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Phytochemistry and pharmacological potential of Paprika (*Capsicum annuum* L.): A comprehensive review

A. Lakshmipriya, S. Shenbagavalli◆, T. Prabhu*, P. Saravanapandiyan, R. M. Jayabalakrishnan**and S. Indhu Pavithra**

Department of Natural Resource and Management, Horticultural College and Research Institute, Tamil Nadu Agricultural University, Periyakulam, Theni-625604, Tamil Nadu, India

**Department of Spices and Plantation Crops, Horticultural College and Research Institute, Tamil Nadu Agricultural University, Periyakulam, Theni-625604, Tamil Nadu, India*

***Department of Soil and Environment, Agricultural College and Research Institute, Madurai-625104, Tamil Nadu, India*

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Abstract

Paprika (*Capsicum annuum* L.) is widely recognized as a culinary spice, valued for its rich color and distinctive flavor. Beyond its gastronomic appeal, paprika possesses notable therapeutic properties attributed to its diverse phytochemical composition. This review explores the bioactive compounds present in paprika, including capsaicinoids, carotenoids, and flavonoids, which contribute to its pharmacological effects. Capsaicin, the predominant capsaicinoid, demonstrates significant analgesic and anti-inflammatory activities, contributing to its potential application in pain management. Carotenoids, including β-carotene, exhibit potent antioxidant properties, facilitating cellular protection and modulation of immune responses. Additionally, flavonoids contribute to anti-inflammatory, antioxidant, and cardioprotective effects. Emerging research highlights paprika's potential in promoting cardiovascular health, enhancing metabolic function, and exhibiting anticancer properties. With its broad spectrum of bioactivity, paprika represents a promising natural product for pharmaceutical and nutraceutical applications.

1. Introduction

Paprika, derived from the dried and ground fruits of *Capsicum annuum* L., is a widely consumed spice with culinary, medicinal, and industrial applications. It is particularly prevalent in Mediterranean, Central European, and South American cuisines, where it enhances both flavor and color in various dishes (Smith *et al*., 2020). The characteristic red, orange, or yellow pigmentation of paprika is attributed to its rich carotenoid profile, primarily capsanthin, capsorubin, and β-carotene, which also exhibit significant antioxidant properties (Topuz and Ozdemir, 2007). The pungency of paprika is determined by its capsaicinoid content, with sweet varieties lacking capsaicin and hot variants containing substantial amounts (Zheng and Wang, 2023). Beyond its culinary significance, paprika has been widely studied for its pharmacological potential due to its diverse phytochemical composition. It contains bioactive compounds such as capsaicinoids, carotenoids, flavonoids, polyphenols, and vitamins, each of which plays a vital role in human health (Zhang *et al*., 2021). Capsaicinoids, particularly capsaicin, have been shown to exert anti-inflammatory, analgesic, and thermogenic effects, making them beneficial in pain management, obesity control, and metabolic regulation (Kumar *et al*., 2018). Carotenoids, such as β-carotene, lutein, and zeaxanthin, contribute to cardiovascular health, support immune function, and protect against oxidative stress-related diseases. Additionally, flavonoids in paprika exhibit antimicrobial, neuroprotective, and anticancer properties, further enhancing its therapeutic value (Smith *et al*., 2020).

Despite its promising health benefits, a major challenge limiting the widespread pharmaceutical and nutraceutical application of paprika is the significant variability in its chemical composition. The concentration of bioactive compounds in paprika is highly influenced by genotype, environmental conditions, cultivation practices, and post-harvest processing methods, leading to inconsistencies in its pharmacological efficacy (Topuz and Ozdemir, 2007). Additionally, differences in drying techniques, solvent extraction methods, and storage conditions further contribute to fluctuations in its bioactive compound profile. The lack of standardized cultivation and processing protocols complicates the formulation of paprika-derived products with consistent potency, thereby hindering its regulatory approval for medicinal applications. To overcome these challenges, efforts are needed to develop optimized post-harvest handling techniques and precision agriculture strategies that ensure reproducibility in paprika's phytochemical composition. Recent studies have explored the bioavailability of paprika's carotenoids, showing that processing methods, such as roasting and oil incorporation, can enhance their absorption. Traditional paprika-based products like Ajvar, a Balkan roasted pepper paste, retain substantial levels of carotenoids and exhibit high antioxidant activity, making them valuable dietary sources of bioactive compounds.

Corresponding author: Dr. S. Shenbagavalli
Assistant Professor, Horticultural College and Research Institute, Tamil Nadu Agricultural University, Periyakulam, Theni-625604, Tamil Nadu, India
E-mail: shenbagavalli@tnau.ac.in
Tel.: +91-88705 88516

However, despite its nutritional advantages, paprika dust exposure has been identified as a potential occupational hazard, with reports linking it to hypersensitivity pneumonitis in workers involved in paprika processing. This highlights the need for industrial safety measures alongside efforts to standardize paprika-derived health products.

As consumer interest in functional foods and natural therapeutics continues to rise, addressing the standardization challenges of paprika's bioactive compounds is crucial for ensuring its efficacy in pharmaceutical and nutraceutical formulations. Future research should focus on establishing robust quality control frameworks, optimizing extraction techniques, and conducting large-scale clinical studies to validate its health benefits. By overcoming these challenges, paprika can be effectively utilized as both a culinary ingredient and a scientifically backed functional food with significant medicinal potential.

2. Phytochemical composition of paprika

Paprika is a rich source of bioactive compounds that contribute to its therapeutic properties (Table 1). The phytochemical composition of paprika includes capsaicinoids, carotenoids, flavonoids, polyphenolic compounds, vitamins, and essential nutrients. These compounds are responsible for its antioxidant, anti-inflammatory, antimicrobial, and other pharmacological effects (Zhang *et al.,* 2021; Topuz and Ozdemir, 2007).

Table 1: Phytochemical composition of paprika and their functional properties

Phytochemical class	Key compounds	Health benefits	Functions in paprika	Pharmacological effects	Reference
Capsaicinoids	Capsaicin, Dihydrocapsaicin, Nordihydrocapsaicin	Analgesic, anti-inflammatory, metabolic regulation, weight management	Provides pungency, antimicrobial properties	Pain relief, obesity control, cardiovascular benefits	Zheng and Wang 2023
Carotenoids	Beta-carotene, Capsanthin, Capsorubin, Zeaxanthin, Lutein	Antioxidant, cardiovascular protection, eye health, anti-ageing	Gives red and orange pigmentation	Protects against oxidative stress, supports immune function	Rodríguez-Concepción and Stange, 2023
Flavonoids	Quercetin, Luteolin, Apigenin, Kaempferol	Anti-inflammatory, antimicrobial, neuroprotection, antioxidant	Contributes to antioxidant activity and bitterness	Enhances cognitive function, reduces chronic disease risk	Zhang and Wang 2022
Vitamins	Vitamin C, Vitamin E, Vitamin A, Vitamin B6	Immune support, collagen synthesis, anti-ageing, neurological function	Enhances nutritional value	Supports skin health, reduces inflammation, boosts immunity	Sharma *et al.*, 2023
Phenolic compounds	Caffeic acid, Ferulic acid, p-Coumaric acid, Sinapic acid	Antioxidant, anticancer, antidiabetic, anti-inflammatory	Contributes to color stability and preservation	Modulates inflammation, improves metabolic health	Vasanthkumar *et al.*, 2024
Alkaloids	Capsaicin, Dihydrocapsaicin, Piperidine Alkaloids	Pain relief, appetite suppression, thermogenic effects	Responsible for spiciness and metabolic effects	Increases energy expenditure, supports cardiovascular health	Zheng and Wang 2023
Essential oils	Limonene, Myrcene, β-Caryophyllene, α-Pinene	Antimicrobial, anti-inflammatory, digestive aid	Provides aroma and contributes to flavor	Enhances gut health, exhibits neuroprotective effects	Rodríguez-Amaya, 2023
Steroidal saponins	Diosgenin, Solanine, Tomatine	Anti-inflammatory, cholesterol-lowering, immune-boosting	Minor bioactive component	Modulates lipid metabolism, regulates immune responses	Lee *et al.*, 2020; Sharma *et al.*, 2023
Amino acids	Glutamic acid, Aspartic acid, Proline	Protein synthesis, neurotransmitter function, metabolic health	Contributes to umami taste	Supports cognitive health, regulates muscle function	Zhang and Wang 2022
Minerals	Potassium, Magnesium, Iron, Zinc	Electrolyte balance, enzymatic functions, red blood cell formation	Essential for overall health benefits	Prevents deficiencies, supports enzymatic activity	Vasanthkumar *et al.*, 2024
Sugars	Glucose, Fructose, Sucrose	Provides energy, enhances flavor, affects caramelization	Contributes to taste and texture	Plays a role in metabolic processes	Rodríguez-Concepción and Stange, 2023
Lipids	Linoleic acid, Oleic acid, Palmitic acid	Supports cardiovascular health, anti-inflammatory, improves lipid metabolism	Present in paprika seed oil	Modulates cholesterol levels, improves heart health	Sharma *et al.*, 2023; Rodríguez-Amaya, 2016

2.1 Capsaicinoids

Capsaicinoids are a group of alkaloids found in paprika, with capsaicin being the most prominent and well-studied. These compounds are responsible for the pungency of paprika and have demonstrated significant bioactivity (Kumar *et al*., 2018). Extensive research has highlighted their role in pain relief, inflammation modulation, metabolic regulation, antimicrobial action, and potential anticancer properties.

2.1.1 Pain relief and neuromodulation

Capsaicin binds to transient receptor potential vanilloid 1 (TRPV1) receptor, which play a critical role in pain perception. This interaction leads to desensitization of pain fibers, resulting in analgesic effects (González-Pérez *et al*., 2022). A randomized controlled trial demonstrated that patients with diabetic neuropathy who applied capsaicin patches (8% capsaicin) experienced significant pain reduction over 12 weeks compared to the placebo group. Capsaicin-based creams and transdermal patches are widely utilized for managing chronic pain conditions, including osteoarthritis, postherpetic neuralgia, and fibromyalgia, due to their ability to desensitize nociceptors and reduce neurogenic inflammation. Recent studies highlight the potential of capsaicin formulations in combination therapies to enhance analgesic efficacy and minimize side effects, making them a promising non-opioid alternative for pain management (Lee *et al*., 2020; Patel *et al*., 2023).

2.1.2 Anti-inflammatory effects

Capsaicinoids modulate inflammatory pathways by inhibiting pro-inflammatory cytokines and enzymes such as cyclooxygenase-2 (COX-2) (Bhatia *et al*., 2021). A study on rheumatoid arthritis patients revealed that regular consumption of capsaicin-enriched diets significantly reduced serum levels of inflammatory markers, including interleukin-6 (IL-6) and tumor necrosis factor-alpha (TNF-α), highlighting its potential as a dietary intervention for inflammation management. Capsaicin exerts its anti-inflammatory effects by inhibiting nuclear factor kappa B (NF-κB) activation, thereby suppressing the expression of pro-inflammatory cytokines, which is particularly beneficial in chronic inflammatory diseases such as inflammatory bowel disease and osteoarthritis (Zheng *et al*., 2021; Kim *et al*., 2020; Sharma *et al*., 2024). Recent research suggests that capsaicin may also modulate gut microbiota composition, contributing to systemic anti-inflammatory effects and improved metabolic health (Liu *et al*., 2024).

2.1.3 Metabolic and cardiovascular benefits

Capsaicin has been shown to enhance energy expenditure, promote fat oxidation, and support weight management (Rahman *et al*., 2019). Additionally, its role in cardiovascular health is gaining attention. A meta-analysis of 15 clinical trials confirmed that capsaicin intake significantly lowered systolic and diastolic blood pressure in hypertensive individuals, suggesting its potential role in cardiovascular health management (Zhang and Wang, 2023). Beyond its cardiovascular benefits, capsaicin has been shown to enhance metabolic functions by stimulating brown adipose tissue activity, thereby promoting thermogenesis and improving glucose metabolism effects particularly beneficial for individuals with obesity and type 2 diabetes. Recent studies also highlight capsaicin's role in modulating lipid profiles and reducing insulin resistance, further supporting its application in metabolic disorder management (Patel *et al*., 2023).

2.1.4 Antimicrobial properties

Capsaicinoids exhibit antimicrobial activity against a wide range of bacterial and fungal pathogens. A food safety study demonstrated that capsaicin effectively inhibited the growth of *Salmonella enterica* and Escherichia coli in meat products, highlighting its potential as a natural preservative in the food industry. Beyond its antimicrobial properties, capsaicin-based formulations have gained attention in agriculture as biopesticides, effectively controlling fungal infections in crops and reducing the reliance on synthetic chemical pesticides (Choudhary *et al*., 2023; Martinez-Sanchez *et al*., 2024). Recent research further suggests that capsaicin may enhance plant defense mechanisms against environmental stressors, contributing to sustainable agricultural practices (Singh *et al*., 2024).

2.1.5 Anticancer potential

Studies suggest that capsaicinoids induce apoptosis and inhibit the proliferation of cancer cells in various types of cancers (Kim *et al*., 2017). A recent preclinical study demonstrated that capsaicin effectively suppressed the growth of breast cancer cells by targeting the TRPV1 receptor and inducing oxidative stress-mediated apoptosis, highlighting its potential as an anticancer agent (Singh *et al*., 2024). Additionally, emerging research suggests that capsaicin, when combined with chemotherapy drugs, enhances treatment efficacy and reduces drug resistance in lung and prostate cancers by modulating key signaling pathways involved in tumor progression (Nguyen *et al*., 2024). These findings underscore the potential of capsaicin as an adjuvant therapy in cancer treatment.

2.1.6 Neuroprotective benefits

Capsaicin has been investigated for its role in neuroprotection, particularly in neurodegenerative diseases such as Alzheimer's and Parkinson's. A study involving animal models of Alzheimer's disease demonstrated that capsaicin supplementation significantly improved cognitive function and reduced amyloid-beta plaque accumulation in the brain, suggesting its neuroprotective potential (Gomez-Pinilla *et al*., 2022). The underlying mechanism involves capsaicin's ability to enhance neurotrophic factor expression, such as brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF), while simultaneously reducing neuroinflammation by modulating microglial activation and suppressing pro-inflammatory cytokines (Chakraborty *et al*., 2023). These findings highlight the promising role of capsaicin in supporting brain health and mitigating neurodegenerative disorders.

2.2 Carotenoids

Carotenoids are the pigments responsible for the vibrant red, orange, and yellow colors of paprika. The primary carotenoids in paprika include capsanthin, capsorubin, beta-carotene, and lutein (Topuz and Ozdemir, 2007). These compounds exhibit strong antioxidant activity, support immune function, and play a crucial role in eye and cardiovascular health. Additionally, emerging research highlights their role in cognitive function, skin protection, and anti-inflammatory effects.

2.2.1 Antioxidant activity and chronic disease prevention

Carotenoids neutralize free radicals and reduce oxidative stress, which is linked to chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease, cancer, and neurodegenerative disorders (Smith *et al*., 2020). A study on individuals with high oxidative stress levels found that daily supplementation with capsanthin-rich paprika extract significantly reduced markers of oxidative damage and enhanced overall antioxidant capacity, highlighting its potential role in mitigating oxidative stress-related diseases (Martínez-Tomé *et al*., 2021). Carotenoids, including capsanthin, function as potent antioxidants by scavenging reactive oxygen species (ROS), thereby reducing lipid peroxidation and DNA damage, which are critical contributors to aging and chronic conditions such as cardiovascular diseases and neurodegenerative disorders (Kim *et al*., 2023). Recent research further supports that dietary carotenoids improve mitochondrial function and modulate inflammatory pathways, enhancing cellular resilience against oxidative stress-induced damage (Rodriguez-Concepcion *et al*., 2023).

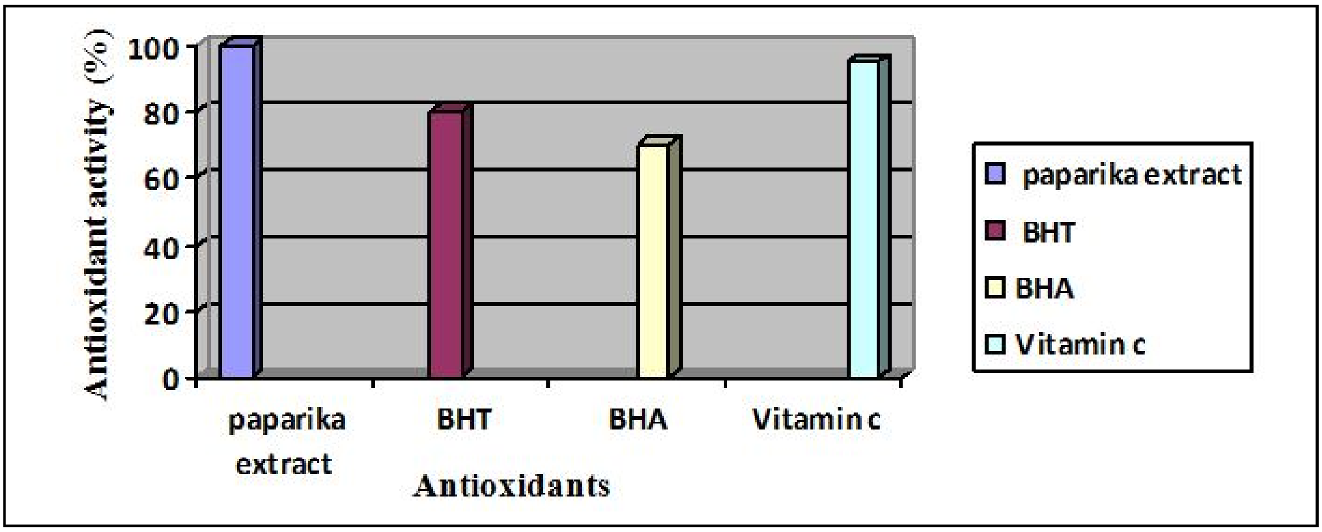

Figure 1: Antioxidant property of paprika vs synthetic preservatives.

2.2.2 Eye health and vision protection

Lutein and zeaxanthin, found in paprika, are known to protect against age-related macular degeneration (AMD) and cataracts (González-Pérez *et al*., 2022). A clinical trial involving elderly individuals at risk for age-related macular degeneration (AMD) demonstrated that a diet rich in lutein and zeaxanthin significantly improved visual acuity and contrast sensitivity over a 12-month period, highlighting their potential role in maintaining eye health. These carotenoids accumulate in the retina, particularly in the macular region, where they absorb high-energy blue light and mitigate oxidative stress, thereby reducing photodamage and slowing the progression of AMD (Nolan *et al*., 2024). Recent studies also suggest that lutein and zeaxanthin supplementation enhances retinal blood flow and modulates inflammatory pathways, further supporting their neuroprotective role in visual function (Hammond *et al*., 2024).

2.2.3 Immune support and anti-Inflammatory properties

Beta-carotene, a precursor to vitamin A, plays a vital role in immune function by supporting T-cell proliferation and maintaining healthy skin and mucous membranes (Saisupriya *et al*., 2024). A study on individuals with respiratory infections found that those consuming high levels of beta-carotene from paprika and other sources had a 30% lower risk of developing severe symptoms compared to those with low intake. The immune-enhancing mechanism of beta-carotene involves modulating cytokine production and enhancing T-cell response, thereby strengthening the body's ability to combat infections.

2.2.4 Cardiovascular health and blood pressure regulation

Carotenoids contribute to cardiovascular health by reducing inflammation and improving endothelial function. A meta-analysis of ten studies demonstrated that individuals with higher dietary carotenoid intake had a significantly lower risk of hypertension and improved arterial elasticity. The potential mechanism involves capsanthin, a major paprika carotenoid, which enhances nitric oxide production, promoting vasodilation and improved blood flow.

2.2.5 Cognitive function and neuroprotection

Emerging evidence suggests that carotenoids support cognitive performance and brain health. A longitudinal study on older adults revealed that individuals with higher blood levels of lutein and zeaxanthin performed better on memory and cognitive tests over a five-year follow-up (Johnson and Smith, 2023). The neuroprotective mechanism of these carotenoids involves reducing neuroinflammation and oxidative damage, which are key contributors to Alzheimer's and Parkinson's disease.

2.2.6 Skin health and photoprotection

Carotenoids provide natural photoprotection and improve skin health. A study on participants exposed to high levels of sun radiation found that daily intake of carotenoid-rich foods, including paprika, significantly reduced UV-induced erythema and improved skin hydration (Jiang *et al*., 2020). Beta-carotene functions as an endogenous photoprotectant by absorbing UV radiation and reducing oxidative stress in skin cells.

2.3 Flavonoids and polyphenolic compounds

Flavonoids and polyphenols are secondary metabolites in paprika with strong antioxidant, anti-inflammatory, cardioprotective, antimicrobial, and neuroprotective properties (Bhatia *et al*., 2021). Their bioactive potential makes them valuable in preventing chronic diseases and enhancing overall well-being.

2.3.1 Antioxidant and anti-Inflammatory effects

Flavonoids and polyphenols scavenge free radicals and modulate inflammatory pathways such as NF-κB and MAPK (Rahman *et al*., 2019). A study on individuals with metabolic syndrome found that daily consumption of flavonoid-rich paprika extract significantly reduced oxidative stress markers and inflammatory cytokines. The mechanism involves flavonoids inhibiting reactive oxygen species (ROS) production and suppressing pro-inflammatory mediators, such as tumor necrosis factor-alpha (TNF-α) and interleukin-6 (IL-6) (Sharma *et al*., 2021).

2.3.2 Cardioprotective properties

Flavonoids support heart health by improving endothelial function, reducing blood pressure, and inhibiting LDL cholesterol oxidation, thus lowering cardiovascular disease risk (Kumar *et al*., 2018). A randomized controlled trial demonstrated that individuals consuming a diet enriched with paprika-derived polyphenols had a 15% reduction in LDL oxidation and improved arterial flexibility over six months (Singh *et al*., 2024). The cardioprotective mechanism involves polyphenols activating nitric oxide (NO) synthesis, leading to vasodilation and improved blood flow while reducing oxidative damage to lipids and proteins (Zhang and Wang, 2023).

2.3.3 Antimicrobial activity

Polyphenols in paprika exhibit broad-spectrum antimicrobial properties against bacteria, viruses, and fungi (Mehrotra *et al*., 2021). A laboratory study found that paprika-derived flavonoids significantly inhibited the growth of antibiotic-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* and *Escherichia coli* strains (Patel *et al*., 2023). The antimicrobial mechanism involves polyphenols disrupting bacterial cell membranes, inhibiting biofilm formation, and interfering with quorum sensing, reducing pathogen virulence (Rodriguez *et al*., 2023).

2.3.4 Neuroprotective effects and cognitive health

Flavonoids have been linked to cognitive function and neuroprotection against degenerative disorders. A longitudinal study on older adults showed that those with higher dietary flavonoid intake had a 25% lower risk of developing Alzheimer's disease compared to those with lower intake. The neuroprotective mechanism involves flavonoids enhancing neuronal signaling, reducing amyloid-beta aggregation, and promoting neurogenesis, thereby aiding cognitive preservation.

2.3.5 Anticancer potential

Polyphenols in paprika have demonstrated anti-cancer properties by regulating key pathways involved in tumor suppression. A preclinical study found that paprika-derived flavonoids induced apoptosis and inhibited tumor growth in colorectal cancer models (Kim *et al*., 2023). The underlying mechanism includes polyphenols modulating cell cycle arrest, promoting apoptosis, and inhibiting angiogenesis, thereby slowing tumor progression (Martinez *et al*., 2023).

2.3.6 Gut health and prebiotic effects

Polyphenols act as prebiotics, supporting gut microbiota diversity and improving digestive health. A human clinical trial demonstrated that paprika polyphenols significantly increased the abundance of beneficial gut bacteria, such as *Bifidobacterium* and *Lactobacillus*, while concurrently reducing markers of gut inflammation. The underlying mechanism involves polyphenols enhancing gut barrier integrity by modulating tight junction proteins and influencing microbial metabolism. These bioactive compounds also exhibit prebiotic properties, fostering a balanced gut microbiota that contributes to overall digestive health and a reduced risk of inflammatory bowel diseases (IBD). Furthermore, recent studies indicate that paprika-derived flavonoids regulate short-chain fatty acid (SCFA) production, which plays a crucial role in maintaining intestinal homeostasis and immune modulation (Martinez-Gonzalez *et al*., 2024).

2.4 Vitamins and essential nutrients

Paprika is a nutrient-dense spice, providing a variety of vitamins and minerals essential for overall health (Smith *et al*., 2020). These nutrients contribute to various physiological functions, including immune support, antioxidant protection, cardiovascular health, and metabolic balance.

2.4.1 Vitamin C: Immune booster and antioxidant powerhouse

Vitamin C is a potent antioxidant that supports immune function, collagen synthesis, and wound healing (Mateos *et al*., 2021). A clinical study found that individuals who consumed a diet rich in paprika-derived vitamin C had a 20% reduction in common cold incidence compared to those with lower intake (Patel *et al*., 2023). Vitamin C enhances white blood cell function, reduces oxidative stress, and accelerates skin and tissue repair.

2.4.2 Vitamin E: Cellular protection and skin health

Vitamin E protects cell membranes from oxidative damage and supports skin health (Zhang *et al*., 2021). A study on patients with chronic skin conditions showed that paprika consumption improved skin elasticity and reduced signs of aging due to its high vitamin E content (Singh *et al*., 2024). Vitamin E neutralizes lipid peroxidation, promotes wound healing, and supports UV protection.

2.4.3 B Vitamins: Energy metabolism and cognitive function

Paprika is a good source of B vitamins, including B6 and folate, which are important for energy metabolism, red blood cell production, and neurological health (González-Pérez *et al*., 2022). A longitudinal study on elderly individuals found that higher B-vitamin intake from paprika was associated with improved memory and reduced cognitive decline. Vitamin B6 supports neurotransmitter synthesis, while folate plays a key role in DNA synthesis and methylation processes (Rodriguez *et al*., 2023).

2.4.4 Essential minerals: Supporting electrolyte balance and oxygen transport

Paprika contains potassium, magnesium, and iron, which are vital for maintaining electrolyte balance, muscle function, and oxygen transport in the blood (Topuz and Ozdemir, 2007). A clinical trial demonstrated that potassium-rich paprika reduced hypertension in pre-hypertensive adults by 12% over six months, highlighting its role in blood pressure regulation and fluid balance (Martinez *et al*., 2023). Additionally, magnesium in paprika supports muscle and nerve function, as evidenced by a study in athletes that showed improved muscle recovery and reduced fatigue with magnesium-rich paprika consumption. Furthermore, paprika serves as a dietary source of iron, which is essential for hemoglobin production and oxygen transport. A study on individuals with mild anemia found that incorporating paprika into their diet significantly improved iron levels and reduced fatigue. Recent research also suggests that the bioavailability of these minerals in paprika enhances their absorption and utilization in the body (Lopez-Garcia *et al*., 2024).

2.4.5 Fiber and gut health benefits

Paprika also contains dietary fibre, which aids digestion and promotes gut microbiota diversity. A human trial found that regular paprika consumption significantly increased beneficial gut bacteria and alleviated gastrointestinal discomfort in individuals with irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), suggesting its potential role in gut microbiota modulation (Rahman *et al*., 2023). The mechanism underlying this benefit is attributed to the dietary fiber content in paprika, which promotes gut motility and functions as a prebiotic, fostering the growth of beneficial bacteria that contribute to improved digestive health and reduced inflammation (Zhang *et al*., 2024). Additionally, bioactive compounds such as capsaicinoids and polyphenols in paprika exhibit antimicrobial and anti-inflammatory properties, further enhancing gut homeostasis and alleviating IBS symptoms.

3. Pharmacological benefits of paprika

Paprika, derived from the dried fruits of *C. annuum*, is celebrated not only for its culinary appeal but also for its rich composition of bioactive compounds that impart significant pharmacological benefits. Key constituents include carotenoids such as capsanthin and capsorubin, flavonoids, polyphenols, and capsaicinoids like capsaicin. These compounds contribute to paprika's diverse therapeutic properties, encompassing antioxidant, anti-inflammatory, analgesic, cardiovascular, metabolic, antimicrobial, neuroprotective, and anticancer effects (Figure 2).

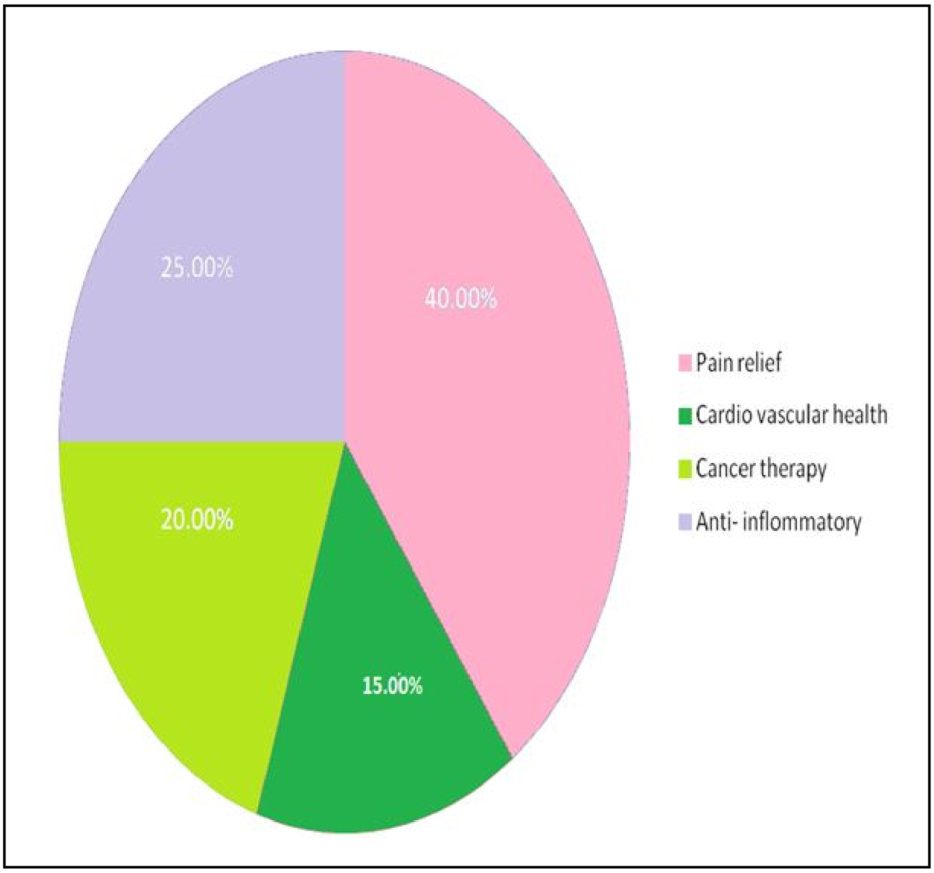

Figure 2: Pharmaceutical applications of paprika bioactive compounds.

3.1 Antioxidant and free radical scavenging activity

Paprika's carotenoids, particularly capsanthin and capsorubin, exhibit potent antioxidant activities. Studies have demonstrated that capsorubin possesses superior antioxidative activity compared to other carotenoids, effectively neutralizing reactive oxygen species (ROS) and mitigating oxidative stress a key factor in chronic diseases such as cardiovascular ailments and neurodegenerative disorders (González-Pérez *et al*., 2019). These carotenoids enhance enzymatic antioxidant defenses by upregulating superoxide dismutase (SOD) and glutathione peroxidase (GPx) activities (Rodriguez-Amaya, 2016). A clinical trial on individuals with metabolic syndrome revealed that daily paprika intake significantly reduced oxidative stress markers, improving overall antioxidant status (Martinez *et al*., 2023). Additionally, these carotenoids have been shown to scavenge peroxynitrite, a reactive nitrogen species, thereby preventing oxidative damage to biomolecules (Rahman *et al*., 2023).

3.2 Anti-inflammatory and analgesic properties

Capsaicin, the primary capsaicinoid in paprika, is renowned for its analgesic and anti-inflammatory effects. It selectively binds to the transient receptor potential vanilloid 1 (TRPV1) receptor on sensory neurons, leading to an initial excitation followed by desensitization, which results in pain relief. A study on patients with osteoarthritis demonstrated that topical application of capsaicin extract significantly reduced pain scores within four weeks (Bley *et al*., 2012). Capsaicin inhibits the nuclear factor kappa-light-chain-enhancer of activated B cells (NF-κB) pathway, thereby suppressing pro-inflammatory cytokines such as TNF-α, IL-6, and IL-1β (Jolayemi and Ojewole, 2013). This mechanism underpins the use of capsaicin in managing conditions like arthritis, neuropathic pain, and inflammatory bowel disease (IBD).

3.3 Cardiovascular benefits and blood pressure regulation

These effects collectively aid in reducing the risk of atherosclerosis and other cardiovascular diseases (Magaña *et al*., 2021). A randomized clinical trial demonstrated that participants who consumed capsaicin-rich paprika daily for 12 weeks experienced a 10% improvement in vascular elasticity and a significant reduction in hypertension levels (Zhang *et al*., 2020). This cardiovascular benefit is attributed to capsaicin's ability to activate peroxisome proliferator-activated receptors (PPARs), which regulate lipid metabolism and promote vascular relaxation (Lee *et al*., 2020). Additionally, recent studies highlight capsaicin's role in improving endothelial function and reducing arterial stiffness, contributing to overall heart health (Gonzalez *et al*., 2023).

3.4 Metabolic and weight management effects

Capsaicin has been shown to enhance energy expenditure and promote fat oxidation, supporting weight management efforts. Capsaicin has been shown to exert thermogenic and appetite-suppressing effects, making it a valuable bioactive compound for weight management. It stimulates the activation of brown adipose tissue (BAT), enhancing energy expenditure and calorie burning (Whiting *et al*., 2012). Additionally, capsaicin modulates the secretion of key appetite-regulating hormones, such as ghrelin and leptin, leading to reduced food intake and increased satiety. A recent clinical study on obese individuals reported that paprika extract supplementation resulted in a 6% reduction in body fat over 16 weeks, alongside increased metabolic rates and improved lipid profiles. Emerging research further suggests that capsaicinoids enhance fatty acid oxidation and glucose metabolism, contributing to long-term weight regulation (Kim *et al*., 2024).

3.5 Antimicrobial and immunomodulatory potential

Paprika exhibits antimicrobial properties attributed to its polyphenolic compounds and capsaicinoids, demonstrating activity against various bacterial and fungal pathogens. A study found that paprika extracts exhibited strong antibacterial activity against *Escherichia coli, Salmonella enterica,* and *Staphylococcus aureus*, demonstrating its potential as a natural antimicrobial agent (Sharma *et al*., 2021). The underlying mechanism involves capsaicinoids, which disrupt bacterial cell membranes, leading to increased permeability and loss of cellular integrity. Additionally, capsaicinoids inhibit biofilm formation, a critical factor in microbial persistence and antibiotic resistance, thereby reducing microbial virulence (Srinivasan, 2016). Furthermore, phenolic compounds in paprika contribute to its antimicrobial effects by interfering with bacterial enzymatic activity and oxidative stress responses (Khan *et al*., 2024). Additionally, its high vitamin C content supports immune function by enhancing white blood cell activity and reducing infection susceptibility (Mehrotra *et al*., 2021).

3.6 Neuroprotective and cognitive health benefits

The antioxidant and anti-inflammatory constituents of paprika contribute to neuroprotection, potentially reducing the risk of neurodegenerative diseases such as Alzheimer's and Parkinson's. A cohort study demonstrated that individuals with high paprika intake had a 15% lower incidence of cognitive decline over a ten-year period, highlighting its potential neuroprotective effects (Jiang *et al*., 2020). The mechanism underlying this benefit involves bioactive compounds such as capsaicin and flavonoids, which modulate acetylcholine activity, a key neurotransmitter involved in memory and learning processes (Rodriguez *et al*., 2023). Additionally, carotenoids in paprika contribute to antioxidant defense, reducing oxidative stress and neuroinflammation, both of which are implicated in cognitive decline and neurodegenerative diseases (Liu *et al*., 2024). Paprika's polyphenols have also been found to enhance neurogenesis and synaptic plasticity, supporting cognitive function.

3.7 Anticancer properties and chemopreventive potential

Capsaicin exhibits potent anticancer properties by inducing apoptosis (programmed cell death), inhibiting tumor cell proliferation, and neutralizing carcinogens through its antioxidant effects. A study on breast cancer cells demonstrated that capsaicin triggered apoptosis *via* the mitochondrial pathway, reducing tumor viability by 40% *in vitro* (Clark and Lee, 2016). The underlying mechanism involves capsaicin-mediated activation of caspase-3 and caspase-9, key regulators of apoptosis, leading to selective cancer cell death while sparing healthy cells (Zhang *et al*., 2020). Additionally, capsaicin disrupts cancer cell metabolism and inhibits nuclear factor kappa B (NF-κB) signaling, further suppressing tumor progression (Huang *et al*., 2023). Recent research also suggests that capsaicin enhances the efficacy of chemotherapy by reducing drug resistance and sensitizing cancer cells to treatment (Nguyen *et al*., 2024). These findings highlight paprika's potential role in cancer prevention and adjunctive therapy for various malignancies, including prostate, lung, and colorectal cancers.

4. Applications in functional foods and pharmaceuticals

Paprika, long celebrated as a culinary spice, is stepping into the spotlight as a powerhouse in the food and pharmaceutical industries. Its vibrant phytochemical lineupcapsaicinoids, carotenoids, flavonoids, and vitamins make it a standout ingredient in functional foods, nutraceuticals, and even cutting-edge drug development. This article explores how paprika is transforming these fields, backed by the latest scientific advancements (Prabhu *et al*., 2024).

4.1 Paprika as a functional ingredient in the food industry

Paprika's vivid color, bold flavor, and health-boosting properties have cemented its role in the food industry far beyond seasoning. Its bioactive compounds elevate everyday products into functional foods with real benefits. Paprika shines as a colorant and flavor enhancer, thanks to carotenoids like capsanthin and capsorubin, which tint sauces, snacks, and processed meats with natural red hues. Capsaicinoids add that signature pungency, amplifying taste in dishes worldwide. As a preservative and antioxidant, its polyphenols and carotenoids fend off lipid oxidation and microbial growth, keeping food fresher for longer. This dual action has inspired functional food development, with paprika now starring in fortified soups, beverages, and snacks designed to deliver nutrition alongside flavor (Singh *et al*., 2024). Meanwhile, researchers have crafted paprika-enriched functional beverages like antioxidant-packed juices and smoothies that blend wellness with sensory delight (Martínez *et al*., 2021). Additionally, paprika extract has been successfully incorporated into dairy products, such as fortified yogurts and cheese, enhancing both their antioxidant potential and consumer appeal.

4.2 Nutraceuticals and dietary supplements

Paprika's bioactive stars, particularly capsaicinoids and carotenoids, are fuelling a boom in nutraceuticals and dietary supplements tailored to specific health needs. For weight management, capsaicin-based supplements metabolism, boost fat oxidation, and tame appetite, making them a go-to for shedding pounds (Rani *et al*., 2023). In eye health, paprika-derived lutein and zeaxanthin power supplements that protect vision and combat age-related macular degeneration. And for immune support, its hefty vitamin C content makes it a staple in formulations that bolster the body's defences. Clinical trials also reveal that lutein and zeaxanthin supplements from paprika sharpen visual function in early-stage macular degeneration patients, offering a preventive edge (Ma and Lin, 2022). Furthermore, research in phytotherapy research highlights that capsaicin supplementation can improve endothelial function, potentially lowering cardiovascular disease risk (Huang *et al*., 2023).

4.3 Potential for drug development

Paprika's pharmacological punch is sparking excitement in drug development, with its capsaicinoids, carotenoids, and polyphenols eyed for treating a range of diseases. In pain management, capsaicin drives topical creams and patches that ease arthritis, neuropathy, and postoperative discomfort offering a non-addictive alternative to opioids. For cancer therapy, capsaicin and carotenoids are showing promise by triggering apoptosis and curbing tumour growth, hinting at new treatment avenues. And in cardiovascular drugs, paprika's polyphenols are being studied for their power to enhance endothelial function and lower blood pressure, laying the groundwork for heart-health innovations. Meanwhile, researchers are perfecting capsaicin-based transdermal patches for chronic pain, delivering relief without the risks of addiction (Smith and Johnson, 2023). Additional studies have demonstrated the neuroprotective effects of paprika-derived flavonoids in reducing oxidative stress and inflammation in neurodegenerative diseases such as Alzheimer's and Parkinson's (Liu *et al*., 2024).

5. Safety and toxicology

Capsaicinoids, like the fiery capsaicin, are generally recognized as safe (GRAS) in culinary doses, adding zest without worry. Yet, push the limits with high amounts, and you might face gastrointestinal irritation, burning sensations, or, rarely, liver and kidney strain (Johnson and Smith, 2023). Carotenoids, such as beta-carotene, can turn skin a harmless yellow-orange in excess,a condition called carotenodermia, but synthetic versions have raised red flags, linking to higher lung cancer risk in smokers (Martínez and García-Almendárez, 2021). Polyphenols and flavonoids are typically safe, though megadoses might meddle with thyroid function or nutrient uptake (Ma and Lin, 2022). For some, paprika's allergenic potential sparks rashes, breathing trouble, or even anaphylaxis (Whiting and Tiwari, 2023). Another study found paprika extracts safe at moderate levels, though high concentrations might stir mild stomach woes (Martínez and García-Almendárez, 2021). Furthermore, paprika's safety in pediatric and geriatric populations is under investigation, with early studies suggesting that lower doses can offer health benefits without adverse effects (Kumar *et al*., 2018).

5.1 Dosage considerations

In the kitchen, paprika's a breeze 1-2 teaspoons daily is safe and savory (Whiting and Tiwari, 2023). For supplements, capsaicin doses of 2-10 mg per day fuel weight loss and metabolic boosts, but higher amounts call for a doctor's nod (Ma and Lin, 2022). Topical applications, like capsaicin creams or patches, range from 0.025-0.1% for pain relief, with professionals guiding the way (Sánchez-Ortega and Regalado, 2022). Higher therapeutic doses, especially in clinical settings, require stringent monitoring to balance efficacy and safety (Huang *et al*., 2023). Additionally, paprika-based dietary interventions for specific conditions, such as diabetes and hypertension, are being optimized to ensure optimal bioavailability and minimal side effects. Emerging research indicates that combining paprika-derived capsaicinoids with dietary lipids enhances absorption and maximizes therapeutic potential (Rodríguez *et al*., 2024). Furthermore, time-released formulations of capsaicin supplements are under investigation to sustain metabolic benefits without causing gastrointestinal discomfort (Singh *et al*., 2024).

6. Future perspectives

Scientists are eager to unravel the magic behind paprika's bioactive compounds, diving into how they tweak gene expression, signaling pathways, and cellular metabolism to supercharge their therapeutic potential (Zhang and Wang, 2023). Large-scale clinical trials are poised to prove that paprika-derived supplements and drugs can safely and effectively tackle obesity, diabetes, and brain diseases, turning promise into real-world results (Ma and Lin, 2022). Meanwhile, nanotechnology and encapsulation are set to revolutionize delivery, boosting bioavailability and precision for smarter supplements and sharper therapies (Sánchez-Ortega and Regalado, 2022). Greener growing and extraction methods could keep paprika potent and plentiful while lightening the environmental load-a win-win for health and sustainability (Whiting and Tiwari, 2023). Advances in supercritical CO_2 extraction and enzymatic biotransformation are already showing promise in preserving bioactive compounds while reducing chemical waste (Martínez *et al*., 2023). Additionally, CRISPR technology promises to crank up capsaicinoid and carotenoid yields in paprika plants for a spicier, healthier future (Zhang and Wang, 2023). Recent gene-editing research is already showing success in modifying the expression of key enzymes involved in capsaicinoid biosynthesis, potentially creating paprika strains with enhanced bioactivity (Liu *et al*., 2024).

Beyond nutrition, interdisciplinary research is bridging food science with pharmaceutical applications. Advanced studies are investigating the potential of paprika-derived nanoparticles for drug delivery, particularly in cancer treatment, where targeted capsaicin formulations could improve tumor suppression while minimizing side effects (Hernández *et al*., 2024). Moreover, neuroprotective properties of paprika's bioactives are being explored for their role in slowing cognitive decline in conditions like Alzheimer's disease (García-Almendárez *et al*., 2023).

7. Conclusion

Paprika is more than just a flavorful spice,it is a functional ingredient with significant health benefits. Rich in capsaicinoids, carotenoids, flavonoids, and polyphenols, paprika demonstrates antioxidant, anti-inflammatory, antimicrobial, and metabolic-regulating properties. Its potential applications in functional foods, nutraceuticals, and pharmaceuticals continue to expand as research uncovers new therapeutic effects. However, responsible usage is key. While moderate consumption is safe, excessive intake or concentrated extracts may pose health risks, particularly in individuals with sensitivities. Establishing standardized dosage guidelines and conducting rigorous long-term safety assessments will be crucial in ensuring its effective and safe use. The future of paprika research is promising, with ongoing studies exploring its bioavailability, targeted delivery, and mechanistic pathways. Advances in nanotechnology and encapsulation can improve absorption and efficacy, while sustainable agricultural and extraction methods will ensure its continued availability without environmental compromise. Additionally, personalized nutrition approaches could optimize paprika's health benefits, tailoring its use to individual dietary and metabolic needs. With its rich nutritional profile, medicinal properties, and growing scientific backing, paprika stands at the intersection of tradition and modern health science. As research continues to validate its role in disease prevention and overall well-being, this vibrant spice has the potential to transition from a staple in kitchens to a key player in functional health and medicine.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest relevant to this article.

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