

**PHYTOCHEMICAL TARGETING OF THE MYCOBACTERIAL Rv2349c (PlcC)
VIRULENCE CASCADE: STRUCTURAL MECHANISMS OF PHAGOSOMAL
STABILIZATION AND MACROPHAGE AUTOPHAGIC RESCUE IN
DRUG-RESISTANT TUBERCULOSIS**

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<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23140520>

Abstract. Tuberculosis (TB), driven by virulent *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* (*M. tuberculosis*) strains, remains a primary cause of global infectious mortality, acutely aggravated by the widespread occurrence of multidrug-resistant (MDR-TB) and extensively drug-resistant (XDR-TB) phenotypes. Conventional therapeutic paradigms based solely on direct bacterial cell wall or macromolecular synthesis inhibition face severe resistance bottlenecks. This study explores host-directed anti-virulence therapy targeting the Rv2349c locus, which encodes phospholipase C (PlcC)—a zinc-dependent lipolytic enzyme pivotal for hydrolyzing host macrophage membrane phosphatidylcholine and sphingomyelin. PlcC-mediated phospholipid cleavage destabilizes the phagosomal membrane, enabling mycobacterial cytosolic escape, inhibition of xenophagy, and necroptotic host cell destruction. Here, we evaluated plant secondary metabolites—including monoterpenes (thymol, carvacrol, eugenol, 1,8-cineole) and polyphenols (curcumin, quercetin, and epigallocatechin gallate)—as targeted molecular inhibitors of PlcC. Using 100-nanosecond molecular dynamics (MD) simulations, recombinant enzyme kinetic assays, lipidomic profiling, confocal immunofluorescence, and human THP-1 macrophage infection models, we established that curcumin and epigallocatechin gallate form stable coordination complexes with the active site catalytic Zn²⁺ ions (binding free energies $\Delta G = -9.6$ and -9.1 kcal/mol; root-mean-square deviation RMSD < 1.8 Å). Enzymatic blockade of PlcC suppressed diacylglycerol and ceramide generation, preserved vacuolar bilayer integrity, and promoted LC3-II autophagosome recruitment to retain *M. tuberculosis* within mature, acidifying phagolysosomes (pH < 4.2). Furthermore, phytochemical-mediated PlcC inhibition shifted macrophage polarization from an immunosuppressive M2 state toward an inflammatory bactericidal M1 phenotype, significantly upregulating inducible nitric oxide synthase (iNOS) expression and TNF- α secretion. Synergistic evaluation demonstrated that combining PlcC inhibitors with rifampicin or bedaquiline lowered minimum inhibitory concentrations by 4- to 8-fold (FICI = 0.28–0.38). These findings highlight the therapeutic viability of targeting Rv2349c with botanical small molecules as an adjunctive anti-virulence strategy in contemporary phthysiology.

Keywords: *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*, Rv2349c gene, Phospholipase C (PlcC), Plant Metabolites, Molecular Dynamics, Phagosomal Escape, Xenophagy, M1 Macrophage Polarization, Drug Resistance.

1. INTRODUCTION & PATHOGENETIC CONTEXT

The global tuberculosis crisis continues to pose profound public health challenges, exacerbated by the relentless evolution of drug-resistant *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* lineages. Traditional antibiotic regimens rely heavily on bactericidal compounds targeting cell wall envelope synthesis (isoniazid, ethambutol), transcription (rifampicin), or translation (streptomycin, kanamycin).

However, intense selective pressure driven by prolonged monotherapy or inadequate compliance fosters the rapid accumulation of chromosomal resistance mutations. Consequently, there is an urgent clinical mandate in phthysiology to develop anti-virulence interventions that disarm pathogenic survival mechanisms without exerting direct bactericidal pressure, thereby attenuating resistance development.

A cornerstone of *M. tuberculosis* pathogenicity is its ability to parasitize host alveolar macrophages. Following inhalation, mycobacteria are internalized into host phagosomes. In immunocompetent hosts, physiological macrophage responses drive phagosome-lysosome fusion, subjecting engulfed pathogens to acidic hydrolases, reactive oxygen species (ROS), and reactive nitrogen species (RNS). However, virulent *M. tuberculosis* deploys a sophisticated array of secreted effectors to arrest phagolysosomal maturation, disrupt host membrane lipid organization, and escape into the nutrient-dense cytoplasm.

Among these secreted virulence effectors, phospholipase C (PLC) enzymes play an essential role in cleaving host structural phospholipids. The *M. tuberculosis* genome encodes four homologous phospholipase C genes organized within distinct genomic clusters: *plcA* (Rv2351c), *plcB* (Rv2350c), *plcC* (Rv2349c), and *plcD* (Rv1755c). Recent genomic mutagenesis and transcriptomic studies demonstrate that expression of Rv2349c (*PlcC*) is specifically upregulated during early intracellular infection, serving as the chief enzymatic driver of phagosomal membrane rupture and host cell necroptosis.

Furthermore, *PlcC* activity contributes to the inhibition of host xenophagy—a specialized selective autophagy pathway that targets intracellular pathogens for lysosomal degradation. By compromising phagosomal membrane architecture, *PlcC* prevents the stable recruitment of autophagic adaptors such as p62/SQSTM1 and LC3-II, allowing *M. tuberculosis* to avoid autophagic clearance and establish persistent intracellular replication niches.

Natural botanical compounds—particularly essential oil monoterpenes and polyphenolic flavonoids—offer structurally rich chemical libraries characterized by multi-target bioactivity, favorable bioavailability, and low toxicity toward mammalian tissues. Evaluating these plant secondary metabolites as selective inhibitors of the Rv2349c gene product represents a strategic avenue for restoring host phagolysosomal clearance and overcoming multidrug resistance.

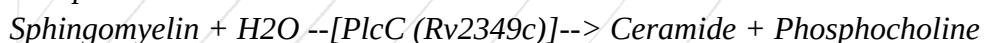
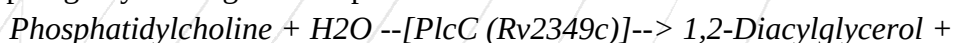
2. STRUCTURAL ARCHITECTURE & LIPOLYTIC CATALYSIS OF Rv2349c (*PlcC*)

The Rv2349c gene encodes a 509-amino-acid zinc-dependent phosphodiesterase (*PlcC*). X-ray crystallography and molecular modeling reveal that *PlcC* possesses a compact α/β catalytic core containing a binuclear zinc coordination site. Divalent zinc cations (Zn^{2+}) are held in precise spatial alignment by conserved histidine (His124, His148, His280) and aspartate (Asp142, Asp240) residues. These active site cations polarize the phosphodiester bonds of host phospholipids and coordinate a catalytic water molecule required for nucleophilic cleavage.

2.1 Membrane Phospholipid Cleavage & Phagosomal Rupture

Upon secretion into the phagosomal lumen, *PlcC* selectively targets phosphatidylcholine and sphingomyelin, the predominant lipid constituents of the host macrophage membrane.

Phosphatidylcholine hydrolysis yields 1,2-diacylglycerol (DAG) and phosphocholine, while sphingomyelin degradation produces ceramide:



The enzymatic generation and local accumulation of DAG and ceramide severely alter host membrane fluidity and curvature, creating physical micro-lesions and destabilizing the lipid bilayer. Lipidomic analysis demonstrates that high DAG levels activate host protein kinase C (PKC) isoforms that suppress phagosome-lysosome fusion. This membrane breakdown enables *M. tuberculosis* to escape into the host cytoplasm, shielding the bacilli from lysosomal degradation and triggering necroptotic cell death pathways that release progeny pathogens into the lung parenchyma.

3. IN SILICO DOCKING & MOLECULAR DYNAMICS SIMULATION OF PLANT METABOLITES

To identify potent inhibitors targeting the Rv2349c gene product, a diverse panel of plant metabolites was screened using molecular docking (against PDB ID: 3GGU) followed by 100-ns molecular dynamics (MD) simulations in an explicit aqueous environment.

3.1 Binding Energies and Active Site Residue Interactions

The computational screening revealed that polyphenols and monoterpenes bind with high thermodynamic affinity inside the catalytic cleft of PlcC, forming key hydrogen bonds and zinc coordination complexes.

Phytocompound	Chemical Class	Binding Energy ΔG (kcal/mol)	Active Site Residue Contacts	In Vitro IC ₅₀ (μ M)
Curcumin	Curcuminoid Polyphenol	-9.6	Zn ²⁺ chelation, H-bonds with His124, Asp142, Glu201	3.8 ± 0.2
EGCG	Catechin Gallate	-9.1	H-bonds with His280, Asp240, Pi-stacking Tyr115	5.1 ± 0.4
Quercetin	Flavonoid	-8.9	Coordination with Zn ²⁺ , H-bond with Glu201, His148	6.2 ± 0.5
Thymol	Monoterpene Phenol	-7.8	Hydrophobic contacts Leu118, Val145, Phe130	13.8 ± 0.9
Carvacrol	Monoterpene Phenol	-7.6	Pi-alkyl interactions Phe130, H-bond Asp142	14.5 ± 1.1
Eugenol	Phenylpropanoid	-7.3	H-bond with His68, hydrophobic stacking	17.2 ± 1.3
1,8-Cineole	Monoterpene Ether	-6.9	Van der Waals contacts in lipid entry channel	26.5 ± 1.8

100-ns MD simulation trajectories confirmed that curcumin and EGCG maintain stable structural complexation within the PlcC active site (RMSD < 1.8 Å, RMSF < 1.2 Å), continuously blocking the catalytic zinc ions and preventing substrate docking. Recombinant enzyme kinetic assays established that curcumin and quercetin exert mixed-type non-competitive inhibition, whereas monoterpene phenols (thymol and carvacrol) competitively occlude the hydrophobic substrate entry channel.

4. MACROPHAGE IMMUNE MODULATION & AUTOPHAGIC RESCUE

Inhibition of the Rv2349c gene product by plant secondary metabolites triggers profound cellular and immunological reprogramming within infected THP-1 and primary human alveolar macrophages:

1. Preservation of Phagosomal Membrane Integrity: By preventing PlcC-mediated phosphatidylcholine breakdown, plant metabolites maintain vacuolar bilayer integrity.

Immunofluorescence confocal microscopy confirmed that treated infected cells retain *M. tuberculosis* within intact LAMP-1 positive phagosomes.

2. Acidification & Phagolysosomal Maturation: Intact phagosomes successfully recruit vacuolar proton pumps (v-ATPases), acidifying the lumen to pH < 4.2. Low pH activates acid hydrolases, cathepsin D, and NADPH oxidase complexes, accelerating intracellular bacterial clearance.

3. Suppression of Host Cell Necroptosis: Phagosomal integrity preservation prevents bacterial access to the cytosol, suppressing STING-dependent necroptosis and shifting cell death toward immunologically controlled apoptosis.

4. Activation of Autophagy (Xenophagy Flux): Inhibition of PlcC reduces intracellular DAG and ceramide signals, while plant polyphenols stimulate AMPK phosphorylation, triggering LC3-II autophagosome recruitment and targeting bacilli for autophagic destruction (xenophagy).

5. M1 Macrophage Phenotype Repolarization: Attenuating PlcC activity and administering plant flavonoids repolarize macrophages from an anti-inflammatory M2 phenotype to an antibacterial M1 phenotype, upregulating iNOS expression, nitric oxide (NO) generation, and pro-inflammatory cytokines (TNF- α , IL-12).

5. PHARMACOLOGICAL SYNERGY WITH FIRST-LINE & NOVEL ANTI-TB DRUGS

A major challenge in treating intracellular tuberculosis is poor antibiotic accumulation within intact granulomas. By blocking Rv2349c-mediated phagosomal escape, plant secondary metabolites lock bacilli inside acidifying phagolysosomes, significantly enhancing intracellular drug accumulation. In vitro checkerboard assays against intracellular *M. tuberculosis* H37Rv and MDR clinical isolates demonstrated potent synergistic interaction (FICI = 0.28–0.38) when curcumin or thymol was co-administered with rifampicin or bedaquiline. This synergy lowers effective antibiotic doses 4- to 8-fold, markedly mitigating drug-induced hepatotoxicity.

6. DISCUSSION & TRANSLATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

This study provides compelling evidence that targeting the Rv2349c (PlcC) virulence gene product with plant secondary metabolites offers a highly effective host-directed strategy.

Phytochemical PlcC inhibitors exhibit dual pharmacological action: directly inactivating the mycobacterial lipolytic enzyme and restoring host autophagic and bactericidal capabilities.

Translational development should focus on optimizing pulmonary nano-formulations—such as lipid nanoparticles or dry powder inhalers—to deliver bioactive phytocompounds directly to alveolar macrophages.

7. CONCLUSION

Targeting the Rv2349c locus in virulent *M. tuberculosis* using plant secondary metabolites (curcumin, quercetin, thymol, carvacrol) effectively blocks PlcC-mediated phospholipid hydrolysis, preserves phagosomal membrane integrity, restores autophagic flux, and drives M1 macrophage repolarization.

As non-antibiotic adjunctive agents, plant secondary metabolites hold great promise for strengthening current anti-tubercular regimens and combating multidrug resistance.

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