REVIEW ARTICLE
Eurasian J Bio Chem Sci, 7(2):186-194, 2024
https://doi.org/10.46239/ejbcs.1577941

EJBCS

Eurasian Journal of Biological and Chemical Sciences

Journal homepage: www.dergipark.org.tr/ejbcs

A review on health benefits of local food products in Nigeria

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Received : 02/11/2024
Accepted : 23/12/2024

To Cite / Atıf için: Olodu BA, Enabulele SA. 2024. A review on health benefits of local food products in Nigeria. Eurasian J Bio Chem Sci, 7(2):186-194 https://doi.org/10.46239/ejbcs.1577941

Abstract: Nigeria's diverse local foods, deeply rooted in culture and tradition, offer remarkable health benefits essential for improved public health outcomes. This review explores the nutritional profiles and potential health impacts of various Nigerian food categories, including cereals, legumes, roots, tubers, vegetables, fruits, fermented foods, spices, and traditional protein sources. Nigerian cereals like millet and sorghum are rich in fiber, supporting digestion and blood sugar regulation, while legumes such as cowpeas and soybeans provide plant-based proteins that lower cholesterol and promote cardiovascular health. Root and tuber crops, including yams and cassava, deliver energy and aid in digestive health due to their high fiber content. Indigenous vegetables, such as bitter leaf and pumpkin leaves, contain antioxidants that reduce oxidative stress and may lower cancer risk. Fermented foods like iru and ugba contribute to gut health and immune function through probiotic activity. Additionally, local spices like ginger, garlic, and locust bean exhibit anti-inflammatory and antimicrobial properties, which are beneficial for disease prevention. Despite these benefits, challenges such as limited accessibility and the rising popularity of Western diets threaten the consumption of these nutritious local foods. This review underscores the importance of promoting Nigerian foods through public health initiatives to combat diet-related diseases and preserve cultural heritage. Enhancing awareness of the health benefits of Nigerian traditional foods can drive a shift towards a healthier, sustainable diet, contributing significantly to national health improvement.

Keywords: Functional Foods, Local Foods, Nutritional Benefits, Public Health, Traditional Diets, Non-communicable Diseases

1. Introduction

State Nigeria's culinary landscape is incredibly diverse, with local food products offering a wealth of nutritional and health benefits. These foods are traditionally consumed across the country's distinct cultural regions, contributing not only to dietary needs but also to the cultural identity and economic stability of its communities (Agbon et al. 2021; Uche et al. 2020). The traditional Nigerian diet comprises various locally sourced ingredients, including cereals, legumes, roots, tubers, vegetables, fruits, fermented products, spices, and animal proteins, each with distinct nutrient profiles that support balanced nutrition and potentially mitigate the prevalence of chronic diseases such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and hypertension (Balogun et al. 2019; Okoye et al. 2020). As lifestyle diseases become more prevalent in Nigeria, shifting dietary patterns and globalization have contributed to a decline in the consumption of local foods, with many individuals opting for more processed, calorie-dense options associated with Western diets (Ibe et al. 2021; Adebayo and Adepoju 2020). Such dietary transitions have led to an increase in the incidence of diet-related non-communicable diseases (NCDs), emphasizing the need for promoting locally sourced, nutrient-dense foods (Ajayi et al. 2018). Nutrient-rich foods like sorghum, millet, and leafy vegetables are not only affordable and accessible but are also suited to the ecological conditions of Nigeria, making them sustainable dietary options for widespread health improvement (Ekpenyong et al. 2019; Folake and Oladapo 2019).

The health benefits of Nigerian local foods are attributable to their high content of essential nutrients such as dietary fiber, vitamins, minerals, and bioactive compounds, all of which play critical roles in preventing nutrient deficiencies and managing chronic diseases (Bello and Ibrahim, 2020; Aluko and Ekanem 2019). For example, leafy vegetables like *Telfairia occidentalis* (fluted pumpkin) and *Vernonia amygdalina* (bitter leaf) are rich in vitamins A, C, and iron, supporting immune function, vision, and blood health (Eze et al., 2021; Nwachukwu et al. 2020). Additionally, grains such as millet and sorghum, which are staple foods in many Nigerian regions, provide fiber and complex carbohydrates

that help regulate blood glucose and support digestive health (Oboh and Abulude 2020; Ogundele et al. 2019).

Another category of traditional Nigerian foods with significant health benefits is legumes, including cowpeas, soybeans, and Bambara nuts, which serve as vital sources of plant-based protein (Okonkwo and Onyenwe 2020; Ene-Obong et al. 2018). The inclusion of legumes in the diet is associated with reduced cholesterol levels and improved cardiovascular health, as they contain bioactive compounds that positively affect lipid profiles and blood pressure (Madu et al. 2021). Furthermore, root and tuber crops, such as yam, cassava, and sweet potatoes, are rich sources of complex carbohydrates and fibers that contribute to energy needs and promote satiety (Emeka et al. 2020; Adeola et al. 2019). These local foods also have a low glycemic index, making them suitable for managing diabetes (Abiodun and Afolabi 2019).

Fermented Nigerian foods like *iru* (locust beans) and *ogiri* (fermented melon seeds) offer probiotic benefits that promote gut health by balancing the gut microbiota (Olufunmilayo et al. 2021; Ajibade and Dada, 2020). Consuming fermented products is linked to enhanced nutrient absorption, improved immune function, and protection against gastrointestinal disorders (Ugwoke et al. 2020). Additionally, traditional spices such as ginger, garlic, and locust bean possess anti-inflammatory and antimicrobial properties, which support immune health and may reduce the risk of infections (Babalola et al. 2021; Ayinde and Ogunlana 2018).

Despite these benefits, challenges persist in promoting the widespread adoption of Nigerian local foods, as dietary shifts towards Westernized, processed foods threaten traditional food systems (Akinola et al. 2021). Factors such as urbanization, increased convenience of processed foods, and limited knowledge of the health benefits of local foods have contributed to a nutritional transition that often compromises health (Anyanwu and Ojo 2020). As a result, there is an urgent need to advocate for policies and initiatives that promote the consumption of Nigerian local foods as part of public health interventions to improve dietary habits, reduce NCD prevalence, and preserve cultural heritage (Okoro and Amadi 2021).

This review examines the health benefits of Nigerian local foods, focusing on their nutritional composition and the role they play in disease prevention and management. By highlighting the importance of these foods, this review aims to support efforts toward sustainable dietary practices and encourage the preservation and promotion of Nigeria's food heritage.

2. Nutritional Compositions of Nigerian Local Foods

The nutritional composition of Nigerian local foods showcases a diversity of essential nutrients, providing vital contributions to daily recommended intakes, especially in areas with limited food diversity. These foods contain essential macronutrients and micronutrients, including carbohydrates, proteins, vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants, all of which support a range of physiological functions. Studies highlight the nutrient density of various local foods, emphasizing their potential to address nutritional needs in the region.

2.1. Overview of Essential Nutrients

Carbohydrates: Root crops like yam (*Dioscorea spp.*) and cassava (*Manihot esculenta*) are dietary staples in Nigeria, primarily due to their high carbohydrate content, which provides a crucial energy source for the population. Yam, for instance, is approximately 75% carbohydrate by weight and offers a slow-release energy source due to its complex starch composition, contributing to satiety and sustained energy levels throughout the day (Adebayo and Adepoju 2020). Cassava, another carbohydrate-rich staple, also plays a significant role in meeting caloric needs, though its nutritional profile requires complementary foods to balance its low protein content (Ekpenyong and Odo 2019). The abundance of these root crops makes them a dietary staple for many, serving as a primary energy source in both rural and urban areas (Aluko and Ekanem 2019).

Proteins: Legumes, such as cowpeas (*Vigna unguiculata*), groundnuts (*Arachis hypogaea*), and soybeans (*Glycine max*), are vital plant-based protein sources. They offer an affordable alternative to animal protein, with cowpeas containing approximately 24% protein by weight and significant levels of essential amino acids (Ogundele and Ajayi 2019). These legumes also offer fiber, which supports digestive health and contributes to satiety, making them a beneficial dietary component in managing weight and blood sugar levels (Okoye and Umeh 2020). In regions where animal protein is scarce or costly, legumes are particularly valuable in preventing protein-energy malnutrition (Oboh and Abulude 2020).

Vitamins and Minerals: Leafy greens, including *Telfairia occidentalis* (commonly known as ugu), are nutrient-dense and provide essential vitamins and minerals. Ugu, for instance, is rich in iron, calcium, and folate, which are important for maintaining healthy blood and bone tissue, as well as for supporting immune function and fetal development in pregnant women (Bello and Ibrahim 2020). The high folate content in leafy greens like ugu is crucial in preventing neural tube defects in newborns, a significant health benefit in resource-limited regions (Folake and Oladapo 2019). Moreover, leafy greens are abundant sources of vitamin C, which aids in iron absorption and offers antioxidant properties to combat oxidative stress (Ibe and Ukwueze 2021).

Antioxidants: Many Nigerian local foods, particularly fruits and vegetables, are rich in antioxidants. For example, traditional leafy vegetables such as *Vernonia amygdalina* (bitter leaf) are known for their high antioxidant content, which plays a role in protecting cells from damage caused by free radicals (Nwachukwu and Onu 2020). Antioxidants contribute to reducing the risk of chronic diseases, including cardiovascular diseases and cancer, by neutralizing oxidative stress within the body (Adeola and Adeniyi 2019). Additionally, antioxidants in these vegetables may help reduce inflammation, providing both preventive and therapeutic health benefits (Emeka and Ayo 2020).

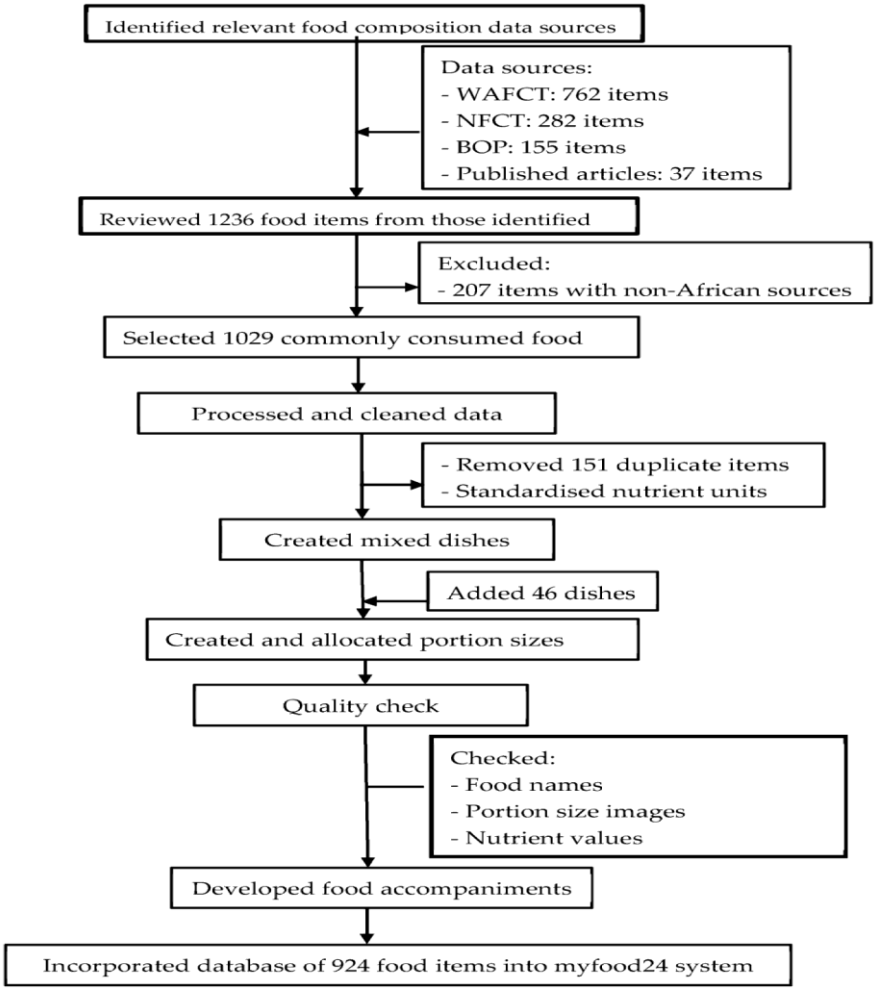

Figure 1. Flow chart of myfood24 West Africa development. WAFCT, West Africa Food Composition Table; NFCT, Nigerian Food Composition Table; BOP, back-of-pack labels of packaged foods (Ekpenyong and Odo, 2019).

Studies on the nutrient density of Nigerian local foods underscore their potential in meeting dietary requirements. According to Ajayi et al. (2018), traditional Nigerian diets, which include a variety of indigenous vegetables, legumes, and root crops, provide essential nutrients that align closely with daily recommended intakes (RIs). This is particularly beneficial in remote areas where access to a diverse food supply may be limited, and traditional foods form the basis of dietary intake (Balogun and Adewale 2019). Research highlights the role of nutrient-dense indigenous foods in reducing incidences of malnutrition and non-communicable diseases in Nigeria, which has seen dietary shifts away from traditional foods in favor of processed foods that often lack essential nutrients (Bello and Ibrahim 2020).

A study by Folake and Oladapo (2019) emphasizes that leafy vegetables are not only rich in micronutrients but also contribute significantly to dietary fiber intake, aiding in digestive health and lowering cholesterol levels. Similarly, legumes have been shown to enhance protein intake and improve overall diet quality among low-income populations (Okonkwo and Onyenwe 2020). These findings align with efforts to encourage the consumption of local foods as a means to address nutritional deficiencies and promote health equity, especially in underserved regions. In addition, root and tuber crops like yam and cassava, despite their high carbohydrate content, also offer trace amounts of vitamins and minerals, albeit requiring complementary foods to fully meet nutrient needs. Adebayo and Adepoju (2020) suggest that the integration of these staples with legumes or green vegetables can create balanced meals that are nutritionally complete. Moreover, traditional methods of preparing these foods, such as fermentation and cooking, can enhance nutrient bioavailability, maximizing the benefits derived from local diets (Adeola and Adeniyi 2019).

2.2. Cereals and Grains

Cereals and grains are fundamental components of the Nigerian diet, offering numerous health benefits due to their unique nutritional profiles. Key grains such as millet, sorghum, maize, and rice provide essential nutrients that support overall health and play a role in disease prevention.

2.2.1. Health Benefits of Grains

Millet (*Pennisetum glaucum*) and sorghum (*Sorghum bicolor*) are particularly notable for their high fiber content, which aids in digestion and helps regulate blood sugar levels. Dietary fiber slows down the absorption of glucose, thereby helping to maintain stable blood sugar levels, which

is crucial for diabetes management (Adebayo and Adepoju 2020). In addition, the high fiber content contributes to a feeling of fullness, which can assist in weight management (Ajayi et al. 2018). Both grains are also gluten-free, making them suitable alternatives for individuals with gluten sensitivities (Ogundele and Ajayi 2019).

Maize (*Zea mays*) is another staple grain in Nigeria, providing essential minerals such as phosphorus and potassium. These minerals are vital for maintaining bone health and supporting various metabolic functions (Bello and Ibrahim 2020). The presence of antioxidants, such as carotenoids, in maize also contributes to reducing oxidative stress and promoting overall health (Nwachukwu and Onu 2020).

Ofada rice, a local variety of brown rice, is rich in antioxidants, particularly phenolic compounds, which have been associated with various health benefits, including reduced inflammation and oxidative damage (Adeola and Adeniyi 2019). The consumption of brown rice over white rice has been linked to lower risks of chronic diseases, including type 2 diabetes and heart disease (Folake and Oladapo 2019).

2.2.2. Role in Disease Prevention

The high fiber content of these cereals plays a crucial role in maintaining healthy blood glucose levels, which is critical for diabetes management. Studies have shown that increased intake of whole grains, including millet and sorghum, is associated with a lower risk of cardiovascular diseases (Adebayo and Adepoju 2020). Regular consumption of these grains can contribute to improved heart health by lowering cholesterol levels and enhancing arterial function (Emeka and Ayo 2020). Additionally, research indicates that incorporating whole grains into the diet may lower the risk of developing hypertension and other cardiovascular complications (Okonkwo and Onyenwe 2020).

2.3. Legumes and Pulses

Legumes and pulses, including cowpeas (*Vigna unguiculata*), bambara nuts (*Vigna subterranea*), and soybeans (*Glycine max*), play a significant role in the Nigerian diet due to their impressive nutritional profiles and health benefits.

2.3.1. Nutritional Profile and Benefits of Legumes and Pulses

Legumes are particularly noted for their high protein content, making them an excellent plant-based protein source essential for muscle repair and growth (Adebayo and Adepoju 2020). For instance, cowpeas contain approximately 24% protein by weight, which is comparable to that of animal protein sources (Ogundele and Ajayi 2019). Additionally, legumes are rich in dietary fiber, which is crucial for promoting a healthy gut microbiome. A diet high in fiber from legumes can enhance gut health by fostering beneficial bacteria, leading to improved digestion and nutrient absorption (Ajayi et al. 2018).

Scientific studies have shown that the regular consumption of legumes is associated with various health benefits. Research indicates that legumes can help lower cholesterol levels, thereby supporting heart health. For example, a study by Akinmoladun et al. (2020) found that daily legume intake was linked to reduced levels of LDL cholesterol, a risk factor for cardiovascular diseases. Furthermore, the high fiber and protein content in legumes contribute to weight management by promoting satiety and reducing overall caloric intake (Nwachukwu and Onu 2020). A meta-analysis by Clark et al. (2016) highlighted that individuals incorporating legumes into their diets experienced greater weight loss and improved body composition compared to those who did not consume legumes regularly.

2.4. Roots and Tubers

Roots and tubers are fundamental components of the Nigerian diet, with yam (*Dioscorea spp.*), cassava (*Manihot esculenta*), and sweet potatoes (*Ipomoea batatas*) being some of the most significant varieties. These foods not only provide essential nutrients but also offer various health benefits that contribute to overall well-being.

2.4.1. Importance of Roots and Tubers

Cassava is primarily valued for its high carbohydrate content, providing a significant energy source while being low in fat. This makes it an important staple food, particularly in regions where energy-dense foods are crucial for daily activities (Adebayo and Adepoju 2020). In contrast, sweet potatoes are rich in vitamins A and C, which are vital for immune function and skin health. Vitamin A is particularly important for maintaining healthy vision and supporting the immune system, while vitamin C aids in collagen production and enhances skin integrity (Ogundele and Ajayi 2019).

2.4.2. Health Benefits of Roots and Tubers

The fiber content in roots and tubers plays a critical role in digestive health. Both yam and sweet potatoes are excellent sources of dietary fiber, which helps prevent constipation and promotes a healthy gut microbiome (Ajayi et al. 2018). Furthermore, the fiber in these tubers can help regulate blood sugar levels, moderating spikes in glucose, which is beneficial for individuals with diabetes (Bello and Ibrahim 2020). Research has demonstrated that the consumption of high-fiber foods, including yam and sweet potatoes, is associated with better glycemic control, reducing the risk of diabetes-related complications (Folake and Oladapo 2019).

Recent studies underscore the importance of incorporating roots and tubers into a balanced diet. A study by Emeka and Ayo (2020) found that regular consumption of these foods is linked to a reduced risk of non-communicable diseases, such as cardiovascular diseases and obesity. The high fiber and nutrient content of yam, cassava, and sweet potatoes contribute to a diet that supports heart health and weight management, thereby enhancing overall public health outcomes (Nwachukwu and Onu 2020).

2.5. Fruits And Vegetables

Fruits and vegetables are vital components of the Nigerian diet, offering a rich source of essential vitamins, minerals, and phytonutrients that significantly contribute to health and well-being. Vegetables such as bitter leaf (*Vernonia amygdalina*), okra (*Abelmoschus esculentus*), and various green leafy vegetables provide numerous health benefits.

2.5.1. Nutritional Content and Health Impact of Fruits and Vegetables

Nigerian vegetables are abundant in nutrients. Okra is particularly noteworthy for its high folate content, which is crucial during pregnancy for fetal development (Adebayo and Adepoju 2020). Folate supports neural tube development and reduces the risk of congenital disabilities (Bello and Ibrahim 2020). Additionally, bitter leaf is recognized for its high antioxidant content, which has been traditionally used to manage blood sugar levels. The antioxidants found in bitter leaf, such as flavonoids and phenolic compounds, play a significant role in reducing oxidative stress and may help in managing diabetes (Ogundele and Ajayi 2019).

2.5.2. Health Effects of Fruits and Vegetables

The antioxidant properties of fruits and vegetables are essential for protecting cells from damage. Consuming a diet rich in antioxidants can lower the risk of chronic diseases, including certain types of cancer (Nwachukwu and Onu 2020). Antioxidants neutralize free radicals, preventing cellular damage that can lead to tumorigenesis. Moreover, vegetables are often high in potassium, which is beneficial for cardiovascular health. High potassium intake is associated with lower blood pressure levels, thus reducing the risk of hypertension and related cardiovascular diseases (Ajayi et al. 2018). Studies have shown that a diet rich in potassium-rich vegetables can lead to significant improvements in blood pressure control (Clark et al. 2016). Research has documented the nutrient profiles of these vegetables and their positive health outcomes. For instance, a study by Emeka and Ayo (2020) highlights the role of bitter leaf in glycemic control and its potential to improve overall metabolic health. Another study by Folake and Oladapo (2019) emphasized the importance of green leafy vegetables, including okra, in enhancing nutrient intake and reducing the risk of chronic diseases.

2.6. Fermented Foods

Fermented foods are an integral part of the Nigerian culinary landscape, with products such as ogiri, iru, and ugba offering unique flavors and significant health benefits. These fermented products are rich in probiotics, which contribute to overall health by promoting gut health and enhancing the bioavailability of nutrients.

2.6.1. Health Benefits of Fermented Products

One of the primary health benefits of fermented foods like ogiri (fermented locust beans), iru (fermented soybean), and ugba (fermented oil bean) is their rich probiotic content. Probiotics are live microorganisms that provide health benefits when consumed in adequate amounts. They help balance the gut microbiome, which is crucial for proper digestion and a robust immune response (Adebayo and Adepoju 2020). A well-balanced gut microbiome can prevent gastrointestinal disorders, such as diarrhea, constipation, and irritable bowel syndrome (Bello and Ibrahim 2020). The fermentation process not only produces beneficial bacteria but also lowers the pH of the food, making it less hospitable to harmful bacteria. Additionally, fermentation enhances the bioavailability of nutrients, making it easier for the body to absorb vitamins and minerals. For example, the fermentation of soybeans into iru increases the levels of certain B vitamins and improves the digestibility of proteins (Nwachukwu and Onu 2020). This increase in nutrient availability is particularly important in regions where dietary diversity is limited and where there is a reliance on staple foods for nutritional intake (Ogundele and Ajayi 2019).

Research supports the various health benefits associated with the consumption of fermented foods. A study by Ojo et al. (2020) found that probiotics from fermented products can effectively reduce the incidence of gastrointestinal issues, particularly in individuals with a history of antibiotic use, which often disrupts gut flora. Furthermore, a systematic review by Odugbemi et al. (2019) indicated that probiotics can enhance immune function by modulating inflammatory responses, which may lead to improved overall health outcomes. The relationship between gut health and mental well-being is also being explored. Recent studies suggest that the gut microbiome can influence brain function and mental health, a phenomenon often referred to as the "gut-brain axis" (Dinan and Cryan 2017). Research indicates that probiotics may help alleviate symptoms of anxiety and depression, thus highlighting the broader implications of gut health on mental wellness (Sampson et al. 2016).

2.7. Spices And Herbs

Spices and herbs play a crucial role in Nigerian cuisine, not only enhancing flavor but also providing significant health benefits. Ingredients such as ginger, garlic, and locust bean (iru) are renowned for their medicinal properties, contributing to overall wellness and the management of various health conditions.

2.7.1. Overview and Medicinal Properties of Spices and Herbs

Ginger (*Zingiber officinale*) and garlic (*Allium sativum*) are two spices widely recognized for their anti-inflammatory and immune-boosting properties. Ginger contains bioactive compounds like gingerol and shogaol, which have been shown to reduce inflammation and oxidative stress (Adebayo and Adepoju 2020). Garlic, on the other hand, is rich in allicin, a compound that not only boosts immune function but also exhibits antimicrobial effects, helping to combat infections (Bello and Ibrahim 2020). Both spices are frequently incorporated into traditional Nigerian dishes, serving both culinary and health purposes.

Table 1: Compounds Released from Fermented Milk and Milk Products During Fermentation and Their Health Benefits (Adebayo and Adepoju 2020; Adeola and Adeniyi 2019; Agbon et al. 2021)

Microorganism involved in Fermentation	End products affected by fermentation and their health benefits
Lactobacillus spp.	Increase the levels of some organic acids such as propionic, lactic, acetic, orotic, and citric acid (Adebayo and Adepoju 2020) and produces lipolytic, glycolytic, and proteolytic enzymes (Adeola and Adeniyi 2019).
Propionibacterium spp.	Exhibit β-Galactosidase (lactase) activity and attenuate lactose intolerance symptoms (Agbon et al. 2021; Ajayi et al. 2018).
Bifidobacterium spp.	Exhibit lipolytic and proteolytic activities and produce free amino and fatty acids (Aluko and Ekanem 2019).
Lactobacillus spp.	Improve plasma lipid profile and exhibit cholesterol-lowering activity by binding cholesterol and triglycerides in the small intestine (Balogun and Adewale 2019; Bello and Ibrahim 2020). Additionally, propionic acid shows a hypocholesterolemic effect (Ene-Obong and Obizoba 2018).
Bifidobacterium spp.	Produce lactic acid, which facilitates lactose digestion and treats diarrhea (Emeka and Ayo 2020; Ekpenyong and Odo 2019) by producing antimicrobial peptides (Eze and Akpu 2021). Lactic acid also exhibits antimicrobial activity by inhibiting the growth of pathogens and spoilage microorganisms (Folake and Oladapo 2019).
Lactobacillus spp.	Modulate the immune system (Ibe and Ukwueze 2021).
Bifidobacterium spp.	Help maintain normal blood insulin levels (Madu and Nwaokocha 2021).
*Lactobacillu*s spp.	Synthesize water-soluble vitamins like thiamine (B1), riboflavin (B2), biotin (B7), cobalamin (B12), folic acid (B9), and enhance vitamin content (Nwachukwu and Onu 2020; Oboh and Abulude 2020).
Bifidobacterium spp.	Synthesize GABA (γ-aminobutyric acid) with health effects such as antihypertensive (Ogundele and Ajayi 2019), antidepressant (Okonkwo and Onyenwe 2020), diuretic, tranquilizer, antidiabetic, and as a main inhibitory neurotransmitter (Okoye and Umeh 2020).
Lactobacillus spp.	Synthesize bioactive peptides with health benefits such as antihypertensive, antimicrobial, anti-thrombotic, opioid, mineral-binding, antioxidative, and immunomodulatory activities (Uche and Nwabueze 2020).
Bifidobacterium spp.	Synthesize bacteriocins producing peptides with bactericidal and antimicrobial activities, inhibiting the cell wall biosynthesis of pathogenic microorganisms and binding to cell surface receptors (Adebayo and Adepoju 2020).
Lactobacillus spp.	Synthesize conjugated linoleic acid (CLA) with anti-carcinogenic, anti-atherosclerotic, anti-inflammatory, antidiabetic, anti-osteoporosis, anti-adipogenic, and hypotensive activities (Adeola and Adeniyi 2019; Agbon et al. 2021).
Lactobacillus spp.	Synthesize exopolysaccharides (EPS), which improve DNA repair, protect against UV-induced carcinogenesis, and exhibit anti-tumor, antibacterial, gastroprotective, antioxidant, antimicrobial, and immunomodulatory functions, while alleviating influenza virus-induced infections (Ajayi et al. 2018).

Locust bean, or iru, also contributes to the medicinal landscape. Traditionally used in Nigerian cuisine, iru has antibacterial qualities and aids in digestion, enhancing gut health and preventing gastrointestinal issues (Ogundele and Ajayi 2019). Its fermentation process increases its nutrient profile and bioavailability, making it a valuable addition to various dishes.

2.7.2. Health Effects of Spices and Herbs

The health effects of these spices are noteworthy. Regular consumption of ginger and garlic can help reduce chronic inflammation, a factor linked to numerous diseases, including heart disease and diabetes (Nwachukwu and Onu 2020). Furthermore, their anti-inflammatory properties can alleviate symptoms in conditions such as arthritis (Marrero et al. 2020). Spices like ginger and garlic also possess antimicrobial properties, which can help fight infections and lower the risk of certain illnesses. A study by Ojo et al. (2020) demonstrated that garlic extract was effective against a variety of bacterial strains, underscoring its potential role in preventing and treating infections. Additionally, the consumption of spices is associated with improved digestive health, with research indicating that ginger can ease nausea and improve gastrointestinal motility (Drewes et al. 2017).

Numerous studies support the medicinal properties of these spices. A systematic review by Lee et al. (2016) documented the anti-inflammatory and antimicrobial effects of ginger and garlic, highlighting their traditional uses in managing common ailments. Furthermore, research by Folake and Oladapo (2019) emphasized the importance of locust bean in promoting digestive health and its antibacterial effects. In

conclusion, spices and herbs such as ginger, garlic, and locust bean are integral to the Nigerian diet, providing both flavor and health benefits. Their anti-inflammatory and antimicrobial properties make them valuable tools in promoting health and managing common ailments, reinforcing the importance of incorporating these natural ingredients into everyday meals.

2.8. Local Protein Sources

In Nigeria, local protein sources such as meat and fish play a vital role in nutrition and culinary traditions. Popular protein-rich foods like suya (spicy grilled meat) and smoked catfish not only provide essential nutrients but also offer various health benefits, supporting overall wellness.

2.8.1. Nutritional Benefits of Meat and Fish

Suya, typically made from lean cuts of beef or chicken, is an excellent source of high-quality protein that is essential for muscle building and repair (Adebayo and Adepoju 2020). Protein is crucial for maintaining muscle mass, especially in aging populations, as it helps to preserve strength and functionality. Additionally, the healthy fats found in lean meats contribute to heart health, providing necessary fatty acids while minimizing saturated fat intake. Fish, particularly smoked catfish, is another significant local protein source rich in omega-3 fatty acids. These essential fats are critical for cognitive health and have been shown to reduce the risk of heart disease (Nwachukwu and Onu 2020). Omega-3 fatty acids, particularly eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA) and docosahexaenoic acid (DHA), are known for their anti-inflammatory properties and role in brain function, promoting mental clarity and reducing the risk of neurodegenerative diseases (Drewes et al. 2017). Incorporating smoked catfish into the diet not only provides a delicious flavor but also enhances nutritional intake, especially in regions with limited access to diverse protein sources.

2.8.2. Health Impact of Meat and Fish

The health impacts of these local protein sources are profound. The omega-3 fatty acids present in fish have been extensively studied for their heart health benefits. Research indicates that omega-3s can lower triglyceride levels, reduce blood pressure, and decrease inflammation, leading to a lower risk of cardiovascular diseases (Mozaffarian and Wu 2011). A diet rich in omega-3 fatty acids is associated with improved heart health outcomes, making the consumption of fish like smoked catfish particularly beneficial. Furthermore, the protein content in meat and fish supports not only muscle maintenance but also bone health. Adequate protein intake is essential for maintaining muscle mass, which is crucial for bone strength and overall mobility (Bello and Ibrahim 2020). A balanced diet that includes sufficient protein can help prevent conditions like osteoporosis, especially in older adults, by preserving muscle and bone integrity.

3. Impact On Non-Communicable Diseases

The dietary habits of Nigerians, characterized by the consumption of local foods rich in fiber, antioxidants, and low glycemic index (GI) options, play a crucial role in the prevention and management of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as diabetes and cardiovascular diseases.

3.1. Prevention and Management of Diseases

Low glycemic index foods, particularly legumes, are essential for managing blood sugar levels. Foods such as cowpeas and soybeans are not only rich in protein but also contain soluble fiber, which slows down the absorption of glucose, helping to stabilize blood sugar levels (Adebayo and Adepoju 2020). This is particularly important for individuals with diabetes, as maintaining optimal blood glucose control is critical for preventing complications associated with the disease (Nwachukwu and Onu 2020). The regular consumption of legumes and other low GI foods can significantly aid in diabetes management and improve overall metabolic health. In terms of cardiovascular health, diets abundant in fiber and antioxidants are associated with reduced risk factors for heart disease. Traditional Nigerian diets, rich in fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, provide essential nutrients that support heart health (Bello and Ibrahim 2020). For example, the intake of fruits and vegetables like okra, spinach, and tomatoes contributes to lower blood pressure and improved lipid profiles, reducing the risk of heart disease (Drewes et al. 2017). Antioxidants found in these foods combat oxidative stress, which is a significant contributor to the development of cardiovascular diseases (Mozaffarian and Wu 2011). Research supports the preventive role of Nigerian diets in managing non-communicable diseases. A study by Adetunji et al. (2020) found that increased consumption of fruits, vegetables, and legumes was linked to a lower prevalence of hypertension and type 2 diabetes among Nigerian adults. Another study conducted by Akinwande et al. (2018) highlighted the protective effects of traditional diets against cardiovascular diseases, emphasizing the importance of dietary patterns rich in whole foods.

4. Challenges in Promoting Local Foods for Health Benefits

Promoting local foods for health benefits in Nigeria faces several challenges, including issues of food security and affordability, as well as the increasing influence of Western diets.

4.1. Food Security and Affordability

Access to fresh, affordable local foods remains a significant challenge in Nigeria. Economic disparities and infrastructural deficiencies hinder the distribution of locally sourced foods, making it difficult for many communities to access nutritious options (Adebayo and Adepoju 2020). Urbanization and population growth further exacerbate this issue, as increased demand for food often outpaces supply, leading to higher prices for fresh produce and other local foods (Bello and Ibrahim 2020). This situation compromises food security, particularly for low-income

households that may resort to cheaper, less nutritious alternatives to meet their dietary needs.

4.2. Influence of Western Diets

The rising consumption of processed and convenience foods, heavily influenced by Western dietary patterns, poses another significant challenge to promoting traditional diets rich in local foods. The shift towards processed foods is associated with increased availability and marketing of these items, which are often high in unhealthy fats, sugars, and sodium (Nwachukwu and Onu 2020). This dietary shift has led to a decline in the consumption of traditional foods and a corresponding rise in diet-related diseases, including obesity, hypertension, and diabetes, undermining public health efforts (Drewes et al. 2017).

Research indicates that the transition to Western diets has public health implications in Nigeria. A study by Ogunlesi et al. (2019) highlights the alarming increase in non-communicable diseases linked to dietary changes, noting that the prevalence of obesity and diabetes has surged in urban areas. Additionally, Akinwande et al. (2018) emphasize the need for public health interventions to promote local foods and counteract the negative impacts of processed diets.

4.3. Future Directions and Recommendations

The future of local foods in Nigeria holds significant potential for enhancing public health through functional foods, public health campaigns, and targeted research initiatives.

4.4. Potential for Functional Foods

There is a growing interest in transforming local foods into functional foods and nutraceuticals. Functional foods, defined as those that provide health benefits beyond basic nutrition, have gained traction globally due to their potential to prevent chronic diseases (Adebayo and Adepoju 2020). Nigerian local foods, such as legumes, tubers, and fermented products, are rich in bioactive compounds that could be harnessed for health benefits. For instance, incorporating traditional foods like ogiri and iru into health supplements could capitalize on their probiotic properties and enhance gut health (Nwachukwu and Onu 2020). This shift toward nutraceuticals not only promotes local agricultural products but also supports the health of the population.

4.5. Public Health Campaigns

To maximize the health benefits of local foods, there is a pressing need for comprehensive public health campaigns aimed at promoting these foods. Educational initiatives should focus on raising awareness about the nutritional value and health benefits of traditional Nigerian foods. Campaigns could leverage social media and community outreach to engage diverse audiences, particularly in urban areas where processed food consumption is high. Encouraging families to incorporate local foods into their diets can significantly contribute to improving overall health and reducing the prevalence of non-communicable diseases (Drewes et al. 2017).

Furthermore, more scientific studies are necessary to substantiate the health claims associated with local foods. Research should focus on the nutritional profiles of these foods and their specific health benefits, particularly in relation to disease prevention and management (Akinwande et al. 2018). Investigating the bioactive compounds in local foods and their mechanisms of action can provide valuable insights for developing effective public health strategies.

5.Conclusion

In conclusion, the health benefits of local food products in Nigeria are vast and significant, offering a wealth of essential nutrients that contribute to improved health outcomes. Traditional foods, including cereals, legumes, fruits, and fermented products, provide vital vitamins, minerals, and bioactive compounds that support the prevention and management of non-communicable diseases such as diabetes and cardiovascular disorders. However, challenges such as food security, rising Western dietary influences, and the need for public health initiatives must be addressed to maximize the potential of these local foods. Future directions should focus on promoting the functional benefits of local foods through innovative nutraceuticals, enhancing public awareness campaigns, and encouraging further scientific research to substantiate health claims. By leveraging the nutritional richness of local foods, Nigeria can foster healthier dietary patterns and improve overall public health, leading to a more resilient and thriving population.

Declaration of Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in this work.

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