ANTIMICROBIAL ACTIVITIES OF POLYPHENOLS & ALKALOIDS IN INDIAN MEDICINAL PLANTS

Dr Sunil Kumar[1], Dr. S. Priyanka[2], Dr. Namdeo Bhagwan Admuthe[3], Dr Tulika Mishra[4], Ms. Divya R Sawant[5], Dr. M. Velammal[6]*

[1]Department of Botany, DAV (P. G.) College, Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh, India.

[2]Department of Biotechnology, D.K. Govt. College for Women(A), Nellore, Andhra Pradesh, India.

[3]Department of Botany, Annasaheb Awate Arts, Commerce and Hutatma Babu Genu Science College, Manchar, Dist. Pune, Maharashtra

[4]Department of Botany, D.D.U Gorakhpur University, Gorakhpur, U.P, India

[5]DPM's Shree Mallikarjun and Shri Chetan Manju Desai College Goa, India.

[6*]Department of Chemistry, Yadava College, Tiruppalai, Madurai, Tamilnadu, India.

***Corresponding Author E mail: velammaladhi442@gmail.com[6**]**

Abstract – Indian medicinal plants are found to be good sources of bioactive compounds in the form of polyphenols and alkaloids, which contain strong antimicrobial activity. The phytochemicals are reported to play important roles in countering bacterial, fungal, and viral infections through microbial cell wall targeting, interruption of enzyme processes, and preventing biofilm production. The rising global interest in antimicrobial resistance (AMR) has led to increased studies of natural substitutes, and polyphenols and alkaloids are showing great promise as new antimicrobial drugs. The structural diversity of these compounds, their mechanism of action, and their use in traditional and conventional medicine are the subject of this chapter. It also elaborates on recent scientific research that has proven their effectiveness, highlighting Indian medicinal plants like *Azadirachta indica (neem), Ocimum sanctum (tulsi), Tinospora cordifolia (giloy), and Rauwolfia serpentina.* The synergistic potential of these phytochemicals with traditional antibiotics is also reviewed to emphasize their contribution to improving antimicrobial therapy.

Keywords

Polyphenols, alkaloids, antimicrobial activity, medicinal plants, natural antibiotics, bioactive compounds, antimicrobial resistance, phytochemicals

I. Introduction

The sudden onset of antibiotic resistance is now an important global health issue, curtailing the effectiveness of standard antimicrobial treatments and enhancing the occurrence of multidrug-resistant (MDR) pathogens. Excessive and indiscriminate use of antibiotics in healthcare, agriculture, and livestock husbandry has further promoted the emergence of resistant microbial populations, threatening public health (Hosain et al.,2021). In consequence, there is also a rising interest in investigating natural products, notably plant-based bioactive compounds, as potent antimicrobial agents.

India, being rich in biodiversity and having a well-documented history of traditional medicine, is a treasure trove of medicinal plants with strong antimicrobial activity. The Ayurveda, Siddha, and Unani systems of medicine have been using plant-based formulations for centuries to cure a variety of microbial infections based on the therapeutic potential of secondary metabolites like polyphenols and alkaloids (Ahmed et al.,2024). Such phytochemicals have been documented to exhibit wide-spectrum antimicrobial activities against bacteria, fungi, and viruses and are hopeful candidates for new antimicrobial agent development.

Polyphenols, such as flavonoids, tannins, and phenolic acids, are well known for their potent antioxidant and antimicrobial activities. They act by disturbing microbial cell membranes, inhibiting bacterial enzyme systems, and regulating quorum sensing mechanisms controlling microbial virulence. Alkaloids, a structurally diverse group of nitrogenous compounds, also possess outstanding antimicrobial activity through mechanisms like DNA intercalation, protein synthesis inhibition, and disruption of microbial metabolic processes (Abass et al.,2024). A number of medicinal plants of Indian origin, e.g., *Azadirachta indica* (neem), Curcuma longa (turmeric), *Tinospora cordifolia* (giloy), and *Rauwolfia serpentina* (Indian snakeroot), are well researched in terms of polyphenol and alkaloid properties and have found to possess robust antimicrobial action against drug-resistant microorganisms.

With the growing need for natural and sustainable therapeutic agents, research on plant-derived antimicrobial compounds has picked up pace. Recent developments in phytochemical profiling, molecular docking studies, and in vitro/in vivo models have shed more light on the antimicrobial action of polyphenols and alkaloids (Singh et al.,2024). Additionally, the possibility of synergistic interactions of these compounds with current antibiotics has created new opportunities for combination therapies to combat resistance.

This chapter explores the structural variability, antimicrobial modes of action, and pharmacological uses of Indian medicinal plant polyphenols and alkaloids. It also outlines recent scientific breakthroughs, their potential in upgrading traditional antimicrobial therapies, and future directions in incorporating plant-based bioactives into mainstream medicine (Gupta et al.,2024). By filling the gap between conventional wisdom and contemporary scientific studies, this chapter hopes to give a clear picture of how plant-derived substances can help in the fight against microbial infections due to increasing antibiotic resistance.

2. Polyphenols: Structure and Antimicrobial Mechanisms

Polyphenols are a vast and structurally diverse group of secondary metabolites produced by plants as part of their defense mechanisms. These compounds are characterized by the presence of multiple hydroxyl (-OH) groups attached to aromatic rings, which contribute to their strong antioxidant and antimicrobial properties. Polyphenols have gained significant attention in recent years for their potential in combating multidrug-resistant (MDR) pathogens due to their ability to interfere with various microbial processes (Elkhalifa et al.,2024). In Indian medicinal plants, polyphenols are abundant and contribute to the therapeutic effects of several herbal remedies used in traditional medicine systems such as Ayurveda, Unani, and Siddha. The antimicrobial action of polyphenols is linked to their ability to disrupt bacterial cell membranes, inhibit essential microbial enzymes, and chelate metal ions necessary for bacterial survival. Additionally, some polyphenols modulate the host immune response, enhancing the body’s natural defense mechanisms against infections.

2.1 Structural Classification of Polyphenols

Polyphenols exhibit a wide range of structural diversity, and they can be classified into different subgroups based on their chemical composition and biological activity. Among them, flavonoids, tannins, lignins, and phenolic acids are the most significant groups with strong antimicrobial properties. Flavonoids represent one of the largest and most diverse subclasses, consisting of compounds such as flavones, flavonols, flavanones, isoflavones, and anthocyanins (Billowria et al.,2024). These molecules are widely distributed in plants and contribute to antimicrobial activity by interacting with bacterial membranes and metabolic pathways. For instance, quercetin, a flavonol found in onions and neem, is known to disrupt bacterial adhesion and biofilm formation, preventing the colonization of pathogens. Another notable group, tannins, includes hydrolyzable and condensed tannins, which possess antimicrobial properties by binding to bacterial proteins and enzymes, leading to cell death.

Lignins, another group of polyphenols, are complex macromolecules that provide structural support to plant cell walls and act as a barrier against microbial invasion (Riseh et al.,2024). These compounds break down into smaller phenolic derivatives such as p-coumaric acid and ferulic acid, which exhibit strong antimicrobial properties by damaging bacterial cell walls and inhibiting enzymatic functions. Phenolic acids, including gallic acid and ellagic acid, interfere with microbial metabolic pathways and reduce oxidative stress, limiting bacterial growth and virulence. The presence of these polyphenols in medicinal plants makes them an excellent natural source of antimicrobial agents, with potential applications in treating bacterial and fungal infections.

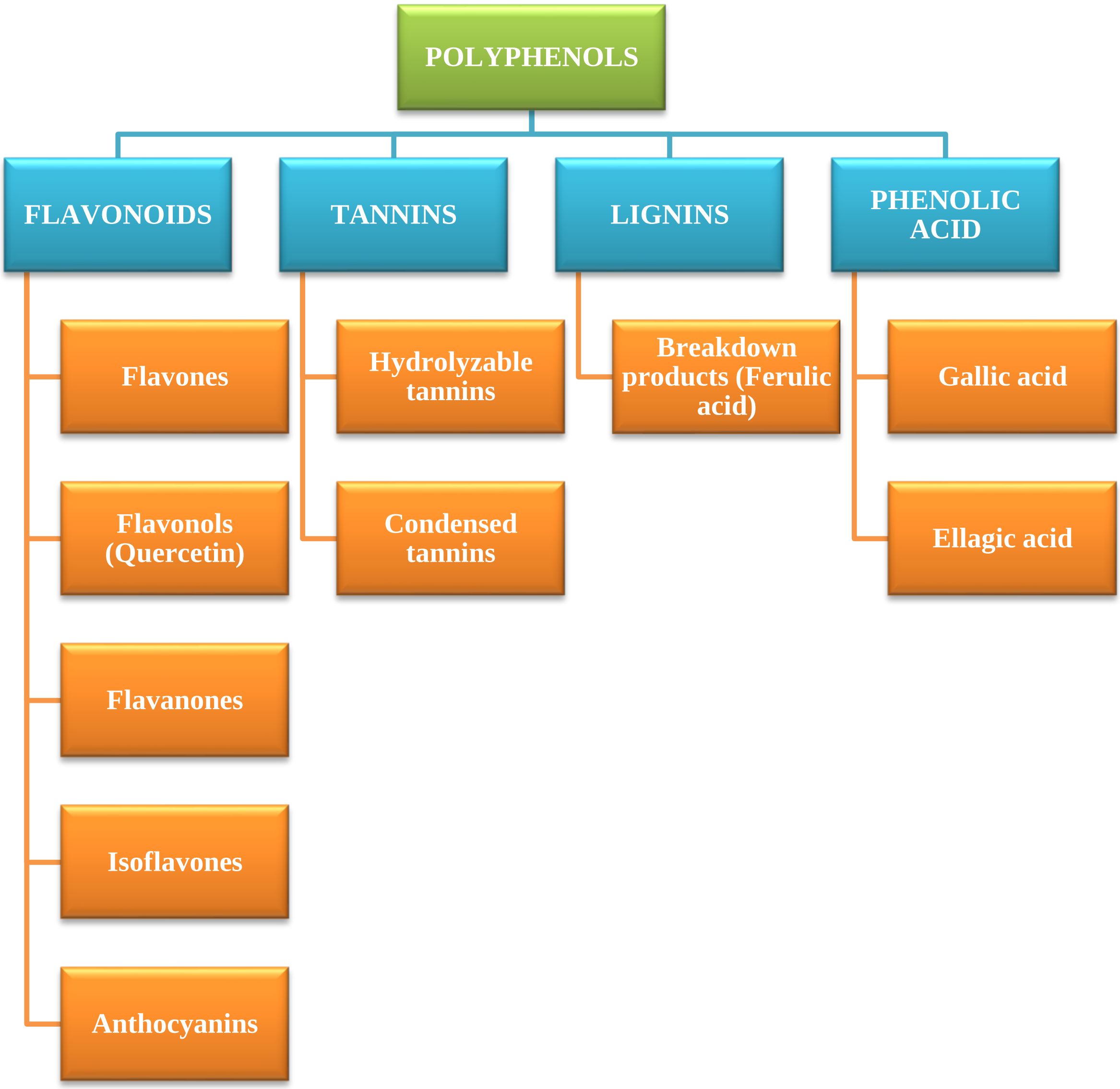

Figure 1: Classification of Polyphenols

2.2 Antimicrobial Mechanisms of Polyphenols

The antimicrobial properties of polyphenols are attributed to their ability to target multiple aspects of microbial physiology. One of the most prominent mechanisms involves the disruption of bacterial cell membranes. Many polyphenols interact with the lipid bilayers of bacterial membranes, altering their permeability and causing leakage of intracellular contents. This disruption weakens the bacterial structure, making it more susceptible to lysis and ultimately leading to cell death (Liu et al.,2022). Additionally, polyphenols such as catechins from green tea exhibit strong membrane-disrupting effects, reducing bacterial viability and preventing biofilm formation, which is crucial for pathogenic bacteria to establish infections.

Another important antimicrobial mechanism of polyphenols is the inhibition of microbial enzymes. Many bacterial species rely on specific enzymes for DNA replication, protein synthesis, and metabolism, and polyphenols can interfere with these vital processes. For instance, curcumin from turmeric inhibits bacterial DNA gyrase, preventing the unwinding of bacterial DNA and thereby halting replication (Akhtar et al.,2022). Similarly, flavonoids such as apigenin from holy basil interfere with bacterial RNA polymerase, disrupting gene expression and bacterial growth. The ability of polyphenols to inhibit essential microbial enzymes makes them effective against a wide range of pathogenic bacteria, including antibiotic-resistant strains.

Polyphenols also exhibit antimicrobial activity by chelating metal ions that are necessary for microbial survival. Many bacteria require metal ions such as iron and magnesium to facilitate enzymatic functions and maintain cellular integrity. Polyphenols can bind to these metal ions, depriving bacteria of essential nutrients and inhibiting their growth (Scarano et al.,2023). For example, tannins found in pomegranate interact with bacterial iron transport systems, effectively starving the bacteria of iron and reducing their virulence. This mechanism is particularly useful in combating pathogenic bacteria that rely on iron acquisition for their survival and proliferation.

Apart from directly targeting bacteria, polyphenols also play a role in modulating the host immune response. Some polyphenols have been found to enhance immune cell activity, stimulating macrophages and neutrophils to engulf and destroy invading pathogens. Additionally, certain polyphenols modulate cytokine production, reducing inflammation and improving immune system function. By strengthening the host’s natural defense mechanisms, polyphenols not only combat infections but also help prevent the recurrence of microbial diseases. This dual action—direct antimicrobial effects and immune system modulation—makes polyphenols a promising alternative to conventional antibiotics.

2.3 Indian Medicinal Plants Rich in Antimicrobial Polyphenols

Indian medicinal plants are a rich source of polyphenols with strong antimicrobial properties. Several plants used in traditional medicine contain polyphenolic compounds that exhibit broad-spectrum activity against bacteria, fungi, and viruses. One of the most well-known examples is *Curcuma longa* (turmeric), which contains curcumin, a powerful antimicrobial polyphenol. Curcumin disrupts bacterial membranes, inhibits biofilm formation, and interferes with bacterial enzymatic activity, making it effective against both Gram-positive and Gram-negative bacteria (Trigo-Gutierrez et al.,2021). It has shown promising results against antibiotic-resistant strains such as *Staphylococcus aureus* and *Escherichia coli*.

Another important medicinal plant rich in polyphenols is *Camellia sinensis* (green tea), which contains catechins—potent antimicrobial flavonoids. Catechins have been found to inhibit bacterial adhesion and biofilm formation, preventing pathogens from establishing infections. Studies have demonstrated that green tea catechins can reduce the virulence of *Helicobacter pylori*, a bacterium responsible for gastric ulcers, by interfering with its adhesion to stomach lining cells. The antimicrobial potential of green tea polyphenols has also been explored in oral health applications, where they help reduce the growth of *Streptococcus mutans*, the primary bacterium responsible for dental caries (Kong et al.,2022).

Emblica officinalis (amla) is another medicinal plant known for its rich polyphenolic content, particularly ellagic acid and gallic acid. These compounds exhibit strong antibacterial activity by inhibiting microbial toxins and reducing bacterial virulence. Amla extracts have been studied for their effectiveness against respiratory and gastrointestinal pathogens, including *Klebsiella pneumoniae* and *Salmonella typhi (*Van Doan et al.,2022). The ability of amla-derived polyphenols to modulate the immune response further enhances their antimicrobial efficacy.

Azadirachta indica (neem) is widely recognized in Indian traditional medicine for its antimicrobial properties, primarily due to its polyphenolic constituents such as quercetin and nimbin. These compounds interfere with bacterial metabolic pathways and inhibit quorum sensing, the bacterial communication system responsible for coordinating virulence factor production. Neem extracts have been found to be effective against a variety of pathogens, including *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* and *Enterococcus faecalis,* both of which are known for their resistance to multiple antibiotics (Mudenda et al.,2024).

3. Alkaloids: Chemical Nature and Antimicrobial Properties

Alkaloids are a diverse group of nitrogen-containing heterocyclic compounds that exhibit potent biological activities. These secondary metabolites are primarily found in plants and play a crucial role in their defense mechanisms against herbivores, pathogens, and environmental stressors. Structurally, alkaloids are characterized by the presence of nitrogen atoms within their cyclic frameworks, contributing to their chemical reactivity and interactions with biological systems. Due to their strong physiological effects, alkaloids have been widely explored for their medicinal applications, particularly in antimicrobial drug development.

The antimicrobial properties of alkaloids stem from their ability to disrupt essential microbial functions. One of the key mechanisms of action involves interfering with microbial protein synthesis. By binding to bacterial ribosomes, alkaloids prevent the translation of vital proteins necessary for cell survival, leading to bacterial inhibition or death (Seukep et al.,2023). Additionally, some alkaloids target microbial cell membranes, causing disruption in membrane integrity and permeability. This results in leakage of intracellular contents, ultimately leading to microbial cell lysis. Another crucial antimicrobial action of alkaloids is the inhibition of quorum sensing, a bacterial communication system that regulates virulence and biofilm formation. By blocking quorum sensing pathways, alkaloids prevent bacteria from coordinating infection strategies, reducing their pathogenicity.

Several naturally occurring alkaloids have demonstrated significant antimicrobial properties. Among them, **berberine**, found in *Berberis aristata* (Indian barberry), has gained attention for its potent activity against multi-drug-resistant (MDR) bacteria (Ahmad et al.,2025). Berberine functions by intercalating with bacterial DNA, inhibiting nucleic acid synthesis and disrupting metabolic processes. Its broad-spectrum antimicrobial action makes it effective against Gram-positive and Gram-negative bacteria, including *Staphylococcus aureus* and *Escherichia coli*. Moreover, berberine has been found to enhance the effectiveness of conventional antibiotics, making it a promising candidate for combination therapies against resistant pathogens.

Quinine, an alkaloid derived from *Cinchona* species, is well known for its antimalarial properties. However, it also exhibits antibacterial effects, particularly against respiratory pathogens such as *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*. Quinine acts by interfering with microbial metabolism and disrupting energy production pathways, leading to reduced bacterial growth. Its ability to target multiple microbial processes makes it valuable in treating bacterial infections that have become resistant to standard antibiotics.

Another significant alkaloid is **reserpine**, extracted from *Rauwolfia serpentina* (Indian snakeroot).

Reserpine is traditionally used for its antihypertensive and sedative effects, but recent research has highlighted its antimicrobial potential (**Paul et al.,2022)**. It works synergistically with antibiotics by inhibiting bacterial efflux pumps—mechanisms that bacteria use to expel antimicrobial agents and develop resistance. By blocking these efflux pumps, reserpine restores bacterial susceptibility to antibiotics, making it a valuable adjunct in antimicrobial therapy.

The structural diversity and multifaceted mechanisms of action of alkaloids make them promising candidates for novel antimicrobial drug development. Their ability to interfere with protein synthesis, disrupt membrane integrity, and inhibit bacterial communication pathways highlights their potential in overcoming antibiotic resistance. With the increasing global threat of MDR infections, alkaloids from medicinal plants such as *Berberis aristata*, *Cinchona* species, and *Rauwolfia serpentina* offer a natural and sustainable alternative to conventional antibiotics. Further research into the optimization of alkaloid extraction, bioavailability enhancement, and synergistic drug formulations could pave the way for the next generation of antimicrobial therapies.

4. Synergistic Potential with Antibiotics

Recent research has highlighted the promising potential of combining polyphenols and alkaloids with conventional antibiotics to enhance their antimicrobial efficacy. When used together, these natural compounds work synergistically with antibiotics to create a multi-faceted attack on pathogenic microorganisms. Polyphenols can compromise bacterial cell membranes and disrupt biofilm formation, while alkaloids may inhibit protein synthesis and efflux pump activities. This complementary interaction not only amplifies the antibacterial action of antibiotics but also allows for a reduction in the necessary dosage, thereby lowering the risk of adverse side effects (**Vaou et al.,2022)**. Moreover, the synergy between these compounds can help mitigate the development of antibiotic resistance, as the combination targets multiple bacterial processes simultaneously, making it more challenging for pathogens to adapt. This integrated approach provides a compelling strategy to reinvigorate existing antibiotic therapies and offers a promising solution to the growing global threat of multidrug-resistant infections.

5. Applications in Medicine and Future Prospects

The extensive antimicrobial properties of polyphenols and alkaloids, combined with their synergistic potential with antibiotics, position them as attractive candidates for pharmaceutical development. Their use in medicine is not limited to standalone antimicrobial applications; these compounds are also being explored as adjuncts to enhance the efficacy of current treatments

(**Adeniji et al.,2022)**. Future research is likely to focus on conducting clinical trials to validate their safety and effectiveness in human populations, as well as on developing advanced formulation techniques that improve their bioavailability and targeted delivery. Innovations in nanotechnology and drug delivery systems hold promise for overcoming the challenges associated with the extraction, standardization, and large-scale production of these bioactive compounds. With further refinement, polyphenols and alkaloids could play a transformative role in personalized medicine, leading to the development of next-generation antimicrobial therapies that are both effective and sustainable (**Kaur et al.,2022)**. As we deepen our understanding of their molecular mechanisms, the integration of these natural compounds into mainstream clinical practice could significantly enhance our ability to manage and treat infectious diseases in an era of rising antibiotic resistance.

Table 1 : Applications in Medicine and Future Prospects of Polyphenols and Alkaloids

Aspect	**Details**
Antimicrobial Properties	Exhibit strong antibacterial, antiviral, and antifungal activity.
Synergy with Antibiotics	Enhance the effectiveness of existing antibiotics, helping to combat resistance.
Adjunctive Therapy	Used alongside conventional treatments to improve patient outcomes.
Clinical Trials	Future research will validate their safety and efficacy in human populations.
Formulation Techniques	Advanced techniques aim to enhance bioavailability and targeted drug delivery.
Nanotechnology Applications	Nanoformulations improve stability, solubility, and controlled release.
Challenges in Production	Issues include extraction efficiency, standardization, and scalability.
Role in Personalized Medicine	Potential for tailored treatments based on individual patient profiles.

Next-Generation Antimicrobials	Could lead to innovative, sustainable alternatives to synthetic drugs.
Combatting Antibiotic Resistance	Offer new strategies to manage infections in the face of rising resistance.

Conclusion

The antimicrobial properties of Indian medicinal plant-derived polyphenols and alkaloids are a promising and effective approach to the increasing problem of drug-resistant infections. By leveraging the varied structural and functional attributes of these natural products, ancient remedies are being reassessed in the context of contemporary scientific evidence, uniting centuries-old knowledge with modern research. Polyphenols, in their capacity to interfere with bacterial membranes, block vital enzymes, chelate essential metal ions, and interfere with the host immune response, provide a multi-faceted strategy for inhibiting pathogens. Concurrently, alkaloids show strong antimicrobial activity through interference with microbial protein synthesis, membrane disruption, and inhibition of quorum sensing, all of which are vital in preventing bacterial virulence and the emergence of resistance.

In addition, the synergistic activity seen when these phytochemicals are combined with traditional antibiotics further emphasizes their clinical significance. These combinations not only increase the effectiveness of current antibiotic therapy but also decrease the dosages needed, reducing side effects and preventing the development of resistance. In the future, the incorporation of these bioactive compounds into contemporary medicine has the potential to transform antimicrobial therapy by providing renewable, natural alternatives to synthetic antibiotics. Further investigation into clinical uses, cutting-edge formulation processes, and industrially scalable manufacture is needed in order to optimize the potential of these compounds. Ultimately, utilizing the antimicrobial capabilities of polyphenols and alkaloids in Indian medicinal plants may result in novel, efficacious treatments to decrease our reliance on traditional antibiotics and offer hope in the combat against multidrug-resistant infections.

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