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Commentary

Nrf2, Hormetic Phytochemicals, and the Case for Food Over Pills

Mueen Ahmed KK*

Manuscript Technomedia LLP, No. 22 (New No. 40), 3rd Cross, Vivekananda Nagar, Bengaluru, Karnataka, INDIA.

Why does an apple appear to protect health while a high-dose antioxidant pill does not-or even causes harm? The conventional answer invokes vague notions of "synergy" or "the whole food matrix," and while those have merit, a more precise and mechanistically satisfying explanation has emerged from the biology of hormesis. Many of the celebrated plant compounds in fruits and vegetables do not work primarily by directly scavenging free radicals at all. Instead, they act as mild stressors that switch on the cell's own master antioxidant defense system. Understanding this distinction reframes the entire whole-food-versus-supplement debate.

The pathway at the center of this story is Nrf2 (Nuclear Factor Erythroid-Derived 2-like 2), the transcription factor that controls the antioxidant response element. According to PubMed, many dietary phytochemicals normally function as natural toxins that protect plants against insects and pathogens, but at the relatively low doses humans consume, these same "toxic" compounds activate adaptive cellular stress-response pathways that protect cells against a variety of adverse conditions. The same source identifies the hormetic mechanisms of compounds such as resveratrol, curcumin, sulforaphane, and catechins, noting that they activate the transcription factor Nrf2 along with sirtuins and FOXO transcription factors, thereby stimulating the production of antioxidant enzymes, protein chaperones, and neurotrophic factors. The crucial point is that the cell mounts its own response; the phytochemical is the trigger, not the active defender.

This is a fundamentally different model from direct radical scavenging, and it has important dosing consequences. According to PubMed, several plant antioxidants exhibit hormetic properties by acting as low-dose stressors that prepare cells to resist more severe stress, activating signaling pathways-most prominently the Nrf2/Keap1, NF-κB, and Sirtuin-FOXO pathways-at low doses while becoming cytotoxic at high doses. The same review of sulforaphane, resveratrol, curcumin, flavonoids, green tea catechins, and diallyl sulfides emphasizes that their *in vivo* benefits are unlikely to be explained simply by their direct antioxidant capacity. This biphasic behavior explains precisely why megadosing can fail: the dose that triggers a healthy adaptive response is low, and pushing higher does not amplify the benefit-it can overshoot into toxicity or shut the response down.

Sulforaphane, the isothiocyanate concentrated in broccoli and other cruciferous vegetables, is the best-characterized example. According to PubMed, sulforaphane induces hormetic dose-responses that are characteristically biphasic and mediated through activation of Nrf2 antioxidant response elements, and in experimental disease models this Nrf2-mediated hormesis reduced the occurrence and severity of a wide range of pathologies including Parkinson's disease, Alzheimer's disease, stroke, age-related ocular damage, and renal nephropathy. The same comprehensive analysis observed that sulforaphane's mechanistic profile resembles that of numerous other hormetic agents, leading to the proposal that activation of the Nrf2/ARE pathway is probably a central and underlying mechanism of hormesis itself-an integrative explanation for how so many structurally diverse dietary compounds can limit age-related damage and disease progression.

The Keap1-Nrf2 system that these compounds engage is the same one tumors can exploit, which is a reminder that the response is powerful and must be appropriately calibrated. According to PubMed, the Keap1-Nrf2 pathway plays a central role in protecting cells against oxidative and xenobiotic stress, with Nrf2 activating the transcription of cytoprotective genes implicated in protection from both cancer and neurodegenerative disease-though it functions as a double-edged sword, since sustained elevated Nrf2 activity can also aid cancer cell survival. This duality reinforces the wisdom of obtaining these compounds at the modest, intermittent doses delivered by food rather than the sustained high doses of concentrated extracts.

The contrast with classical "direct" antioxidants such as high-dose vitamin E or beta-carotene is illuminating. Those compounds were expected to work by stoichiometrically neutralizing radicals, and when tested at high doses in large trials they generally failed or caused harm. Hormetic phytochemicals operate on a different principle entirely: they recruit the cell's endogenous, enzymatically amplified, and self-regulating defense network. A small dose of sulforaphane can induce antioxidant enzymes that each neutralize many radicals over their catalytic lifetime-a far more efficient and physiologically integrated outcome than swamping the system with a stoichiometric scavenger.

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This mechanistic understanding offers the most compelling case yet for prioritizing food over pills. The benefit of cruciferous vegetables, berries, tea, and spices like turmeric may derive less from any antioxidant content measurable in a test tube than from their capacity to deliver hormetic Nrf2 activators at the low, repeated doses that biology rewards. It also cautions against the assumption that isolating and concentrating these compounds into supplements will reproduce, let alone improve upon, the effect-since the dose-response is biphasic and the high doses achievable in a capsule may land on the wrong side of the curve. For healthy aging, the evidence increasingly favors a varied, plant-rich diet not as a vague lifestyle nicety but as a precisely targeted way to keep the body's own antioxidant defenses switched on.

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Correspondence:
Dr. Mueen Ahmed KK
Manuscript Technomedia LLP, No. 22 (New No. 40), 3rd Cross, Vivekananda Nagar, Bengaluru, Karnataka, INDIA.
Email: mueen.ahmed@gmail.com

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