

Chalcone Derivatives and Their Metal Complexes: Investigating Biological Properties, Mechanisms and Computational Implications

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Abstract

Chalcones are open-chain flavonoids characterized by an α,β -unsaturated carbonyl system that contributes to their diverse pharmacological activities. The structural versatility of chalcones allows substitution at multiple positions, enabling the synthesis of derivatives with improved biological efficacy. Transition metal complexation, particularly with Rhodium (Rh), Copper (Cu), and Nickel (Ni), enhances the stability, solubility, and biological potential of chalcone derivatives. This paper comprehensively reviews the synthetic approaches for chalcone derivatives, methods of metal complexation with a focus on Rh complexes, and their biological activities including anticancer, antibacterial, antifungal, and antioxidant effects. Mechanistic insights into their biological activity are discussed alongside computational studies such as density functional theory (DFT) and molecular docking. Furthermore, the environmental and catalytic implications of chalcone-metal complexes are highlighted, emphasizing their dual role in medicinal and environmental chemistry.

Key words- Chalcones, Green Chemistry, Environment, Transition Metal, Anticancer, Antibacterial, Antioxidant

Introduction

Chalcones (1,3-diaryl-2-propen-1-ones) are open-chain flavonoids that possess a conjugated α,β -unsaturated carbonyl system, which is essential for their biological activity. Widely found in plants, chalcones exhibit an array of pharmacological effects, including anti-inflammatory, antimicrobial, antioxidant, antimalarial, and anticancer activities. Due to their simple molecular framework and ease of chemical modification, chalcones serve as versatile scaffolds for medicinal chemistry research. Synthetic chalcones are typically produced via the Claisen–Schmidt condensation, which involves the reaction of an aromatic aldehyde with an aromatic ketone in the presence of a base catalyst. Recent advancements have introduced more environmentally friendly methods such as microwave-assisted synthesis, ultrasound irradiation, ionic liquid-mediated reactions, and solvent-free techniques. These methods not only improve reaction efficiency and selectivity but also align with the principles of green chemistry, reducing environmental impact. Beyond synthetic versatility, chalcones are excellent ligands for transition metal complexation. Complexes with metals like Rh, Cu, and Ni have demonstrated enhanced pharmacological properties. Rhodium, in particular, forms stable complexes with chalcones that show superior anticancer activity compared to other metals, attributed to its ability to generate reactive oxygen species (ROS), induce apoptosis, and interact strongly with DNA and proteins. Comparative studies indicate that Rh complexes often outperform Cu and Ni complexes in cytotoxicity and stability, highlighting their potential in drug development. Metal complexation also improves the physicochemical properties of chalcones, such as solubility and thermal stability, which are critical for bioavailability. Computational studies, including DFT calculations and HOMO–LUMO analysis, have provided mechanistic insights into the electronic structure of these complexes and their interactions with biomolecular targets. Molecular docking simulations further corroborate experimental data by predicting

binding affinities and potential active sites on target proteins. In addition to their medicinal relevance, chalcone-metal complexes exhibit promising environmental applications. Their chelation ability can be employed for heavy metal remediation, while redox-active complexes are useful in catalytic processes. Integrating medicinal and environmental chemistry perspectives highlights the multifunctional potential of chalcone derivatives and their metal complexes. This paper aims to provide a comprehensive review of chalcone derivatives and their metal complexes, focusing on Rh complexes. It covers synthetic methodologies, metal coordination chemistry, biological activities, mechanistic and computational studies, and environmental implications. By consolidating recent findings, this study seeks to guide future research in both medicinal and sustainable chemistry applications.

2. Synthetic Approaches for Chalcone Derivatives-

Chalcone derivatives are primarily synthesized through the classical Claisen–Schmidt condensation, which involves the reaction of an aromatic aldehyde with an aromatic ketone in the presence of a base, usually sodium hydroxide or potassium hydroxide. The reaction is typically carried out in alcoholic solvents such as ethanol or methanol. The conjugated α,β -unsaturated carbonyl system is formed through the elimination of water, yielding the Chalcone structure. This method remains the most widely used due to its simplicity, high yield, and scalability. Recent advancements have introduced green chemistry approaches to chalcone synthesis. Microwave-assisted synthesis significantly reduces reaction time from hours to minutes while maintaining high yields. The method also often eliminates the need for organic solvents, making it environmentally friendly. Similarly, ultrasound-assisted reactions have been employed to enhance reaction rates through cavitation effects, promoting better molecular interaction between reactants. Ionic liquids and solid-supported catalysts have also gained attention as sustainable alternatives for chalcone synthesis. Ionic liquids act as both solvent and catalyst, offering advantages such as recyclability and low volatility. Solid-supported catalysts, including zeolites and alumina, facilitate heterogeneous reactions that simplify product separation and reduce waste.

Solvent-free synthesis is another eco-friendly method where chalcones are formed under neat conditions using mechanochemical grinding or thermal methods. This approach eliminates the use of harmful organic solvents and aligns with the principles of green chemistry. Structural diversity of chalcones is achieved by varying the substituents on the aromatic rings. Electron-donating groups such as $-\text{OH}$ and $-\text{OCH}_3$, and electron-withdrawing groups like $-\text{NO}_2$ and $-\text{Cl}$, can be introduced to modulate biological activity. These substitutions influence electronic distribution, lipophilicity, and the ability to coordinate with metals, thereby affecting both pharmacological and environmental applications. Overall, modern synthetic approaches combine efficiency, sustainability, and versatility, providing a rich platform for developing biologically active chalcone derivatives. Yields in green methods often range between 86–96%, and reaction times can be reduced from hours to minutes, making these methods highly attractive for large-scale production.

3. Rhodium and Other Metal Complexation-

Chalcone derivatives act as bidentate or polydentate ligands, primarily coordinating through the carbonyl oxygen and the α,β -unsaturated double bond. Transition metals, particularly Rhodium (Rh), Copper (Cu), and Nickel (Ni), have been extensively studied for their complexation with chalcones. Rhodium complexes are typically synthesized by refluxing chalcone ligands with Rh(III) precursors such as $\text{RhCl}_3 \cdot 3\text{H}_2\text{O}$ in solvents like ethanol or methanol. The reaction is often assisted by mild heating and occasionally by microwave irradiation to improve yield and reduce reaction time. The resulting Rh-chalcone complexes are generally air-stable and can be isolated in good yield. Characterization techniques include UV–Vis spectroscopy (to detect

metal-ligand charge transfer), FT-IR spectroscopy (to confirm coordination through shifts in carbonyl and C=C stretching frequencies), ^1H and ^{13}C NMR spectroscopy, mass spectrometry, and X-ray crystallography for structural elucidation. Comparative studies with Cu(II) and Ni(II) complexes show that while these metals also enhance biological activity, Rh complexes often exhibit superior cytotoxicity, stability, and redox properties. The enhanced activity of Rh complexes is attributed to its ability to facilitate ROS generation, induce apoptosis in cancer cells, and bind effectively to DNA and proteins. Cu and Ni complexes, although active, tend to show lower stability under physiological conditions and reduced selectivity for target biomolecules. The coordination geometry of Rh complexes is often octahedral or square planar, depending on the ligand and reaction conditions. Chelation reduces the polarity of the chalcone, enhancing lipophilicity, which improves cell membrane penetration and bioavailability. These properties collectively result in stronger biological effects compared to uncomplexed chalcones. Additionally, metal complexation impacts antioxidant properties. By stabilizing the enone system and facilitating electron delocalization, metal ions enhance radical scavenging ability. Such effects are not only beneficial for pharmacology but also for environmental applications, where metal-chalcone complexes can act as redox catalysts for degradation of pollutants. In summary, Rhodium-chalcone complexes represent a superior class of compounds with enhanced biological and environmental relevance, outperforming Cu and Ni analogues in many pharmacological assays. The combination of synthetic versatility, metal coordination, and computational insights provides a comprehensive framework for designing novel therapeutic and catalytic agents.

4. Biological Properties of Chalcone-Metal Complexes-

Chalcone derivatives, particularly when complexed with transition metals like Rhodium, exhibit a wide spectrum of biological activities. The incorporation of a metal center often enhances solubility, stability, and interaction with biomolecular targets, thereby improving pharmacological efficacy. This section discusses anticancer, antibacterial, antifungal, and antioxidant activities of chalcone-metal complexes.

4.1 Anticancer Activity

Rhodium-chalcone complexes have shown potent cytotoxic effects against various cancer cell lines, including breast (MCF-7), lung (A549), colon (HCT-116), and liver (HepG2) cancer cells. The anticancer mechanism involves:

- 1. Apoptosis Induction** – Rh-chalcone complexes trigger programmed cell death via the intrinsic mitochondrial pathway, often involving upregulation of caspase-3 and caspase-9 enzymes.
- 2. Reactive Oxygen Species (ROS) Generation** – The redox-active Rh center facilitates ROS production, causing oxidative stress that damages cellular components, ultimately leading to cell death.
- 3. DNA Intercalation and Enzyme Inhibition** – Rh-chalcone complexes can intercalate with DNA and inhibit topoisomerase I and II, interfering with DNA replication and transcription. Comparative studies reveal that Rhodium complexes often exhibit lower IC₅₀ values than Cu or Ni complexes, indicating higher potency. Substitutions on the chalcone aromatic rings (e.g., –OH, –OCH₃, –Cl) significantly influence cytotoxicity by modulating electronic distribution and lipophilicity.

4.2 Antibacterial Activity- Chalcone-metal complexes demonstrate broad-spectrum antibacterial activity against Gram-positive bacteria (*Staphylococcus aureus*, *Bacillus subtilis*) and Gram-negative bacteria (*Escherichia coli*, *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*). Mechanisms include:

- Disruption of bacterial cell membranes due to increased lipophilicity from metal coordination.
- Inhibition of bacterial enzymes critical for cell wall synthesis and metabolism.

- Generation of ROS causing oxidative damage to bacterial cells.

Rhodium-chalcone complexes show higher antibacterial activity than free chalcones, likely due to enhanced cellular uptake and stability. Cu and Ni complexes are also active but generally less potent than Rh derivatives.

4.3 Antifungal Activity - Rhodium-chalcone complexes exhibit antifungal effects against *Candida albicans*, *Aspergillus niger*, and *Fusarium* species. The antifungal mechanism includes:

- Binding to fungal DNA and proteins, leading to impaired replication and enzyme activity.
- Generation of oxidative stress that disrupts fungal metabolism.
- Chelation-induced destabilization of fungal cell walls.

The activity can be tuned by introducing substituents on the aromatic rings and by selecting the appropriate metal center. Rh-based complexes consistently outperform Cu and Ni complexes in antifungal assays.

4.4 Antioxidant Activity-

The α,β -unsaturated carbonyl system of chalcones acts as an electron donor, enabling radical scavenging activity. Metal coordination enhances antioxidant capacity by:

- Stabilizing the chalcone conjugated system.
- Facilitating electron delocalization across the metal-ligand framework.
- Reducing free radical formation in biological systems.

Rhodium-chalcone complexes show higher radical scavenging efficiency in DPPH and ABTS assays compared to free chalcones and Cu/Ni complexes. Antioxidant activity not only protects cells from oxidative stress but also contributes to anticancer and antimicrobial effects.

4.5 Summary of Biological Advantages-

- Enhanced bioavailability and stability due to metal coordination.
- Higher cytotoxicity against cancer cells (lower IC₅₀ values) for Rh complexes.
- Broad-spectrum antimicrobial effects, including antibacterial and antifungal activity.
- Potent antioxidant activity, contributing to protective and therapeutic roles.
- Tunability of activity through ligand modification and choice of metal center.

Rhodium-chalcone complexes thus represent a multifunctional class of biologically active compounds, outperforming other transition metal complexes in many assays and providing a strong foundation for therapeutic development.

5. Mechanism of action of rhodium-chalcone complexes -

Understanding the mechanism of action of Rhodium-chalcone complexes is crucial for rational drug design. These complexes exhibit multifaceted biological interactions, including DNA/protein binding, ROS generation, and enzyme inhibition.

5.1 DNA Interaction

Rhodium-chalcone complexes can intercalate between DNA base pairs, facilitated by the planar conjugated α,β -unsaturated carbonyl system. Intercalation distorts the DNA helix, preventing replication and transcription. Spectroscopic studies using UV-Vis and fluorescence methods demonstrate strong binding affinities, with binding constants often higher than those of free chalcones.

5.2 Enzyme Inhibition

The complexes inhibit critical enzymes such as topoisomerases I and II, which regulate DNA supercoiling and are essential for cell proliferation. By chelating with enzyme active sites or inducing conformational changes, Rh-chalcone complexes block enzymatic activity, leading to cell cycle arrest and apoptosis.

5.3 ROS-Mediated Apoptosis

Rhodium complexes generate reactive oxygen species (ROS) in cancer cells. ROS accumulation triggers oxidative stress, damaging proteins, lipids, and DNA. This leads to activation of the mitochondrial apoptotic pathway, including upregulation of caspase-3, caspase-9, and p53 proteins, culminating in programmed cell death.

5.4 Cell Cycle Arrest

Mechanistic studies reveal that Rh-chalcone complexes induce G2/M phase arrest, preventing mitotic progression. Flow cytometry analysis shows increased percentages of cells in G2/M after treatment, confirming disruption of normal cell cycle regulation.

5.5 Comparative Mechanistic Analysis- Compared to Cu and Ni complexes, Rh complexes show higher ROS generation, stronger DNA binding, and more efficient enzyme inhibition. These mechanistic differences explain the superior anticancer activity observed for Rh-chalcone complexes.

In conclusion, the multi-targeted mechanism of Rh-chalcone complexes, combining DNA interaction, enzyme inhibition, and ROS-mediated apoptosis, highlights their potential as potent anticancer agents.

6. Computational Studies- Computational chemistry provides insights into electronic structure, reactivity, and molecular interactions of chalcone-metal complexes, supporting experimental findings and guiding future design.

6.1 Density Functional Theory (DFT) Studies-

DFT calculations are used to optimize the geometry of Rh-chalcone complexes and analyze frontier molecular orbitals (HOMO and LUMO). Key findings include:

- **HOMO-LUMO Gap:** A smaller gap indicates higher chemical reactivity and potential for biological activity. Rh-chalcone complexes generally show reduced HOMO-LUMO gaps compared to free chalcones, correlating with enhanced cytotoxicity.
- **Electronic Distribution:** DFT studies reveal delocalization of electron density over the metal-ligand framework, explaining strong DNA/protein interactions and antioxidant properties.

6.2 Molecular Docking

Molecular docking studies simulate the binding of Rh-chalcone complexes to biomolecular targets, including DNA and enzymes:

- Docking results show strong hydrogen bonding, π - π stacking, and van der Waals interactions with DNA bases.
- Docking with enzymes such as topoisomerases confirms active-site binding, supporting experimental inhibition data.

6.3 Electrostatic Potential Mapping - Electrostatic potential maps highlight nucleophilic and electrophilic regions in the complex, predicting sites of interaction with biomolecules. Rh-chalcone complexes show favorable electrostatic complementarity, facilitating strong binding to DNA and proteins.

6.4 Structure-Activity Relationship (SAR) - Computational studies help correlate structural features with biological activity:

- Electron-donating groups on aromatic rings enhance binding affinity and cytotoxicity.
- Metal coordination stabilizes the complex and increases lipophilicity, improving cell penetration.

6.5 Comparative Insights - Rhodium complexes outperform Cu and Ni complexes in computational metrics such as binding energy, HOMO-LUMO gap, and electrostatic complementarity, explaining their superior biological activity.

In summary, computational studies provide a rational basis for the observed pharmacological effects of Rh-chalcone complexes, complementing experimental observations and guiding the design of next-generation derivatives.

7. Environmental and Catalytic Applications-

Beyond their medicinal potential, chalcone-metal complexes, particularly Rhodium derivatives, have significant environmental and catalytic applications.

7.1 Catalytic Applications- Rhodium-chalcone complexes serve as efficient catalysts in various organic transformations:

- **Oxidation Reactions:** Rh complexes facilitate selective oxidation of alcohols to aldehydes or ketones under mild conditions.
- **Hydrogenation Reactions:** These complexes catalyze hydrogenation of alkenes and alkynes, improving reaction rates and selectivity.
- **Cross-Coupling Reactions:** Rh-chalcone complexes act as catalysts in Suzuki-Miyaura and Heck-type reactions, enabling C–C bond formation with high efficiency.

The catalytic efficiency is attributed to the redox-active Rh center and the conjugated chalcone framework, which stabilize intermediate species and facilitate electron transfer.

7.2 Environmental Applications - Chalcone-metal complexes can also remediate environmental pollutants:

- **Heavy Metal Chelation:** These complexes bind heavy metals such as Pb^{2+} , Hg^{2+} , and Cd^{2+} , reducing their toxicity and mobility in water systems.
- **Dye Degradation:** Rh-based complexes act as photocatalysts to degrade organic dyes, including methylene blue and rhodamine B, under visible light.
- **Antioxidant Protection:** By scavenging reactive oxygen species in environmental samples, chalcone-metal complexes prevent oxidative damage to aquatic ecosystems. The dual role of Rh-chalcone complexes in catalysis and environmental protection highlights their potential for sustainable chemistry applications, combining medicinal benefits with ecological responsibility.

7.3 Comparative Advantages -

While Cu and Ni chalcone complexes are also catalytically active, Rh complexes offer:

- Higher stability under reaction conditions.
- Greater redox flexibility for oxidative transformations.
- Enhanced efficiency in pollutant degradation.

These features make Rh-chalcone complexes highly valuable for green chemistry initiatives and environmentally friendly industrial applications.

8. Conclusion and Future Perspectives

Chalcone derivatives and their Rhodium complexes represent a versatile and powerful class of compounds with applications spanning medicinal chemistry, computational studies, and environmental chemistry.

Key conclusions:

1. **Synthetic Versatility:** Modern methods, including microwave-assisted, ultrasound-assisted, and green chemistry approaches, enable efficient and sustainable synthesis of diverse chalcone derivatives.
2. **Enhanced Biological Activity:** Rh-chalcone complexes exhibit superior anticancer, antibacterial, antifungal, and antioxidant activities compared to uncomplexed chalcones and other metal complexes (Cu, Ni).
3. **Mechanistic Insights:** Rh complexes act via multi-target mechanisms, including DNA intercalation, enzyme inhibition, ROS generation, and cell cycle arrest.
4. **Computational Correlation:** DFT, HOMO-LUMO analysis, molecular docking, and electrostatic potential mapping support experimental findings and provide rational design strategies.
5. **Environmental Relevance:** These complexes are effective catalysts and can remediate pollutants, demonstrating their dual utility in medicinal and environmental chemistry.

Future Directions

- **In Vivo Studies:** Further preclinical and clinical studies are needed to validate Rh-chalcone complexes as therapeutic agents.
- **Structural Optimization:** Rational design of derivatives with improved selectivity, solubility, and bioavailability.
- **Sustainable Chemistry:** Expansion of green synthesis and catalytic applications to minimize environmental impact.
- **Computational-Experimental Integration:** Continued use of computational studies to guide the synthesis of more potent and selective complexes.

In conclusion, Rhodium-chalcone complexes outperform other transition metal complexes in biological and environmental applications, positioning them as promising candidates for next-generation therapeutics and sustainable chemical processes.

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