

## Impact of Iranian Viola Odorata Extract on the Malignant Traits of Colorectal Cancer Cells

Jalil Arab<sup>1</sup>, Farzad Seyed Forootan<sup>2,3</sup>, Mohammad Armin<sup>4</sup>, Saghar Yousefnia<sup>5</sup>, Marzieh Nematollahi<sup>2</sup>, Iman Niktab<sup>6</sup>, Mohammad Hossien Nasr Esfahani<sup>2</sup>, Jafar Vatandoost<sup>7</sup>, Kamran Ghaedi<sup>5,\*</sup>

1. Department of Agricultural Biotechnology, Plant Branch, Sabzevar Branch, Islamic Azad University, Sabzevar, Iran
2. Department of Cellular Biotechnology at Cell Science Research Center, Royan Institute of Biotechnology, ACECR, Isfahan, Iran
3. Legal Medicine Research Center, Legal Medicine Organization, Tehran, Iran
4. Department of Agronomy and Plant Breeding, Sabzevar Branch, Islamic Azad University, Sabzevar, Iran
5. Department of Cell and Molecular Biology, Semnan University, Semnan, Iran
6. Department of Animal Biotechnology, Cell Science Research Center, Royan Institute for Biotechnology, ACECR, Isfahan, Iran
7. Department of Biology, Hakim sabzevari University, Sabzevar, Iran

\* **Corresponding author:** Kamran Ghaedi, Department of Cell and Molecular Biology and Microbiology, Faculty of Biological Science and Technology, University of Isfahan, Hezar Jerib Ave., Azadi Sq, Isfahan, Iran. Email: kamranghaedi@sci.ui.ac.ir

Received 2024 April 13; Accepted 2025 February 04.

### Abstract

**Background:** Cancer, particularly colorectal cancer, is a growing global public health issue with a significant impact on individuals aged fifty and older. Viola odorata, a traditional herbal remedy, has been investigated for its potential anti-cancer effects, particularly in inhibiting the metastasis of certain cancer cell types.

**Objectives:** This study aimed to evaluate and compare the effects of Viola odorata extract on the malignant characteristics of colorectal cancer cell lines HT-29 and HCT-116.

**Methods:** Samples of Viola odorata were collected from five different geographical locations in Iran. The chemical composition of the extracts was analyzed using Fourier transform infrared spectroscopy (FTIR), and the concentration of polyphenols and flavonoids was determined by high-performance liquid chromatography (HPLC). The hydro-alcoholic extract was then used to treat HT-29 and HCT-116 colorectal cancer cell lines. Apoptosis, migration, colony formation, and cell viability were assessed and compared.

**Results:** Treatment with Viola odorata extract induced apoptosis in both HT-29 and HCT-116 cell lines. The extract also significantly reduced cell migration and colony formation. Cell viability was markedly decreased, with HCT-116 cells showing greater sensitivity to the extract than HT-29 cells.

**Conclusion:** Viola odorata extract demonstrated anti-cancer activity against colorectal cancer cell lines, with a more pronounced effect in HCT-116 cells. These findings suggest that Viola odorata may be a promising therapeutic agent for targeting colorectal cancer cells, especially at higher concentrations, and its efficacy appears to be cell-dependent.

**Keywords:** Apoptosis; Colorectal cancer; Flavonoids; Viola odorata

### 1. Background

Colorectal cancer (CRC) occurs primarily in the colon or the rectum. It plays a crucial role in mortality and cancer complications (1). CRC

is the second most common cancer in women, the third in men, and the fourth worldwide (2). When there is an increase in abnormal cellular proliferation and survival potential, these

atypical cells develop benign adenomas that may turn into carcinomas over decades, leading to metastasis (3). The CRCs comprise a highly heterogeneous group of diseases driven by a wide range of mutagens and mutations. Since not all types of CRC share the same stimulatory mutation, it is difficult to define a molecular "catch-all" therapy (4). According to the temporal specifications and demographic projections, the global CRC burden is expected to increase by up to 60% by 2030, with more than 2.2 million new cases and 1.1 million cancer deaths. These characteristics may vary depending on the economic developments of different countries (5). Numerous factors affect CRC, including family history (6), old age (7), excessive alcohol consumption (8), lack of physical activity (9), diabetes, red meat consumption, high-fat diets with no fiber (10), and inflammatory bowel diseases (i.e., ulcerative colitis and Crohn's disease) (11). CRC complications could also be affected by lifestyle, obesity, and diet (12).

Currently, various treatments and prognostic procedures are being developed to combat this type of cancer (13). *Viola odorata* Linn. (Violaceae), called Banafsha or sweet violet, is a medicinal plant native to Asia, Europe, Australia, and North America (14). *V. odorata* has multiple therapeutic properties, such as anti-inflammatory (15), anti-rheumatic (16), anti-hypertension (17), anti-cancer (18-22), and antioxidant activity (23). Some active ingredients of *V. odorata* are salicylic acid derivatives, saponin, alkaloids (e.g., anthocyanidins), violins, and cyclotides (e.g., cycloviolacin) (24). Cyclotides can destroy the membrane at high concentrations in cancer cells via intercalating with membrane-bound sphingomyelin and cholesterol-rich membrane lipid rafts (25). A subset of flavonoids, anthocyanin, activates the apoptosis pathway via the apoptosis induction factor, Caspase 3, and endonuclease G (pro-apoptotic factor). In addition, it prevents the progression and growth of cancer cells via cell cycle arrest in G0/G1 and G2/M by inducing p21 wild-type

p53-activated fragment and P27 cyclin-dependent kinase inhibitor 1 expression and reducing cyclin A and B (26). Chemotherapeutic agents, DNA-damaging drugs (e.g., doxorubicin and cisplatin), antimetabolites (e.g., methotrexate), anti-tubulin agents (e.g., taxol), and hormones have various side effects, including bone marrow suppression, hair loss, drug resistance, cardiac toxicity, neurological dysfunction, and gastric ulcer (27, 28). Most anti-cancer herbs have antioxidant activity through their phenolic compounds. Phenolic compounds (including flavonoids and flavonols) exhibit antioxidant properties because of the hydroxyl groups they contain (29-31). Medicinal plants with antioxidant activities play a crucial role in scavenging free radicals. Mechanisms of antioxidants include quenching free radicals, reducing peroxide, transition metal chelating, and simulating the activities of antioxidant enzymes in vivo (30). An in vivo study has shown that *V. odorata* extract significantly decreases tumor size of MCF7, SKBR3, and their derived mammospheres (3D) in chicken embryos (20).

Herbs and their extracts might offer a treatment option for CRC with fewer side effects compared to standard treatments, which often entail side effects. The present laboratory study aimed to identify the effects of *V. odorata* alcoholic extract on migration, apoptosis, colony formation, and cell survival of CRC cell lines and to compare its properties with untreated controls.

## 2. Objectives

This study aimed to evaluate and compare the effects of *Viola odorata* extract on the malignant characteristics of colorectal cancer cell lines HT-29 and HCT-116.

## 3. Methods

### 3.1. Plant material

In March and April of 2021, during the growing season of the plant, whole aerial parts of *V. odorata* were collected and

identified using Flora Iranica (31) from five geographical locations in Iran based on the vegetation maps and available information (Ghazvin, Gilan, Golestan, Kermanshah, and Mazandaran). The samples were dried at room temperature (25 °C) in the shade and a ventilated place. The chemical composition of the plants was evaluated using Fourier transform infrared (FTIR) spectroscopy and high-performance liquid chromatography (HPLC) techniques. The samples were kept in the herbarium of Gonbad Kavous University of Technology for further investigations (herbarium code: GKU / NO. 803896).

### 3.2. Cell culture

Two human CRC cell lines, HT-29 (Genetic Storage Center, Tehran, Iran) and HCT-116 (Pasteur Institute, Tehran, Iran), were purchased. Two cells were cultured in Dulbecco's Modified Eagle Medium (DMEM) high glucose supplemented with 10% fetal bovine serum (FBS), 1% penicillin/streptomycin, 1% L-glutamine, and 1% non-essential amino acids at 37 °C in a humidified atmosphere with 5% CO<sub>2</sub> (all chemical materials were purchased from Sigma, USA).

### 3.3. *Viola odorata* hydro-alcoholic extract

The aerial parts of *V. odorata* were ground and prepared for extraction. Phenolic and flavonoid extraction was performed based on a modified method described by Gharibi et al. (32). In summary, 10 g of aerial parts powders were extracted with 200 ml aqueous methanol (80 %, v/v). The extraction was performed with an orbital shaker (150 rpm) for 72 h at 25°C. Then, the extract was filtered using a Whatman filter paper No 40 (15 cm). Finally, the filtered extract was evaporated at 40 °C and dried in desiccators under a vacuum to a constant weight.

### 3.4. FTIR spectroscopy

FTIR is one of the best tools to identify

the types of chemical bonds (functional groups) in compounds. This research used FTIR to characterize the functional groups in the aerial parts of *V. odorata*, especially hydroxyl (-OH) groups with antioxidant functions. A small amount (5 mg) of aerial parts powder was dispersed in dry potassium bromide. The mixture was thoroughly mixed in a mortar and pressed 6 times in 2 min to form a thin K-Br disk. The disc was then placed in a sample cup of diffuse reflection services. FTIR Model 6300 Japan (JASCO, Tokyo, Japan) recorded the FTIR spectrum of plant materials in the wavelength range of 400-4,000 cm<sup>-1</sup>. The FTIR spectra were analyzed using the Brangule et al. method. (33).

### 3.5. HPLC

The *V. odorata* extract was analyzed by an HPLC system (model Agilent 1090). HPLC washout method has previously been used by Gharibi et al. (34). Pure solutions of recognized ingredients were used as external standards for HPLC analysis. All standards (tannic acid, rosmarinic acid, apigenin, quercetin, rutin hydrate, rutin, ferulic acid, gallic acid, caffeic acid, luteolin, p-coumaric acid, and chlorogenic acid) were optimally dissolved in HPLC grade methanol before injecting into the analytical HPLC system. A 0.22 µm nylon acro-disk filter was used, and 20 µl of the samples were injected. The stationary phase had a 250 mm × 4.6 mm (5 µm) symmetry C18 column (Waters Crop., Milford, MA, USA; 10 mm × 4 mm I.D.), and the mobile phase included solvent A and B with a flow rate of 0.8 mL min<sup>-1</sup>. The detection was accomplished between 200 and 400 nm through a UV detector. In the mobile phase, 0.1% of water-formic acid was used as solvent A, and 0.1% of formic acid in acetonitrile as solvent B. The gradient conditions were also utilized: a linear step from 10% to 26% solvent B (v/v) for 40 min, 65% solvent B for 70 min, and 100% solvent B for 75 min. The components were identified by comparing the peak area and retention time

by pure standards. The results were calculated as mg/100 g of the sample dry weight in the long run.

### 3.6. MTS assay

The MTS assay was used to assess the cell viability of HT-29 and HCT-116 in control (untreated) and treatment conditions. Control cells received only a culture medium. Briefly, the cells were digested in a single-cell suspension and cultured in 96-well polystyrene plates with  $5 \times 10^3$  cells/100  $\mu$ L per well. Cells were cultured in normal conditions before treating with different doses of fresh hydro-alcoholic extraction of *V. odorata* (50, 100, 200, 400, 600, 800, and 1,000  $\mu$ g/mL) at 37 °C for 24, 48, and 72 h. Afterward, 20  $\mu$ L of prepared MTS solution (Sigma, USA) was added to each well and incubated at 37 °C for three h. Eventually, the ELISA Plate Reader assessed cell viability under 492 nm wavelength and evaluated survival rates (35). All experimental samples were accomplished in triplicate and compared to the controls.

### 3.7. Migration assay (scratch assay)

A scratch assay was performed to test the migration capacity of CRC cell lines under control and treatment conditions. Cell lines were cultured in 6-well dishes at a seeding concentration of  $2 \times 10^5$  cells/well. The treatment group was treated with optimized doses of *V. odorata* extract. To arrest proliferation, after 48 h, 20  $\mu$ g/mL mitomycin (Sigma, USA) was added to the dishes with 80-90% confluency for two h. A thin scratch/wound was made with a 100  $\mu$ L pipette tip. Images were taken by Olympus camera (Japan) attached to an inverted microscope at 40  $\times$  magnifications afterward. The distance between the two lines of the wound was measured at 0, 24, and 48 h after scratching to calculate the migration rate. Wound closure (%) was calculated based on the following ratio:

Wound closure percent =  $A\Delta h/A0h \times 100\%$ .  
where A is the gap size ( $\mu$ m) when the scratch was carried out (0 h), while  $A\Delta h$  is the difference in the gap size at the second measurement compared to the initial size of the gap.

### 3.8. Soft agar assay

A soft agar assay was performed to calculate the colony formation or anchorage-independent proliferation ability of HT-29 and HCT-116 in control and treatment conditions. For this purpose, 4 g of low melting temperature agarose gel (LMTAG) was dissolved in 100 ml of water to prepare the desired gel. After autoclaving, it was placed in the refrigerator to be used in the soft agar assay. The assay was performed in six-well plates that were pre-coated with 2 mL of 1.2% (w/v) LMTAG (Sigma, USA) in a 2x culture medium (high-glucose DMEM supplemented with 20% FBS, 1% penicillin/streptomycin, 1% L-glutamine, and 1% non-essential amino acids) that was solidified at room temperature. Cell lines were then harvested and adjusted to medium to 104 (10,000) cells/mL, which were then incorporated with 1 mL of pre-warm 0.6% (w/v) LMTAG and were located on top of the present basement gel layer. The complex was solidified before incubation at 37 °C in a humidified incubator with 5% CO<sub>2</sub> for 3-4 weeks. During this time, the cells were fed with 500  $\mu$ L culture medium in a well once a week. At the end of the assay, the colonies were stained by adding 500  $\mu$ L of 30% MTS in the incubator for three hours. Colonies larger than 50  $\mu$ m were counted (36).

### 3.9. Apoptosis assay

The apoptotic assay was based on the Annexin V-FITC/PI kit protocol (Sigma, USA). After 48 h treatment with the optimized concentration of *V. odorata* extract, the cells were detached enzymatically via 0.05% trypsin/EDTA and washed with calcium

buffer. Subsequently, 10  $\mu\text{L}$  Annexin V FITC and 10  $\mu\text{L}$  propidium iodide were added to 100  $\mu\text{L}$  cell suspension in calcium buffer and incubated for 20 min at 4 °C in the dark. Flow cytometry analysis was accomplished by the FACSCalibur flow cytometer (Becton Dickinson, USA) (37).

### 3.10. Statistical analysis

ImageJ performed statistical analysis for Windows (64-bit Java 1.8.0\_172) and GraphPad Prism 8. The results were presented as mean  $\pm$  SEM for at least three independent experiments for each analysis. Student's t-test (unpaired, two-tailed) with p-values of  $< 0.05$  was used to indicate statistically significant differences.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. FTIR analysis

FTIR was used to discover the functional groups in the powder obtained from the aerial parts of *V. odorata*, which were collected from five locations in Iran (Golestan, Gilan, Ghazvin, Kermanshah, and Mazandaran). A high level of antioxidant compounds (in the form of hydroxyl groups (-OH) in the range of 3,200-3,500 wavenumber  $\text{cm}^{-1}$ ) was observed in the samples. The FTIR spectra of *V. odorata* are presented in Figures 1A, 1B, and B2. The interpretations of *V. odorata* compounds are presented in Table 1, Figure 1, and Figure 2.

Table 1. FTIR interpretation of *V. odorata* compounds

Location	Wavenumber $\text{cm}^{-1}$ (Test sample)	Wavenumber $\text{cm}^{-1}$ (Reference article)	Functional group assignment	Phyto compounds identified
Golestan	3397.96 $\text{cm}^{-1}$	3200-3500	O-H stretch, Hydroxyl group, H-bonded	Poly Hydroxyl compound
	1735.62 $\text{cm}^{-1}$	1705-1765	C=O stretch, Carbonyl	Carbonyl compound
	1647.88 $\text{cm}^{-1}$	1600-1650	C=O stretching vibration, Ketone group	Ketone compounds
	1415.49 $\text{cm}^{-1}$	1400-1500	C=C-C, Aromatic ring stretch	Aromatic compound
	1321.96 $\text{cm}^{-1}$	1310-1410	O-H bend, Alcoholic group	Phenol or tertiary alcohol
	1053.91 $\text{cm}^{-1}$	1070-1150	C-O stretch, Ether group	Cyclic ethers
Gilan	3386.39 $\text{cm}^{-1}$	3200-3500	O-H stretch, Hydroxyl group, H-bonded	Poly Hydroxyl compound
	1735.62 $\text{cm}^{-1}$	1705-1765	C=O stretch, Carbonyl	Carbonyl compound
	1651.73 $\text{cm}^{-1}$	1600-1650	C=O stretching vibration, Ketone group	Ketone compounds
	1417.42 $\text{cm}^{-1}$	1400-1500	C=C-C, Aromatic ring stretch	Aromatic compound
	1321 $\text{cm}^{-1}$	1310-1410	O-H bend, Alcoholic Group	Phenol or tertiary alcohol
	1049.09 $\text{cm}^{-1}$	1070-1150	C-O stretch, Ether group	cyclic ethers
Kermanshah	3391.21 $\text{cm}^{-1}$	3200-3500	O-H stretch, Hydroxyl group, H-bonded	Poly Hydroxyl compound
	1735.62 $\text{cm}^{-1}$	1705-1765	C=O stretch, Carbonyl	Carbonyl compound
	1650.77 $\text{cm}^{-1}$	1600-1650	C=O stretching vibration, Ketone group	Ketone compounds
	1419.35 $\text{cm}^{-1}$	1400-1500	C=C-C, Aromatic ring stretch	Aromatic compound
	1321.96 $\text{cm}^{-1}$	1310-1410	O-H bend, Alcoholic group	Phenol or tertiary alcohol
	1055.84 $\text{cm}^{-1}$	1070-1150	C-O stretch, Ether group	Cyclic ethers
Mazandaran	3380.6 $\text{cm}^{-1}$	3200-3500	O-H stretch, Hydroxyl group, H-bonded	Poly Hydroxyl compound
	1735.62 $\text{cm}^{-1}$	1705-1765	C=O stretch, Carbonyl	Carbonyl compound
	1649.8 $\text{cm}^{-1}$	1600-1650	C=O stretching vibration, Ketone group	Ketone compounds
	1415.49 $\text{cm}^{-1}$	1400-1500	C=C-C, Aromatic ring stretch	Aromatic compound
	1321.96 $\text{cm}^{-1}$	1310-1410	O-H bend, Alcoholic Group	Phenol or tertiary alcohol
	1052.94 $\text{cm}^{-1}$	1070-1150	C-O stretch, Ether group	Cyclic ethers
Ghazvin	3389.28 $\text{cm}^{-1}$	3200-3500	O-H stretch, Hydroxyl group, H-bonded	Poly Hydroxyl compound
	1734.66 $\text{cm}^{-1}$	1705-1765	C=O stretch, Carbonyl	Carbonyl compound
	1650.77 $\text{cm}^{-1}$	1600-1650	C=O stretching vibration, Ketone group	Ketone compounds
	1416.46 $\text{cm}^{-1}$	1400-1500	C=C-C, Aromatic ring stretch	Aromatic compound
	1321.96 $\text{cm}^{-1}$	1310-1410	O-H bend, Alcoholic Group	Phenol or tertiary alcohol
	1053.91 $\text{cm}^{-1}$	1070-1150	C-O stretch, Ether group	Cyclic ethers



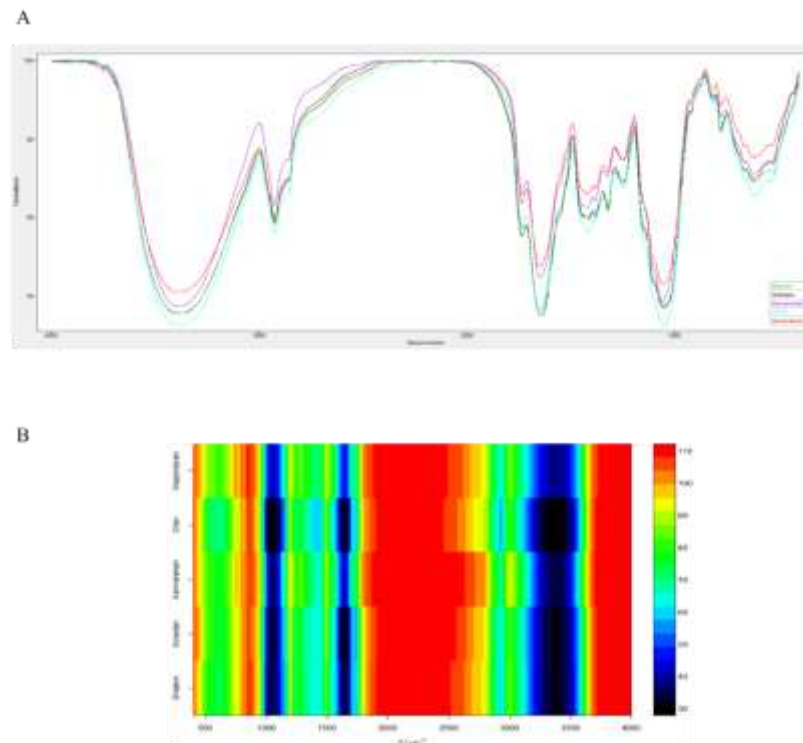


Figure 1: FTIR spectrum (A) and FTIR heatmap (B) of *V. odorata* from five locations (Golestan, Gilan, Ghazvin, Kermanshah, and Mazandaran). FTIR was used to discover the functional groups in the powder obtained from the aerial parts of *V. odorata*. A high level of antioxidant compounds (in the form of hydroxyl groups (-OH) in the range of 3,200-3,500 wavenumber  $\text{cm}^{-1}$ ) was observed in the samples

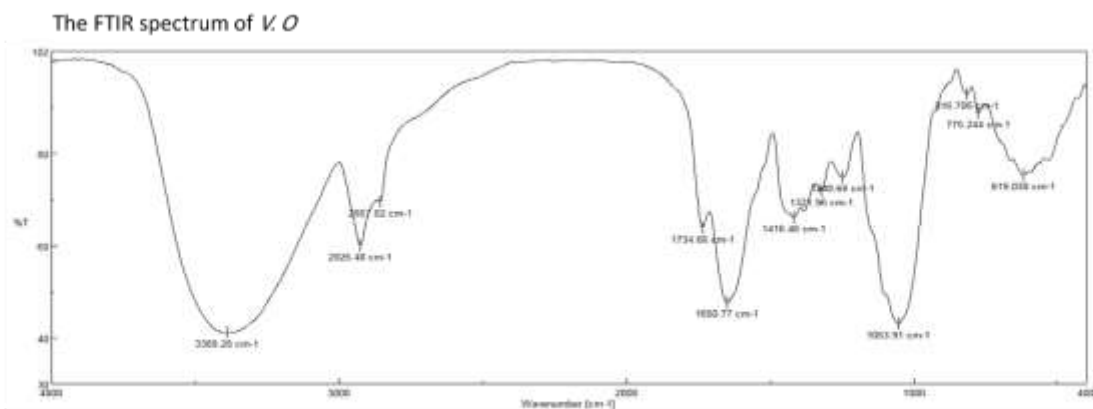


Figure 2: FTIR spectra of *V. odorata* of Mazandaran location

#### 4.2. HPLC of hydro-alcoholic extraction of *Viola odorata*

Quantitative characterization of phenolic and flavonoid compounds of *V. odorata* was carried out using HPLC analysis at 266 and 330 nm. Among five locations, the samples from Mazandaran showed the highest levels of phenolic and flavonoid compounds. The profiles of the HPLC peaks from the Mazandaran sample are shown in Table 2.

HPLC results of the other locations were presented in a supplementary figure. The HPLC detected the presence of 12 flavonoid and phenolic compounds. All these compounds are displayed as mg/100 g dry weight of the sample. The most polyphenolic components of *V. odorata* were gallic acid, chlorogenic acid, caffeic acid, rosmarinic acid, tannic acid, rutin hydrate, and rutin (Figure 3).

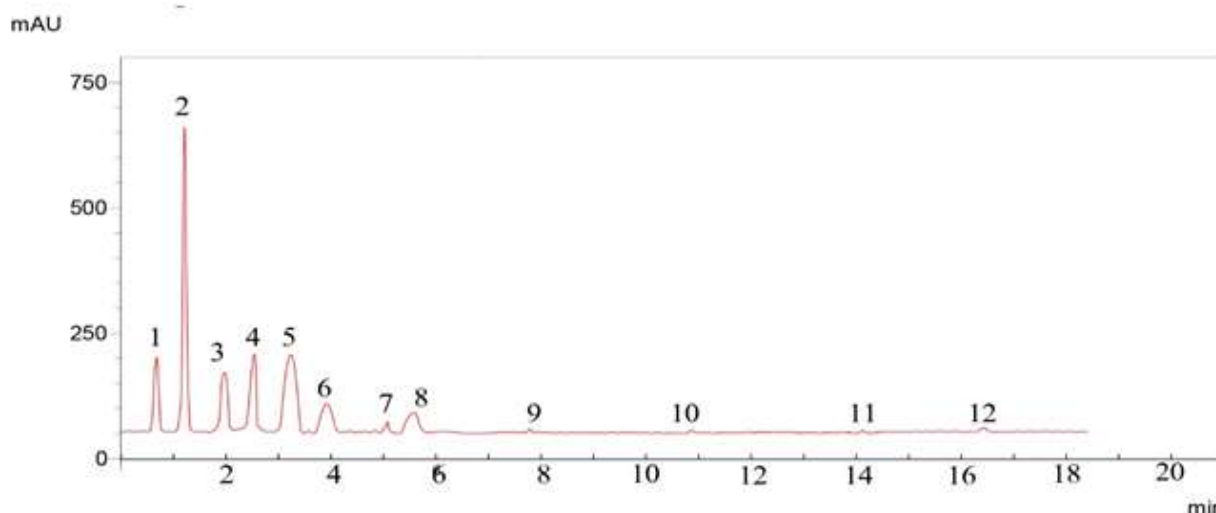


Figure 3: HPLC chromatogram of *V. odorata* of Mazandaran location. The polyphenolic compounds were characterized in the footnote.

1: tannic acid, 2: gallic acid, 3: chlorogenic acid, 4: caffeic acid, 5: rutin hydrate, 6: rutin, 7: p-coumaric acid, 8: ferulic acid, 9: rosmarinic acid, 10: luteolin, 11: quercetin, 12: apigenin

Among phenolic acids, gallic acid contained the highest content (14 mg/100

g), while rutin had the highest values among flavonoids (3.93 mg/100g).

Table 2. Based on HPLC analysis, the major phenolic and flavonoid compounds of *V. odorata* are from the Mazandaran location. The values are expressed in mg/100 g of sample dry weight. <sup>a</sup> The data were sorted based on components' retention time (RT).

Standards	RT (min)	mg/100g sample
Tannic acid	0.67	6.9
Gallic acid	1.19	14
Chlorogenic acid	1.97	18.1
Caffeic acid	2.42	0.02
Rutin hydrate	3.14	0.27
Rutin	3.96	3.93
p-Coumaric acid	5.04	.82
Ferulic acid	5.64	0.20
Rosmarinic acid	7.87	1.4
Luteolin	10.92	0.01
Quercetin	14.12	0.005
Apigenin	16.48	0.03

#### 4.3. *Viola odorata* extract induced cell death in HT-29 and HCT-116

MTS assay was performed to recognize the cytotoxic potential (50% inhibitory concentration (IC<sub>50</sub>)) of *V. odorata* extract on HT-29 and HCT-116. Cells were treated with an increasing concentration of plant extract (0-1,000 µg / ml) for 24, 48, and 72 h. Although after 24 h, cell death was only significant at the dose of 1,000 µg/mL, increasing doses of *V. odorata* extract

demonstrated that after 48 and 72 h, cell viability decreased in a dose- and time-dependent manner. The value of IC<sub>50</sub> was 800 µg/mL for HT-29 and HCT-116 (P<0.05). HT-29 and HCT-116 exhibited some resistance at 600 µg/mL concentrations. Based on these results, we proposed that *V. odorata* extract could induce cell death in CRC cell lines in a cell-dependent manner (Figure 4).

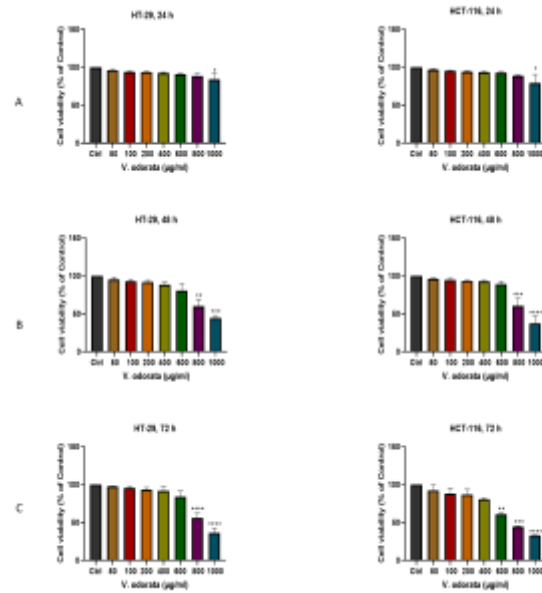


Figure 4: Cytotoxic activity of *V. odorata* extracts on HCT-116 and HT-29. Various concentrations of *V. odorata* extract were used to treat the cell lines in A) 24 h, B) 48 h, and C) 72 h. The effective concentration of *V. odorata* extract was 800 µg/mL for HCT-116 and HT-29. Stars indicate significant differences between samples and control (0 µg/mL) at  $*p < 0.05$ ,  $**p < 0.01$ ,  $***p < 0.001$

#### 4.4. *Viola odorata* extract induced apoptosis in HT-29 and HCT-116

Annexin V kit was utilized to detect the apoptosis rate (early and late apoptosis) in HT-29 and HCT-116. The results demonstrated that optimized doses of *V. odorata* extract (800 µg/mL for HT-29 and HCT-116) induced 13.15% and 25.13% early

apoptosis and 17.44% and 15.42% late apoptosis in HT-29 HCT-116, respectively ( $P < 0.05$ ). Data showed that *V. odorata* extract induced apoptosis in a cell-dependent manner in CRC cell lines (Figures 5A, B). Some necrosis was also observed in both treated and untreated groups in all cell lines (Figure 5A).

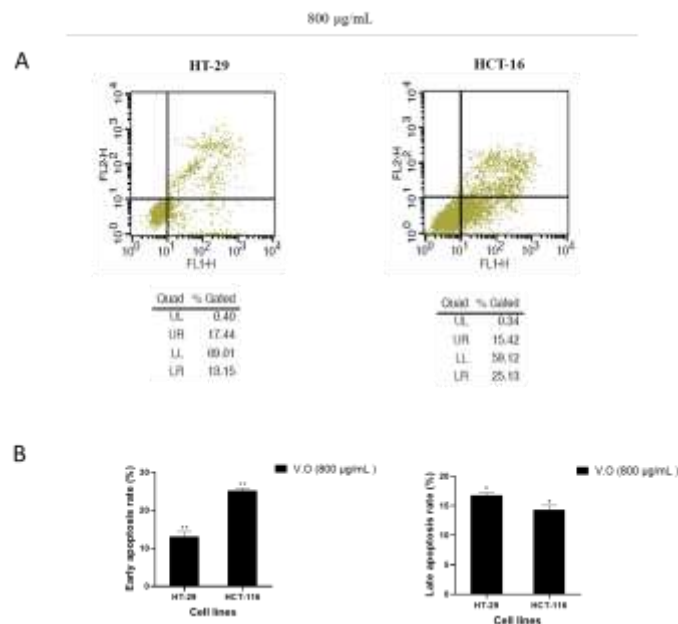


Figure 5: Detection of apoptosis activity of *V. odorata* extracts on HT-29 and HCT-116. A) Annexin V cytometry analysis for the detection of apoptosis rate in HT-29 and HCT-116, B) Data showed that *V. odorata* extract induced early and late apoptosis in HT-29 and HCT-116 ( $P < 0.01$ ).  $*p < 0.05$ ,  $**p < 0.01$ ,  $***p < 0.001$ ,  $****p < 0.0001$ .



#### 4.5. *Viola odorata* extract inhibited the migration of HT-29 and HCT-116.

A wound-healing assay at 0, 24, 48, and 72 h after scratching was performed and reported as migration rates (Figures 6A, B). The migration rates of HT-29 and HCT-116 treated with *V. odorata* extracts were 21% and 35%, respectively, 24 hours after scratching. This rate was approximately 9% and 11% lower than the migration rates of the control groups without treatment ( $P < 0.05$ ). Gradually, 48 h after scratching, the migration rates of HT-29 and HCT-116 treated with plant extracts were 18% and

10%, respectively, which showed a decrease of 19% and 9%, respectively, compared to the related untreated samples ( $P < 0.05$ ) (Figures 6C, D). The migration rates of treated HT-29 and HCT-116 were around 8% and 9%, respectively, 72 h after scratching, demonstrating a 21% and 17% reduction in comparison to their untreated control groups ( $P < 0.01$ ) (Figures 6C, D). Overall, the data showed that *V. odorata* extract significantly inhibited the migration of HCT-116 and HT-29. In addition, this inhibition was higher in the migration rate of HCT-116 in comparison to HT-29 ( $P < 0.05$ ).

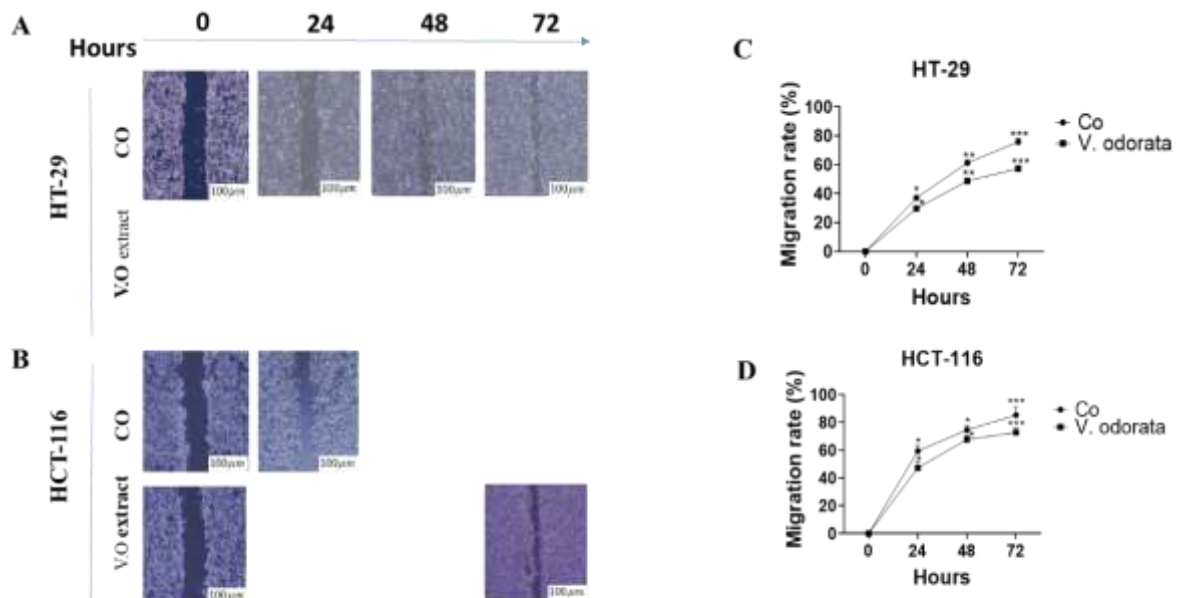


Figure 6: Detection of migration ability of HT-29 and HCT-116 treated by *V. odorata* extract. A series of images of scratch assay from HT-29 and HCT-116 were taken at 0, 24, 48, and 72 h post scratch in both control and treated samples. The groups were A) HT-29 and B) HCT-116. The quantification of the migration rate of monolayers in both control and treated samples was calculated. The groups were C) HT-29 and D) HCT-116. As shown, the migration rate of treated groups in all types of cells was significantly lower than their control counterparts at 24, 48, and 72 h ( $P < 0.05$ ). Results showed that *V. odorata* extract significantly inhibited the migration of HT-29 and HCT-116. Represented value bars are the mean of triplicate independent experiments  $\pm$  SEM. The bar is 100  $\mu$ m. Star indicates a significant difference between samples and controls (*V. odorata* untreated) at \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

#### 4.6. *Viola odorata* extract inhibited colony formation of HT-29 and HCT-116

Soft agar assay assessed the colony formation ability of HT-29 and HCT-116 in treated and control groups (Figures 7A, B). Compared to the control groups without treatment, the HT-29 and HCT-116 groups treated with *V. odorata* extract had 2.3%

and 2.7% fewer colonies, respectively. This finding showed that *V. odorata* extract significantly reduced the ability of HT-29 and HCT-116 to form colonies. Notably, the reduction was significantly higher in HCT-116 compared to HT-29 cell lines ( $P < 0.05$ ) (Figure 7B).

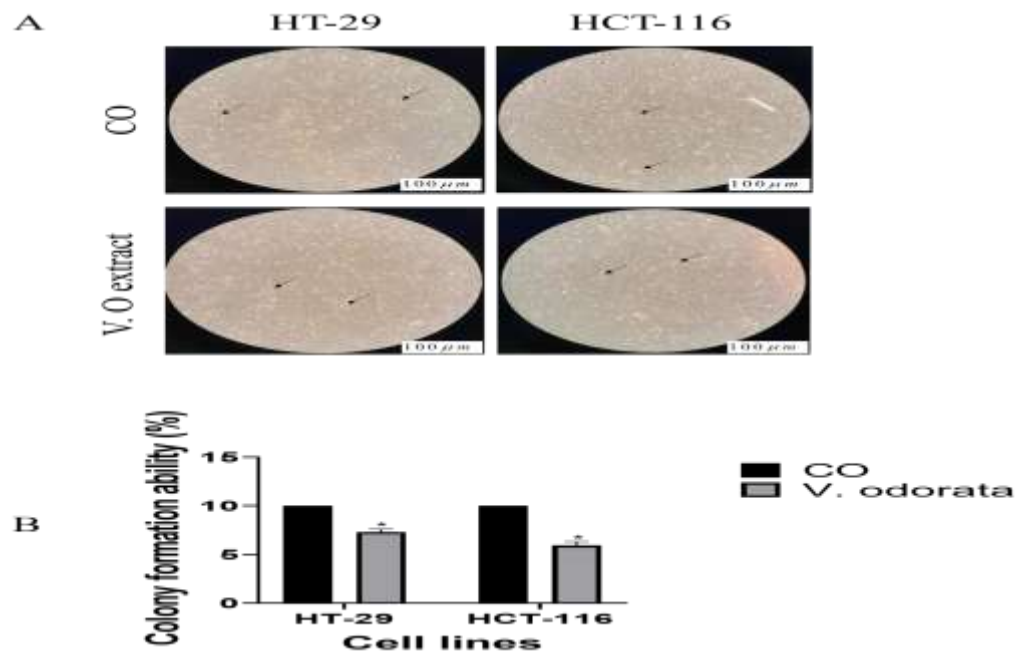


Figure 7: Detection of colony formation ability of HT-29 and HCT-116 treated by *V. odorata* extract. A) Colonies of HT-29 and HCT-116 in control and treatment conditions in soft agar. B) Colony formation ability of HT-29 and HCT-116 in control and treatment conditions in soft agar. *V. odorata* extract decreased the colony formation ability of HT-29 and HCT-116. The bar is 100 µm. Star indicates a significant difference between samples and related controls (*V. odorata* untreated) at \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

## 5. Discussion

As the prevalence of CRC is increasing throughout the world, it is crucial to find effective drugs and treatments. Although the rise in early-onset CRC is unknown, it may be due to dietary changes or other lifestyle factors. These are usually first reflected in the cancer incidence in the younger age group (38). The average survival time for advanced CRC patients is reported to be 18 months (36). The screening methods usually rely on the diagnosis of adenomatous polyps as the precursor lesions of colon cancer to prevent colorectal cancer (39). Standard cancer treatment is generally based on chemotherapy, cytotoxic drugs, radiotherapy, and surgery (40). Chemotherapy has numerous side effects, such as muscle aches, fatigue, stomach pain, headache, diarrhea and vomiting, blood disorders, sore throat, constipation, memory impairment, nervous system damage, loss of appetite, and hair loss (41). However, it has been reported that herbal extracts can stop cancer cells at different stages, such as phases G2 / M and G1 / S, and prevent their growth and proliferation

with fewer side effects (42). *Viola odorata* is an important herb used in cancer treatment due to its anti-cancer compounds, including phenol, cyclotide, and anthocyanin (17). The present study investigated the anti-cancer properties of *V. odorata* extract in CRC cell lines. Our results showed that *V. odorata* extract caused cell death, induced apoptosis, and reduced the rate of migration and colony formation in CRC cell lines.

This research used FTIR to identify functional groups in aerial parts of *V. odorata*. FTIR spectroscopy revealed the composition of functional components in different parts of plants and even assessed their quality (43). The active anti-cancer compounds of *V. odorata* include cyclotides, saponin, cycloviolacin, salicylic acid derivatives, glycosides, vioacercitin, alkaloids, violins, flavonoids, and anthocyanidins (20).

In the current research, 12 flavonoid and phenolic compounds were detected using HPLC. The most polyphenolic compounds of *V. odorata* were gallic acid, chlorogenic acid, caffeic acid, rosmarinic acid, tannic acid, rutin hydrate, and rutin. HPLC results have shown the detection of several flavonoids, such as

quercetin, luteolin, kaempferol, and apigenin, in *V. odorata* extract (20, 44). Some reports have confirmed the anti-cancer effects of flavonoids (45). Several studies have also confirmed the anti-cancer activity of apigenin and luteolin detected in *V. odorata* (46). Recent reports have displayed that gallic acid, ferulic acid, p-coumaric acid, and syringic acid strongly correlate with free radical scavenging activity (47). The position of the hydroxyl group in polyphenols is mainly responsible for their antioxidant activity; therefore, phenolics may be involved in inhibiting radicals. Similarly, other reports have illustrated a higher antioxidant activity in caffeic and chlorogenic acids than in other phenolic compounds (48). Flavonoids have three rings, named A, B, and C. Numerous studies have shown that the catechol (B) ring in catechins, flavonols, and flavones is the leading cause of their antioxidant activity (49).

Previous studies have demonstrated that the alcoholic extract of *V. odorata* induced cell death in both cell lines and mammospheres derived from the cell line without any toxic effects on normal mammary cells. This statement indicates that *V. odorata* extract may induce cell death in a cell-dependent manner based on the cell membrane composition (20). Some studies have illustrated that the cytotoxic effects of *V. odorata* are induced by the isolation of cyclopeptides in various cancer cell lines (varv F, varv A, and cycloviolacin O2) (50).

Our data from annexin V analysis demonstrated that optimized doses of *V. odorata* extract induced cell death through early and late apoptosis in HT-29 and HCT-116. In addition, we observed some necrosis in CRC cell lines in both treated and untreated groups. Previous data from annexin V analysis displayed that *V. odorata* extract at its optimal concentration may cause cell death via early and late apoptosis in SKBR3, MCF7, and their derived mammospheres. It also induced apoptosis by enhancing the activity of caspase 3/7 and 8. Necrosis was also observed in

SKBR3 and MCF7 cell lines and their derived mammospheres in both groups (treated and untreated). The necrosis could be due to programmed necrosis in cancer cells caused by limited nutrients and insufficient supplies of cancer cells (20).

The necrosis may have also occurred due to late apoptosis (51). Yi et al. illustrated that kaempferol, a natural flavonoid, can induce apoptosis by reducing the expression of Bcl2 and poly ADP ribose polymerase (PARP) and increasing Bax expression and PARP cleavage in breast cancer cells (52). In addition, quercetin (a flavonoid found in extracting *V. odorata*) can lead to apoptosis in breast cancer cells via Foxo3a signaling modification (20).

Tumor metastasis is the leading cause of cancer mortality worldwide (53). Our data showed that *V. odorata* extract significantly reduced the rate of migration and the wound-healing ability of HCT-116 and HT-29. Similarly, Zeinoddini et al. demonstrated the anti-metastatic effect of *V. odorata* since the migration rate and wound healing ability of T47-D cells were significantly reduced at the concentration of 1 mg/ml of *V. odorata*. This efficacy can be explained by various mechanisms, such as the role of G $\beta$ y in preventing breast cancer cell metastasis (54). In addition, NF- $\kappa$ B interference by p53-ROS may reduce the migration of breast cancer cells and subsequently inhibit MMP-2 and MMP-9 gene expression (55). The role of junctional adhesion molecule-A through RAP1 GTPase and  $\beta$ 1-integrin in migration and reducing adhesion of breast cancer cells (56), as well as the role of Notch1 in tumor diffusion, proliferation, and metastasis (57), may also be related to the anti-immigration effect of *V. odorata*. Additionally, in the soft agar assay, we observed that the inhibitory effects of *V. odorata* extract on the colony formation rate of CRC cell lines varied depending on the cell type, similar to the observations reported by Tuasha et al. (58).

## 6. Conclusion

In the present study, we investigated the inhibitory activity of *V. odorata* extract against human HT-29 and HCT-116 CRC cell lines. This study is the first to investigate the effect of *V. odorata* extract on malignant characteristics of CRC in these cell lines. The lowest dose of the introduced drug with the highest mortality rate was compared in CRC cell lines (treated) and control (untreated) cells. Finally, we proposed *V. odorata* extract as an anti-cancer drug because it reduces migration and colony formation and increases the apoptosis rate in CRCs. In addition, we speculated that *V. odorata* might act in a cell-dependent manner. However, further studies are needed to establish this drug's exact mechanism of action. Our study's results reinforce traditional medicine beliefs that *V. odorata* may be a relative cancer inhibitor.

**Acknowledgements:** We would like to express our gratitude to our great colleague, Mr. Abbas Kiani Esfahani, for his technical assistance with flow cytometry.

**Availability of data and materials:** Raw data and materials are available upon request.

**Conflicts of interests:** No conflict of interest.

**Consent for publication:** Not applicable.

**Ethics approval and consent to participate:** The permission to use cancer cell lines based on the standard protocols was obtained from the Ethics Committee of Royan Institute (ethics code: IR.ACECR.ROYAN.REC), The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki.

**Financial disclosure:** No funding information.

**Author contributions:** All authors contributed equally to the research, writing,

and revision of this manuscript.

**Abbreviations:** Bcl-2, B-cell lymphoma 2; CRC, Colorectal cancer; DMEM, Dulbecco's modified Eagle's medium; EDTA, Ethylene diamine tetra acetic acid; FBS, Fetal bovine serum; FTIR, Fourier transform infrared spectroscopy; G $\beta$  $\delta$ , G beta-gamma complex; JAM-A, Junctional adhesion molecule-A; HPLC, High-performance liquid chromatography; IC50, 50% Inhibitory concentration; LMTAG, Low melting temperature agarose gel; MMP, Matrix metalloproteinases; NF- $\kappa$ B, Nuclear factor kappa-light-chain-enhancer of activated B cells; PARP, poly ADP ribose polymerase, p27KIP1, p27 cyclin-dependent kinase inhibitor 1; p21WAF1, p21 wild-type p53-activated fragment.

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