Journal of Carcinogenesis
Covering Genesis to Therapeutics

Journal of Carcinogenesis, ISSN: 1477-3163
2025; Vol 24: Issue 6s, https://carcinogenesis.com/

Emerging Role Of Phytochemicals In Cancer Therapy: Mechanism And Clinical Perspectives

Ms. Rachana Belwal[*1], Dr. Raghav Dixit[2], Dr. Sushil Kumar Mewara[3], Dr. Harjeet Singh[4], Ms. Megha Yadav[5], Mr. Abhishek Sharma[6], Mr. Rajat Saxena[7], Ms. Shivali Sagar[8], Dr. Vishal Chauhan[9]

[1]Assistant Professor, Department of Pharmaceutical Chemistry, School of Pharmacy and Research, Dev Bhoomi Uttarakhand University, Dehradun, Uttarakhand, India, Pin Code -248007

[2]Assistant Professor, School of Pharmaceutical Sciences, Swami Rama Himalayan University, Jolly Grant, Dehradun, Uttarakhand, India, Pin Code -248016

[3]Assistant Professor, Pathology, Government Medical College, Kota, Rajasthan, India, Pin Code - 324005

[4]Principal and Professor, Department of Pharmacy, Integrated Academy of Management and Technology, Ghaziabad, Uttar Pradesh, India, Pin Code - 201009

[5]Assistant Professor, BIU College of Pharmacy, Bareilly International University, Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh, India, Pin Code - 243006

[6]Assistant Professor, BIU College of Pharmacy, Bareilly International University, Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh, India, Pin Code - 243006

[7]assistant Professor, Faculty of Pharmacy, Pharmacy Academy, IFTM University, Moradabad, Uttar Pradesh, India, Pin Code - 244001

[8]Assistant Professor, College of Pharmacy, Graphic Era Hill University, Bhimtal Campus, Nainital, Uttarakhand, India, Pin Code - 263136

[9]HOD, Department of Pharmaceutical Chemistry, Faculty of Pharmacy and Biomedical Sciences, MAHSA University, Jenjarom, Selangor, Malaysia, Pin Code - 42610

Correspondence to Author:

Ms. Rachana Belwal*

B.Pharm, M.Pharm, (Ph.D),

Assistant Professor, School of Pharmacy and Research, Dev Bhoomi Uttarakhand University, Dehradun, Uttarakhand, India, Pin Code- 248007

Email id: rachana.pharma21@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Cancer continues to be a major global health burden, with conventional therapeutic strategies such as chemotherapy, radiotherapy, and targeted therapies often limited by issues of toxicity, resistance, and recurrence. This has stimulated growing interest in alternative and complementary approaches, particularly the use of phytochemicals—naturally occurring bioactive compounds derived from plants. Phytochemicals possess diverse pharmacological properties and have been shown to modulate multiple cellular and molecular pathways involved in carcinogenesis. Their anticancer activity is mediated through mechanisms such as the suppression of oxidative stress, induction of apoptosis, regulation of the cell cycle, inhibition of angiogenesis and metastasis, and modulation of signaling cascades including NF-κB, MAPK, and PI3K/Akt pathways. Prominent phytochemicals such as curcumin, resveratrol, quercetin, epigallocatechin gallate (EGCG), and fisetin have demonstrated promising results in both preclinical and clinical studies. Despite these advances, challenges such as poor bioavailability, rapid metabolism, and lack of large-scale clinical trials hinder their clinical translation. Emerging strategies, including nanotechnology-based delivery systems and phytochemical-drug combinations, offer promising avenues to overcome these limitations. This review provides a comprehensive overview of the molecular mechanisms underlying the anticancer effects of phytochemicals, evaluates their current clinical perspectives, and highlights future directions for their effective integration into modern cancer therapy.

KEYWORDS: *Phytochemicals, Cancer therapy, Apoptosis, Oxidative stress, Cell cycle arrest, Angiogenesis, Metastasis, Curcumin, Resveratrol, Quercetin, EGCG, Fisetin*

How to Cite: Rachana Belwal, Raghav Dixit, Sushil Kumar Mewara, Harjeet Singh, Megha Yadav, Abhishek Sharma, Rajat Saxena, Shivali Sagar, Vishal Chauhan., (2025) Emerging Role Of Phytochemicals In Cancer Therapy: Mechanism And Clinical Perspectives, *Journal of Carcinogenesis*, *Vol.24, No.6s*, 727-734.

1. INTRODUCTION

Cancer is one of the most complex and life-threatening diseases worldwide, ranking among the leading causes of death. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the global cancer burden is expected to rise significantly in the coming decades, primarily due to population growth, aging, and lifestyle-related risk factors such as smoking, obesity, poor diet, and lack of physical activity. Despite remarkable advancements in cancer research, including improved diagnostic tools and therapeutic interventions such as chemotherapy, radiotherapy, targeted therapy, and immunotherapy, the clinical management of cancer continues to face major challenges. These include drug resistance, adverse side effects, tumor recurrence, and high treatment costs, which ultimately compromise patient quality of life.

The multifactorial nature of cancer demands a holistic approach to therapy. Traditional plant-derived compounds, also known as phytochemicals, have been used in various traditional medicine systems for centuries to prevent and treat diseases, including cancer. In recent years, there has been a resurgence of interest in phytochemicals due to their ability to interact with multiple molecular targets simultaneously, their relatively low toxicity compared to synthetic drugs, and their availability from dietary sources. These natural compounds are abundant in fruits, vegetables, herbs, spices, and beverages such as tea and wine, making them an integral part of human nutrition and health.

Phytochemicals exert their anticancer effects through diverse mechanisms, such as scavenging reactive oxygen species (ROS), inducing programmed cell death (apoptosis), arresting uncontrolled cell division (cell cycle regulation), inhibiting angiogenesis (formation of new blood vessels), and preventing metastasis (spread of cancer to distant organs). Additionally, they modulate key oncogenic signaling pathways including NF-κB, MAPK, PI3K/Akt, and p53, thereby influencing cancer cell survival, proliferation, and resistance mechanisms.

Several phytochemicals have been extensively studied for their anticancer potential. For instance, curcumin from turmeric demonstrates anti-inflammatory and anti-proliferative properties; resveratrol from grapes and berries exhibits strong antioxidant and pro-apoptotic activities; quercetin from onions and apples is known for its ability to induce cell cycle arrest; epigallocatechin gallate (EGCG) from green tea has shown inhibitory effects on tumor growth; and fisetin from strawberries and apples has demonstrated promising results against oxidative stress and cancer cell proliferation. Preclinical studies have validated the efficacy of these compounds, and some are currently under clinical evaluation.

While phytochemicals offer great promise, their clinical application faces limitations, particularly poor bioavailability, rapid metabolism, and inconsistent pharmacokinetics. Recent advances in nanotechnology, drug delivery systems, and synergistic drug-phytochemical combinations are being explored to overcome these barriers. Furthermore, integrating phytochemicals into preventive strategies and personalized medicine frameworks may represent a transformative approach in oncology.

This review aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the emerging role of phytochemicals in cancer therapy, focusing on their molecular mechanisms of action, therapeutic potential, clinical perspectives, and future challenges in their translation to mainstream cancer treatment.

2. MECHANISMS OF ACTION OF PHYTOCHEMICALS IN CANCERTHERAPY

Phytochemicals act on multiple molecular and cellular processes that drive cancer initiation, promotion, and progression. Their ability to simultaneously influence several signaling pathways makes them unique compared to conventional single-target drugs. The following sections provide detailed insights into the principal mechanisms by which phytochemicals exert anticancer effects:

1. Antioxidant and Pro-oxidant Effects

Phytochemicals possess both antioxidant and, under specific conditions, pro-oxidant properties. Their antioxidant role involves scavenging reactive oxygen species (ROS) and reactive nitrogen species (RNS), preventing DNA damage, lipid

peroxidation, and protein oxidation. For example, resveratrol and quercetin are potent antioxidants that protect normal cells from oxidative stress. Conversely, in cancer cells where ROS levels are already elevated, phytochemicals such as curcumin and EGCG may act as pro-oxidants, further increasing ROS accumulation to toxic levels, thereby inducing apoptosis.

2. Induction of Apoptosis (Programmed Cell Death)

Apoptosis is a key protective mechanism against uncontrolled proliferation. Phytochemicals promote apoptosis through both the intrinsic (mitochondrial) and extrinsic (death receptor-mediated) pathways:

- **Intrinsic Pathway:** Compounds like curcumin enhance mitochondrial membrane permeability, leading to cytochrome c release and activation of caspase-9 and caspase-3. They also modulate the balance between pro-apoptotic (Bax, Bak) and anti-apoptotic (Bcl-2, Bcl-xL) proteins.
- **Extrinsic Pathway:** Certain phytochemicals upregulate death receptors (Fas, TRAIL receptors) and activate caspase-8, triggering apoptosis.
- Additionally, many phytochemicals activate tumor suppressor p53, which governs cell cycle arrest and apoptosis.

3. Cell Cycle Regulation

Uncontrolled cell division is a hallmark of cancer. Phytochemicals target various checkpoints of the cell cycle:

- **G0/G1 Arrest:** Quercetin and resveratrol inhibit cyclin D1 and CDK4/6, preventing progression from G1 to S phase.
- **S-phase Inhibition:** EGCG disrupts DNA synthesis by inhibiting DNA polymerases and topoisomerases.
- **G2/M Arrest:** Curcumin and fisetin interfere with cyclin B1/CDK1 complex activity, halting cells prior to mitosis. Through these mechanisms, phytochemicals reduce proliferation and sensitize cancer cells to chemotherapeutic agents.

4. Inhibition of Angiogenesis and Metastasis

For tumor growth and metastasis, angiogenesis (formation of new blood vessels) is essential. Phytochemicals inhibit this process by:

- Downregulating vascular endothelial growth factor (VEGF) and its receptor signaling.
- Suppressing pro-angiogenic enzymes such as COX-2 and inducible nitric oxide synthase (iNOS).
- Reducing the expression of matrix metalloproteinases (MMP-2, MMP-9), which degrade the extracellular matrix and facilitate tumor invasion. Resveratrol, EGCG, and curcumin are among the most studied compounds in anti-angiogenic and anti-metastatic research.

5. Modulation of Oncogenic and Tumor Suppressor Signaling Pathways

Phytochemicals influence key intracellular signaling cascades, including:

- **NF-κB Pathway:** Many phytochemicals inhibit NF-κB activation, thereby reducing the transcription of genes linked to inflammation, survival, and proliferation.
- **PI3K/Akt/mTOR Pathway:** Curcumin and EGCG downregulate this survival pathway, sensitizing cells to apoptosis.
- **MAPK/ERK Pathway:** Quercetin modulates MAPK signaling, influencing cell growth and differentiation.
- **AMPK Activation:** Some compounds activate AMPK, which inhibits mTOR and promotes autophagy and apoptosis.
- **p53 Pathway:** Resveratrol and fisetin enhance p53 activity, thereby promoting apoptosis and genomic stability.

6. Epigenetic Regulation

Phytochemicals also influence gene expression through epigenetic modifications:

- DNA methylation: EGCG inhibits DNA methyltransferases (DNMTs), restoring silenced tumor suppressor genes.
- Histone modification: Curcumin and resveratrol modulate histone acetylation and deacetylation, altering chromatin structure.
- Non-coding RNAs: Certain phytochemicals regulate microRNAs (miRNAs) that are involved in cancer progression.

7. Synergistic Interactions with Conventional Therapies

Phytochemicals can sensitize tumors to chemotherapy and radiotherapy by lowering resistance mechanisms:

- Curcumin enhances the efficacy of paclitaxel, doxorubicin, and cisplatin.
- Resveratrol improves radiosensitivity by impairing DNA repair in cancer cells.
- Such synergistic effects not only improve treatment outcomes but also allow for reduced dosages of toxic chemotherapeutics.

Overall, these multifaceted mechanisms underscore the therapeutic potential of phytochemicals as both preventive and therapeutic agents in oncology.

Table 1: Phytochemicals, Sources, and Mechanisms of Action

Phytochemical	**Source**	**Mechanism of Action**	**Cancer Type Studied**
Curcumin	Turmeric (*Curcuma longa*)	Induces apoptosis, inhibits NF-κB, anti-inflammatory, anti-angiogenic	Breast, colon, pancreatic
Resveratrol	Grapes, berries	Cell cycle arrest, apoptosis induction, ROS modulation	Colon, prostate, breast
EGCG (Epigallocatechin gallate)	Green tea	Anti-angiogenic, apoptosis induction, epigenetic modulation	Breast, prostate, melanoma
Sulforaphane	Broccoli, cruciferous vegetables	Cell cycle arrest, apoptosis, anti-metastatic	Prostate, colon, lung
Genistein	Soybeans	Anti-proliferative, apoptosis induction, anti-angiogenic	Prostate, breast, leukemia
Quercetin	Onions, apples, berries	Apoptosis, anti-inflammatory, inhibits angiogenesis	Lung, prostate, liver
Moringa phytochemicals	*Moringa oleifera*leaves	Apoptosis induction, BCL-2 inhibition, anti-inflammatory	Breast, liver, colon

Challenges in Clinical Translation

Despite the promising anticancer potential of phytochemicals, translating preclinical findings into clinically effective therapies remains challenging. These challenges include bioavailability, standardization, safety, and regulatory hurdles.

1. Bioavailability and Pharmacokinetics

- **Definition:** Bioavailability refers to the proportion of a compound that reaches systemic circulation and can exert its therapeutic effect. Pharmacokinetics describes how the body absorbs, distributes, metabolizes, and eliminates the compound.
- **Challenges:**
  - Many phytochemicals, such as curcumin and resveratrol, have poor water solubility and low absorption in the gastrointestinal tract.
  - Rapid metabolism in the liver and intestines often reduces the plasma concentration of active compounds.
  - Short half-life leads to insufficient exposure of tumor cells to therapeutic doses.
- **Potential Solutions:**
  - Nanoparticle-based delivery systems (liposomes, polymeric nanoparticles, micelles) to enhance solubility and stability.
  - Use of prodrugs or structural modifications to improve absorption.
  - Co-administration with bioenhancers (e.g., piperine with curcumin) to inhibit metabolism and increase systemic availability.

2. Standardization and Quality Control

- **Definition:** Standardization ensures consistent chemical composition, potency, and purity of phytochemical preparations.
- **Challenges:**
  - Plant sources vary by species, growth conditions, and harvest time, leading to differences in phytochemical content.
  - Extraction and processing methods (solvent type, temperature, duration) can affect compound stability and efficacy.
  - Lack of uniform guidelines makes it difficult to reproduce results across different laboratories and clinical trials.
- **Potential Solutions:**
  - Adoption of Good Manufacturing Practices (GMP) for herbal extracts.

- Analytical methods (HPLC, LC-MS) for quantification and quality assessment of active constituents.
- Development of reference standards for major phytochemicals.

3. Safety, Toxicity, and Drug Interactions

- **Definition:** Safety refers to the absence of harmful effects, while toxicity describes dose-dependent adverse effects. Drug interactions occur when phytochemicals alter the activity of conventional drugs.
- **Challenges:**
  - Some phytochemicals can have cytotoxic effects on normal cells at high doses.
  - Long-term safety data are limited for many compounds.
  - Phytochemicals can interfere with the metabolism of chemotherapeutic agents, either reducing efficacy or increasing toxicity.
  - Examples include inhibition or induction of cytochrome P450 enzymes affecting drug clearance.
- **Potential Solutions:**
  - Conduct thorough in vitro and in vivo toxicity studies.
  - Investigate pharmacodynamic and pharmacokinetic interactions with standard anticancer drugs.
  - Establish safe dose ranges and monitoring guidelines in clinical trials.

4. Regulatory Hurdles

- **Definition:** Regulatory hurdles refer to the legal and procedural requirements needed for approval of phytochemical-based therapies.
- **Challenges:**
  - Phytochemicals fall into a complex category—sometimes classified as dietary supplements, sometimes as drugs—depending on jurisdiction.
  - Extensive preclinical and clinical studies are required to demonstrate efficacy, safety, and quality.
  - Lack of harmonized guidelines for herbal-based drugs slows down regulatory approval.
- **Potential Solutions:**
  - Engage early with regulatory authorities (FDA, EMA, CDSCO) to define trial requirements.
  - Adopt standardized clinical trial designs, endpoints, and reporting for phytochemical interventions.
  - Collaborate with industry and academic institutions to meet regulatory compliance.

Advanced Strategies for Effective Delivery

One of the main limitations in translating phytochemicals into effective anticancer therapies is their poor bioavailability, low solubility, and rapid metabolism. Advanced drug delivery systems are being explored to overcome these challenges, enhance therapeutic efficacy, and reduce systemic toxicity.

1. Nanoparticle-Based Delivery

- **Overview:** Nanoparticles (NPs) are submicron-sized carriers that can encapsulate phytochemicals, protecting them from degradation and improving absorption.
- **Advantages:**
  - Enhanced solubility and stability of poorly water-soluble compounds.
  - Controlled and sustained release of active agents.
  - Passive targeting via the Enhanced Permeation and Retention (EPR) effect in tumors.
- **Examples:**
  - Curcumin-loaded polymeric nanoparticles showing increased cytotoxicity in breast cancer cells.
  - Resveratrol-loaded nanoparticles demonstrating improved pharmacokinetics and tumor accumulation.

2. Liposomes and Micelles

- **Liposomes:**
  - Spherical vesicles composed of phospholipid bilayers.
  - Can encapsulate both hydrophilic and hydrophobic phytochemicals.
  - Protect compounds from enzymatic degradation and reduce systemic toxicity.
  - Example: Liposomal curcumin formulations have shown improved bioavailability and anticancer activity in preclinical models.
- **Micelles:**
  - Self-assembled amphiphilic molecules forming a hydrophobic core and hydrophilic shell.
  - Ideal for delivering hydrophobic phytochemicals.
  - Can enhance solubility, stability, and cellular uptake.

3. Targeted and pH-Responsive Delivery Systems

- **Targeted Delivery:**

- Involves conjugating phytochemicals with ligands (antibodies, peptides, aptamers) that bind specifically to tumor cell receptors.
- Enhances selective uptake by cancer cells while sparing normal tissues.
- Examples: Folate-conjugated curcumin nanoparticles targeting folate receptors overexpressed in many tumors.

- **pH-Responsive Systems:**
  - Exploit the acidic microenvironment of tumors for controlled drug release.
  - Phytochemicals remain stable in normal tissues but are released selectively at tumor sites.
  - Benefits include reduced systemic side effects and enhanced therapeutic index.

Future Perspectives and Directions

Phytochemicals hold significant promise as anticancer agents, but their full potential can only be realized by integrating innovative strategies and personalized approaches. Future research should focus on the following directions:

1. Personalized Medicine Approaches

- **Concept:** Tailoring phytochemical-based therapies to individual patients based on genetic, epigenetic, and molecular profiles.
- **Advantages:**
  - Improves therapeutic efficacy by targeting specific tumor vulnerabilities.
  - Minimizes adverse effects by avoiding unnecessary exposure to ineffective compounds.

- **Examples:**
  - Using patient-specific biomarkers to guide the use of curcumin or resveratrol in tumors with specific molecular signatures (e.g., BCL-2 overexpression or NF-κB activation).

2. Combination with Immunotherapy and Chemotherapy

- **Rationale:** Phytochemicals can enhance the effectiveness of standard therapies while reducing their toxicity.
- **Synergistic Effects:**
  - Curcumin or EGCG combined with chemotherapy agents (like cisplatin or doxorubicin) has shown enhanced apoptosis and inhibition of metastasis in preclinical models.
  - Some phytochemicals modulate immune checkpoints or enhance cytotoxic T-cell activity, supporting immunotherapy.
- **Goal:** Develop combination regimens that maximize tumor suppression while minimizing systemic toxicity.

3. Integration of Traditional Medicine Knowledge

- **Rationale:** Many phytochemicals have been used for centuries in traditional medicine (Ayurveda, Traditional Chinese Medicine, etc.) for cancer-related conditions.
- **Benefits:**
  - Provides a valuable starting point for identifying effective compounds.
  - Can guide dosing, formulation, and combinatorial strategies.
- **Approach:** Combine empirical knowledge with modern research techniques to validate efficacy and safety.

4. Omics-Based Studies and Biomarker Development

- **Omics Technologies:** Genomics, transcriptomics, proteomics, and metabolomics can provide comprehensive insights into how phytochemicals interact with cancer pathways.
  Applications:
  - Identify predictive biomarkers for responsiveness to specific phytochemicals.
  - Understand mechanisms of action at the molecular level.
  - Enable development of precision medicine strategies for phytochemical therapy.
- **Outcome:** Streamline the translation of phytochemicals into clinically effective interventions.

3. CONCLUSION

Phytochemicals represent a promising class of anticancer agents due to their diverse mechanisms of action, including apoptosis induction, cell cycle arrest, anti-inflammatory effects, angiogenesis inhibition, and epigenetic regulation. Preclinical studies have consistently demonstrated their ability to target multiple cancer pathways with relatively low toxicity, highlighting their potential as adjuncts or alternatives to conventional therapies.

However, significant challenges remain in translating these findings into clinical applications. Poor bioavailability, rapid metabolism, lack of standardization, potential drug interactions, and complex regulatory requirements limit their therapeutic use. Advanced drug delivery strategies, such as nanoparticles, liposomes, micelles, and targeted or pH-responsive systems, offer solutions to overcome pharmacokinetic limitations and enhance tumor specificity.

Looking ahead, integrating personalized medicine approaches, combination therapies with chemotherapy or immunotherapy, and omics-driven biomarker development can maximize the clinical impact of phytochemicals. Furthermore, incorporating traditional medicine knowledge can provide valuable insights into effective dosing and combinatorial strategies.

In conclusion, while challenges remain, ongoing research in advanced delivery methods, personalized strategies, and mechanistic understanding provides a strong foundation for the clinical translation of phytochemicals. With continued innovation, these natural compounds have the potential to become an integral component of future cancer therapy, offering safer and more targeted treatment options.

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