

BEETROOT AS A FUNCTIONAL FOOD: NUTRITIONAL COMPOSITION AND HEALTH IMPLICATIONS

Rutuja Rajendra Gadekar, Dnyaneshwari Udhav Khatal, Ankita Ashok Jambe, Thube Komal

Vidya Niketan College of Pharmacy, Bota

Abstract:

Beetroot (*Beta vulgaris*) has emerged as a notable functional food due to its dense nutritional profile and array of bioactive compounds. Rich in dietary nitrates, betalains, polyphenols, vitamins (especially folate and vitamin C), essential minerals (such as potassium and iron), and dietary fiber, beetroot contributes significantly to human health. This review discusses the nutritional composition of beetroot and explores its health implications, particularly its roles in cardiovascular health, blood pressure regulation, exercise performance, antioxidant and anti-inflammatory effects, and potential anticancer activity. Growing evidence from clinical and epidemiological studies supports the regular inclusion of beetroot in the diet for health promotion and disease prevention. As a natural and accessible dietary component, beetroot offers considerable potential in the development of functional food products aimed at improving public health outcomes. Beetroot (*Beta vulgaris*) is increasingly recognized as a valuable functional food due to its unique combination of nutrients and bioactive compounds that offer a range of health benefits. This root vegetable is particularly rich in dietary nitrates, which have been shown to enhance nitric oxide production, leading to improved endothelial function and reduced blood pressure. Additionally, beetroot contains potent antioxidants such as betalains, polyphenols, and vitamin C, which contribute to its anti-inflammatory and oxidative stress-reducing properties. Its micronutrient profile, including folate, potassium, magnesium, and iron, further supports metabolic and cardiovascular health. Research has also highlighted beetroot's potential in improving athletic performance, cognitive function, and its emerging role in cancer chemoprevention. This review synthesizes current evidence on the nutritional composition of beetroot and its implications for human health, emphasizing its potential role in chronic disease prevention and the promotion of overall well-being. As an affordable and natural dietary source of functional compounds, beetroot represents a promising candidate for incorporation into health-focused nutrition strategies and food product development.

Keywords:

Beetroot, functional food, dietary nitrates, betalains, antioxidants, cardiovascular health, exercise performance, anti-inflammatory, nutritional composition, disease prevention

Introduction

The growing interest in functional foods has sparked extensive research into naturally occurring dietary components that offer health benefits beyond basic nutrition. Among these, beetroot (*Beta vulgaris*), a root vegetable traditionally consumed for its flavor and color, has gained significant scientific and commercial attention due to its potential role in promoting health and preventing disease. Originally cultivated for its leaves, beetroot has become a valued part of the human diet and is now recognized for its dense concentration of bioactive compounds, including dietary nitrates, betalains, phenolic compounds, and essential vitamins and minerals.[2]

Dietary nitrates, one of the primary bioactive constituents in beetroot, have been extensively studied for their role in nitric oxide (NO) production, which influences vascular tone, blood pressure regulation, and overall cardiovascular health. In addition, betalains—pigments responsible for beetroot's deep red-purple color—exhibit strong antioxidant and anti-inflammatory properties. Together with other compounds such as vitamin C, folate, potassium, and polyphenols, these nutrients position beetroot as a multifunctional food with the potential to support physiological functions and reduce the risk of chronic diseases. Beetroot consumption has been associated with a range of health outcomes, including improved cardiovascular function, enhanced exercise performance, reduced oxidative stress, and even potential anticancer effects. Its accessibility, affordability, and versatility in culinary applications further enhance its suitability as a dietary intervention in both clinical and everyday settings. Despite its increasing popularity, there is still a need to synthesize the growing body of evidence to better understand beetroot's full nutritional and therapeutic potential.[12]



Fig. 1. Beetroot

The demand for functional foods—foods that offer health benefits beyond basic nutrition—has steadily increased due to the growing prevalence of chronic diseases, such as cardiovascular conditions, diabetes, and cancer. These foods, enriched with bioactive compounds, are believed to play a role in enhancing health, preventing disease, and improving overall well-being. Among the variety of natural foods being studied, beetroot (*Beta vulgaris*) has emerged as a highly promising candidate for functional food development due to its rich nutritional profile and bioactive compounds with potential therapeutic benefits.

Beetroot, historically used in culinary applications for its earthy flavor and vibrant color, contains a variety of bioactive molecules, including dietary nitrates, betalains, polyphenols, fiber, vitamins, and essential minerals. One of the most notable constituents of beetroot is dietary nitrate, which is metabolized into nitric oxide (NO) in the body, contributing to improved blood flow, vasodilation, and reduced blood pressure. This has sparked interest in beetroot as a dietary intervention for managing hypertension and promoting cardiovascular health. In addition, beetroot's striking red-purple color is attributed to betalains, which possess potent antioxidant and anti-inflammatory properties, making them valuable in reducing oxidative stress and combating inflammation—key factors involved in the pathogenesis of numerous chronic diseases. Beyond its cardiovascular and anti-inflammatory benefits, beetroot has also been linked to improvements in exercise performance, cognitive function, and metabolic health. Studies have demonstrated that beetroot supplementation can enhance endurance, delay fatigue, and improve recovery following physical activity, likely due to the effects of nitrates on oxygen utilization and muscle function. Furthermore, the high content of folate, vitamin C, potassium, and other micronutrients supports various physiological processes, from immune function to red blood cell production, further reinforcing beetroot's role in maintaining health.[17]

The growing body of research on beetroot has also pointed to its potential anticancer properties, driven by its antioxidant-rich composition and ability to modulate cellular pathways associated with cancer development. This emerging area of research positions beetroot not only as a functional food for everyday health but also as a promising candidate for the prevention and management of chronic diseases. Despite the mounting evidence supporting the health benefits of beetroot, there remains a need for a comprehensive synthesis of its nutritional composition, mechanisms of action, and therapeutic implications. The current review seeks to address this gap by exploring the functional food properties of beetroot, analyzing the scientific literature surrounding its health benefits, and evaluating its potential applications in public health nutrition.

- **Rising Interest in Functional Foods:**

- Growing demand for foods that offer health benefits beyond basic nutrition.
- Functional foods are seen as a strategy to combat chronic diseases (cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, cancer, etc.).

- **Beetroot as a Functional Food:**

- Beetroot (*Beta vulgaris*) has emerged as a promising functional food due to its nutritional composition and bioactive compounds.
- Traditionally consumed for its flavor and vibrant color, beetroot is now recognized for its health-promoting properties.

- **Nutritional Composition of Beetroot:**

- Contains **dietary nitrates, betalains, polyphenols, vitamins** (e.g., folate, vitamin C), **minerals** (e.g., potassium, magnesium), and **dietary fiber**.
- These compounds contribute to its health benefits, including cardiovascular, anti-inflammatory, and antioxidant effects.[11]

- **Key Bioactive Components and Their Benefits:**

- **Dietary Nitrates:**
 - Convert to **nitric oxide (NO)** in the body, improving blood flow, vasodilation, and reducing blood pressure.
 - Associated with cardiovascular health, especially in managing hypertension.
- **Betalains:**
 - Powerful **antioxidants** and **anti-inflammatory agents** that help reduce oxidative stress and inflammation, which are involved in chronic disease development.
- **Polyphenols:**
 - Contribute to antioxidant and anti-inflammatory effects.
- **Micronutrients (e.g., Vitamin C, Folate, Potassium):**
 - Support immune function, red blood cell production, and overall metabolic health.[9]

- **Health Benefits:**

- **Cardiovascular Health:** Regular beetroot consumption supports heart health, particularly by lowering blood pressure.
- **Exercise Performance:** Dietary nitrates improve endurance and reduce fatigue during physical activity.
- **Cognitive Function:** Beetroot's nitrate content may improve cognitive performance and brain health.
- **Anti-Cancer Properties:** Emerging research suggests beetroot may help prevent or slow down cancer due to its antioxidant and anti-inflammatory properties.

- **Research Gap and Need for Synthesis:**

- While studies highlight beetroot's potential, there is a need for a comprehensive synthesis of its nutritional composition and health benefits.
- This review aims to provide a detailed overview of beetroot's functional properties and its role in disease prevention.[12]

- **Public Health and Future Implications:**

- Beetroot's accessibility, affordability, and versatility make it a valuable dietary intervention.
- It has the potential to be incorporated into everyday diets and food products aimed at improving public health.

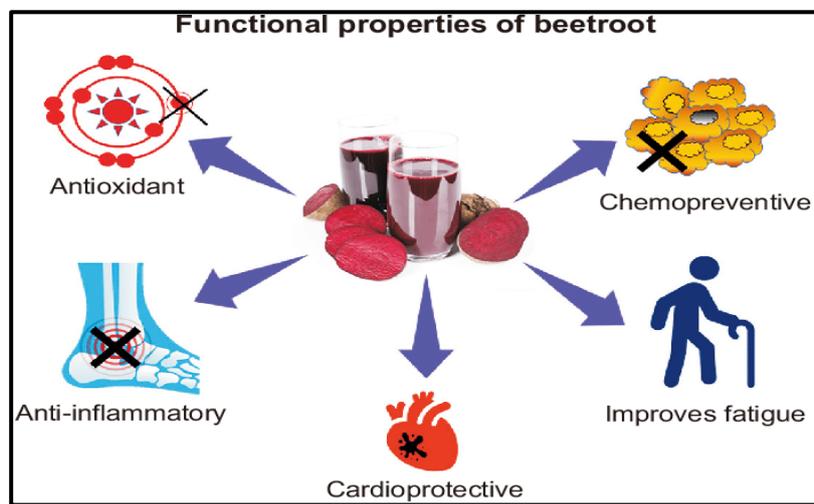


Fig. 2. Functional Properties of Beetroot

Phytochemical Composition of Beetroot

1. Betalains:

- **Betacyanins** (red-violet pigments) and **Betaxanthins** (yellow-orange pigments).
- **Antioxidant properties:** Betalains help neutralize radicals, reducing oxidative stress and inflammation.
- **Anti-inflammatory effects:** Modulate inflammatory pathways, reducing chronic disease risk.[23]
- **Potential anticancer activity:** Studies suggest betalains may inhibit cancer cell growth.

2. Dietary Nitrates:

- Beetroots are a rich source of **nitrates**, which are converted into **nitric oxide (NO)** in the body.
- **Nitric oxide** enhances **vascular health**, promotes **vasodilation**, and **lowers blood pressure**.
- Improves exercise performance by enhancing **oxygen efficiency** and muscle function.

3. Phenolic Compounds:

- Includes **flavonoids**, **stilbenes**, and other polyphenols.
- **Antioxidant and anti-inflammatory effects:** Protect cells from oxidative damage and reduce inflammation.[15]
- Associated with improved **cognitive function** and **cardiovascular health**.

4. Saponins:

- Present in beetroot, these compounds have **antioxidant** and **immune-boosting** properties.
- **Antimicrobial and anticancer** potential due to their ability to interact with cell membranes.

5. Alkaloids:

- Beetroot contains small amounts of alkaloids, which contribute to **neuroprotective** effects.
- Known to promote **brain health** by supporting cognitive function and reducing inflammation.

Nutritional Composition of Beetroot

1. Macronutrients:

- **Carbohydrates:**
 - Beetroot is a moderate source of **carbohydrates**, with a significant portion being **natural sugars** (glucose and fructose), providing energy.

- High in **dietary fiber** (about 2.8g per 100g), which aids digestion, regulates blood sugar, and supports gut health.
- **Proteins:** Contains a small amount of **protein**, contributing to overall amino acid intake.
- **Fats:** Very low in fat, making it a heart-healthy food.

2. Vitamins:[17]

- **Folate (Vitamin B9):**
 - Essential for **DNA synthesis, cell growth, and red blood cell production.**
 - One of the richest sources of folate among vegetables.
- **Vitamin C:**
 - Known for its **antioxidant properties** and **immune-boosting** effects.
 - Supports **collagen synthesis**, which is crucial for skin, blood vessels, and joint health.
- **Vitamin B6:**
 - Plays a key role in **amino acid metabolism, nervous system function, and hemoglobin production.**

3. Minerals:

- **Potassium:**
 - Important for **blood pressure regulation and muscle function.**
 - Supports **fluid balance** in the body and reduces the risk of stroke.
- **Magnesium:**
 - Supports **muscle and nerve function and bone health.**
- **Iron:**
 - Contributes to **hemoglobin formation and oxygen transport** in the body.
 - Aids in preventing **iron-deficiency anemia.**
- **Calcium:**
 - Helps in **bone health and the functioning of muscles and nerves.**

4. Antioxidants:

- **Betalains, vitamin C, and polyphenols** offer powerful **antioxidant protection**, neutralizing radicals and protecting cells from oxidative damage.
- These antioxidants play a role in reducing the **risk of chronic diseases** such as cancer, cardiovascular diseases, and neurodegenerative conditions.[21]

Other Bioactive Compounds in Beetroot

- **Dietary Fiber:**
 - Beetroot is rich in **soluble and insoluble fiber**, supporting digestive health by promoting regular bowel movements and reducing the risk of constipation.
 - Helps in **weight management** by promoting satiety and reducing appetite.
- **Choline:**
 - Supports **liver function, fat metabolism, and cognitive health.**

- **Betaine:**
 - A naturally occurring compound in beetroot, which has been shown to **improve liver function** and **reduce homocysteine levels**, potentially lowering the risk of cardiovascular diseases.

Properties of beetroot that are potentially chemo-preventive [25]

1. Antioxidant Activity

- **Betalains:** The vibrant red and yellow pigments in beetroot, particularly **betacyanins** (which give the deep red color) and **betaxanthins** (which contribute to yellow-orange hues), have potent **antioxidant** properties. They help neutralize radicals, which can damage cells and contribute to the development of cancer.
 - **Mechanism:** By scavenging reactive oxygen species (ROS), betalains protect cells from oxidative stress that could lead to DNA mutations, a key factor in carcinogenesis.
- **Vitamin C:** Beetroot is a good source of **vitamin C**, another potent antioxidant that helps protect cellular DNA from oxidative damage, preventing mutations that could lead to cancer.
- **Polyphenols:** These compounds, including flavonoids, have strong antioxidant and anti-inflammatory effects, supporting the inhibition of cancer cell proliferation and protecting against DNA damage.[13]

2. Anti-Inflammatory Effects

- Chronic inflammation is a well-established risk factor for cancer. Beetroot contains several bioactive compounds that exhibit **anti-inflammatory** properties, including:
 - **Betalains:** In addition to antioxidant properties, betalains modulate inflammatory pathways, reducing the expression of pro-inflammatory cytokines that are linked to cancer progression.
 - **Polyphenols:** These compounds also help reduce inflammatory markers in the body, thereby mitigating inflammation-induced carcinogenesis.
- **Nitrate-derived Nitric Oxide:** Beetroot's high **nitrate content** is metabolized to **nitric oxide (NO)**, which has been shown to reduce the expression of inflammatory markers that can promote cancer cell growth. NO can also contribute to the reduction of inflammation in tissues.[28]

3. Modulation of Carcinogen Metabolism

- **Betacyanin and Betalain Compounds:** Studies suggest that betalains can alter the activity of enzymes involved in **carcinogen metabolism**, such as **cytochrome P450 enzymes**. This modulation may reduce the bioactivation of certain carcinogens (substances that can cause cancer), thus lowering cancer risk.
- **Detoxification Pathways:** Beetroot has been shown to support liver function, which plays a critical role in detoxifying carcinogens and harmful substances from the body.

4. Induction of Apoptosis (Programmed Cell Death)

- **Betalains:** There is evidence that beetroot compounds can promote **apoptosis** (programmed cell death) in abnormal or cancerous cells. By encouraging the self-destruction of mutated or cancerous cells, betalains help prevent the proliferation of harmful cells that could form tumors.
- **Anticancer Signaling Pathways:** Beetroot compounds may interact with specific signaling pathways in cancer cells, such as those involving **p53** (a tumor suppressor protein) or **NF-κB** (a protein complex involved in inflammation), promoting cancer cell death and inhibiting tumor growth.[27]

5. DNA Protection and Repair

- **Betalains and Polyphenols:** Beetroot's betalains and polyphenolic compounds have been shown to protect **DNA integrity** and facilitate the **repair of DNA damage**. Since DNA damage is a key driver of cancer development, this protective effect can reduce the risk of mutations leading to oncogenesis (the formation of tumors).

- **Folate:** Beetroot is an excellent source of **folate (vitamin B9)**, a nutrient involved in DNA synthesis and repair. Adequate folate intake is crucial for maintaining DNA integrity and preventing mutations that could contribute to cancer.

6. Inhibition of Cancer Cell Proliferation

- **Betacyanins:** These compounds have been shown to **inhibit cancer cell proliferation**, particularly in colon, liver, and breast cancer cells. By slowing down or halting the growth of cancer cells, beetroot may help prevent the spread of tumors.
- **Anticancer Effects on Various Cancer Types:** Research indicates that beetroot extracts have shown **cytotoxic** (toxic to cancer cells) and **antiproliferative** (inhibiting cancer cell growth) effects in various cancer cell lines, including breast, lung, prostate, and colon cancer.[24]

7. Modulation of Epigenetic Mechanisms

- **Epigenetic modifications** (changes to gene expression without altering DNA sequence) are a key mechanism in cancer development. Beetroot, particularly through its polyphenolic content, has been shown to influence **epigenetic pathways**, potentially reversing gene silencing or activating tumor-suppressor genes.
- **Folate:** Folate from beetroot also plays a role in **DNA methylation**, a key epigenetic mechanism that influences gene expression and can potentially prevent the activation of oncogenes (genes that promote cancer).

8. Protection Against Specific Cancer Types

- **Colon Cancer:** Studies have demonstrated that beetroot's **betacyanins** and **betalains** inhibit the growth of colon cancer cells and may reduce the formation of colon polyps, which are precursors to cancer.
- **Liver Cancer:** Beetroot may have hepatoprotective effects by supporting liver detoxification and by acting against liver cancer cells through its antioxidant and anti-inflammatory actions.
- **Breast Cancer:** Beetroot extracts have shown potential in inhibiting breast cancer cell proliferation and migration, possibly through a combination of antioxidant, anti-inflammatory, and apoptosis-inducing effects.

Future Perspectives on Beetroot as a Chemopreventive Agent

1. Clinical Trials and Human Studies

- **Need for Human-Based Studies:** While much of the research on beetroot's chemopreventive properties has been conducted in vitro (cell cultures) and in vivo (animal models), clinical trials involving human participants are essential to confirm its effectiveness in cancer prevention.
 - **Clinical Trials Focus:** Future studies should focus on assessing the long-term effects of beetroot consumption on cancer incidence and progression in humans, particularly for common cancers such as **colon, lung, and breast cancer**.
 - **Optimal Dosage:** Determining the **effective dosage** and **form of beetroot consumption** (e.g., fresh, juice, extract, powder) will be important to assess its therapeutic potential and identify any side effects or toxicity concerns.[19]

2. Standardization of Beetroot Extracts

- **Standardization of Bioactive Compounds:** For beetroot to be used as a chemopreventive agent in functional foods or as a therapeutic supplement, there is a need to **standardize** the content of bioactive compounds like **betalains, nitrates, and polyphenols**.
 - **Consistency in Active Components:** Establishing a reliable method for producing standardized beetroot extracts would help ensure consistency in clinical outcomes and product efficacy.

3. Mechanistic Research and Pathway Elucidation

- **Molecular Mechanisms:** Although some mechanisms have been proposed (e.g., antioxidant activity, nitric oxide production, apoptosis induction), further research is required to fully elucidate the **molecular pathways** through which beetroot exerts its chemopreventive effects.

- **Gene Expression:** Investigating how beetroot influences **epigenetic mechanisms**, such as **DNA methylation** and **histone modification**, could offer new insights into its role in preventing cancer at the genetic level.[18]
- **Signaling Pathways:** Detailed studies on the interaction between beetroot compounds and specific **cell signaling pathways** (e.g., **NF-κB**, **p53**, **MAPK**) could reveal targets for chemopreventive intervention.

4. Combination Therapies with Other Foods and Supplements

- **Synergistic Effects:** Beetroot's chemopreventive potential may be enhanced when combined with other **nutrient-dense foods** or **bioactive compounds**. Future studies should explore the **synergistic effects** of beetroot with other antioxidants, vitamins, minerals, and phytochemicals in cancer prevention.
 - **Examples of Combinations:** Combining beetroot with foods rich in **curcumin** (turmeric), **green tea polyphenols**, or **cruciferous vegetables** (e.g., broccoli, kale) could result in **complementary mechanisms** of action for more effective chemoprevention.

5. Exploration of Beetroot in Personalized Nutrition

- **Personalized Approaches:** Advances in **personalized nutrition** could lead to customized dietary recommendations for cancer prevention, with beetroot playing a key role based on an individual's genetic profile, health status, and risk factors.
 - **Genetic Variability:** Research could explore how different genetic variations influence the absorption, metabolism, and effectiveness of beetroot's bioactive compounds, leading to tailored dietary recommendations.
 - **Nutrigenomics:** Understanding how beetroot's nutrients interact with an individual's unique genetic makeup could optimize its cancer-preventive effects.

6. Development of Beetroot-Based Functional Foods

- **Food Product Innovation:** As beetroot is a versatile and widely available food, there is significant potential for the development of **beetroot-based functional foods** that can deliver its chemopreventive benefits in convenient forms, such as:
 - **Juices and Smoothies:** Enriched with standardized beetroot extracts to maximize its bioactive compounds.
 - **Supplements and Fortified Foods:** Beetroot powder, capsules, or functional snacks could be developed to provide a practical, daily source of its beneficial compounds.
 - **Culinary Innovations:** Creative recipes, such as beetroot-infused oils, soups, or baked goods, could incorporate beetroot in everyday diets for cancer prevention.[1]

7. Environmental and Sustainable Production

- **Sustainability:** Beetroot is an easily cultivated, cost-effective vegetable, making it a viable option for large-scale production of bioactive compounds in a sustainable manner. Future research should focus on sustainable agricultural practices for beetroot cultivation that enhance its phytochemical content while minimizing environmental impact.
 - **Agricultural Practices:** Exploring the effects of **organic farming**, **soil quality**, and **harvest timing** on beetroot's phytochemical profile could improve its nutritional and medicinal properties.
 - **Biotechnological Advances:** Techniques such as **genetic modification** or **biotechnological fermentation** could increase the yield of beetroot's bioactive compounds, making it more potent for health interventions.

8. Public Awareness and Education

- **Public Health Initiatives:** There is a need for **public education** on the health benefits of beetroot as a functional food, particularly in the context of cancer prevention.

- **Dietary Guidelines:** Future research could lead to the inclusion of beetroot in **dietary guidelines** and **cancer prevention recommendations**, encouraging its consumption as part of a balanced, cancer-protective diet.
- **Health Campaigns:** Promoting beetroot as a natural, affordable, and effective option for supporting long-term health could increase its adoption as a preventative measure against cancer.

9. Regulatory Approvals and Standardization

- **Regulatory Framework:** For beetroot and beetroot-based supplements to be used in cancer prevention, regulatory agencies (e.g., FDA, EFSA) need to establish **guidelines** for their safety and efficacy.[19]
 - **Health Claims:** Research should focus on obtaining **scientific validation** to support health claims, especially for its chemopreventive properties, to facilitate the widespread use of beetroot as a health-promoting food ingredient.

Conclusion

Beetroot (*Beta vulgaris*) is emerging as a promising functional food with potential chemopreventive properties. Its rich array of bioactive compounds—including betalains, dietary nitrates, polyphenols, vitamins, and minerals—provides a multifaceted approach to cancer prevention. Research indicates that beetroot can exert its chemopreventive effects through a variety of mechanisms, such as antioxidant activity, anti-inflammatory effects, DNA protection and repair, and induction of apoptosis in cancer cells. Additionally, its ability to modulate carcinogen metabolism and inhibit cancer cell proliferation further reinforces its potential as a preventive agent against various types of cancer. While studies in vitro and animal models provide strong evidence of beetroot's health benefits, human clinical trials are essential to validate these findings and optimize its usage in cancer prevention strategies. Further research is also needed to explore the mechanisms of action, optimal dosages, and synergistic effects when combined with other health-promoting foods.

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