

Piper beetle: A Comprehensive Review of its Ethnobotanical and Pharmacological Potential

¹Rushikesh Jadhav, ²Sakshi Waikar, ³Dr Atul Bendale

¹Student, ²Assistant Professor, ³Assistant Professor

¹Mahavir Institute of Pharmacy, Nashik, Maharashtra

PP Savani University Dhamdod, Kosamba, Gujarat 394125

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Abstract- *Piper betle* L. (Piperaceae), commonly known as the betel vine, holds a unique position in the sociocultural fabric of South and Southeast Asia. While largely recognized for its role in the masticatory "betel quid" (Paan), the leaf itself possesses a rich history as a potent therapeutic agent in traditional medicine systems like Ayurveda, Siddha, and Unani. This review transcends the leaf's recreational identity to explore its status as a "healing master." We examine the phytochemistry of *P. betle*, highlighting bioactive compounds such as eugenol, hydroxychavicol, and chavibetol, responsible for its medicinal properties. The review comprehensively analyzes current pharmacological evidence supporting its antimicrobial, antioxidant, anti-inflammatory, gastroprotective, and potential chemopreventive activities. Furthermore, a critical distinction is drawn between the therapeutic profile of the isolated betel leaf versus the carcinogenic risks associated with the complete betel quid (containing tobacco and areca nut). The review concludes that *P. betle* represents an underutilized reservoir of bioactive molecules with significant potential for modern therapeutic applications, warranting further clinical exploration.

Index-Terms: *Piper betle*, Phytochemistry, Eugenol, Hydroxychavicol, Antimicrobial, Antioxidant, Traditional Medicine.

I. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between humanity and the plant kingdom is ancient, with plants serving as the primary source of medicine for millennia. Despite the advent of synthetic pharmaceuticals, a significant portion of the global population relies on traditional herbal remedies for primary healthcare. Among the myriad plants utilized in traditional systems of South and Southeast Asia, *Piper betle* L., belonging to the family Piperaceae, is ubiquitous.

Known variously as "Paan" in Hindi, "Tambula" in Sanskrit, and "Sirih" in Malay, the heart-shaped leaf of the betel vine is deeply embedded in cultural rituals, social gatherings, and religious ceremonies. Its most visible use is as a wrapper for the "betel quid," a masticatory mixture usually containing areca nut and slaked lime, and often tobacco. This widespread social usage has, to some extent, overshadowed the intrinsic medicinal value of the leaf itself.

Ancient texts of Ayurveda designate *P. betle* not merely as a breath freshener but as a powerful therapeutic agent. It is classified as pungent, warming, and capable of balancing Kapha and Vata doshas. Historically, it has been employed to treat conditions ranging from halitosis and digestive disorders to respiratory ailments and dermal wounds.

This review aims to reclaim the status of *Piper betle* as a "healing master" by systematically examining its phytochemical composition and evaluating contemporary scientific evidence for its pharmacological activities. It seeks to bridge the gap between traditional knowledge and modern scientific validation, emphasizing the therapeutic potential of the leaf extract distinct from the associated risks of the betel quid.

II. BOTANICAL DESCRIPTION AND PHYTOCHEMISTRY

Piper betle is a perennial, dioecious, creeping herb rooted at the nodes. It thrives in warm, humid climates and is extensively cultivated across India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, and Indonesia. The leaves are simple, alternate, heart-shaped, and bright green, possessing a characteristic aromatic odor and a pungent taste.

The healing prowess of *P. betle* is attributable to its rich and complex phytochemical profile. The leaf contains water, proteins, carbohydrates, minerals (calcium, potassium), and vitamins (A, C, and B-complex). However, its primary pharmacological activity resides in its essential oil and various extracts.

2.1. Essential Oil Components

The essential oil constitutes about 0.08% to 0.2% of the fresh leaf weight. The composition varies significantly based on the cultivar and geographical origin, but major bioactive components consistently include:

- Chavibetol (Betelphenol): An isomer of eugenol, often the dominant compound in many Indian cultivars, contributing to the characteristic aroma and antimicrobial properties.
- Eugenol: A phenylpropene notable for its anesthetic, analgesic, and anti-inflammatory effects.
- Hydroxychavicol: A major phenolic compound exhibiting potent antioxidant and anti-carcinogenic properties.
- Chavicol: A phenolic compound with strong antiseptic qualities.
- Caryophyllene and Cadinene: Sesquiterpenes contributing to anti-inflammatory activity.

2.2. Other Bioactive Constituents

Beyond the volatile oil, extracts of the leaf yield significant secondary metabolites including tannins, flavonoids (like quercetin and kaempferol), and various alkaloids. These compounds work synergistically, enhancing the overall therapeutic effect of the leaf.

III. TRADITIONAL MEDICINAL USES (ETHNOBOTANY)

Before modern pharmacological screening, indigenous communities utilized *P. betle* for a wide spectrum of ailments.

In Ayurveda, the leaf juice is used as an adjuvant to various medicines to enhance their effects. It is considered a digestive stimulant (Deepana) and carminative (Pachana). Warm leaves smeared with oil are applied to the chest to relieve coughs and respiratory congestion in children.

In traditional Chinese medicine, betel roots and leaves are used to treat coughing, edema, and rheumatic pain. In Malaysia and Indonesia, the leaves are often boiled, and the water is used as a mouthwash for oral hygiene to treat toothaches, gum swelling, and bad breath, demonstrating early knowledge of its antimicrobial properties.

Furthermore, the leaves have been traditionally employed as an antiseptic for healing wounds, boils, and cutaneous infections. The leaf paste is applied topically for its analgesic properties to relieve headaches and joint pain.

IV. PHARMACOLOGICAL ACTIVITIES: SCIENTIFIC VALIDATION

Modern research has increasingly validated many of the traditional claims surrounding *Piper betle*.

4.1. Antimicrobial and Antifungal Activity

Perhaps the most extensively documented property of *P. betle* is its broad-spectrum antimicrobial action. The essential oil and various extracts (ethanol, methanol, aqueous) have demonstrated significant inhibitory effects against a range of pathogenic bacteria, including *Staphylococcus aureus*, *Streptococcus mutans*, *Escherichia coli*, and *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*.

The mechanism of action is believed to involve the disruption of bacterial cell membranes by phenolic components like eugenol and hydroxychavicol, leading to leakage of cellular constituents and cell death.

Furthermore, *P. betle* shows potent antifungal activity against dermatophytes and yeasts, including *Candida albicans*. This validates its traditional use in treating oral thrush and skin infections. Its activity against *Streptococcus mutans* makes it a valuable candidate for preventing dental caries and maintaining oral hygiene.

4.2. Antioxidant Activity

Oxidative stress, resulting from an imbalance between free radicals and antioxidants, is implicated in numerous chronic diseases, including cardiovascular disorders and cancer. *Piper betle* extracts exhibit strong antioxidant properties.

Hydroxychavicol and eugenol are powerful scavengers of free radicals, such as superoxide anions and hydroxyl radicals. They also enhance the activity of endogenous antioxidant enzymes like superoxide dismutase (SOD) and catalase (CAT) in biological systems. The high phenolic content of the leaf directly correlates with its ability to mitigate oxidative damage to lipids and DNA.

4.3. Anti-inflammatory and Analgesic Properties

Inflammation is a root cause of many pathologies. The topical application of warm betel leaves for pain relief is a common folk remedy. Scientific studies confirm that betel leaf extracts possess significant anti-inflammatory activity.

Extracts have been shown to inhibit the production of pro-inflammatory mediators like prostaglandins and nitric oxide, and suppress the activity of enzymes like cyclooxygenase-2 (COX-2). The presence of eugenol, a known local anesthetic and anti-inflammatory agent, significantly contributes to these effects, validating its use in treating rheumatism and painful swellings.

4.4. Gastroprotective and Digestive Activity

Contrary to the irritating effects of tobacco/areca nut on the gastric lining, the pure *P. betle* leaf is gastroprotective. Aqueous extracts contain mucilages that coat the stomach lining, protecting it from acid pepsin. Studies in animal models have shown that betel leaf extract can significantly reduce the ulcer index and increase the gastric mucus content, exhibiting anti-ulcerogenic activity comparable to standard drugs like ranitidine.

Furthermore, the leaf is known to stimulate the secretion of saliva and digestive enzymes (amylase, lipase), confirming its traditional role as a digestive aid taken after meals.

4.5. Anticancer and Chemopreventive Potential

This is the most complex and crucial area of *P. betle* research. It is vital to distinguish between the *betel quid* and the *betel leaf*.

Epidemiological studies have strongly associated chronic chewing of betel quid (specifically those containing tobacco and areca nut) with a high incidence of oral submucous fibrosis and oral cancer. The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) classifies betel quid with tobacco as a Group 1 carcinogen.

However, research on extracts of the *Piper betle leaf alone* tells a different story. Isolated compounds like hydroxychavicol have demonstrated chemopreventive and anti-cancer properties

in vitro and in vivo models. Hydroxychavicol has been shown to induce apoptosis (programmed cell death) in various cancer cell lines, including chronic myeloid leukemia cells and oral carcinoma cells, without significantly affecting normal cells. It appears to act by interfering with the cell cycle progression of cancer cells.

Therefore, while the "vehicle" (the quid) is toxic, the leaf itself contains compounds that may actively fight cancer.

4.6. Antidiabetic Activities

Emerging research suggests that *P. betle* leaf extracts may have hypoglycemic effects. Studies in diabetic rats have shown that administration of the leaf extract can lower blood glucose levels, potentially by inhibiting enzymes responsible for carbohydrate digestion (like alpha-amylase and alpha-glucosidase) or by improving insulin sensitivity.

V. SAFETY AND TOXICOLOGY PROFILE

The dichotomy of *Piper betle*—as a healing agent versus a component of a carcinogenic habit—requires careful delineation.

Oral toxicity studies in animal models have generally found aqueous and ethanolic extracts of *P. betle* leaves to be relatively non-toxic at typical dietary doses. The World Health Organization (WHO) has recognized the traditional use of the leaf as generally safe when not combined with known carcinogens.

The toxicity associated with "paan" is overwhelmingly linked to the additives:

1. Areca Nut (Supari): Contains arecoline, which causes fibroblast proliferation leading to oral submucous fibrosis, a precancerous condition.
2. Tobacco: Contains potent tobacco-specific nitrosamines (carcinogens).
3. Slaked Lime (Chuna): Causes chronic irritation and alkaline injury to the oral mucosa, promoting the penetration of carcinogens.

Therefore, the "healing master" title is reserved for the leaf used in isolation or with non-toxic adjuncts, not the complete, habitual betel quid.

VI. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Piper betle is a botanical paradox. It is globally recognized as the wrapper of a harmful, addictive quid, yet the leaf itself is a repository of potent therapeutic molecules. This review confirms that *P. betle* is indeed a "healing master" in its own right, with validated antimicrobial, antioxidant, anti-inflammatory, and gastroprotective properties.

The presence of hydroxychavicol and eugenol makes the leaf a promising source for developing novel therapeutic agents, particularly for oral health products, wound healing treatments, and potentially chemopreventive adjuncts.

Future research must focus on:

1. Standardization of extracts based on key bioactive markers to ensure consistent therapeutic effects.
2. More extensive human clinical trials to translate preclinical findings into viable medical treatments, particularly for digestive disorders and oral hygiene.
3. Public health education clarifying the distinction between the medicinal properties of the leaf and the dangers of the tobacco/areca nut quid.

In conclusion, separating *Piper betle* from its toxic associations reveals a plant of immense medicinal value, validating centuries of traditional wisdom with modern scientific rigor.

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