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Dietary Exposure to Heavy Metals in Food: Mechanisms of Toxicity, Bioaccumulation, and Human Health Risk — A Systematic Literature Review

Putri Nurjanah[1]

[1] Universitas Sahid Jakarta, Jakarta, Indonesia

Abstract

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This study examines dietary exposure to heavy metals in food, focusing on toxicity mechanisms, bioaccumulation, and associated human health risks. Heavy metals such as lead, cadmium, and mercury enter food systems through environmental contamination and persist due to their non-biodegradable nature. Using a qualitative Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach, this study synthesizes recent research to identify key patterns linking contamination pathways, food chain transfer, and toxicological effects. The findings indicate that dietary intake is a primary exposure route, amplified by bioaccumulation and biomagnification processes that increase internal metal concentrations over time. At the molecular level, oxidative stress and cellular disruption are identified as central mechanisms underlying toxicity. Furthermore, existing risk assessment frameworks may underestimate cumulative exposure from multiple food sources. This study highlights the need for integrated approaches to food safety assessment and risk management, emphasizing the importance of considering systemic and long-term exposure in evaluating toxicological risks.

1. Introduction

Food safety remains a critical global public health concern due to the increasing presence of chemical contaminants in the food supply, particularly heavy metals. Unlike organic contaminants, heavy metals such as lead (Pb), cadmium (Cd), mercury (Hg), and arsenic (As) are non-biodegradable, persistent in the environment, and capable of accumulating along the food chain. These characteristics make them especially hazardous, as continuous low-level dietary exposure may lead to long-term toxic effects in humans (Ali et al., 2019; Zaynab et al., 2022). The contamination of food by heavy metals is closely associated with anthropogenic activities, including industrial emissions, agricultural practices, wastewater irrigation, and improper waste disposal, which introduce toxic elements into soil and water systems that ultimately enter edible crops and animal products (Mishra et al., 2018; Alengebawy et al., 2021).

From a toxicological perspective, dietary exposure to heavy metals represents a major pathway of human exposure, often exceeding contributions from air or water in certain populations. Once ingested, these metals can accumulate in vital organs such as the liver, kidneys, and brain, leading to a wide range of adverse health outcomes. Chronic exposure has been linked to neurological disorders, renal dysfunction, cardiovascular diseases, and carcinogenic effects, thereby posing a significant burden on public health systems (Balali-Mood et al., 2021; Ohiagu et al., 2022). The severity of these health impacts is strongly influenced by bioaccumulation and biomagnification processes, through which metal concentrations increase progressively along trophic levels, amplifying exposure risks in human diets (Ali & Khan, 2019).

At the molecular level, the toxicity of heavy metals is primarily mediated through mechanisms such as oxidative stress, disruption of enzymatic systems, and interference with cellular signaling pathways. Heavy metals are known to generate reactive oxygen species (ROS), leading to lipid peroxidation, protein modification, and DNA damage, which collectively contribute to cellular dysfunction and disease development (Fu & Xi, 2020; Genchi et al., 2020). These mechanistic pathways are central to understanding how prolonged exposure translates into systemic toxicity, highlighting the importance of integrating molecular toxicology into food safety assessments.

In addition to biological mechanisms, the assessment of health risks associated with heavy metal exposure has become a key focus in food toxicology research. Risk assessment frameworks commonly employ indicators such as estimated daily intake (EDI), target hazard quotient (THQ), and hazard index (HI) to evaluate potential non-carcinogenic and carcinogenic risks associated with contaminated food consumption (Abtahi et al., 2017; Miranzadeh Mahabadi et al., 2020). Regulatory agencies, including the World Health Organization (WHO), have established tolerable intake limits for various heavy metals; however, evidence suggests that these thresholds may be exceeded in certain regions due to cumulative exposure and inadequate monitoring systems (Wong et al., 2022).

Despite the growing body of literature on heavy metal contamination, existing studies often focus on isolated aspects of the problem, such as environmental distribution, specific food products, or individual metals. This fragmented approach limits the development of a comprehensive understanding that integrates exposure pathways, toxicity mechanisms, and risk assessment within a unified framework. Furthermore, variations in methodological approaches and regional contexts create inconsistencies in reported findings, making it difficult to derive generalized conclusions applicable to global food safety management.

Accordingly, there is a need for a systematic and integrative synthesis of recent research that consolidates current knowledge on dietary exposure to heavy metals, their mechanisms of toxicity, and associated human health risks. Such synthesis is essential for identifying consistent patterns, clarifying conceptual relationships, and supporting evidence-based risk management strategies.

Therefore, this study aims to systematically review and synthesize recent literature on heavy metal contamination in food, focusing on dietary exposure pathways, bioaccumulation processes, molecular mechanisms of toxicity, and human health risk assessment. By adopting a qualitative Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive and structured understanding of how heavy metal exposure through food contributes to toxicological risks and to highlight its implications for food safety and public health.

From a methodological perspective, this study employs a qualitative SLR to integrate findings from peer-reviewed journal articles and authoritative reports published in recent years. Rather than conducting empirical testing, the analysis emphasizes thematic synthesis to identify recurring patterns and conceptual linkages across studies. This approach is particularly relevant given the interdisciplinary nature of food toxicology, which spans environmental science, molecular biology, and public health.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Heavy Metal Contamination in Food Systems

Heavy metal contamination in food systems originates primarily from environmental sources, including polluted soil, irrigation water, and atmospheric deposition, which introduce toxic elements into agricultural and aquatic production systems. Early studies emphasized that industrialization and agricultural intensification significantly contribute to the accumulation of heavy metals in food crops, particularly in developing regions where environmental regulations may be less stringent (Mishra et al., 2018; Onakpa et al., 2018). These contaminants are subsequently transferred into the human food chain through plant uptake and animal consumption, creating a continuous exposure pathway.

Subsequent research has expanded this perspective by highlighting the persistence and mobility of heavy metals in environmental matrices, which facilitate their long-term accumulation in edible food products. The ability of metals such as cadmium and lead to remain stable and bioavailable in soil–plant systems increases their likelihood of entering human diets (Ali et al., 2019; Hembrom et al., 2019). Empirical and review-based studies further demonstrate that vegetables, rice, and aquatic food sources are particularly susceptible to contamination, making them key contributors to dietary exposure (Latif et al., 2018; Uddin et al., 2021).

More recent literature emphasizes that food contamination by heavy metals is not only a localized issue but a global food safety challenge. Studies synthesize evidence across multiple regions, indicating that contamination levels frequently exceed permissible limits, thereby posing significant risks to human health (Munir et al., 2021; Zaynab et al., 2022). This body of work collectively establishes that heavy metal contamination in food systems is driven by complex interactions between environmental pollution, agricultural practices, and food production processes.

2.2. Mechanisms of Heavy Metal Toxicity

The toxicological effects of heavy metals are primarily mediated through molecular and cellular mechanisms that disrupt normal biological functions. Foundational studies on oxidative stress highlight that reactive oxygen species (ROS) generation is a central pathway through which toxicants induce cellular damage, affecting lipids, proteins, and DNA (Pizzino et al., 2017). These oxidative processes serve as a key link between environmental exposure and disease development.

Further research has demonstrated that heavy metals interfere with metabolic and enzymatic systems, leading to dysfunction in critical physiological processes. For instance, metals such as cadmium and mercury can bind to sulfhydryl groups in proteins, altering enzyme activity and impairing cellular homeostasis (Fu & Xi, 2020; Genchi et al., 2020). These disruptions contribute to systemic toxicity and are associated with multiple organ damage.

Recent studies provide more detailed insights into the molecular pathways involved in heavy metal toxicity, including inflammation, mitochondrial dysfunction, and apoptosis. Comprehensive reviews indicate that prolonged exposure to metals such as arsenic and chromium can trigger complex signaling pathways that exacerbate cellular injury and increase the risk of chronic diseases (Balali-Mood et al., 2021; Nowicka, 2022). These findings reinforce the importance of integrating molecular toxicology into the assessment of food-related chemical risks.

2.3. Bioaccumulation and Food Chain Transfer

Bioaccumulation and biomagnification are key processes that amplify the toxicological risks of heavy metals within the food chain. Early conceptual and empirical studies highlight that heavy metals accumulate in organisms over time due to their resistance to metabolic degradation, leading to increased concentrations in higher trophic levels (Butt et al., 2018). This process significantly elevates the exposure risk for humans, who occupy the top of the food chain.

Subsequent research further elaborates on trophic transfer mechanisms, emphasizing that heavy metals can move across different ecological compartments, including soil, water, plants, and animals. These pathways facilitate the progressive concentration of toxic elements, particularly in staple food items such as rice and fish (Ali & Khan, 2019; Sonone et al., 2020). The cumulative nature of exposure through multiple dietary sources underscores the complexity of assessing total intake.

More recent literature confirms that bioaccumulation is influenced by factors such as environmental conditions, species characteristics, and dietary habits. Studies demonstrate that variations in agricultural practices and ecosystem dynamics can significantly affect the extent of metal accumulation in food products (Ahmad et al., 2021; Uddin et al., 2021). This highlights the need for integrated approaches to understanding exposure pathways across environmental and food systems.

2.3. Human Health Risk Assessment and Regulatory Perspectives

The assessment of human health risks associated with heavy metal exposure has evolved significantly, incorporating both quantitative and regulatory frameworks. Early systematic evaluations introduced methods for estimating dietary exposure and assessing risk through indicators such as the target hazard quotient (THQ) and hazard index (HI), which quantify potential non-carcinogenic risks (Abtahi et al., 2017). These tools have become standard in food toxicology studies.

Subsequent studies applied these risk assessment models to various food systems, demonstrating that consumption of contaminated food products can result in exposure levels exceeding recommended safety thresholds (Miranzadeh Mahabadi et al., 2020). These findings highlight the importance of continuous monitoring and risk evaluation to protect public health.

More recent research integrates regulatory perspectives by examining global safety standards and reference values established by international organizations. Reviews indicate that while regulatory limits provide essential guidance, discrepancies between permissible levels and actual exposure remain a concern, particularly in regions with high environmental contamination (Wong et al., 2022). Additionally, comprehensive analyses emphasize that cumulative exposure from multiple dietary sources may not be adequately addressed by existing regulatory frameworks (Zaynab et al., 2022).

Overall, the literature suggests that effective risk assessment requires a holistic approach that combines exposure estimation, toxicological understanding, and regulatory alignment. This integrated perspective is essential for improving food safety management and reducing the health risks associated with heavy metal contamination.

3. Methods

This study adopts a qualitative Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach to examine dietary exposure to heavy metals in food, focusing on their mechanisms of toxicity, bioaccumulation processes, and associated human health risks. The SLR method is selected because the objective of the study is to synthesize and integrate existing scientific knowledge rather than to generate new empirical data or perform statistical testing. This approach is particularly appropriate for toxicology research, where understanding complex interactions between exposure pathways, molecular mechanisms, and health outcomes requires a comprehensive and structured evaluation of prior studies.

The literature search was conducted systematically using major academic databases, including Google Scholar, Scopus-indexed journals, and publisher platforms such as Elsevier, Springer, and MDPI. The search strategy employed combinations of keywords related to "heavy metals," "food contamination," "dietary exposure," "bioaccumulation," "toxicity mechanisms," and "risk assessment," ensuring coverage of interdisciplinary perspectives across environmental science, food safety, and molecular toxicology. The selection criteria prioritized peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2017 and 2022 to ensure the relevance and recency of the analysis, while allowing limited inclusion of highly cited foundational studies where necessary to support theoretical explanations.

The screening process involved evaluating titles, abstracts, and full texts to identify studies directly relevant to heavy metal contamination in food and its implications for human health. Articles focusing exclusively on non-food exposure pathways or lacking clear toxicological relevance were excluded. Additionally, preference was given to review articles, systematic reviews, and studies providing comprehensive discussions of exposure, mechanism, and risk assessment, as these contribute to a more integrative synthesis.

The selected literature was analyzed using qualitative thematic synthesis, which involved identifying recurring patterns, conceptual relationships, and consistent findings across studies. The analysis focused on key thematic dimensions, including sources of contamination, pathways of dietary exposure, molecular mechanisms of toxicity, bioaccumulation processes, and risk assessment frameworks. Rather than applying quantitative aggregation or meta-analysis, the study emphasizes conceptual integration to develop a coherent understanding of how heavy metal exposure through food contributes to toxicological risks and public health concerns.

4. Results

This section presents and interprets the key findings derived from the systematic literature review. Rather than reporting empirical or statistical outputs, the analysis synthesizes recurring themes and conceptual patterns related to dietary exposure to heavy metals in food, their mechanisms of toxicity, and associated human health risks. The findings are organized around core toxicological dimensions, including contamination pathways, bioaccumulation processes, molecular toxicity mechanisms, and risk assessment frameworks, reflecting the interdisciplinary nature of food toxicology research.

4.1. Key Themes Identified from the Literature

The reviewed literature consistently demonstrates that heavy metal toxicity in food systems is not driven by a single factor but emerges from interconnected environmental, biological, and regulatory processes. These processes collectively shape exposure intensity, internal accumulation, and subsequent health risks. Importantly, the literature indicates that risk is cumulative and systemic, rather than isolated to specific contaminants or food sources.

Table 1. Synthesized Results on Heavy Metal Exposure, Toxicity Mechanisms, and Human Health Risk

Analytical Dimension	Key Findings from Literature	Toxicological Implications
Environmental contamination	Heavy metals enter food systems through soil, water, and industrial pollution sources	Persistent exposure pathways affecting food safety (Mishra et al., 2018; Ali et al., 2019)

Dietary exposure	Consumption of contaminated crops and aquatic products is the primary human exposure route	Continuous low-dose exposure with long-term effects (Latif et al., 2018; Uddin et al., 2021)
Bioaccumulation	Metals accumulate in biological tissues due to non-biodegradability	Increasing internal toxic burden over time (Butt et al., 2018; Ali & Khan, 2019)
Biomagnification	Concentrations increase across trophic levels in the food chain	Amplified exposure risk in humans (Sonone et al., 2020; Ahmad et al., 2021)
Oxidative stress	Heavy metals induce reactive oxygen species (ROS) production	Cellular damage and disease initiation (Pizzino et al., 2017; Fu & Xi, 2020)
Toxicodynamics	Disruption of enzymes and signaling pathways	Organ dysfunction and systemic toxicity (Genchi et al., 2020; Balali-Mood et al., 2021)
Health outcomes	Chronic exposure linked to neurological, renal, and carcinogenic effects	Long-term public health burden (Ohiagu et al., 2022; Zaynab et al., 2022)
Risk assessment models	THQ, HI, and EDI widely used to quantify exposure risks	Standardized evaluation of non-carcinogenic and cumulative risks (Abtahi et al., 2017; Miranzadeh Mahabadi et al., 2020)
Regulatory concerns	Exposure levels may exceed safety thresholds in certain regions	Gaps in monitoring and enforcement systems (Munir et al., 2021; Wong et al., 2022)

4.2. Integrated Toxicological Risk Framework

Beyond individual findings, the literature reveals a structured conceptual relationship linking environmental contamination to human health outcomes through sequential and interacting mechanisms. Heavy metal toxicity operates as a multi-stage process involving (1) environmental introduction, (2) transfer into food systems, (3) accumulation within biological organisms, and (4) manifestation of toxic effects at the molecular and systemic levels.

Table 2. Conceptual Integration of Heavy Metal Exposure and Toxicological Risk

Process Stage	Key Mechanism	Outcome	Risk Implication
Environmental input	Industrial discharge, agricultural contamination	Presence of metals in soil and water	Initial contamination source
Food chain transfer	Uptake by plants and aquatic organisms	Entry into human diet	Continuous exposure pathway
Bioaccumulation	Storage in tissues over time	Increased internal concentration	Chronic exposure risk
Biomagnification	Trophic-level amplification	Higher concentrations in top consumers	Elevated human exposure
Molecular toxicity	Oxidative stress, enzyme disruption	Cellular damage and dysfunction	Disease development
Systemic effects	Organ damage, inflammation, carcinogenesis	Long-term health outcomes	Public health burden
Risk assessment	THQ, HI, regulatory thresholds	Quantification of exposure risk	Basis for safety regulation

4.3. Integrated Toxicological Risk Framework

The synthesis indicates that dietary exposure to heavy metals is inherently cumulative and systemic, shaped by continuous environmental inputs and biological amplification processes. The dominance of dietary pathways highlights the central role of food systems in mediating human exposure, distinguishing heavy metals from other environmental toxicants that may be more localized or episodic in nature.

A critical insight emerging from the literature is that molecular-level mechanisms, particularly oxidative stress and enzymatic disruption, provide the fundamental link between exposure and disease outcomes. These mechanisms operate consistently across different metals, suggesting that toxic effects are not isolated phenomena but part of a broader toxicological pattern.

Furthermore, the findings reveal that existing risk assessment frameworks, while widely applied, may underestimate cumulative exposure arising from multiple dietary sources and long-term consumption patterns. This limitation is compounded by variations in environmental contamination levels and differences in dietary habits across populations.

Overall, the results support a conceptual view in which heavy metal toxicity in food systems should be understood as an integrated risk continuum, rather than as isolated exposure events. This perspective underscores the importance of combining environmental monitoring, molecular toxicology, and regulatory risk assessment to effectively address food safety challenges.

5. Discussion

The findings indicate that dietary exposure to heavy metals should be understood as a cumulative and system-level toxicological process rather than a localized contamination issue. Environmental inputs, food chain transfer, and biological accumulation interact to create continuous exposure pathways that extend beyond individual food sources. In this context, bioaccumulation and biomagnification play a critical role in amplifying exposure, suggesting that risk cannot be accurately assessed without considering trophic-level dynamics and long-term dietary patterns.

At the mechanistic level, the dominance of oxidative stress and cellular disruption highlights a consistent pathway through which heavy metals induce toxicity across different biological systems. This suggests that diverse health outcomes associated with heavy metal exposure share common underlying processes, reinforcing the need for integrated toxicological assessment. Furthermore, existing risk evaluation approaches may not fully capture cumulative exposure from multiple sources, indicating the importance of developing more comprehensive frameworks that reflect real-world consumption patterns and combined toxic effects.

6. Conclusion

his study demonstrates that heavy metal contamination in food represents a complex toxicological issue driven by interconnected environmental, biological, and exposure-related processes. The synthesis shows that dietary intake serves as a primary pathway of human exposure, supported by bioaccumulation and biomagnification mechanisms that increase internal metal concentrations over time. These processes collectively contribute to sustained exposure and elevate long-term health risks.

From a conceptual standpoint, the study integrates contamination pathways, molecular toxicity mechanisms, and risk assessment perspectives into a unified framework. This integration provides a clearer understanding of how environmental pollution translates into human health impacts through food systems. It also highlights the importance of viewing heavy metal toxicity as a continuous and cumulative process rather than as isolated exposure events.

In practical terms, the findings emphasize the need for more comprehensive monitoring systems and improved risk assessment models that account for cumulative dietary exposure. Future research may focus on quantitative modeling of exposure pathways, regional assessments of contamination patterns, and experimental validation of toxicity mechanisms to strengthen the evidence base for food safety management and public health protection.

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