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Chapter 5: Synergistic and Mechanistic Neuroprotection: *Ginkgo biloba* and *Gastrodia elata* in Combination Therapy

Dr. Atchutuni V S Ravi Sai Nadh[1], Sk. Iaefath Naaz[2], Mohammed Rehan[3], Km. Shweta Singh[4]

[1, 2]*Department of Pharmacology, KVSR Siddhartha College of Pharmaceutical Sciences, Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh, India*

[3]*Pharm D, Integral University, Lucknow, India*

[4]*Amity Institute of Pharmacy, Amity University, Lucknow, 226010, UP, India.*

Corresponding Author

Dr. Atchutuni V S Ravi Sai Nadh

Email: *a2zravisai@gmail.com*

Abstract

Neurodegenerative diseases, characterized by progressive neuronal damage, represent a significant global health challenge. Effective therapeutic strategies are urgently needed to preserve neuronal structure and function, thereby mitigating neurological decline. This report examines the individual neuroprotective profiles of *Ginkgo biloba* and *Gastrodia elata*, two prominent traditional herbal medicines, and explores the compelling theoretical basis for their synergistic effects in combination therapy.

Ginkgo biloba exerts its neuroprotective actions primarily through potent antioxidant, anti-inflammatory, and anti-apoptotic activities. It also significantly enhances cerebral blood flow, modulates neurotransmitter systems, and reduces amyloid-beta aggregation. *Gastrodia elata*, conversely, demonstrates robust antioxidant, anti-inflammatory, and anti-apoptotic properties, complemented by unique GABAergic enhancement, promotion of brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF), activation of the PI3K/Akt pathway, and modulation of brain protein metabolism.

The analysis reveals substantial complementary and overlapping mechanisms between these two herbs. Their combined administration is hypothesized to offer a broader, more comprehensive therapeutic strategy, simultaneously addressing multiple facets of neurodegeneration such as oxidative stress, inflammation, excitotoxicity, and impaired cerebral circulation. This multi-target approach aligns well with the complex pathophysiology of neurological disorders, suggesting that the combined therapeutic outcome could surpass the sum of their individual contributions. While preclinical evidence supports the individual neuroprotective effects of both herbs and the synergistic potential of *Ginkgo* with other agents, dedicated clinical trials specifically investigating the *Ginkgo biloba* and *Gastrodia elata* combination are essential to validate these theoretical advantages and translate them into effective clinical applications.

Keywords: *GABAergic, neuroprotective, PI3K/Akt pathway, excitotoxicity, cerebral, brain-derived neurotrophic factor.*

1. Introduction to Neuroprotection

1.1. Definition, Importance, and Pathological Context (1-4)

Neuroprotection is defined as the preservation of neuronal structure and/or function through the prevention or mitigation of neurological damage or degeneration. The fundamental objective of neuroprotection is to prevent or slow disease progression and secondary injuries by halting or at least slowing the loss of neurons. The importance of this field stems from its potential to safeguard brain health, thereby enhancing the quality of life for individuals affected by a wide range of neurological conditions. Neuroprotection is a widely investigated treatment option for numerous central nervous system (CNS) disorders, including neurodegenerative diseases such as Alzheimer's disease (AD) and Parkinson's disease, as well as acute conditions like stroke, traumatic brain injury, and spinal cord injury.

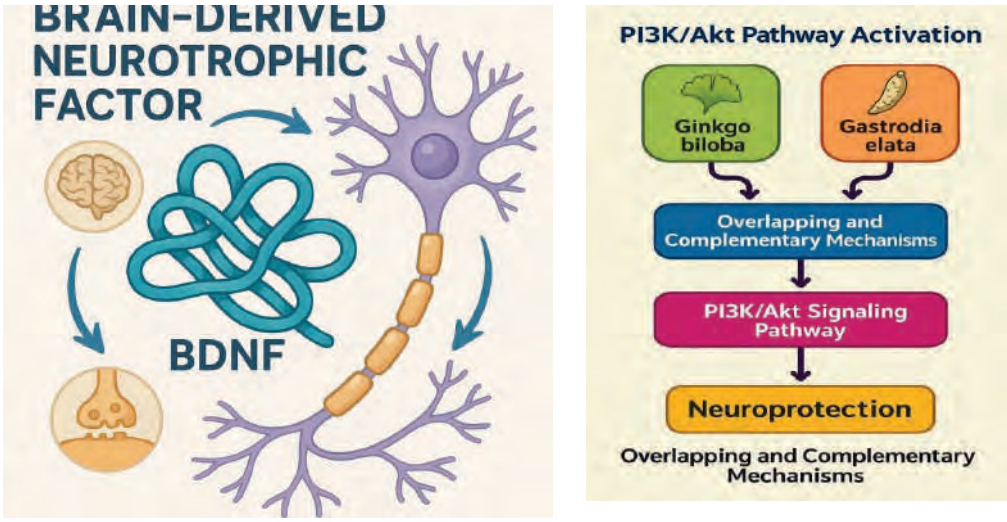


Fig. 5.1: Overlapping and Complementary Mechanisms

Despite the diverse clinical manifestations observed across various CNS disorders, many of the underlying mechanisms driving neurodegeneration are remarkably similar. These common pathological processes include, but are not limited to, decreased delivery of oxygen and glucose to the brain, energy failure, heightened oxidative stress, mitochondrial dysfunction, excitotoxicity, inflammatory changes, iron accumulation, and protein aggregation. Among these, oxidative stress and excitotoxicity are frequently targeted by neuroprotective treatments due to their strong association with CNS disorders and their capacity for synergistic degradation when combined.

The inherent complexity of neurological damage, characterized by a confluence of interconnected pathological pathways, underscores a critical limitation of therapeutic approaches that target only a single pathway. Such monotherapies may prove insufficient to effectively combat the multifaceted pathology of neurodegenerative diseases. This complexity provides a foundational argument for investigating and developing multi-target therapeutic

strategies. Herbal medicines, by their very nature, contain diverse active compounds that can simultaneously influence multiple biological pathways. This characteristic supports the exploration of combination therapies, such as the co-administration of *Ginkgo biloba* and *Gastrodia elata*, which can concurrently address several contributing pathological factors. This comprehensive approach holds the potential to yield a more robust and comprehensive neuroprotective effect than either a single-target pharmaceutical or a single-herb therapy alone. This perspective also helps explain why conventional, often single-target, pharmacotherapies frequently offer limited symptomatic relief or fail to halt disease progression. Neuroprotective strategies are broadly categorized into pharmacological interventions, such as antioxidants, anti-inflammatory agents, and neurotrophic factors, and non-pharmacological methods, including lifestyle modifications, regular exercise, cognitive training, and stress management techniques. Emerging therapies, including gene therapy and stem cell therapy, also present promising avenues for future development.

1.2. Fundamental Mechanisms of Neuronal Damage and Neuroprotection (5-7)

The intricate cascade of events leading to neuronal damage involves several critical mechanisms. Oxidative stress, characterized by an imbalance between the production of reactive oxygen species (ROS) and the body's antioxidant defenses, is a pervasive contributor to neuronal injury. Inflammation, an immune response intended for protection, can paradoxically lead to significant tissue damage within the delicate neural environment. Excitotoxicity, resulting from the overstimulation of neurons by excitatory neurotransmitters like glutamate, can trigger a cascade of events leading to neuronal cell death. Mitochondrial dysfunction compromises the cellular energy production, leaving neurons vulnerable to various insults. Finally, apoptosis, or programmed cell death, represents a common endpoint for neurons subjected to diverse pathological stressors.

Neuroprotective modalities aim to counteract these damaging processes through various mechanisms:

- **Antioxidants** directly neutralize free radicals, thereby reducing oxidative stress. Examples include vitamins C and E, and Coenzyme Q10.

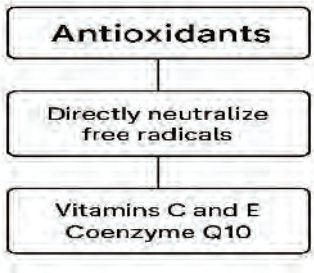


Fig. 5.2: Role of Antioxidants

- **Anti-inflammatory Agents** mitigate inflammatory responses and promote tissue repair.

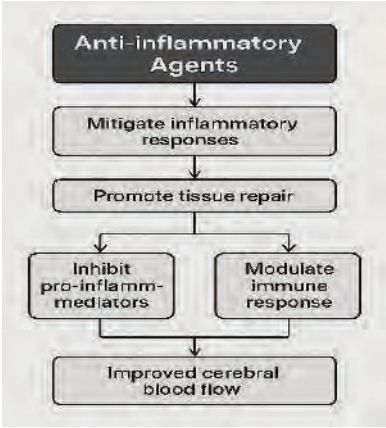


Fig. 5.3: Inflammatory Mechanisms

- **Neurotrophic Factors**, such as Brain-Derived Neurotrophic Factor (BDNF), are proteins essential for supporting neuronal survival, growth, and differentiation.

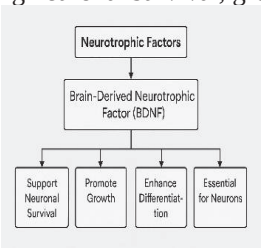


Fig. 5.4: BDNF Mechanisms

- **Glutamate Antagonists** limit excitotoxicity by blocking specific glutamate receptors.

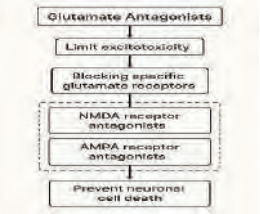


Fig. 5.5: Glutamate Antagonists Mechanisms

- **Modulation of Signaling Pathways** involves interventions targeting key intracellular cascades, including PI3K/Akt, Nrf2, NF-κB, MAPK, and Wnt/β-catenin, which are crucial for cell survival, stress response, and inflammation.

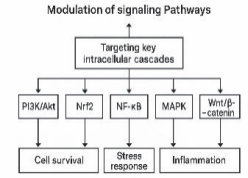


Fig. 5.6: Glutamate Antagonists Mechanisms

- **Anti-apoptotic Effects** encompass strategies designed to prevent programmed cell death, a frequent outcome of various neuronal insults.

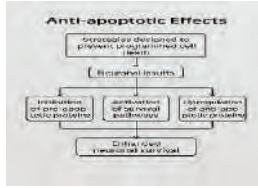


Fig. 5.7: Anti-apoptotic Effects

Improved Cerebral Blood Flow (8) enhances the delivery of vital oxygen and glucose to brain tissue, which is fundamental for neuronal function and survival.

The relationship between oxidative stress and inflammation is not merely one of co-occurrence but often a vicious causal loop. Oxidative stress can actively trigger and exacerbate inflammatory responses, and in turn, inflammatory processes can generate additional reactive oxygen species, perpetuating neuronal damage. Therefore, therapeutic agents possessing both potent antioxidant and anti-inflammatory properties are particularly valuable. Such agents can effectively disrupt this destructive cycle at multiple points, offering a more comprehensive and potentially synergistic protective effect. This multi-pronged attack on interconnected pathologies is a hallmark of effective neuroprotection, especially crucial in the context of chronic neurodegenerative conditions where multiple pathways contribute to disease progression.

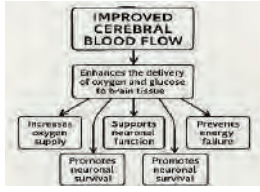


Fig. 5.8: Cerebral Blood Flow

1.3. *Ginkgo biloba*: Neuroprotective Profile and Mechanisms (9-16)

3.1. Key Bioactive Constituents and Standardized Extracts

Ginkgo biloba extract (GBE) is one of the most extensively investigated herbal remedies globally for cognitive disorders and Alzheimer's disease (AD). For many years, it has been widely utilized in Europe and other regions as a supportive therapy and for the prevention of cognitive decline.

The most frequently studied and clinically employed standardized extract is EGb 761. This extract is meticulously standardized to contain 24% flavonoid glycosides and 6% terpene lactones , with stringent quality control measures ensuring that ginkgolic acids remain below 5 ppm. Ginexin-F®, another standardized *Ginkgo biloba* extract, shares a similar compositional equivalence to EGb 761, allowing for the relevance of findings from EGb 761 studies to be extended to Ginexin.

The primary active ingredients contributing to *Ginkgo biloba*'s pharmacological effects fall into two major groups:

- **Flavonoids:** These include quercetin, kaempferol, iso-rhamnetin, myricetin, laricitrin, mearnsetin, apigenin glycosides, and biflavonoids such as ginkgetin and isoginkgetin. Flavonoids are largely responsible for the potent antioxidant properties observed in *Ginkgo* extracts.
- **Terpene Lactones:** This group encompasses ginkgolides (specifically A, B, C, and J) and bilobalide. Ginkgolide B, in particular, has demonstrated significant neuroprotective effects.

Pharmacokinetic studies indicate that the key terpene lactones exhibit good oral bioavailability. Following oral administration of a *Ginkgo biloba* solution, the mean absolute bioavailability was reported as 80% for ginkgolide A, 88% for ginkgolide B, and 79% for bilobalide. The extract is subsequently excreted via expiration, urine, and feces.

The consistent use of standardized extracts like EGb 761 across numerous preclinical and clinical studies is a critical factor for the reproducibility of research findings and the successful translation of these findings into clinical practice. Herbal medicines, by their very nature, can exhibit significant variability in the concentration of their active compounds due to differences in growth conditions, harvesting methods, and processing techniques. Standardization mitigates this inherent variability, thereby enhancing the reliability and comparability of research outcomes. This consistency is paramount for developing a reliable therapeutic agent. Conversely, this also implies that non-standardized *Ginkgo* preparations might yield inconsistent or less effective results, which could contribute to the mixed outcomes sometimes observed in clinical trials evaluating *Ginkgo biloba*.

3.2. Molecular and Cellular Mechanisms of Neuroprotection (17-18)

Ginkgo biloba exerts its neuroprotective effects through a multifaceted array of molecular and cellular mechanisms:

- **Antioxidant Activity:** *Ginkgo biloba* directly scavenges reactive oxygen species (ROS) and free radicals, significantly reducing oxidative stress, a major contributor to neuronal damage. It also augments the endogenous antioxidant system by increasing levels of Nrf2, superoxide dismutase (SOD), catalase, glutathione (GSH) reductase, and gamma-glutamylcysteinyl synthetase. The flavonoid fraction is largely responsible for these antioxidant properties.

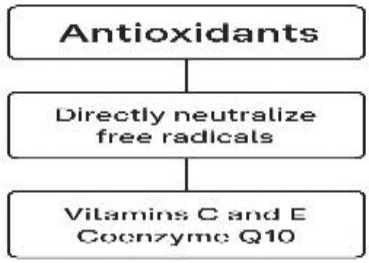


Fig. 5.9: GSH

- **Anti-inflammatory Effects:** *Ginkgo biloba* inhibits the release of neuroinflammatory mediators such as myeloperoxidase (MPO), TNF-α, IL-6, MAPK, and COX-2. It suppresses TNF-α signaling via the protein-1 pathway and inactivates NF-κB.

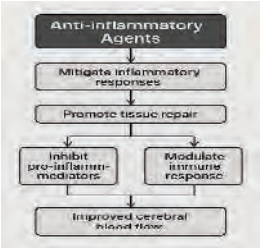


Fig. 5.10: COX

- m **Anti-apoptotic Effects:** It protects neurons from apoptosis, a programmed cell death pathway implicated in various neurological disorders. Ginkgolide B has been specifically shown to prevent mitochondrial dysfunction and reduce ROS generation, thereby itigating apoptosis.

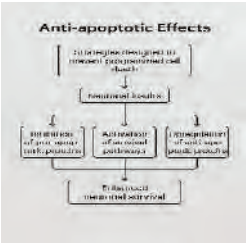


Fig. 5.11: GSH

Mitochondrial Protection: *Ginkgo biloba* protects against mitochondrial damage and dysfunction. EGb 761 and bilobalide have been observed to up-regulate the gene expression of mitochondrial NADH dehydrogenase.

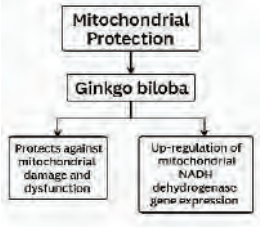


Fig. 5.12: *Gingko biloba* Mechanism

- **Modulation of Neurotransmitters:** It inhibits the reuptake of serotonin, dopamine, and norepinephrine. It also reversibly inhibits monoamine oxidase A (MAO-A) and modestly inhibits anticholinesterase activity, leading to enhanced cholinergic transmission in the brain.

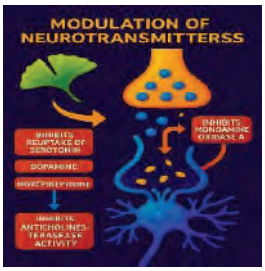


Fig. 5.13: Neuromodulation

- **Vasoactive/Cerebral Blood Flow Improvement:** *Ginkgo biloba* promotes vasodilation and improves cerebral blood flow and microcirculation. This action is achieved, in part, by stimulating the release of endogenous relaxing factors such as endothelium-derived relaxing factor and prostacyclin, and by antagonizing platelet-activating factor (PAF).

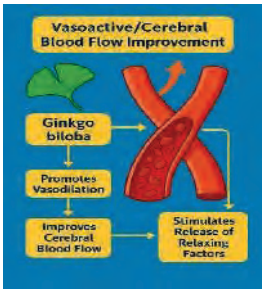


Fig. 5.14: PAF

Amyloid-β (Aβ) Modulation: Studies indicate that *Ginkgo biloba* reduces the aggregation and toxicity of amyloid-β, and may decrease its synthesis, a crucial aspect in Alzheimer's disease pathology.

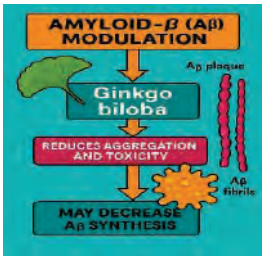


Fig. 5.15: Amyloid – B- Modulation

- **Neuroplasticity and Growth Factors:** It elevates CREB production through the activation of BDNF protein and generally promotes neuroplasticity.

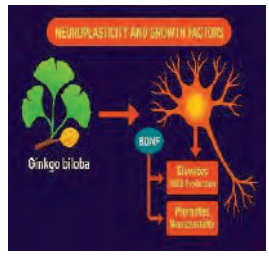


Fig. 5.16: Neuroplasticity

- **Signaling Pathways:** *Ginkgo biloba* interacts with and modulates various signaling pathways, including AMPK, NFκB, mTOR, Nrf-2, and Wnt/β-catenin. It also activates ERK1/2 and Akt signaling pathways, which are critical for cell survival and proliferation.

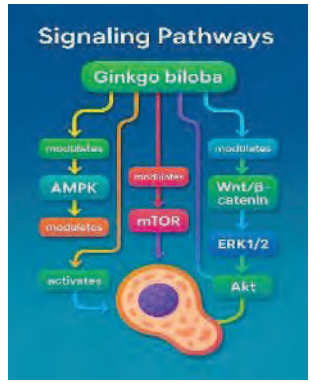


Fig. 5.17: Signaling Pathways

Table 5.1: Key Neuroprotective Mechanisms and Associated Bioactive Compounds of *Ginkgo biloba*

Neuroprotective Mechanism	Associated Compounds	Brief Description of Action
Antioxidant Activity	Flavonoids, EGb 761	Scavenges ROS, enhances endogenous antioxidant enzymes (Nrf2, SOD, GSH).
Anti-inflammatory Effects	Flavonoids, Terpene Lactones, EGb 761	Inhibits inflammatory mediators (TNF-α, IL-6), modulates NF-κB.
Anti-apoptotic Effects	Ginkgolide B, EGb 761	Protects neurons from programmed cell death, mitigates mitochondrial dysfunction.
Mitochondrial Protection	Bilobalide, Ginkgolide B, EGb 761	Prevents mitochondrial damage, up-regulates NADH dehydrogenase.
Neurotransmitter Modulation	EGb 761	Inhibits reuptake of serotonin, dopamine, norepinephrine; enhances cholinergic transmission.
Vasoactive/Cerebral Blood Flow Improvement	Terpene Lactones, EGb 761	Promotes vasodilation, antagonizes PAF, improves microcirculation.
Amyloid-β (Aβ) Modulation	EGb 761	Reduces Aβ aggregation and toxicity, may decrease Aβ synthesis.

Neuroprotective Mechanism	Associated Compounds	Brief Description of Action
Neuroplasticity/Growth Factors	EGb 761	Elevates CREB, activates BDNF protein.
Signaling Pathway Modulation	EGb 761	Modulates AMPK, NFκB, mTOR, Nrf-2, Wnt/β-catenin; activates ERK1/2, Akt.

1.4. *Gastrodia elata*: Neuroprotective Profile and Mechanisms (19-25)

1. 4.1. Key Bioactive Constituents and Traditional Uses

Gastrodia elata (GE), traditionally known as Tianma, is a highly regarded herbal medicine in traditional Chinese medicine. It has been extensively used in East Asian countries for centuries to address a wide spectrum of neurological disorders, including headaches, dizziness, spasms, epilepsy, strokes, forgetfulness, and paralysis.

The neuropharmacological effects of *Gastrodia elata* are attributed to its diverse array of bioactive compounds:

- **Gastrodin:** This glycoside analog is recognized as the major and primary bioactive component of *Gastrodia elata*.
- **Phenolic Derivatives:** Important phenolic compounds include p-hydroxybenzyl alcohol (p-HB), 4-hydroxybenzyl alcohol, benzyl alcohol, and vanillyl alcohol. Notably, p-HB is capable of penetrating the blood-brain barrier (BBB), which is crucial for its central nervous system activity.
- **Other Compounds:** Additional active constituents include gastrodial, parishin, various polysaccharides, and β-sitosterol.

Pharmacokinetic studies demonstrate that gastrodin exhibits favorable properties, being rapidly absorbed in the intestines, widely distributed throughout the body, and readily crossing the BBB. Its high bioavailability has been confirmed in various rat models, providing strong support for its therapeutic potential in CNS disorders.

1.4.2. Molecular and Cellular Mechanisms of Neuroprotection (26-30)

Gastrodia elata exerts its neuroprotective effects through a broad range of molecular and cellular mechanisms:

- **Antioxidant Activity:** *Gastrodia elata* effectively scavenges reactive oxygen species (ROS) andsignificantly alleviates oxidative stress, a key factor in neuronal damage.
- **Anti-inflammatory Effects:** It suppresses the production and release of pro-inflammatory cytokines, including TNF-α and IL-6. *Gastrodia* also modulates NF-κB pathways and inhibits microglial activation, thereby mitigating neuroinflammation.
- **Anti-apoptotic Effects:** *Gastrodia elata* protects neuronal cells against programmed cell death (apoptosis) induced by various stressors.

- **GABAergic Transmission Enhancement:** Gastrodin and vanillin are known to enhance GABAergic (inhibitory) neurotransmission. This action contributes to neuroprotection and is particularly beneficial in alleviating seizures and anxiety-related behaviors, by calming neuronal hyperexcitability.

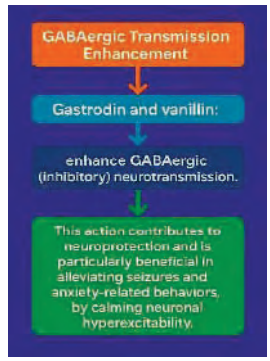


Fig. 5.18: GABAergic Transmission

- **Neurotrophic Factor Promotion:** *Gastrodia elata* promotes the secretion of brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF), a vital protein for neuronal survival and growth

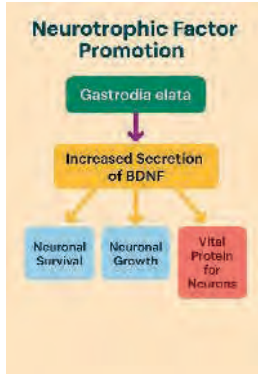


Fig. 5.19: Neurotropic Factor Promotion

- **Modulation of Signaling Pathways:** It activates the PI3K signaling pathway , which is crucial for cell survival. It also modulates other key pathways such as Nrf2, Wnt, nNOS, NF-κB, and MAPK , and is implicated in the Ras/Raf/MEK/ERK pathways

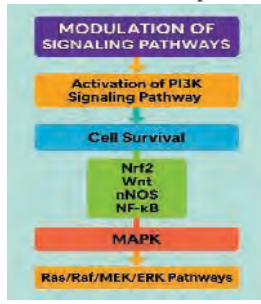


Fig. 5.20: Modulation

- **Nerve Regeneration and Survival:** *Gastrodia elata* actively promotes nerve regeneration and enhances neuronal survival.

Fig. 5.21: Nerve Generation

- **Modulation of Brain Protein Metabolism:** It modulates brain protein metabolism at the proteomic level, including down-regulating proteins related to neuronal growth cone control and synaptic activities, and up-regulating molecular chaperones.

Gastrodia elata, particularly its main compound gastrodin, is extensively cited for its direct neuroprotective effects, including antioxidant, anti-inflammatory, and anti-apoptotic properties, which directly preserve neuronal integrity. Simultaneously, *Gastrodia*'s significant role in enhancing GABAergic transmission and its traditional and researched sedative-hypnotic and anticonvulsant properties are highlighted. This unique combination of direct cellular protection (shielding neurons from oxidative stress, inflammation, and apoptosis) and profound neuromodulatory effects (specifically enhancing inhibitory GABAergic transmission) positions *Gastrodia elata* as a remarkably comprehensive neuroprotective agent. The neuromodulatory aspect is particularly critical in pathological conditions characterized by neuronal hyperexcitability, such as epilepsy or excitotoxicity-driven neuronal injury, where calming excessive neuronal activity can prevent further damage. This dual action suggests a broader therapeutic applicability and a distinct mechanistic contribution from *Gastrodia* compared to agents that focus solely on maintaining cellular integrity. **(31-36)**

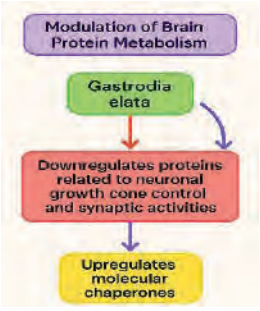
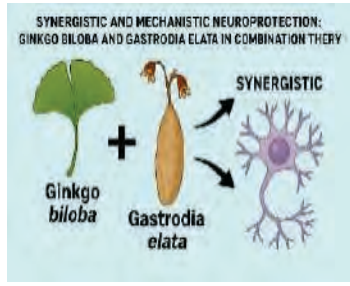


Fig. 5.22: Upregulation

Table 5.2: Key Neuroprotective Mechanisms and Associated Bioactive Compounds of *Gastrodia elata*

Neuroprotective Mechanism	Associated Compounds	Brief Description of Action
Antioxidant Activity	Gastrodin, p-HB	Scavenges ROS, alleviates oxidative stress.
Anti-inflammatory Effects	Gastrodin, Polysaccharides	Suppresses pro-inflammatory cytokines (TNF-α, IL-6), modulates NF-κB, inhibits microglial activation.
Anti-apoptotic Effects	Gastrodin, Parishin	Protects neuronal cells from programmed cell death.
GABAergic Transmission Enhancement	Gastrodin, Vanillin	Potentiates GABA receptor activity, enhancing inhibitory neurotransmission.
Neurotrophic Factor Promotion	Gastrodin	Promotes secretion of BDNF, supporting neuronal survival and growth.
Signaling Pathway Modulation	Gastrodin, p-HB	Activates PI3K, modulates Nrf2, Wnt, nNOS, NF-κB, MAPK, Ras/Raf/MEK/ERK pathways.
Nerve Regeneration and Survival	Gastrodin, GE active components	Promotes nerve regeneration and enhances neuronal survival.
Brain Protein Metabolism Modulation	GE active components	Modulates protein metabolism, including chaperones and stress-related proteins.

1.5. Synergistic and Mechanistic Effects in Combination Therapy (37-39)



1.5.1. Rationale for Combining Ginkgo and Gastrodia for Neuroprotection

The rationale for combining *Ginkgo biloba* and *Gastrodia elata* for neuroprotection is rooted in the complex and multifactorial nature of neurodegenerative diseases. Both herbs individually exhibit multi-target pharmacological activities , a characteristic that aligns well with the intricate pathogenesis of these disorders. Combining these two traditional herbal medicines offers an even broader spectrum of action, allowing for the simultaneous addressing of various pathological factors.

Conventional pharmacotherapies for neurological conditions often provide limited symptomatic relief and frequently fail to halt disease progression, underscoring the need for alternative or adjunctive strategies. Herbal combinations, by their inherent complexity and diverse compound profiles, may offer

valuable alternatives. For instance, *Ginkgo* has demonstrated benefits as an adjunct to conventional cholinesterase inhibitor therapy in Alzheimer's disease, suggesting its capacity to work synergistically with other neuroprotective agents.

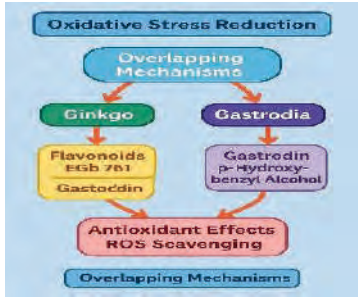
Neurodegenerative diseases are characterized by a confluence of multiple, often interconnected, pathological pathways, including oxidative stress, inflammation, excitotoxicity, and mitochondrial dysfunction. While both *Ginkgo biloba* and *Gastrodia elata* individually demonstrate the ability to target several of these distinct pathological pathways, the combination of these two herbs can be conceptualized as a sophisticated "multi-hit" strategy. This approach transcends simple additive effects, potentially leading to true synergy where the combined therapeutic outcome is greater than the sum of their individual contributions. This is because the active compounds from both herbs can simultaneously modulate entire networks of biological pathways rather than just isolated targets. For example, by concurrently reducing oxidative stress, mitigating inflammation, supporting mitochondrial function, improving cerebral blood flow, and modulating neurotransmission, the combination can launch a comprehensive attack on the multifactorial etiology of neurodegeneration. This holistic approach is particularly relevant for chronic, complex conditions like AD or Parkinson's disease, where a broad therapeutic strategy is more likely to be effective in slowing or reversing disease progression.

1.5.2. Overlapping and Complementary Molecular Pathways

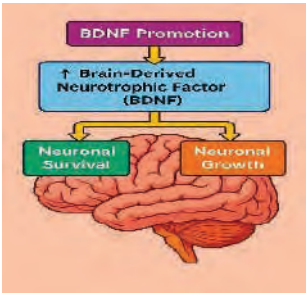
The potential for synergy between *Ginkgo biloba* and *Gastrodia elata* arises from both their shared and distinct neuroprotective mechanisms.

Overlapping Mechanisms:

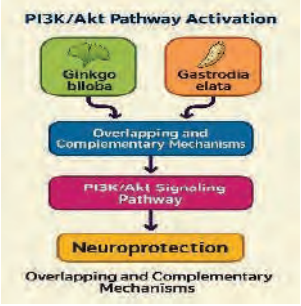
- **Oxidative Stress Reduction:** Both herbs are potent antioxidants, capable of scavenging ROS and enhancing endogenous antioxidant systems. *Ginkgo* achieves this through flavonoids and EGb 761 , while *Gastrodia* relies on gastrodin and p-hydroxybenzyl alcohol. This shared robust defense against oxidative damage could lead to a significantly enhanced protective effect, particularly given that oxidative stress and excitotoxicity have synergistic degrading effects when combined.



- **Anti-inflammation:** Both *Ginkgo* and *Gastrodia* actively mitigate neuroinflammation by modulating inflammatory mediators and pathways such as NF-κB. *Ginkgo* influences MPO, TNF-α, IL-6, MAPK, and COX-2 , while *Gastrodia* suppresses pro-inflammatory cytokines like TNF-α and IL-6 and inhibits microglial activation.
- **Anti-apoptosis:** Both herbs demonstrate the ability to protect neurons from programmed cell death (apoptosis).
- **BDNF Promotion:** Both *Ginkgo* and *Gastrodia* appear to promote the production or secretion of Brain-Derived Neurotrophic Factor (BDNF), a crucial neurotrophic factor for neuronal health.

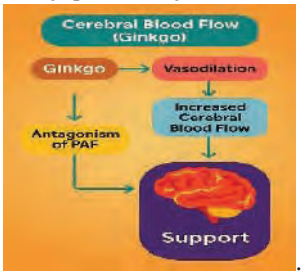


- **PI3K/Akt Pathway Activation:** Both herbs are implicated in activating the PI3K/Akt signaling pathway, which is known to be beneficial for neuronal proliferation, survival, and protection against amyloid-β neurotoxicity.



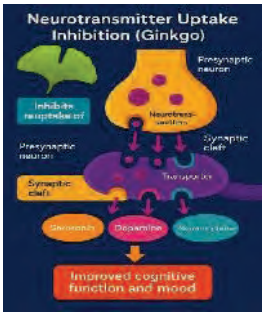
Complementary Mechanisms:

- **Cerebral Blood Flow (Ginkgo):** *Ginkgo biloba* uniquely improves cerebral blood flow and microcirculation by promoting vasodilation and antagonizing platelet-activating factor (PAF). This action can significantly enhance oxygen and nutrient delivery to brain regions, supporting overall neuronal health and recovery, particularly in ischemic conditions

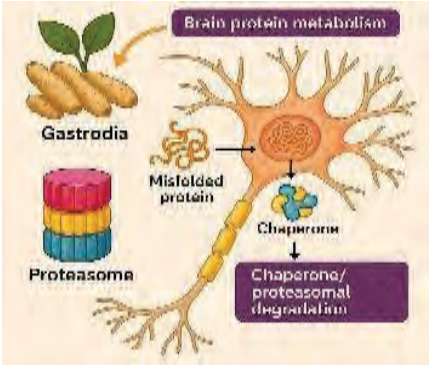


- **GABAergic Modulation (Gastrodia):** *Gastrodia elata*, especially its primary compound gastrodin, enhances GABAergic inhibitory neurotransmission. This is critical for calming neuronal hyperexcitability, which can contribute to excitotoxicity and widespread neuronal brain. damage.

- **Neurotransmitter Uptake Inhibition (Ginkgo):** *Ginkgo* inhibits the reuptake of serotonin, dopamine, and norepinephrine, and modulates cholinergic transmission. These actions can lead to improved cognitive function and mood.



- **Brain Protein Metabolism (Gastrodia):** *Gastrodia* modulates brain protein metabolism and chaperone/proteasomal degradation pathways , which could be crucial in addressing issues related to protein aggregation, a hallmark of many neurodegenerative diseases.



- **Amyloid-β Specificity (Ginkgo):** *Ginkgo* has more direct and established evidence of reducing amyloid-β aggregation and toxicity.

The synergistic potential of *Ginkgo* and *Gastrodia* extends beyond simple additive effects to a complex interplay that is best understood through the lens of "network pharmacology." This means that their collective active compounds do not merely target isolated molecules but rather modulate entire interconnected networks of biological pathways. For example, *Ginkgo*'s anti-inflammatory action (e.g., via NF-κB suppression) might reduce the overall inflammatory burden in the brain, thereby creating a less hostile microenvironment that allows *Gastrodia*'s BDNF-promoting effects to be more effective. Similarly, *Ginkgo*'s ability to improve cerebral blood flow could optimize the delivery and distribution of *Gastrodia*'s neuroprotective compounds to target brain regions. This "network" approach is particularly well-suited for complex, multifactorial diseases where single-target drugs often fall short, as it aims to restore system-level homeostatic balance rather than merely blocking a single problematic molecule. This strategy also aligns with the traditional Chinese medicine philosophy of using complex herbal formulas to treat complex conditions.

Table 5.3: Overlapping and Complementary Neuroprotective Pathways of *Ginkgo biloba* and *Gastrodia elata*

Neuroprotective Mechanism	*Ginkgo biloba* Contribution	*Gastrodia elata* Contribution	Synergistic Potential/Complementarity
Antioxidant	Yes (Flavonoids, EGb 761)	Yes (Gastrodin, p-HB)	Enhanced ROS scavenging and endogenous antioxidant system support, addressing oxidative stress from multiple angles.
Anti-inflammatory	Yes (EGb 761, NF-κB modulation)	Yes (Gastrodin, NF-κB modulation)	Comprehensive suppression of neuroinflammation by targeting diverse inflammatory mediators and pathways.
Anti-apoptotic	Yes (EGb 761, Ginkgolide B)	Yes (Gastrodin, Parishin)	More robust protection against programmed neuronal cell death from various insults.
Cerebral Blood Flow Modulation	Yes (Vasodilation, PAF antagonism)	No (Direct evidence not primary)	*Ginkgo*'s unique role in optimizing nutrient/oxygen delivery, potentially enhancing *Gastrodia* compound distribution.
GABAergic Modulation	No (Direct evidence not primary)	Yes (Gastrodin, Vanillin)	*Gastrodia*'s specific action in calming neuronal hyperexcitability complements overall neuroprotection.
BDNF Promotion	Yes (EGb 761)	Yes (Gastrodin)	Augmented neurotrophic support for neuronal survival, growth, and plasticity.
PI3K/Akt Pathway Activation	Yes (EGb 761)	Yes (Gastrodin)	Combined activation of a key pathway for cell survival, proliferation, and anti-Aβ neurotoxicity.
Neurotransmitter Reuptake Inhibition	Yes (Serotonin, Dopamine, Norepinephrine)	No (Direct evidence not primary)	*Ginkgo*'s specific role in balancing monoamine and cholinergic systems for cognitive function.

Neuroprotective Mechanism	*Ginkgo biloba* Contribution	*Gastrodia elata* Contribution	Synergistic Potential/Complementarity
Brain Protein Metabolism Modulation	No (Direct evidence not primary)	Yes (GE active components)	*Gastrodia*'s unique contribution to addressing protein aggregation, a hallmark of neurodegenerative diseases.
Amyloid-β Modulation	Yes (EGb 761)	No (Direct evidence not primary)	*Ginkgo*'s specific action in reducing Aβ aggregation and toxicity, a key AD pathology.

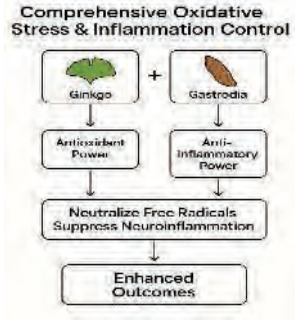
1.5.3. Potential for Enhanced Efficacy and Multi-Target Action

While the provided literature does not contain explicit clinical studies on the direct combination of *Ginkgo biloba* and *Gastrodia elata*, the existing body of research strongly supports the use of herbal medicines for their inherent multi-target features. The individual efficacy of *Ginkgo* and *Gastrodia* across multiple neuroprotective mechanisms suggests a strong potential for enhanced outcomes when combined.

Indirect evidence from other combination therapies provides a compelling argument for the synergistic potential of *Ginkgo* and *Gastrodia*. For instance, *Ginkgo* combined with donepezil, a conventional Alzheimer's disease drug, demonstrated superior cognitive outcomes and a greater decrease in plasma MDS-Oaβ (Multimer Detection System–Oligomeric Aβ) compared to donepezil alone in amyloid PET-positive AD patients. This finding strongly suggests that *Ginkgo* can synergize with other neuroprotective agents, augmenting their effects. Similarly, co-administration of EGb 761 and donepezil exhibited a better anti-amnestic effect through more augmented pro-cholinergic and antioxidative effects of both drugs. In a *Drosophila* model of AD, *Ginkgo* combined with Epigallocatechin gallate (EGCG) delayed AD onset and prevented the production of pro-inflammatory cytokines, showing better endpoints than either individual extract, highlighting the potential for synergy between different natural compounds. Furthermore, combinations of *Ginkgo* and *Panax ginseng* enhanced neuroprotective effects against excitotoxicity in *in vitro* models by activating ERK1/2 and Akt signaling pathways.

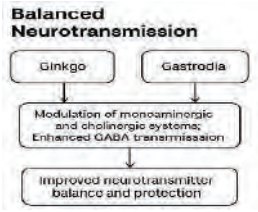
Based on their distinct yet complementary mechanistic profiles, several specific synergistic benefits can be hypothesized for the *Ginkgo* and *Gastrodia* combination:

- **Comprehensive Oxidative Stress & Inflammation Control:** The combined antioxidant and anti-inflammatory power of both herbs could more effectively neutralize free radicals and suppress neuroinflammation, which are primary drivers of neuronal damage and are known to have synergistic degradative effects.



- **Enhanced Neurotrophic Support:** The combined promotion of BDNF by both *Ginkgo* and *Gastrodia* could lead to a more robust and sustained support for neuronal survival, growth, and plasticity.

- **Balanced Neurotransmission:** *Ginkgo*'s modulation of monoamines and cholinergic systems, coupled with *Gastrodia*'s enhancement of GABAergic inhibitory transmission, could lead to a more balanced and protective neurotransmitter environment, crucial for optimal brain function.



- **Improved Drug Delivery and Cellular Environment:** *Ginkgo*'s demonstrated ability to enhance cerebral blood flow could significantly improve the delivery and distribution of *Gastrodia*'s active compounds across the BBB, while simultaneously fostering a healthier microenvironment conducive to neuronal recovery.

The potential synergistic effects of *Ginkgo* and *Gastrodia*, particularly their complementary and multi-target actions, align with the emerging concept of "polypill" or multi-compound strategies for chronic, multifactorial diseases. Rather than relying on a single "magic bullet," this approach acknowledges the intricate etiology of neurodegeneration and aims to address multiple contributing factors simultaneously. This could lead to superior efficacy, potentially allowing for lower individual compound doses (thereby reducing the likelihood of side effects), and ultimately a more robust and sustained therapeutic outcome, moving beyond the limitations frequently observed with monotherapy in many neurological disorders. This strategic direction is also deeply rooted in the traditional Chinese medicine philosophy of utilizing complex herbal formulas to treat complex illnesses.

1.6. Pharmacokinetic Considerations, Safety, and Clinical Outlook (40)

1.6.1. Bioavailability and Blood-Brain Barrier Permeability of Key Compounds (41-45)

The effectiveness of any neuroprotective agent hinges on its ability to reach the central nervous system in therapeutically relevant concentrations. For both *Ginkgo biloba* and *Gastrodia elata*, the bioavailability of their key active compounds and their capacity to cross the blood-brain barrier (BBB) are crucial considerations.

For *Ginkgo biloba*, the key terpene lactones, including ginkgolide A, ginkgolide B, and bilobalide, demonstrate good oral bioavailability, with reported mean absolute bioavailability rates ranging from 79% to 88% following oral administration. While the explicit mechanism of BBB crossing for all *Ginkgo* compounds is not detailed, the observed neuroprotective effects of *Ginkgo* in the brain strongly imply that its active constituents are indeed capable of traversing this critical physiological barrier.

Regarding *Gastrodia elata*, gastrodin, its primary active compound, exhibits favorable pharmacokinetic properties. It is rapidly absorbed in the intestines, widely distributed throughout the body, and readily crosses the BBB. Its high bioavailability has been confirmed in various rat models, with measurable concentrations in blood, brain tissue, and bile, providing robust support for its pharmacokinetic suitability for treating CNS disorders. Additionally, p-hydroxybenzyl alcohol, another active constituent of *Gastrodia*, is also known to penetrate the BBB.

The favorable pharmacokinetic profiles of the active components from both *Ginkgo* and *Gastrodia* are not merely individual benefits but a crucial prerequisite for their combined therapeutic potential. If one compound were poorly absorbed, rapidly metabolized, or unable to effectively cross the BBB, its contribution to a synergistic neuroprotective effect would be severely limited. Their shared capacity to effectively reach the central nervous system ensures that the proposed multi-target benefits are biologically feasible, allowing for their mechanistic interactions to occur at the site of pathology within the brain. This also suggests a lower likelihood of pharmacokinetic antagonism, where one compound might inadvertently hinder the absorption, distribution, metabolism, or excretion of the other, which is a common concern in multi-drug therapies.

1.6.2. Safety Profiles and Potential Drug Interactions (46)

Evaluating the safety profiles and potential drug interactions of *Ginkgo biloba* and *Gastrodia elata* is paramount for their clinical application, especially in combination.

Ginkgo biloba extract (EGb 761) is generally considered to have a favorable safety profile, with reported adverse events typically being mild. However, clinical evidence for its efficacy as a standalone treatment for dementia remains mixed. Potential interactions with conventional medications exist. *Ginkgo* may increase blood sugar levels, potentially reducing the effectiveness of diabetes medications, necessitating close monitoring of blood glucose. It may also increase the risk of seizures when co-administered with drugs that lower the seizure threshold. Furthermore, due to its antiplatelet activity, *Ginkgo* interacts with medications that slow blood clotting, such as anticoagulants and antiplatelet drugs, increasing the risk of bleeding. It is important to distinguish between standardized extracts and raw *Ginkgo* kernels; high doses of *Ginkgo kernels* (not typically found in standardized extracts) can have severe adverse effects, including vomiting, seizures, skin ulceration, dyspepsia, loss of consciousness, and even death.

Gastrodin, the main active compound of *Gastrodia elata*, is considered to possess a favorable safety profile. Acute toxicity studies have shown no significant toxicity or mortality even at very high oral doses (up to 5000 mg/kg) or intravenous doses (1000 mg/kg), indicating its clinical safety.

The provided literature does not contain direct information or studies on the safety profile of the *Ginkgo* and *Gastrodia* combination. However, given the generally good safety profiles of the individual components, a combination might also be well-tolerated. Despite the promising individual safety profiles, the absence of specific safety data for the *Ginkgo-Gastrodia* combination necessitates rigorous pharmacovigilance and dedicated clinical trials. The very nature of synergy, where therapeutic effects are amplified, could also extend to adverse effects or unforeseen drug-herb interactions. For instance, if both compounds subtly influence a common metabolic enzyme or pathway, their combined effect

could be supra-additive and potentially lead to adverse outcomes not observed with either herb alone. Therefore, the transition from theoretical synergy to clinical application requires a thorough understanding of their combined safety, including potential interactions with commonly prescribed conventional medications and any potential pharmacokinetic or pharmacodynamic interactions between the two herbal components themselves. This represents a critical gap that future research must address before widespread clinical adoption of this combination therapy.

1.6.3. Current Clinical Landscape and Future Research Directions for Combination Therapy (47)

The current clinical landscape for *Ginkgo biloba* and *Gastrodia elata* as individual agents presents a mixed picture, with a notable absence of direct clinical trials on their combination.

Clinical trials evaluating *Ginkgo biloba* as a single agent for dementia prevention or treatment have yielded mixed results. While some studies show modest benefits in cognitive performance and social functioning , or as an adjunct to donepezil, demonstrating superior cognitive outcomes and a greater decrease in plasma MDS-Oaβ in amyloid PET-positive AD patients , overall efficacy remains controversial. Possible explanations for these mixed outcomes include misclassification of patients with non-AD dementia, relatively short study periods, and issues with patient adherence.

Gastrodia elata (GE), as a traditional Chinese medicine, is reported to be "clinically employed to treat neurological disorders" and to demonstrate "therapeutic efficacy supported by robust clinical evidence". Gastrodin, its main active component, was approved for the treatment of sedation and neurasthenia as early as 1984.

Despite the promising theoretical basis for combination therapy, the provided literature does not explicitly detail clinical trials specifically testing the *Ginkgo* and *Gastrodia* combination. However, there is ongoing interest in multi-component approaches, exemplified by a clinical trial (NCT06704334) combining *Ginkgo* leaf dropping pills with Huperzine A injection and median nerve electrical stimulation for cognitive impairment after brain injury.

The extensive traditional use of both *Ginkgo* and *Gastrodia* in neurological disorders provides a strong empirical foundation and suggests a degree of safety and efficacy that predates modern scientific validation. However, the successful translation of this traditional knowledge into evidence-based modern medicine, particularly for complex herbal combinations, necessitates rigorous scientific investigation. The mixed results sometimes observed for *Ginkgo* monotherapy in modern trials might not necessarily negate its potential but could rather reflect the inherent limitations of a single-herb approach for complex, multifactorial diseases, or issues related to study design, patient selection, or adherence. Therefore, the future of *Ginkgo* and *Gastrodia* combination therapy lies in systematically validating this traditional wisdom through well-designed, robust clinical trials that specifically investigate their synergistic mechanisms and patient-centric outcomes. This approach is crucial for bridging the gap between centuries of empirical use and contemporary scientific rigor, potentially revealing novel and effective therapeutic strategies. It also implies that traditional formulas containing both herbs could serve as valuable starting points for modern pharmacological and clinical research.

Future Research Directions:

- **Dedicated Combination Studies:** Large-scale, prospective, randomized, blind controlled trials are urgently warranted to rigorously validate the hypothesized synergistic effects and elucidate the precise mechanisms of the *Ginkgo* and *Gastrodia* combination.
- **Mechanistic Elucidation:** Further in-depth research is needed to fully elucidate the specific molecular and cellular pathways involved in the synergistic actions of the combination. This

could involve advanced techniques such as proteomics, metabolomics, and network pharmacology.

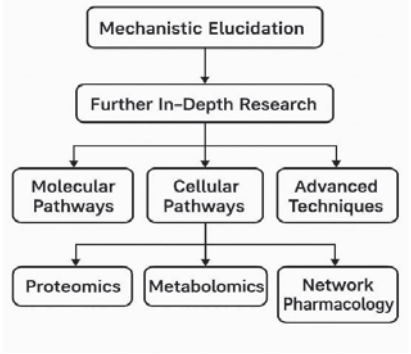


Fig. 5.23: Future Research Directions

- **Optimizing Dosing and Formulation:** Studies should focus on determining the optimal ratios and formulations of the combined extracts to maximize synergistic benefits while minimizing potential adverse effects. **Specific Neurological Conditions:** Investigating the efficacy of this combination in specific neurological conditions where both herbs show individual promise, such as Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease, post-stroke cognitive impairment, and traumatic brain injury.

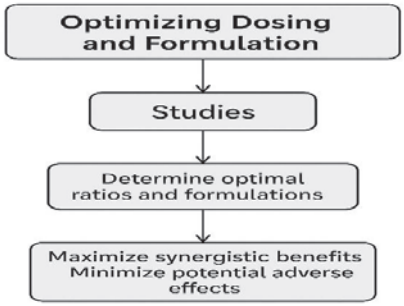


Fig. 5.24: Optimizing Dose

- **Biomarker Development:** Utilizing advanced biomarkers (e.g., plasma MDS-Oaβ for AD, as mentioned in) to objectively assess treatment efficacy and track disease progression.

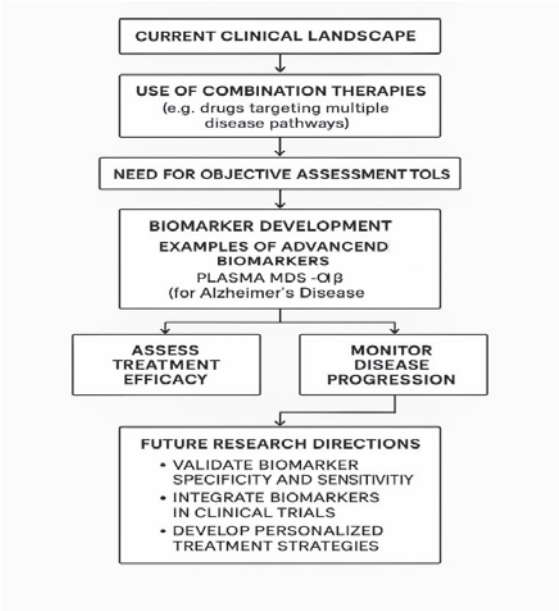


Fig. 5.25: Development of Biomarker [48-50]

Conclusion and Recommendations

The combined neuroprotective potential of *Ginkgo biloba and Gastrodia elata* lies in their complementary mechanisms, including antioxidant, anti-inflammatory, anti-apoptotic, neurotransmitter modulation, and pathway regulation, making them highly suitable for addressing the multifactorial nature of neurodegenerative disorders. Their synergistic effects offer a holistic therapeutic strategy that can enhance efficacy compared to single-agent treatments. Future research should focus on validating this synergy through preclinical and clinical studies, clarifying molecular mechanisms, optimizing formulations and dosing, and exploring their role as adjunctive therapies. Overall, the integration of these botanicals presents a promising avenue for developing multi-targeted and effective interventions in neurological disease management.

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