate and discontinuation of therapy. A diagnosis of acute liver injury secondary to Yellow Phosphorus (YP) poisoning and adverse drug reaction to NAC was made. Hospitalisation ensued to monitor anaphylaxis, closely assess liver function and coagulation parameters, prevent acute fulminant liver failure and manage bleeding complications. The patient's Model for End-Stage Liver Disease (MELD) score on the day of arrival was 29, which progressed to 33 on day 1. Deteriorating coagulation

Parameter	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3		Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 14	Day 28
Total bilirubin (mg/dL)	2.01	3.32	4.07	4.11		4.48		3	1.21	1.08
Direct bilirubin (mg/dL)	1.29	1.91	2.42	2.9		3.29		1.9	0.64	0.53
AST/SGOT (U/L)	1213	1677	517	201	161	222		159	43	23
ALT/SGPT (U/L)	681	939	328	308	275	331		311	96	27
ALP (U/L)	56	51	70			65		87	58	49
PT (seconds)	57.2	80.7	21.3	26.7	22.4	15.2	11.9	11.2	11.5	12.6
INR	4.77	6.73	1.78	2.23	1.87	1.27	0.99	0.93	0.96	1.05
APTT (seconds)	45.3	45.9	29.5	33.7	33.6	32.1				
Ammonia (mmol/L)	87		82			45				
Urea (mg/dL)	26.1	19	23.6			20.1				
Creatinine (mg/dL)	0.67	0.58	0.54			0.54				
Sodium (mEq/L)	132		133			131				
Potassium (mEq/L)	3.4		3.4		2.7	3.4	3.6			
Chloride (mEq/L)	103		103			104				

Magnesium (mg/dL)	2	2.1			1.6	1.6				
Calcium (mg/dL)	7.7	7.8		7.1	6.5	7.7				
Phosphorus (mg/dL)	1.42	2.62								
Haemoglobin (g/dL)	12.4			13.1			12			
Total count	4280			4690			6620			
Platelet count (Lakhs)	1.75			1.67			1.47			
Strip pregnancy	Negative									

**[Table/Fig-1]:** Summary of investigations (post-hospitalisation).

\*Normal Plasma Ammonia Level: (11-35); AST/SGOT: Aspartate transaminase/Serum glutamic oxaloacetic transaminase; ALT/SGPT: Alanine transaminase/Serum glutamic pyruvic transaminase; ALP: Alkaline phosphatase; PT: Prothrombin time; INR: International normalised ratio; APTT: Activated partial thromboplastin time

Parameter	Arrival/ED	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4
pH	7.48	7.49	7.50	7.48	7.47
pCO <sub>2</sub>	29.4	26.6	28.4	29.6	28.3
HCO <sub>3</sub>	21.8	20.1	22	21.6	20.5
pO <sub>2</sub>	96	95	104	93.3	90.4
Lactate	1.7	1.8	1.5	0.9	0.5
Base excess	-2.6	-2.8	0.2	-0.8	-1.8

**[Table/Fig-2]:** Blood gas analysis (Post-hospitalisation).

profile over subsequent days necessitated Fresh Frozen Plasma (FFP) transfusions (4 Units). Plasmapheresis was considered as NAC reinitiating was not feasible due to potential anaphylaxis. The procedure involved a Plasma Exchange (PLEX) volume of 2.6 L {2.4 L FFP+0.2 L Normal Saline (NS)}, using 14 units of FFP with heparin and additional calcium supplementation after every 3-4 units of FFP. The patient tolerated the procedure well; her symptoms were managed conservatively, and subsequent measurements demonstrated gradual improvement in LFT and International Normalised Ratio (INR) over a week. The patient's condition improved, oral feeds were initiated on day 5, suitable consults were obtained, and she was discharged on day 7 of hospitalisation.

## DISCUSSION

Yellow Phosphorus is a waxy, yellowish, crystalline solid with wide-ranging industrial applications, including the manufacturing of tracer bullets, incendiaries, semiconductor additives, fertiliser derivatives and fireworks (Asia and Latin America). It is commonly used as an insecticide and rodenticide and even finds application in homoeopathic medicine [1]. YP among adults is predominantly ingested with the intention of deliberate self-harm [2,3]. However, as rodenticide tubes (containing YP) resemble toothpaste, they may be accidentally ingested in the paediatric population.

Absorption of YP occurs predominantly through the Gastrointestinal (GI) tract but can also happen via the respiratory tract, skin, and mucous membranes, following which it is evenly incorporated into various tissues. The liver is the primary site of distribution due to its first-pass metabolism [4].

YP acts as a fat-soluble protoplasmic poison and a potent hepatotoxin, leading to severe tissue hypoxia by generating phosphine gas that inhibits cytochrome C oxidase and oxidative metabolism [5]. The exact mechanism of toxicity remains largely unknown; however, it is believed to alter ribosomal function, protein synthesis [6], blood glucose regulation, glycogen deposits [7], lipoprotein and triglyceride synthesis. Consequently, intracellular accumulation and fatty degeneration of organs such as the liver, kidney, heart, and brain can also occur [8,9]. The central nervous, cardiovascular, haematological, renal, and hepatobiliary systems are particularly susceptible to hypoxic injury, with progression to shock and cardiovascular collapse. Even small amounts of YP can cause profound multiorgan dysfunction and death, although the usual fatal dose is 60 mg (1 mg/kg body weight).

The progression of YP poisoning has been categorised into three distinct clinical stages [10]. Stage 1- <24 hours of ingestion,

symptoms reflective of GI irritation occur due to the development of phosphine gas upon contact between phosphorus and hydrochloric acid in the stomach.

Stage 2 (1-3 days), patients may remain asymptomatic, but liver enzyme and bilirubin levels deteriorate due to toxic hepatitis.

Stage 3 (>72 hours) Acute Liver Failure (ALF) can manifest, accompanied by coagulopathy, encephalopathy, arrhythmias, Acute Renal Failure/Acute Kidney Injury (ARF/AKI), and haemodynamic instability. Recovery or death can occur at this stage. The symptoms manifested by the patient in the present case report were consistent with the known pharmacological effects of YP.

This patient also exhibited lower total counts (bone marrow toxicity) and hypocalcaemia consistent with YP poisoning due to the preferential binding of calcium by phosphorus in serum [11]. YP causes necrobiosis of the liver [12], manifesting as ALF with deranged LFTs and coagulopathy as the most common presentation [13], clinically ranging from mild transaminitis to fulminant liver failure.

NAC, conventionally used for paracetamol poisoning due to its antioxidant and hepatoprotective properties, has been studied in cases of ALF [14,15]. Its effectiveness in rodenticide-induced ALF is still under investigation, showing promising results in some and questionable benefit in others [16]. A recent study conducted in the Indian sub-population suggest that NAC may be beneficial if initiated early in YP intoxication, with delays in initiation linked to higher mortality [17]. One possible mechanism is NAC's role in lowering von Willebrand Factor (vWF) levels in the blood, which is elevated in YP poisoning. Anaphylactoid reactions to intravenous NAC have been extensively documented [18,19], which are rarely fatal but generally non-life threatening and easily treatable. A similar anaphylactoid reaction was observed in the present patient and was amenable to conventional treatment [20,21]. Other treatment modalities include corticosteroids have been used and found to be ineffective and potentially harmful in YP poisoning, and the combination of corticosteroids and exchange transfusion did not prevent coma progression or reduce mortality rates [22].

Poisoning with YP presents a significant challenge in terms of effective treatment options. Recent Liver Transplant Society of India (LTSI) guidelines focus on urgent liver transplantation to treat rodenticide hepatotoxicity [23]. While a liver transplant remains the definitive therapy in YP poisoning and has been implemented in select cases of ALF [24], including in an Indian setting, high cost and limited availability render it inaccessible to many patients [25]. Moreover, the scarcity of liver donors exacerbates this issue. Hence, developing countries focus on maximising patient survival with nontransplant treatments. Alternatively, Continuous Renal Replacement Therapy (CRRT) and Therapeutic Plasma Exchange (TPE) have demonstrated some promise in paediatric YP poisoning cases [26], but their affordability remains a barrier to widespread implementation. TPE is the removal of a patient's plasma and replacement of it with plasma from a donor along with a colloid using an extracorporeal device.

Although PLEX transfusions in acute YP intoxication were described as early as 1971, the landmark study by Larsen FS et al., introduced the first open randomised controlled trial of PLEX for ALF, leading

to the incorporation of plasmapheresis into the therapeutic options for ALF [27]. Before this publication, existing studies on PLEX in liver failure primarily consisted of retrospective case series or cohort studies, exhibiting considerable variability in the protocols employed. The 2019 guidelines from the American Society for Apheresis (ASFA) establish High-Volume Plasma Exchange (HV-PLEX) as the preferred first-line treatment for ALF, either as a standalone therapy or in combination with other modalities (category 1 indication) [28]. HV-PLEX has received Level I, Grade 1 recommendation in the European guidelines as well as in Asia-Pacific guidelines [29] for ALF management, attributed to its proposed mechanism of removing plasma cytokines and drivers of the systemic inflammatory cascade and an added advantage of providing deficient clotting factors and albumin. Emerging evidence also suggests the efficacy of standard-volume PLEX (SV-PLEX) [30] and low-volume PLEX (LV-PLEX) in ALF management [31].

Plasmapheresis thus emerges as a potential therapeutic modality, serving either as a standalone treatment or as a bridge to liver transplantation in YP poisoning, thereby enhancing survival rates. Early elevations in transaminase and ALP, a >10-fold increase in ALT, severe PT derangement, metabolic acidosis, and hypoglycaemia predict poor prognosis. At the same time, the latter two are significantly associated with mortality. Several studies attest to PLEX showing therapeutic benefits in YP poisoning in improving transplant-free survival, [32] reducing total bilirubin, SGOT, INR, Total Leucocyte Count (TLC) ammonia, Sequential Organ Failure Assessment (SOFA) and MELD Na score [33,34] albeit with some caveats like the amount consumed and time to initiation from consumption [35]. The discrepancy also exists with regard to protocol deployed, the number of sessions required [36], and the type of PLEX therapy to be used- with all, LV-PLEX, SV-PLEX and high volume PLEX (HV-PLEX) showing considerable success in YP poisoning. The authors deployed SV-PLEX for the patient with considerable success.

## CONCLUSION(S)

Previously, the management of YP poisoning had remained mainly supportive, with the accepted definitive management being liver transplantation among those who developed ALF. Emerging evidence suggests that plasmapheresis is beneficial when initiated early and prevents the necessity for a liver transplant in ALF.

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