

Anticancer Activity of *Micromeria fruticosa* and *Teucrium polium* Growing in Lebanon

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ABSTRACT

The anticancer activities of two Lebanese plant extract *Micromeria fruticosa* (A) and *Teucrium polium* (B) and their fractions were tested against MCF7 and A549 cancer cell lines using MTT assay. Separation was carried out through column chromatography and TLC analysis. Results showed that both plants possess a promising and dose dependent inhibitory activity with IC50 of extract A 28.52 and 26.47 µg/ml on MCF7 and A549 cells respectively, and that of extract B was 41 and 27.9 µg/ml on MCF7 and A549 cell lines, respectively. More interestingly, combination treatment with either extracts A or B and cisplatin, significantly boosted the cytotoxic effect of cisplatin against the two cancer cell lines. Further studies are recommended to determine the active components in both plants responsible for these activities and explore their interactions at molecular level.

INTRODUCTION

Medicinal plants have been widely utilized for tumor and cancer prevention^{1,2}. Over 60% of today's anticancer chemotherapeutic drugs originate from natural sources as plants^{3,4}. Family Lamiaceae (or Labiatae), is a flowering plant that has roughly 236 genera and more than 7000 species⁵, of which the genus *Micromeria* and *Teucrium*. *Micromeria fruticosa*⁶ and *Teucrium polium*⁷ (Lamiaceae) are perennial herbs or shrubs that dwells in rocky and dry-open territories in the Mediterranean areas like Turkey, Syria, and Lebanon^{8,9}.

Plants of Family Lamiaceae, including that of genus *Micromeria* and *Teucrium*, are well known for their therapeutic potential and have been widely used to treat many ailments as migraines, gastrointestinal disorders, upper respiratory tract infections, and some cardiovascular diseases¹⁰. *Micromeria* plants was reported to possess antimicrobial activities beneficial for the treatment of common cold, wounds, and skin infections¹¹⁻¹³. Other studies suggested its protective effect against hepatotoxicity and pain management¹⁴⁻¹⁶. On the other hand, *Teucrium* plant were utilized to treat abscesses, conjunctivitis, gout, inflammation, parasitic infections, and diabetes¹⁷. Both plants (*Micromeria* and *Teucrium*) are considered as important source of phenolic, terpenoidal, and flavonoidal compounds¹⁸. This abundance of polyphenolic components stands behind the antioxidant quality and the wide range of reported pharmacological activities of both genus¹⁹.

Numerous studies have elaborated the importance of phenolic compounds and the distinct anticancer effects of *Teucrium* plants. Extracts from *T. polium* were capable of diminishing cell invasion and metastasis of human prostate cancer cells²⁰, promoting cell apoptosis of human lung carcinoma cells²¹, and inhibiting breast adenocarcinoma cancerous cell growth²². Moreover, it was also

demonstrated to potentiate the cytotoxic and apoptotic abilities of anticancer drugs, including Vincristine, Vinblastine, and Doxorubicin²³. Similarly, aqueous extracts and volatile oils from *M. fruticosa* displayed tumor prevention activity against human colon tumor cells, mammary carcinoma F7, and the human glioblastoma multiform cell line (U-87 MG)^{24,25}.

In Lebanon, twelve *Teucrium* and eleven *Micromeria* species were reported to grow widely in the mount region²⁶. However, none of these plants were evaluated for its anticancer or other biological effect. In our previous work, the volatile oil of *Micromeria fruticosa* was analyzed and evaluated for its antimicrobial activity. Accordingly, this study aimed to evaluate the in vitro anticancer activities of *M. fruticosa* and *T. polium*, grown in Lebanon, against human breast cancer cell lines (MCF7) and human lung carcinoma cell lines (A549). In addition, we also aimed to determine their beneficial use as adjuvant to anticancer drugs.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Plant materials

The aerial parts of *Micromeria fruticosa* and *Teucrium polium* were collected from a rocky mountain in the Lebanese Bekaa valley (1300m above sea level) during their full flowering period on July 2017. The plants were authenticated by Dr. Ali Chakas (Botanist from the Lebanese University, Faculty of Science). A voucher specimen of each plant was deposited in the herbarium of the Faculty of Pharmacy at the Beirut Arab University and give the specimen number Mf-9-17 & Tp-10-17 respectively.

Preparation of plant extract

The air-dried and ground aerial parts of *M. fruticosa* and *T. polium* were subjected to excessive alcoholic extraction at room temperature until exhaustion.

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The residues were removed by filtration. *M. fruticosa* extract (A) and that of *T. polium* (B) were concentrated using a rotary evaporator under reduced pressure at 35-40°C and then lyophilized into powders.

Chemicals

All organic solvents for column chromatography (CC) and thin-layer chromatography (TLC) (petroleum ether, ethyl acetate, and methanol) were analytical grade and purchased from Sigma-Aldrich® (Germany). The alumina used was Neutral alumina 507 (for CC) and Silica-gel GF254 (for preparative TLC) that were purchased from Fluka® (Switzerland). TLC was performed on pre-coated silica gel 60 F254 purchased from ALUGRAM® SIL G (Germany). Methanol was used for recrystallization and LC-MS, while UV analysis was HPLC-grade purchased from Sigma-Aldrich® (Germany).

Separation of crude extract

Crude extracts of A and B were separated using column chromatography (silica gel, 350 g, column diameter 3.5 cm). Elution was carried out with gradient mixtures of petroleum ether (PE) and ethyl acetate (eluent from 20% to 100% EtOAc), and then continued with EtOAc and methanol (from 5% to 60% methanol) to give 22 fractions (A1-A22) for *Micromeria fruticosa* (extract A) and 43 fractions (B1-B43) for *Teucrium polium* (extract B). Each fraction was analyzed using TLC analysis, detected by UV lamp, and sprayed with different spray reagents to be visualized and to suggest the chemical class. Based on TLC analysis (Rf, shape, and spot color), similar fractions were combined together for further separation through CC to yield the sub fractions. The physical and chemical class of each fraction are shown in Table 1.

Cell culture

Human breast cancer cell lines (MCF7) and human lung carcinoma cell lines (A549) were purchased from the American Type Culture Collection (ATCC; Manassas, VA) and maintained in DMEM high glucose media (Sigma Chemical Company) supplemented with 0.1mg/ml streptomycin, 100 U/mL penicillin, and 10% fetal bovine serum (FBS). Cell lines were maintained at 37°C under an atmosphere containing 5% CO₂.

Table 1: Physical and chemical properties of the separated fractions.

Fraction	Elution solvent	TLC screening	Number of compounds	Expected chemical class
A7	(PE/ EtOAc80:20)	Yellow with conc NH ₃	1 major 2 minor	Flavonoid
A9	(PE/ EtOAc70:30)	Yellow with conc NH ₃	1 major 1 minor	Flavonoid
A10	(PE/ EtOAc65:35)	Yellow with conc NH ₃	1 major 1 minor	Flavonoid
A11	PE/ EtOAc70:30	Yellow with conc NH ₃	1 major 1 minor	Flavonoid
A15	PE/ EtOAc50:50	Yellow with conc NH ₃	2 major 1 minor	Flavonoid
B2	PE/ ETAC70:30	Yellow with conc NH ₃	1 major 2 minor	Flavonoid
B5	PE/EtAc60:40	Yellow with conc NH ₃	1 major 2 minor	Flavonoid
B10	PE/EtAc30:70	Orange with Dragendorff's	1 major	Alkaloid
B12	PE/EtAc25:75)	Yellow with conc NH ₃	2 major 3 minor	Flavonoid
B13	PE/EtAc20:80)	Yellow with conc NH ₃	1 major 2 minor	Flavonoid
B14	(PE/EtAc15:85	Yellow with conc NH ₃	1 major 1 minor	Flavonoid

Treatment of cells

A 1mg/mL stock solution of lyophilized plant extracts in DMSO was prepared, while the stock solution of the chemotherapeutic drug Cisplatin (CDDP) was diluted in NaCl. Solutions were immediately sterilized by filtration through a sterile membrane filter with a porosity of 0.2 micron. Different concentrations were prepared by diluting the stock solution with DMSO. Cells were plated in 96-well micro titer plates, at a concentration of 105 cells/well, and incubated in a humidified environment of 37°C with a 5% CO₂ incubator for cell adhesion. The anti proliferative activity was carried out by measuring the cell viability of the MCF7 and A549 cell lines 72 hours after the treatment with increasing concentrations of total extracts A and B (10, 20, 30, 40, 50, and 100 µg/ml), their separated fractions (100, 150, 200, and 250 µg/ml), and cisplatin (2, 4, 8, 10, 20, and 40 µg/ml). Similarly, MCF-7 and A549 cells were treated with combinations of total extracts A and B (20 µg/ml) and cisplatin (2 µg/ml). Untreated cells (the control) for plant extracts received DMSO, while cisplatin received NaCl.

Cell viability assay

Cells were plated in 96-well plates at a density of 10,000 cells/well and treated with tested compounds and total extracts at different concentrations for 72 hours. A 3-(4, 5-dimethylthiazol-2-yl)-2,5-diphenyltetrazolium bromide (MTT) solution (5 mg/ml) was added to evaluate mitochondrial viability²⁷. After 4hrs. of incubation at 37°C, the supernatants were removed and 100 µl of isopropanol-HCL was added to each well to solubilize the formazan crystals. The optical density, determined at 595 nm, measured the signal and the background. The experiment was repeated three times independently, each time in triplicates. The percentage of viability for each sample was calculated using the obtained OD values within the following formula: Percentage of viability (%) = OD sample/OD control × 100. The cytotoxicity of each compound is expressed as an IC₅₀ value. The IC₅₀ value is the concentration of test agents that caused a 50% inhibition or cell death averaged from at least three separate experiments. This value was obtained by plotting percentage inhibition versus concentration of compounds.

Statistical analysis

All results were presented as the mean ± standard error of the mean (SEM). Statistical analyses were performed using GraphPadPrism 8 (GraphPad Software Inc., CA, USA). Two-way ANOVA was used to calculate sample probability values (p); p ≤ 0.05 was considered statistically significant. Groups that are significantly different from the control are indicated in the Figures as * p ≤ 0.05, ** p ≤ 0.01, *** p ≤ 0.001, and p ≤ 0.0001.

RESULTS

Both the total extracts of *Micromeria fruticosa* (A) and *Teucrium polium* (B) and their separated fractions were found to reduce cell survival of MCF7 and A549 cancer cells.

The MTT assay was used to determine the proliferation rate of cancerous cell lines (MCF7 and A549) treated with different concentrations of total plant extracts A and B and their fractions. Results revealed that the cytotoxic activity of the total extract of the two plants were higher than their separated fractions. IC₅₀ of extract A was 28.52 ± 1.455 and 26.47 ± 1.423 µg/ml on MCF7 and A549 cell lines, respectively. While IC₅₀ of extract B was 41.07 ± 1.614 and 27.97 ± 1.447 µg/ml on MCF7 and A549 cell lines, respectively (Table 2 and Figure 1). Most of the separated fractions from A and B showed dose-dependent inhibitory activity on the cancerous cell lines. The most effective fraction isolated from extract A was 'A15' (IC₅₀=186.67 ± 2.271 on MCF7), and the most effective fraction separated from extract B was 'B5' (IC₅₀=170.8 ± 2.232 and 141.9 ± 2.152 on MCF7 and A549 cells, respectively) (Table 2).

Table 2: IC50 values of total extracts A and B and their fractions (µg/ml).

Compounds	MCF7 IC ₅₀ ± SEM (µg/ml)	A549 IC ₅₀ ± SEM (µg/ml)
Total extract A	28.52 ± 1.455	26.47 ± 1.423
A7	>250	>250
A9	>250	>250
A10	>250	>250
A11	>250	>250
A15	186.7 ± 2.271	>250
Total extract B	41.07 ± 1.614	27.97 ± 1.447
B2	>250	>250
B5	170.8 ± 2.232	141.9 ± 2.152
B10	223.7 ± 2.350	208.7 ± 2.319
B12	>250	>250
B13	>250	>250
B14	>250	>250
Cisplatin	14.74 ± 1.168	5.299 ± 0,7242

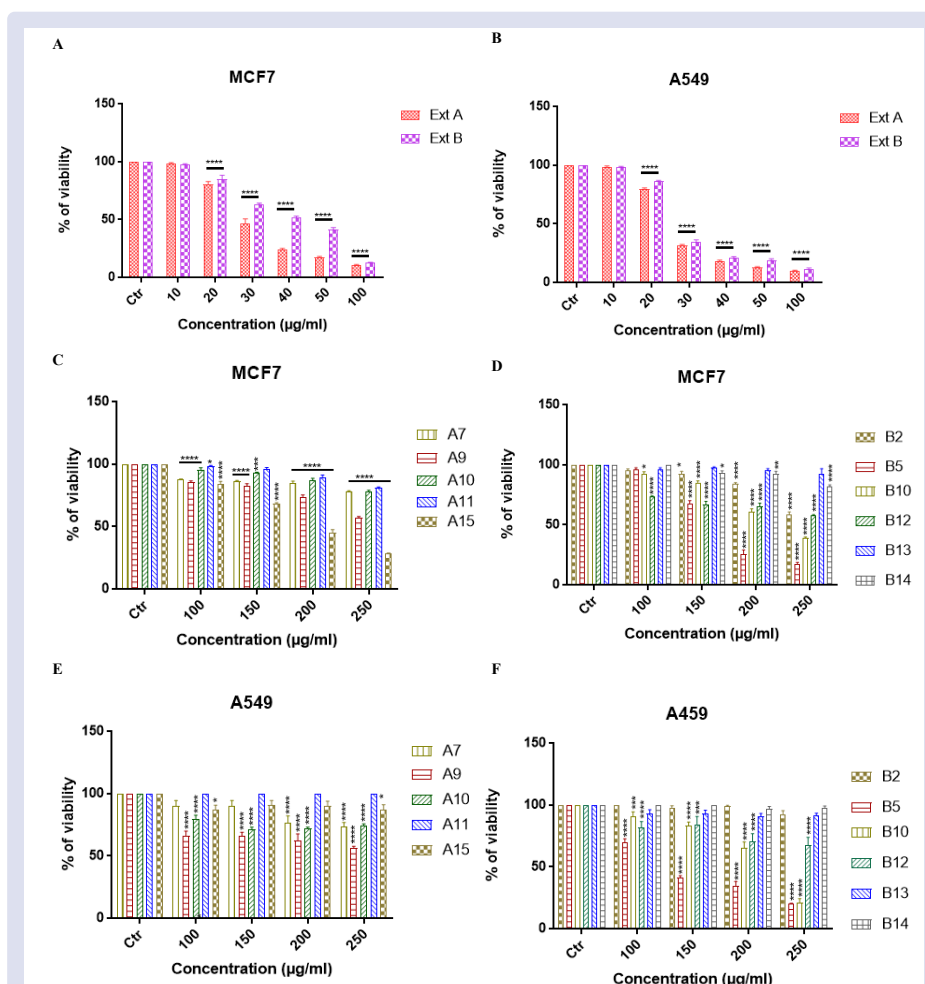


Figure 1: Total extract A and B and their separated fractions enhance the inhibition of proliferation in MCF7 and A549 cancer cell lines. A, F. MCF7 and A549 cells were incubated for 72 hrs with different concentrations (0-250 µg/ml) of total extract A and B and fractions. Cell viability was estimated by MTT test. Percent of the viability is calculated through the formula: % viability = OD (optical density) of treated cells / OD of non-treated cells × 100. Each column represents different concentrations of extracts. (A) Represents the total extract A and B in MCF7; (B) represents the total extract A and B in A549; (C) represents the separated fractions of extract A in MCF7; (D) represents the separated fractions of extract B in MCF7; (E) represents the separated fractions of extract A in A549; (F) represents the separated fractions of extract B in A549. Experiments were conducted in triplicates and results represent the mean ± SEM (standard error of the mean) of n=3 independent experiments. The resultant P-value was expressed as * P < 0.05; ** P < 0.01; P*** < 0.001 was considered to be statistically highly significant and **** P < 0.0001 extremely significant (Two-way ANOVA). Ctr, control; Ext A, *Micromeria fruticosa*; Ext B, *Teucrium polium*.

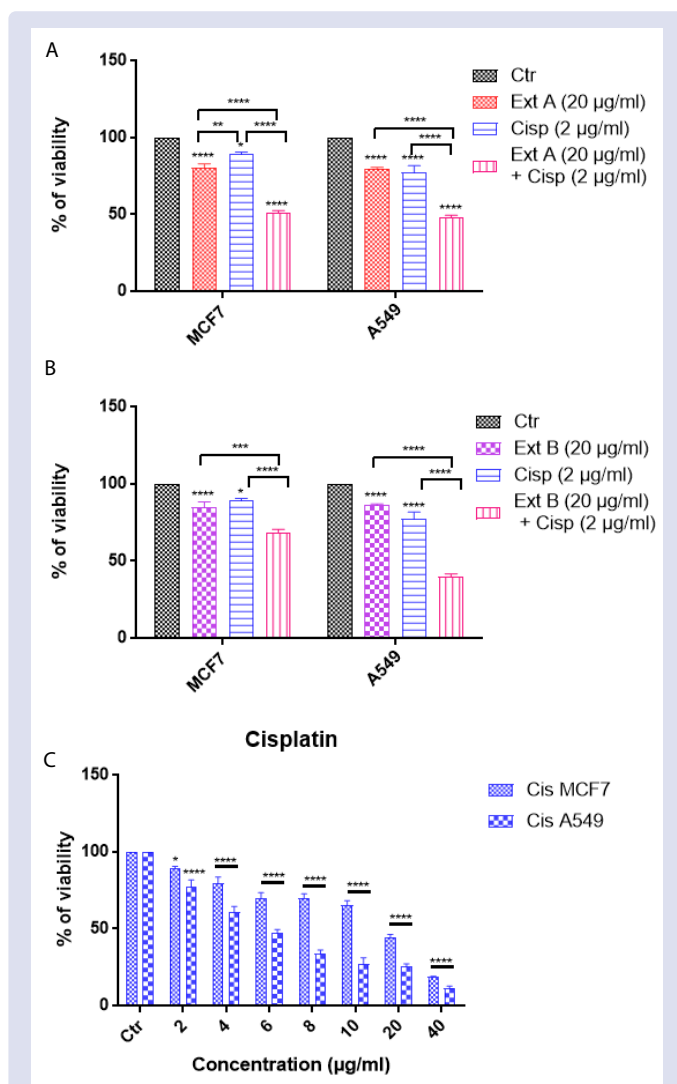


Figure 2: Effects of total extract A and B and/or cisplatin treatment on the cell viability of MCF7 and A549 cell lines. A, C. MCF7 and A549 cells were incubated for 72 hrs with different concentrations (0-40 µg/ml) of cisplatin and with 20 µg/ml of total extract A and B. (A) Represents the total extract A (20 µg/ml) and/or cisplatin (2 µg/ml) in MCF7 and in A549 cell lines; (B) Represents the total extract B (20 µg/ml) and/or cisplatin (2 µg/ml) in MCF7 and in A549 cell lines. (C) Represents the total extract A (20 µg/ml) and/or cisplatin (2 µg/ml) B in A549; (B) Represents the different concentrations (0-40 µg/ml) of cisplatin in MCF7 and in A549 cell lines. Experiments were conducted in triplicates and results represent the mean \pm SEM (standard error of the mean) of $n = 3$ independent experiments. The resultant P-value was expressed as * $P < 0.05$; ** $P < 0.01$; *** $P < 0.001$ was considered to be statistically highly significant and **** $P < 0.0001$ extremely significant (Two-way ANOVA). Cisp, cisplatin; Ext A, *Micromeria fruticosa*; Ext B, *Teucrium Polium*.

Co-treatment with cisplatin and plant extracts resulted in potentiation of the inhibitory effects on MCF7 and A549 cell viability. In the same method, the anti-proliferative activity of cisplatin on MCF7 and A549 cell lines was performed after 72 hours of treatment. The results showed that cisplatin inhibited the proliferation of MCF7 and A549 cancer cells in a concentration-dependent manner (Figure 2C). It was more effective against A549 cancer cells ($IC_{50} = 5.299 \pm 0.7242 \mu\text{g/ml}$) than MCF7 cancer cells ($IC_{50} = 14.74 \pm 1.168 \mu\text{g/ml}$). To investigate whether the combination of cisplatin and plant extracts may have a greater anticancer effect on the cell lines (A549 and MCF7) than single treatment, cells were treated with a low dose of cisplatin 2 µg/ml and low concentrations (20 µg/ml) of total plant extracts. The doses for

cisplatin and plant extracts were based on results that revealed a low level of toxicity on cell lines. Results demonstrated that the combination treatment significantly enhanced the inhibitory effects on cell viability compared to total extract or cisplatin treatments alone in the MCF7 and A549 cell lines (Figure 3A and 3B). Taken together, these results showed that total extracts A and B boosted the cytotoxic effect of cisplatin against the two cancer cell lines.

DISCUSSION

Due to the damaging side effects of chemotherapy, alternative modalities to prevent and treat malignancies are highly demanded and desired. Screening of medicinal plants have been a promising approach to complement or possibly reduce the adverse side effects of chemotherapy²². This study showed that both *Micromeria Fruticosa* and *Ticorium polium* extract have dose-dependent inhibitory effect on the cancerous cell lines MCF7 and A549, with IC_{50} of 28.52 ± 1.455 and $26.47 \pm 1.423 \mu\text{g/ml}$ for extract A, 41.07 ± 1.614 and $27.97 \pm 1.447 \mu\text{g/ml}$ for extract B on MCF7 and A549 cell lines, respectively. In addition, both plant extracts A and B significantly potentiated the inhibitory effect of cisplatin on cell viability compared with total extract or cisplatin alone on MCF7 and A549 cell lines. According to American National Cancer Institute, an IC_{50} of 30 µg/ml or less has been identified as the criteria to determine significant cytotoxic activity of a plant extract²⁸. Interestingly, our results identified lower values with IC_{50} 28.52 ± 1.455 and $26.47 \pm 1.423 \mu\text{g/ml}$ for extract A, 41.07 ± 1.614 and $27.97 \pm 1.447 \mu\text{g/ml}$ for extract B on MCF7 and A549 cell lines respectively. The cytotoxic activity of *T. polium* were reported against melanoma (IC_{50} value $91.2 \mu\text{g/ml}$)²⁹ and human breast adenocarcinoma MDA-MB-361 cells (IC_{50} value of $200 \mu\text{g/ml}$)²², but no data were found against MCF7 or A549 cell lines. Other studies reported that extract of *M. fruticosa* exerted ant proliferative activity with IC_{50} of 175 and $200 \mu\text{g/ml}$ against U-87 MG (glioblastoma multiform) cell lines²⁵.

Accordingly, the inhibition effect of Lebanese plant species (*Micromeria* & *Ticorium*) were much potent than other plants like *Salvia* ($IC_{50} = 57-76 \mu\text{g/ml}$) against human melanoma cell lines (A375) and human foreskin fibroblast (HFF) cell lines³⁰. The differences in IC_{50} between current results and previously reported studies may be attributed to the methods of extraction, different ecological factors, and cell type specificity. The augmentation of anti-proliferative activity of Cisplatin when co-administered with *Micromeria* or *Teucrium* extract suggested the plant as a potential adjuvant remedy in cancer therapy. Further studies are needed to explore the bioactive components in both plants responsible for this cytotoxic activity and possible mechanism of interactions.

CONCLUSION

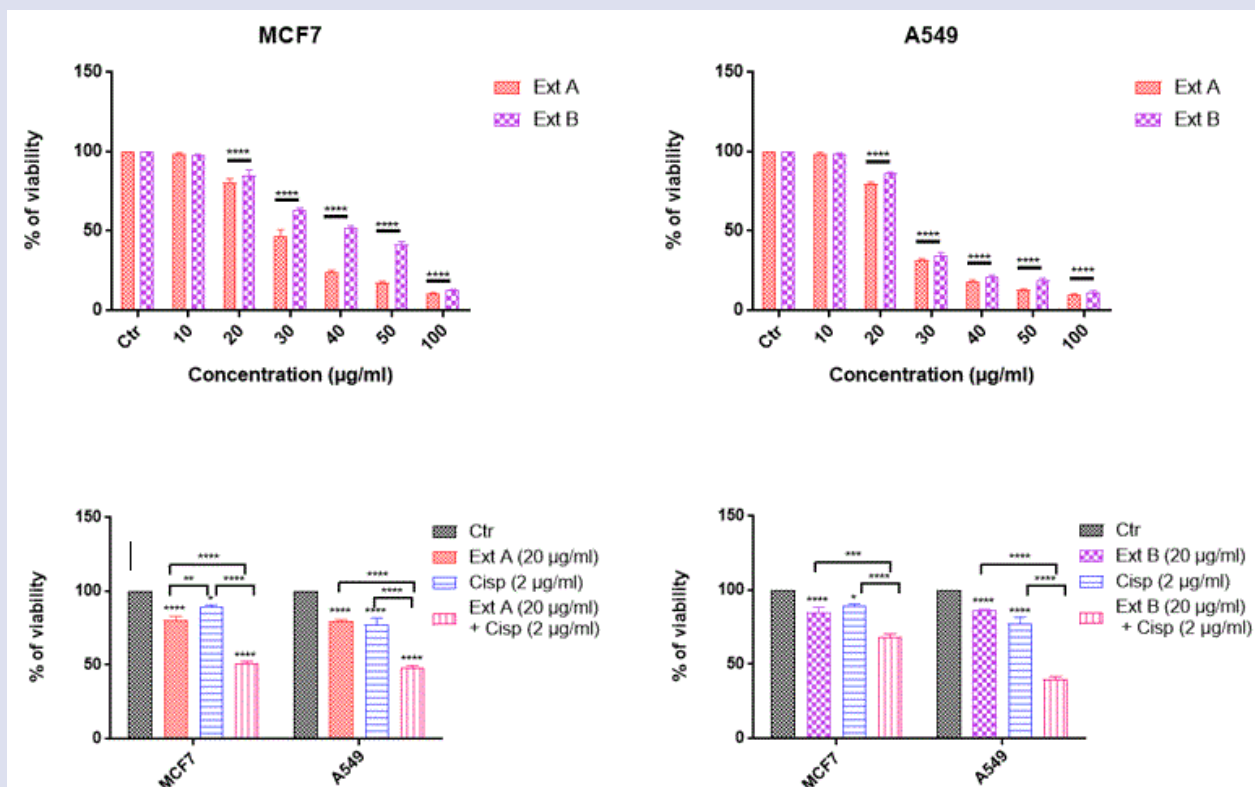
This is the first study to report the anticancer activity of *Micromeria fruticosa* and *Teucrium polium* plants in Lebanon. Both plants showed high inhibitory activity against MCF7 and A549 cancer cell lines with IC_{50} below $30 \mu\text{g/ml}$. More interestingly, both plants significantly boosted the activity of cisplatin at low doses, suggesting the plants as new potential remedies in the cancer therapy.

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GRAPHICAL ABSTRACT



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