Scientia Review, Vol. 02(03), March 2026, pp. 14-17 ISSN: 3107-7919

Scientia Review

Website: www.scientiafoundation.in

POPULAR SCIENCE ARTICLE

Fish as Functional Food with Nutritional and Health Advantages

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Received: 09 March 2026
Revised: 10 March 2026
Accepted: 11 March 2026
Published online: 11 March 2026

Article ID: SR01097

Citation: Taye, R. K., & Nath, K. D. (2026). Fish as Functional Food with Nutritional and Health Advantages. *Scientia Review*, 2(3), 14-17

Abstract

Fish has long been recognized as an important component of a healthy human diet due to its high quality protein and rich supply of essential nutrients. In recent years fish has gained attention as a functional food because of its ability to provide physiological benefits beyond basic nutrition. Fish contains biologically active compounds such as omega three fatty acids vitamins minerals and bioactive peptides which contribute to the prevention and management of several chronic diseases. Regular fish consumption has been associated with improved cardiovascular health better brain function enhanced immune response and reduced risk of metabolic disorders. The presence of long chain polyunsaturated fatty acids such as eicosapentaenoic acid and docosahexaenoic acid plays a significant role in anti- inflammatory processes and maintenance of cellular health. Fish also serves as a valuable dietary source of micronutrients including iodine selenium zinc and vitamin D which are essential for proper metabolic functioning. The growing interest in functional foods has increased scientific research on the health promoting properties of fish and fish based products.

***Keywords*:** Fish, Nutrition, Protein, Health, Functional, Vitamins, Minerals

Introduction

Food plays a fundamental role in maintaining human health and preventing diseases. In addition to providing energy and essential nutrients modern nutrition science recognizes the importance of foods that offer additional physiological benefits. Such foods are known as functional foods because they promote health and reduce the risk of chronic diseases beyond their basic nutritional value. Among the various natural foods fish has emerged as one of the most important functional foods due to its unique nutritional profile and wide range of health promoting compounds.

Fish is widely consumed across the world and is considered an excellent source of high quality protein essential fatty acids vitamins and minerals. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization global fish consumption has increased significantly over the past few decades due to increased awareness of its nutritional and health benefits. Fish protein is highly digestible and contains all essential amino acids required for human growth and development. Furthermore, fish provides important micronutrients such as iodine selenium calcium iron and vitamin D which are often lacking in many diets.

One of the most significant characteristics of fish is the presence of long chain omega three polyunsaturated fatty acids particularly eicosapentaenoic acid and docosahexaenoic acid. These fatty acids have been widely studied for their beneficial effects on cardiovascular health brain development and inflammatory disorders (Calder, 2015). Scientific evidence suggests that regular consumption of fish can reduce the risk of heart disease improve cognitive function and support overall health.

Because of these attributes fish is now widely recognized as a functional food. The concept of functional foods has become increasingly important in addressing global challenges related to malnutrition lifestyle diseases and aging populations. Understanding the

nutritional composition and health promoting properties of fish can help promote its inclusion in balanced diets and improve public health outcomes.

Nutritional Composition of Fish

Fish is highly valued for its rich nutritional composition which includes proteins essential fatty acids vitamins minerals and various bioactive compounds. These nutrients contribute to both basic nutrition and functional health benefits.

Protein content

Fish is an excellent source of high quality protein which is easily digestible and efficiently utilized by the human body. Fish protein contains all essential amino acids required for tissue growth repair and metabolic functions. Compared with many terrestrial animal proteins fish protein has a higher biological value and lower connective tissue content which enhances digestibility (Ghaly *et al.*, 2013).

Protein from fish also plays an important role in maintaining muscle mass supporting immune function and regulating metabolic processes. Fish derived peptides have been reported to possess antioxidant antimicrobial and antihypertensive properties which further enhance the functional value of fish.

Lipids and omega three fatty acids

Fish lipids are unique because they contain high levels of polyunsaturated fatty acids especially omega three fatty acids. The most important omega three fatty acids found in fish are eicosapentaenoic acid and docosahexaenoic acid. These fatty acids are essential for human health and cannot be synthesized efficiently by the body.

Marine fish such as salmon mackerel sardine and tuna are particularly rich in omega three fatty acids. These compounds play a vital role in maintaining cardiovascular health regulating inflammatory responses and supporting brain development (Calder, 2015). Omega three fatty acids are also involved in maintaining the structure and function of cell membranes throughout the body.

Vitamins

Fish is a valuable source of several essential vitamins including vitamin A vitamin D vitamin E and B complex vitamins. Fatty fish are among the few natural dietary sources of vitamin D which is essential for bone health immune function and calcium metabolism.

Vitamin A present in fish contributes to vision immune function and skin health. B group vitamins such as vitamin B12 niacin and riboflavin are also abundant in fish and play important roles in energy metabolism and neurological function.

Minerals

Fish provides a wide range of essential minerals including iodine selenium calcium iron phosphorus and zinc. Marine fish are particularly rich in iodine which is required for thyroid hormone synthesis and metabolic regulation.

Selenium present in fish acts as a powerful antioxidant that protects cells from oxidative damage. Calcium and phosphorus support bone health while iron is essential for oxygen transport in the blood. These minerals contribute significantly to the overall nutritional value of fish.

Bioactive Components in Fish

In addition to traditional nutrients fish contains several bioactive compounds that contribute to its functional properties.

Bioactive peptides

Fish proteins can release bioactive peptides during digestion or food processing. These peptides exhibit a variety of biological activities including antioxidant antihypertensive antimicrobial and immunomodulatory effects (Kim and Wijesekara, 2010). Such compounds have potential applications in functional food development and disease prevention.

Taurine

Taurine is an amino acid found in significant amounts in fish. It plays an important role in cardiovascular function bile salt formation and neurological development. Studies have shown that taurine may help regulate blood pressure improve lipid metabolism and support heart health.

Astaxanthin

Certain fish species particularly salmon contain astaxanthin which is a powerful antioxidant carotenoid. Astaxanthin helps protect cells from oxidative stress and may contribute to improved immune function and reduced inflammation.

Health Benefits of Fish Consumption

Regular consumption of fish has been associated with numerous health benefits due to its rich nutrient composition and bioactive compounds.

Cardiovascular health

One of the most well established benefits of fish

consumption is its positive effect on cardiovascular health. Omega three fatty acids present in fish help reduce blood triglyceride levels improve cholesterol profile and lower blood pressure. These fatty acids also reduce platelet aggregation which decreases the risk of blood clot formation (Mozaffarian and Rimm, 2006).

Several epidemiological studies have shown that populations with higher fish consumption have lower incidence of coronary heart disease and stroke. Regular intake of fish has therefore been recommended as part of a heart healthy diet.

Brain development and cognitive function

Docosahexaenoic acid is a major structural component of the brain and retina. Adequate intake of this fatty acid is essential for proper brain development in infants and children. Fish consumption during pregnancy has been linked to improved cognitive development and visual function in infants.

In adults omega three fatty acids may help maintain cognitive function and reduce the risk of neurodegenerative diseases such as Alzheimer disease. These fatty acids contribute to neuronal communication membrane fluidity and anti inflammatory processes in the brain.

Anti inflammatory effects

Chronic inflammation is associated with many diseases including arthritis diabetes and cardiovascular disorders. Omega three fatty acids found in fish have strong anti inflammatory properties which help regulate inflammatory pathways in the body (Calder, 2015).

Regular fish consumption may therefore help reduce symptoms of inflammatory diseases and support overall health.

Metabolic health

Fish consumption has also been associated with improved metabolic health. Omega three fatty acids may enhance insulin sensitivity regulate lipid metabolism and reduce the risk of type two diabetes. Additionally fish protein may contribute to better satiety and weight management which supports metabolic balance.

Immune function

Fish contains several nutrients such as vitamin D selenium zinc and omega three fatty acids which support immune function. These nutrients help regulate immune responses reduce oxidative stress and improve the body ability to resist infections.

Fish and Public Health

From a public health perspective fish plays a crucial role in addressing both malnutrition and non-communicable diseases. In many developing countries fish provides an affordable source of high quality protein and essential micronutrients. Small indigenous fish species consumed whole are particularly valuable because they provide calcium iron and vitamin A.

Increasing fish consumption can contribute to improved nutritional security and reduced prevalence of nutrient deficiencies. At the same time the functional properties of fish may help prevent chronic diseases that are becoming increasingly common in modern societies.

Sustainable fisheries and aquaculture development are therefore essential to ensure a consistent supply of fish for global populations. Responsible management of fish resources can support both environmental sustainability and human health.

Conclusion

Fish is widely recognized as one of the most valuable functional foods due to its exceptional nutritional composition and health promoting properties. It provides high quality protein essential fatty acids vitamins minerals and various bioactive compounds that support overall health and disease prevention. The presence of omega three fatty acids particularly eicosapentaenoic acid and docosahexaenoic acid plays a critical role in promoting cardiovascular health supporting brain development and reducing inflammation.

In addition to these benefits fish contributes to improved metabolic health stronger immune function and better nutritional security. Regular consumption of fish as part of a balanced diet can therefore help reduce the risk of chronic diseases and improve overall well being. Promoting sustainable fish production and encouraging dietary inclusion of fish are important strategies for enhancing public health and nutrition worldwide.

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