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Multi-Target Biological Activities of Underexplored Medicinal Plants: An Evidence-Based Review for Drug Discovery

Dr M.V.S. Mahesh Kumar*[1]

[1]Associate Professor, Department of Pharmacognosy
M.Tanuja[2], B. Akhila Sushmita[3], V. Akhila[4]
Viswanadha Institute of Pharmaceutical Sciences, Visakhapatnam-531173, India.

Abstract:

Medicinal plants are widely used in traditional medicine systems, yet scientific research has mainly focused on a limited number of popular plant species. As a result, many medicinal plants with proven traditional importance remain underexplored. Recent experimental studies indicate that such plants possess **multi-target biological activities**, enabling them to act against more than one disease pathway simultaneously. This review presents an evidence-based discussion of the major biological activities reported for underexplored medicinal plants, including antioxidant, anti-inflammatory, antimicrobial, antidiabetic, and cytoprotective effects. The review emphasizes experimental findings from laboratory and animal studies and highlights the role of phytochemical synergy in producing multi-target effects. Key research gaps such as lack of standardization, toxicity evaluation, and clinical validation are also discussed. This article aims to provide undergraduate pharmacy students with a clear scientific understanding of how underexplored medicinal plants can contribute to future drug discovery.

Keywords: Medicinal plants, Multi-target activity, Biological activities, Phytochemicals, Experimental studies

1. INTRODUCTION

Medicinal plants have played a significant role in healthcare since ancient times and continue to contribute to modern drug development. A large number of pharmaceutical drugs have originated directly or indirectly from plant sources. However, scientific research has predominantly concentrated on a small group of commonly known medicinal plants, while many traditionally used plants remain scientifically underexplored.Diseases such as diabetes, inflammation, microbial infections, and cancer involve multiple biological pathways. Therefore, therapeutic agents capable of acting on more than one target are increasingly important. Medicinal plants naturally contain multiple bioactive compounds, making them suitable candidates for **multi-target therapy**. This review focuses on experimental evidence supporting the multi-target biological activities of underexplored medicinal plants and discusses their relevance in pharmacy education and drug discovery.plants possess strong antioxidant activity by neutralizing free radicals and enhancing endogenous antioxidant enzymes. This activity forms the basis for several other pharmacological effects

2. Importance of Multi-Target Therapy in Modern Medicine

Single-target drugs are often effective for acute conditions but may be less successful in treating chronic and complex diseases. Multi-target therapy offers several advantages:

- Better therapeutic efficacy
- Reduced drug resistance
- Lower risk of adverse effects
- Synergistic pharmacological action

Medicinal plants naturally support this approach due to the presence of multiple phytochemicals acting through different mechanisms.

3. Major Biological Activities Reported in Experimental Studies

3.1 Antioxidant Activity

Oxidative stress results from an imbalance between free radical generation and the antioxidant defense system, leading to cellular and tissue damage. Excess reactive oxygen species (ROS) are implicated in aging and in the pathogenesis of chronic diseases such as cancer, diabetes, cardiovascular disorders, and neurodegenerative conditions.

Experimental studies demonstrate that underexplored medicinal plant extracts exhibit significant antioxidant activity due to the presence of phenolics, flavonoids, tannins, and other secondary metabolites. These compounds act by scavenging free radicals, chelating metal ions, and enhancing endogenous antioxidant enzymes such as superoxide dismutase, catalase, and glutathione peroxidase. In vitro assays like DPPH, ABTS, FRAP, and lipid peroxidation inhibition confirm their strong antioxidant potential.

3.2 Anti-Inflammatory Activity

Inflammation is a protective biological response to injury, infection, or irritation; however, prolonged inflammation contributes to chronic diseases including arthritis, cardiovascular disorders, and autoimmune conditions. Inflammatory processes involve the release of mediators such as prostaglandins, cytokines, nitric oxide, and cyclooxygenase enzymes.

Laboratory and animal studies demonstrate that extracts of medicinal plants suppress inflammatory mediators by inhibiting enzymes like COX and LOX and by reducing the production of pro-inflammatory cytokines. These extracts also decrease edema, tissue infiltration, and oxidative damage in experimental models. Such findings provide scientific support for their traditional use in treating pain, swelling, and inflammatory disorders.

3.3 Antimicrobial Activity

The rapid emergence of antimicrobial resistance has increased the need for alternative therapeutic agents. Medicinal plants have long been used in traditional systems to treat infectious diseases caused by bacteria, fungi, and other pathogens.

Experimental evidence indicates that plant-derived extracts and phytochemicals exhibit antimicrobial activity by inhibiting microbial growth, disrupting cell membranes, and interfering with essential metabolic pathways. Some compounds also prevent microbial adhesion and biofilm formation, enhancing their effectiveness against resistant strains. These properties suggest that medicinal plants can serve as potential sources of novel antimicrobial agents.

3.4 Antidiabetic and Metabolic Activity

Antidiabetic and Metabolic Activity

Diabetes mellitus is a chronic metabolic disorder characterized by persistent hyperglycemia due to impaired insulin secretion, insulin action, or both. Metabolic disorders associated with diabetes include dyslipidemia, obesity, and insulin resistance, which increase the risk of cardiovascular complications.

Antidiabetic and metabolically active agents exert their effects through multiple mechanisms, including enhancement of insulin secretion, improvement of insulin sensitivity, inhibition of carbohydrate-digesting

enzymes (α-amylase and α-glucosidase), reduction of hepatic glucose production, and modulation of lipid metabolism. Regulation of key signaling pathways such as AMP-activated protein kinase (AMPK) and peroxisome proliferator-activated receptors (PPARs) plays a crucial role in maintaining glucose and lipid homeostasis.

Synthetic antidiabetic drugs such as metformin, sulfonylureas, and thiazolidinediones are effective but may cause adverse effects with long-term use. Consequently, natural products and plant-derived compounds—including flavonoids, alkaloids, polyphenols, and terpenoids—have attracted significant attention. Bioactive compounds like quercetin, berberine, resveratrol, and curcumin have demonstrated antidiabetic and metabolic regulatory effects by improving insulin sensitivity, reducing oxidative stress, and correcting lipid abnormalities.

Overall, antidiabetic and metabolic agents play a vital role in the management of diabetes and related metabolic disorders, and natural compounds offer promising complementary therapeutic options.

3.5 Cytoprotective and Antiproliferative Effects

Cellular damage and uncontrolled cell proliferation are key factors in the development of cancer and degenerative diseases. Cytoprotective agents help maintain cellular integrity, while antiproliferative agents inhibit abnormal cell growth.

Experimental studies indicate that certain medicinal plant extracts protect cells against oxidative and chemical-induced damage by enhancing antioxidant defenses and stabilizing cellular membranes. Antiproliferative effects are linked to modulation of the cell cycle, induction of apoptosis, and inhibition of cancer cell signaling pathways. These findings highlight the therapeutic potential of plant-derived compounds in disease prevention and cancer management.

3.6 Anti-Inflammatory Activity

Inflammation is a protective immune response to injury or infection, but chronic inflammation contributes to diseases such as arthritis, cardiovascular disorders, diabetes, and cancer. Anti-inflammatory agents act by suppressing inflammatory mediators and signaling pathways involved in this process.

The major mechanisms of anti-inflammatory activity include inhibition of **cyclooxygenase (COX-1 and COX-2)** and **lipoxygenase (LOX)** enzymes, resulting in reduced production of prostaglandins and leukotrienes. Many agents also inhibit **pro-inflammatory cytokines** such as TNF-α, IL-1β, and IL-6, and downregulate transcription factors like **NF-κB** and **MAPK**, which regulate inflammatory gene expression.

Synthetic drugs such as **non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs)** and **corticosteroids** are widely used but may cause adverse effects with long-term use. Consequently, natural products—especially **flavonoids, polyphenols, terpenoids, and alkaloids**—have gained attention due to their anti-inflammatory and antioxidant properties with relatively lower toxicity. Compounds such as **curcumin, quercetin, resveratrol, and boswellic acids** have demonstrated significant anti-inflammatory effects in experimental models.

Overall, anti-inflammatory agents play a crucial role in managing inflammatory diseases, and natural products represent promising alternatives for safer long-term therapy.

4. Role of Phytochemicals in Multi-Target Action

Phytochemicals such as flavonoids, phenolic compounds, alkaloids, and terpenoids contribute to the biological activities of medicinal plants. The combined action of these compounds results in **synergistic pharmacological effects**, making plant extracts more effective than isolated compounds in some cases.

5. Limitations and Research Gaps

Despite promising results, several limitations exist:

- Lack of standardized experimental methods
- Insufficient safety and toxicity studies
- Limited clinical research
- Inadequate molecular-level investigations

Addressing these gaps is essential for converting experimental findings into therapeutic applications.

6. Future Scope

Underexplored medicinal plants offer a valuable research opportunity. Future studies can focus on:

- Bioactivity-guided screening
- Mechanism-based evaluation
- Safety assessment
- Development of herbal formulations

Such research can contribute to sustainable drug discovery and evidence-based herbal medicine.

7. Conclusion

Underexplored medicinal plants exhibit diverse multi-target biological activities supported by experimental evidence. Their ability to modulate multiple disease pathways makes them promising candidates for future drug development. For undergraduate pharmacy students, studying these plants provides a strong foundation in pharmacognosy, pharmacology, and research methodology.

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