*Review Article*

DIETARY APPLICATIONS OF BEE POLLEN: NUTRITIONAL COMPOSITION, HEALTH BENEFITS, AND APPLICATIONS

Abstract

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| Dietary applications using bee pollen have attracted attention in recent years due to its unique composition as well as its potential health benefits. Bee pollen contains essential nutrients such as proteins, fats, vitamins, and minerals, which significantly contribute to the health of both bees and humans. In the context of health, the consumption of bee pollen has been associated with various benefits, including antioxidant, anti-inflammatory, and antimicrobial properties, which have the potential to support the immune system and improve quality of life. Pollen composition can vary depending on the botanical source and geographical location, which has implications for its nutritional diversity and effectiveness as a dietary supplement. In addition, there are challenges in optimally utilizing the nutritional potential of pollen, mainly related to the differences in quality and composition between different pollen types. Pollen-based diet optimization, both in the context of agriculture and human health, is a promising area that requires more in-depth research. This study aims to explore various aspects of bee pollen diet applications, including its nutritional composition, health benefits, and challenges and solutions. By better understanding the potentials and limitations of bee pollen, we hope to pave the way for the development of more effective, sustainable products that support ecosystem and human health. |

*Keywords: bee pollen; nutrition; health; diet.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Bee pollen, composed of pollen grains collected by honey bees, has garnered significant interest in nutrition research due to its diverse composition and potential health benefits. Its nutritional profile includes proteins, lipids, vitamins, and minerals, positioning it as a valuable dietary supplement for both human and animal consumption (Melo & Almeida-Muradian, 2017). Recent studies have highlighted the promising therapeutic attributes of bee pollen, including antioxidant and antimicrobial properties, suggesting its potential role in disease prevention and health promotion (Abdelnour et al., 2018; (Komosińska‐Vassev et al., 2015; . Furthermore, the intricate relationship between bee pollen and holistic health is underscored by ongoing research into its biochemical composition and the physiological effects it exerts on different biological systems (Denisow & Denisow‐Pietrzyk, 2016; Frias et al., 2015). Given the rising interest in natural and functional foods, the exploration of bee pollen's dietary applications has become increasingly relevant in both nutritional science and food technology (Bayram, 2021).

The importance of bee pollen extends to its complex interactions within ecosystems, particularly its role in supporting pollinators and enhancing agricultural productivity. As a natural bioactive substance, it serves as a nutrient reservoir and is critical for bee populations, essential for the pollination of various crops (Cane & Tepedino, 2016; Liolios et al., 2015). The economic implications of preserving bee health and the nutritional benefits derived from bee pollen consumption present a compelling case for extensive research in this area (Colwell et al., 2017; Jong et al., 2019). Recent literature emphasizes the growing awareness of the nutritional inadequacies faced by pollinators and proposes a reevaluation of pollen quality, diversity, and its impacts on bee health and foraging behaviors Lau et al., 2022)Chau & Rehan, 2024).

A primary research challenge that emerges from the increasing recognition of bee pollen is understanding how its diverse compositions translate into tangible health benefits and nutritional applications. Current literature suggests that while the nutritional capabilities of bee pollen are extensive, the variance in its composition due to geographical and botanical factors complicates its application in dietary contexts Erdoğan et al., 2022)(Wu et al., 2020; . Moreover, the role of pollen as a variable food source within different ecological niches raises questions regarding its utility as a consistent dietary supplement across varying populations and species, including both humans and animals Frias et al., 2015)Wood et al., 2018). Therefore, the challenge lies in determining effective methods to harness bee pollen's health benefits while addressing its variability.

Several solutions to these challenges have been proposed in the literature. Research indicates a need for optimization of pollen diets to improve health and performance, particularly among livestock and domestic animals (Abdel-Hamid & El‐Tarabany, 2019; (Picoli et al., 2019; . This includes studies evaluating the effects of different bee pollen types on growth performance and overall health parameters in poultry and aquatic species (Picoli et al., 2019; Messina et al., 2020). Insights gained from such investigations highlight the critical role of pollen quality and its lipid, protein, and micronutrient contributions to maintaining optimal health metrics (Seven et al., 2015; Mayda et al., 2020). Furthermore, advancements in food science have enabled the enhancement of bee pollen digestibility, consequently increasing its bioavailability and functional efficacy when incorporated into various diets (Wu et al., 2020; Komosińska‐Vassev et al., 2015).

Specific research targeting the nutritional properties of bee pollen has shown promise in elucidating its health benefits. For instance, numerous studies have indicated bee pollen's potential as a natural immunomodulator, potentially improving health outcomes in herbivores and humans (Abdelnour et al., 2018; Chen et al., 2016). Its antioxidant, anti-inflammatory, and antimicrobial properties are especially noteworthy, linked to improved digestive health, enhanced immune response, and reduced oxidative stress indicators (Yazlovitska et al., 2023; Frias et al., 2015). Experimental approaches evaluating interactions between dietary supplements and metabolic parameters have provided critical insights into how bee pollen can be effectively integrated into public health strategies aimed at disease prevention (Abdelnour et al., 2018; Lau et al., 2022). Exploring these synergies is a vital area for further research.

A comprehensive review of existing literature reveals a persistent gap in knowledge regarding standardization and regulation of bee pollen processing to ensure consistent quality and safety for dietary applications (Komosińska‐Vassev et al., 2015; Mayda et al., 2020). Regulatory frameworks governing food safety must be adapted to address these emerging nutritional products, particularly as consumer interest continues to grow. There is considerable variation in the composition and effectiveness of bee pollen available due to differences in collection methods, plant sources, and processing techniques (Ricigliano et al., 2022; Erdoğan et al., 2022). Therefore, ongoing research into quality control measures and standardization processes is essential to facilitate the safe and effective use of bee pollen in diverse dietary settings.

This study aims to contribute to the existing literature by providing a thorough analysis of the nutritional composition of bee pollen and its corresponding health benefits, while also addressing key gaps in standardization and application. The justification for this research stems from the necessity to create a holistic understanding of bee pollen, not merely as a nutritional supplement but as an integral component of overall health strategies. By synthesizing findings from various studies, this research will endeavor to clarify the mechanisms through which bee pollen exerts its beneficial effects, ultimately providing a clearer framework for its application in dietary formulations and public health initiatives..

2. Nutritional and Chemical Composition of Bee Pollen

Bee pollen is one of the most biochemically complex natural products, with a composition that is highly dependent on its botanical and geographical origin. Different plant sources produce varying nutrient profiles, due to differences in flower physiology, pollen type and the environmental conditions under which bees collect it. In addition, factors such as season, bee type and processing method also affect its quality and chemical content. Bee pollen from one region can have very different levels of protein, fat or bioactive compounds compared to other regions. This diversity adds scientific value, but also poses challenges in terms of standardization and health claims of bee pollen as a food or supplement. Bee pollen is a mixture of pollen, nectar, and bee secretions that is known as a nutritious food for the bees themselves and also has potential applications in human health. Its chemical composition varies widely depending on botanical origin and geography. Research shows that proteins, lipids, carbohydrates, vitamins, and minerals are present in varying proportions (Komosińska-Vassev et al., 2015; , (Abdelnour et al., 2018; , Denisow & Denisow-Pietrzyk, 2016).

Bee pollen is rich in proteins, carbohydrates and fats in balanced proportions. Protein levels in pollen range from 8.4% to 18.1% according to a study conducted by (Frias et al., 2015). According to research by Wu et al. (Wu et al., 2020), bee pollen can contain between 20-40% protein, and the proportion is highly dependent on the plant species from which the pollen is taken. The proportion of protein in bee pollen ranges from 8.4% to 32% of dry weight, with variations depending on the source plant species (Giacomini et al., 2021). The protein consists of crude protein and essential amino acids that are important for bee growth and development (Lilek et al., 2021). In addition, bee pollen also contains carbohydrates that serve as the main source of energy for bees. These carbohydrates mainly consist of glucose and fructose produced from nectar (Giacomini et al., 2021). Carbohydrate components such as glucose, fructose and other polysaccharides contribute to the total energy value of bee pollen, making it a rapidly available natural energy source. This micronutrient content makes bee pollen a potential food ingredient in helping to meet daily nutrient requirements and prevent micronutrient deficiencies.

In addition to conventional nutrients, bee pollen is also known for its wealth of bioactive compounds. Components such as flavonoids (e.g. quercetin and kaempferol), phenolic acids, phytosterols, as well as metabolic enzymes make it an ingredient that is not only nutritious but also biologically functional. Research shows that about 50% of the essential amino acids required by bees are found in pollen (Ghosh et al., 2020). Pollen can contain a variety of amino acids, including lysine, methionine, and threonine, which play an important role in bee growth and health (Ghosh et al., 2020, Denisow & Denisow-Pietrzyk, 2016). Pollen can contain a variety of amino acids, including lysine, methionine, and threonine, which play an important role in bee growth and health (Ghosh et al., 2020, Denisow & Denisow-Pietrzyk, 2016). These compounds contribute to the antioxidant, anti-inflammatory, and even antimicrobial activities that have been reported in various studies. The total phenolic content and free radical inhibitory activity of bee pollen are comparable, or even exceed some other natural products such as propolis or honey. Vitamins found include vitamin C, vitamin E, and vitamin B complex, while minerals such as calcium, magnesium, and zinc are also present in significant amounts (Komosińska-Vassev et al., 2015; , Alves & Santos, 2016). The antioxidant content of bee pollen, such as polyphenols and flavonoids, also provides additional benefits in protecting cells from oxidative damage (Komosińska-Vassev et al., 2015; , Karkar et al., 2020). This potential opens up opportunities to use bee pollen not only as a source of nutrients, but also as an active component in food-based disease prevention strategies.

**3. BIOLOGICAL ACTIVITIES: ANTIOXIDANT, ANTI-INFLAMMATORY, AND IMMUNOMODULATORY EFFECTS**

The main biological activity of bee pollen is its antioxidant capacity, which plays an important role in neutralizing oxidative stress. Oxidative stress results from an imbalance between the production of free radicals (reactive oxygen species (ROS)) and the body's ability to neutralize them through the endogenous antioxidant system. This can lead to cell and tissue damage, and is involved in the development of various chronic diseases such as cancer, cardiovascular disease and neurodegenerative disorders. Bee pollen exhibits strong antioxidant activity, mainly due to its flavonoids, phenolic acids, carotenoids and vitamin C content. Research by Mayda et al. (2020), reported that bee pollen from various plant sources showed significant antioxidant activity, with IC50 values for DPPH (2,2-diphenyl-1-picrylhydrazine) free radical scavenging activity ranging from 1.43 to 4.87 mg/mL according to the source. This activity is attributed to the presence of phenolic compounds that have the ability to reduce oxidative stress, which is a major contributor to various chronic diseases. These compounds are able to capture free radicals, inhibit lipid peroxidation, and increase the activity of antioxidant enzymes such as superoxide dismutase and catalase. The effectiveness of bee pollen in lowering oxidative stress markers has been proven through various in vitro tests and animal studies, confirming its potential as a natural antioxidant in the diet.

In addition to antioxidant properties, bee pollen also exhibits significant anti-inflammatory activity. Chronic inflammation is an important factor in the pathogenesis of various degenerative and metabolic diseases. Denisow & Denisow-Pietrzyk (2016) demonstrated that compounds in bee pollen, such as flavonoids and phenolic acids, can reduce the levels of pro-inflammatory cytokines such as TNF-α and IL-6, which are involved in the inflammatory process. It was found that the application of bee pollen in the diet showed a significant reduction in inflammatory indicators in animal models, indicating its therapeutic potential in the treatment of inflammatory diseases. The anti-inflammatory activity of bee pollen is mainly mediated by its ability to decrease the expression and secretion of pro-inflammatory cytokines such as interleukin-6 (IL-6) and tumor necrosis factor-alpha (TNF-α). These cytokines are major components in the inflammation pathway, and their inhibition contributes to the reduction of the systemic inflammatory response. Another study showed that bee pollen extract from Fagopyrum esculentum was able to reduce interleukin-6 (IL-6) and tumor necrosis factor-alpha (TNF-α) levels in a streptozotocin-induced type II diabetes model. Decreased levels of both cytokines have the potential to reduce inflammation and improve pancreatic β-cell function (Zhang et al., 2022). This decrease in cytokine levels is an indicator that bee pollen plays a role in reducing the inflammatory response.

Bee pollen has immunomodulatory effects that help strengthen the immune system. Immunomodulation includes the process of strengthening or regulating the immune system response, either to increase the body's defense against pathogens or suppress excessive immune reactions. A study showed that bee pollen supplementation in animal diets can improve oxidative stress biomarkers and strengthen immune responses (Yazlovitska et al., 2023). Bee pollen affects both the innate and adaptive immune systems. Research shows that bee pollen can increase the phagocytic activity of macrophages, natural killer (NK) cells and dendritic cells - all important components of innate immunity. In addition, bee pollen also supports the proliferation and function of T and B lymphocytes, which play a role in adaptive immunity. Research by Komosińska-Vassev et al. (2015) Komosińska-Vassev et al. (2015) showed that bee pollen consumption can enhance immune responses. In the study, animals that received bee pollen supplementation showed an increase in T cell activity and the number of B cells in circulation, which are key components in modulating adaptive immune responses. This suggests that bee pollen can serve as an effective immunostimulating agent, strengthening the body's defense system against infection. This ability is crucial in maintaining a balanced immune system and enhancing the immune response to infection, especially in immunocompromised individuals or chronically stressed conditions.

Bee pollen also shows promising antimicrobial activity. These antimicrobial properties are related to the content of phenolics and flavonoids that are able to inhibit the growth of pathogenic microorganisms, both bacteria and fungi. the use of supercritical extracts from bee pollen can increase antibacterial and antioxidant activity, which means it can strengthen the immune system's defense against infections (Messina et al., 2020). Studies have reported that bee pollen is effective against Gram-positive bacteria such as Staphylococcus aureus and Bacillus subtilis, as well as some Gram-negative bacteria such as Escherichia coli and Pseudomonas aeruginosa. The mechanism of antimicrobial action of bee pollen is thought to involve disruption of the microbial cell membrane as well as inhibition of important cellular functions. This activity adds to the therapeutic value of bee pollen and opens up opportunities for its use as a natural antimicrobial agent, both in medicine and in the food industry as a natural preservative.

4. Potential of Bee Pollen in Human Diet

Bee pollen contains almost all the macronutrients and micronutrients that the human body needs, including protein with a complete essential amino acid profile, complex carbohydrates, polyunsaturated fatty acids, and significant amounts of vitamins and minerals. This combination of contents suggests that bee pollen has great potential as a supplemental dietary component to improve overall nutrient intake, especially in populations at risk of nutrient deficiencies. According to Abdel-Hamid et al (2019), their study involving rabbits showed that bee pollen consumption can affect metabolic hormone parameters, such as insulin and triiodothyronine. Increased levels of these hormones could potentially support better metabolism, promote growth, and support nutritional balance in the human body if applied in the human diet. The diverse nutritional composition of bee pollen makes it relevant in the context of vegan or vegetarian diets that may lack some essential nutrients. Bee pollen's rich composition in amino acids, minerals, and vitamins such as C, B, and E provides a solution to fulfill nutrient deficiencies in such diets (Ferguson et al., 2018). Bee pollen is not only beneficial to animal health but can also contribute to human health, by showing its positive effects in improving human metabolic performance (Ricigliano et al., 2022).

The nutritional composition of bee pollen includes proteins, lipids, carbohydrates, fiber, vitamins, minerals, and bioactive compounds, and shows therapeutic potential such as anti-inflammatory, antioxidant, and antimicrobial Picoli et al., 2019). The utilization of bee pollen in the diet has the potential to improve immune response and overall health, both in humans and animals Abdelnour et al., (2018); Melo & Almeida-Muradian, (2017). Consumption of bee pollen also demands attention to its safety aspects. Despite its natural origin, bee pollen is at risk of causing allergic reactions, particularly in individuals with sensitivities to pollen or bee products. The potential for contamination with pesticide residues or hazardous chemicals, and the selection of a clean and contamination-free source of bee pollen is crucial for consumer health (López-Fernández et al., 2015; Böhme et al., 2017). In practice, bee pollen has been adapted into various forms of dietary and nutraceutical products, including capsules, tablets, granules, powders, or as an additive in processed products such as cereals, yogurt, smoothies, and energy drinks. This versatility makes bee pollen suitable for integration into modern diets that emphasize convenience without compromising nutritional value. The combination of high nutritional value, broad bioactivity, and ease of product formulation, provides a strong basis for the wider utilization of bee pollen in contemporary human dietary systems.

**Table 1. Potential Bee Pollen in Human Diet**

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| Bee Pollen Formulation | Measured Parameters | Results | Effects on Human Diet | Source |
| Ethanol extraction from bee pollen | Antiglycation activity, bioactive content | Decreased blood glucose levels, IL-6: 30% lower | Lower the risk of type II diabetes and inflammation. | (Zhang et al., 2022; , Denisow & Denisow‐Pietrzyk, 2016) |
| Bee pollen in dietary supplementation | Amino acid content, antioxidant activity | Total amino acids: 18.3%, antioxidant activity increased by 25% | Supports muscle health and improves endurance. | (Ghosh et al., 2020; , Komosińska‐Vassev et al., 2015) |
| The use of bee pollen on a vegan diet | Total nutrients, mineral availability | Mineral content: Fe: 20 mg/100g, Zn: 15 mg/100g | Strengthen nutrient intake on a vegan diet. | (Bayram, 2021; , Komosińska‐Vassev et al., 2015) |
| Research on the impact of bee pollen on quail | Composition of fat in meat | Meat fat reduced by 10%; fat quality improved by 20% | Improve the quality of meat products consumed by humans. | (Seven et al., 2015; , Abdel-Hamid & El‐Tarabany, 2019) |
| Bee pollen as an adjunct in nutritional therapy | Anti-inflammatory activity | Improved anti-inflammatory activity by 40% | Helps manage digestive disorders and boosts immunity. | Abdelnour et al., 2018), Messina et al., 2020; |

5. Conclusion

Bee pollen has great potential as a nutritional supplement with its rich nutritional composition, including proteins, vitamins, and antioxidants. Pollen consumption can provide various health benefits, such as improving immunity and reducing the risk of disease. Challenges in standardization and variability in pollen quality need to be addressed to optimize its application in human and animal diets. With a better understanding of the properties and benefits of bee pollen, it is expected that the use of this product can contribute significantly to public health and ecosystem sustainability.

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