Chapter 12

Heavy Metal Bioaccumulation in Food Chains and Health Risks

Richa Saxena
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9229-9235
Invertis University, India

Abhilekha Sharma
Noida International University, India

Vaishnavi Srivastava
Chhatrapati Shahu Ji Maharaj University, India

Dipti Bharti
Darbhanga College of Engineering, India

ABSTRACT

This chapter provides a comprehensive examination of the intricate interplay between heavy metal contamination, the food chain, and the associated health risks to human populations. The investigation encompasses a multifaceted exploration of the sources, pathways, and mechanisms involved in the bioaccumulation of heavy metals within the food web. The chapter initiates with a thorough analysis of the diverse sources of heavy metal contamination, ranging from industrial discharges to agricultural practices, elucidating the intricate routes through which these pollutants infiltrate ecosystems. Special emphasis is placed on understanding the dynamic interactions within soil-plant-animal systems that facilitate the uptake and transfer of heavy metals across trophic levels. This chapter amalgamates interdisciplinary insights from environmental science, toxicology, and public health, offering a valuable resource for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners engaged in the critical task of addressing heavy metal contamination in the food chain.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the modern era of industrialization, agriculture, and urbanization, the pervasive presence of heavy metal contamination in food chains has emerged as a critical global challenge with profound implications for both the environment and human health. Heavy metals, such as lead, cadmium, mercury, and arsenic, are persistent environmental pollutants released into ecosystems through anthropogenic activities (Ali et al., 2021; Nachana'a et al., 2019). The consequences of their infiltration into the intricate web of food chains extend far beyond immediate ecological disruptions, raising significant concerns about the safety and well-being of human populations that rely on these ecosystems for sustenance.

1.1 Background and Significance

Heavy metal contamination in food chains has emerged as a pressing environmental and public health concern, necessitating a comprehensive exploration of its origins and impacts (Kumar et al., 2019 ; Saxena et al.,2020) . The rapid industrialization, extensive agricultural practices, and urban development of recent decades have led to the release of significant amounts of heavy metals into the environment. These metals, including lead, cadmium, mercury, and arsenic, are persistent pollutants that, once introduced, can disrupt ecosystems and pose serious risks to human health.

The historical context of industrialization and its associated processes has substantially contributed to the widespread dispersion of heavy metals in air, water, and soil (Wu et al., 2016 ; Fang et al.,2019) . The combustion of fossil fuels, discharge of industrial effluents, and improper waste disposal have led to the accumulation of these contaminants in diverse ecological compartments. Understanding this historical background is crucial for delineating the pathways through which heavy metals enter the food chain, thereby enabling effective mitigation strategies (Bengtsson et al.,2018).

The significance of addressing heavy metal contamination is underscored by its potential to cause detrimental effects at multiple levels (Masri et al.,2021). Ecologically, these contaminants can disrupt the balance of ecosystems, affecting biodiversity, and impairing the vitality of soil and aquatic environments. Furthermore, heavy metals exhibit a remarkable capacity to bioaccumulate, progressively concentrating as they move up the trophic levels of the food chain. This bioaccumulation poses a direct threat to human populations consuming contaminated food, as these metals can elicit a range of adverse health effects, including neurotoxicity, developmental disorders, and carcinogenicity.

1.2 Scope of Heavy Metal Contamination in Food Chains

The scope of heavy metal contamination extends across various environmental matrices, influencing the entire food chain from soil to human consumers (Toussaint et al.,2019). Soil serves as the primary reservoir, where heavy metals initially accumulate through deposition and various human activities. From the soil, these contaminants are taken up by plants, entering the plant-animal food chain (Arslan et al.,2017). Aquatic ecosystems also play a crucial role, as waterborne heavy metals affect aquatic organisms, subsequently impacting organisms higher in the food web (Okereafor et al., 2020) .

The geographical and temporal scope of heavy metal contamination is diverse, with localized hotspots experiencing elevated concentrations due to specific industrial activities or historical practices (Alloway et al.,2013 ; Kaushal et al.,2021). Understanding this spatial variability is essential for targeted interven-

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