Journal of Science Research International (JSRI)
ISSN: 2456-6365 (Online)

NATURAL ANTIOXIDANTS IN AGING RESEARCH: CURRENT TRENDS AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

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Received: 14 March 2026	Revised: 22 April 2026	Accepted: 14 May 2026	Published: 30 May 2026

DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20550477

Abstract:

The aging process is intricately linked to oxidative stress, yet the role of natural antioxidants has evolved significantly from the classical free radical scavenging theory toward a more nuanced understanding of redox signaling, hormesis, and cellular senescence. This review critically examines current trends and future prospects for natural antioxidants—including dietary polyphenols, flavonoids, carotenoids, and Nrf2 activators—in aging research. Recent mechanistic insights reveal that these compounds extend healthspan not merely by neutralizing reactive oxygen species but by modulating key longevity pathways (SIRT1, AMPK, mTOR), inducing mitophagy, activating the Nrf2/ARE antioxidant response, and exerting senolytic effects that selectively eliminate senescent cells. Despite robust preclinical evidence in model organisms, clinical translation remains limited due to poor bioavailability, lack of validated biomarkers, and potential pro-oxidant risks. Emerging strategies include nanotechnology-based delivery systems, gut microbiome modulation, personalized antioxidant therapy, and AI-driven discovery of novel natural senolytics. Successful clinical application will require a paradigm shift toward precisely delivered, bioavailable, and context-dependent interventions.

Keywords: *Aging, Oxidative Stress, Natural Antioxidants, Polyphenols, Senolytics, Nrf2, Bioavailability, Healthspan.*

1. Introduction

Aging is a progressive, multifactorial biological process characterized by the gradual decline of physiological integrity, leading to impaired function and increased vulnerability to death [1]. Among the nine proposed hallmarks of aging, oxidative stress and mitochondrial dysfunction occupy a central position, interacting closely with genomic instability, telomere attrition, epigenetic alterations, and cellular senescence [2]. The free radical theory of aging, first proposed by Denham Harman in 1956, posits that reactive oxygen species (ROS) generated as byproducts of aerobic metabolism cause cumulative damage to DNA, proteins, and lipids, thereby driving the aging phenotype [3].

Natural antioxidants are compounds derived from plants, fungi, marine organisms, and dietary sources that neutralize ROS or enhance endogenous antioxidant defenses. Major classes include dietary polyphenols (resveratrol, curcumin, quercetin, epigallocatechin gallate), carotenoids (lycopene, β-carotene), vitamins (C and E), and endogenous modulators such as glutathione precursors and Nrf2 activators [4]. Over the past two decades, more than 10,000 publications have explored the anti-aging potential of these compounds; however, translation from bench to bedside has been fraught with challenges.

This review aims to: (i) provide an updated perspective on the oxidative stress theory of aging, (ii) summarize current mechanistic trends beyond simple ROS scavenging, (iii) evaluate preclinical and clinical evidence, (iv) identify translational barriers, and (v) discuss future prospects including nanodelivery, microbiome targeting, personalized approaches, and AI-driven discovery.

2. The oxidative stress theory of aging: An updated perspective

2.1 From free radicals to redox signaling

The original free radical theory has been refined considerably. It is now understood that ROS are not merely toxic byproducts but essential second messengers in physiological signaling cascades, including cell proliferation, differentiation, and immune responses [5]. Low to moderate ROS levels activate adaptive stress responses through transcription factors such as Nrf2 (nuclear factor erythroid 2-related factor 2) and NF-κB, whereas excessive ROS overwhelm antioxidant capacity and cause damage [6]. This duality has given rise to the concept of *redox hormesis*—the idea that mild oxidative stress can be beneficial by upregulating protective mechanisms.

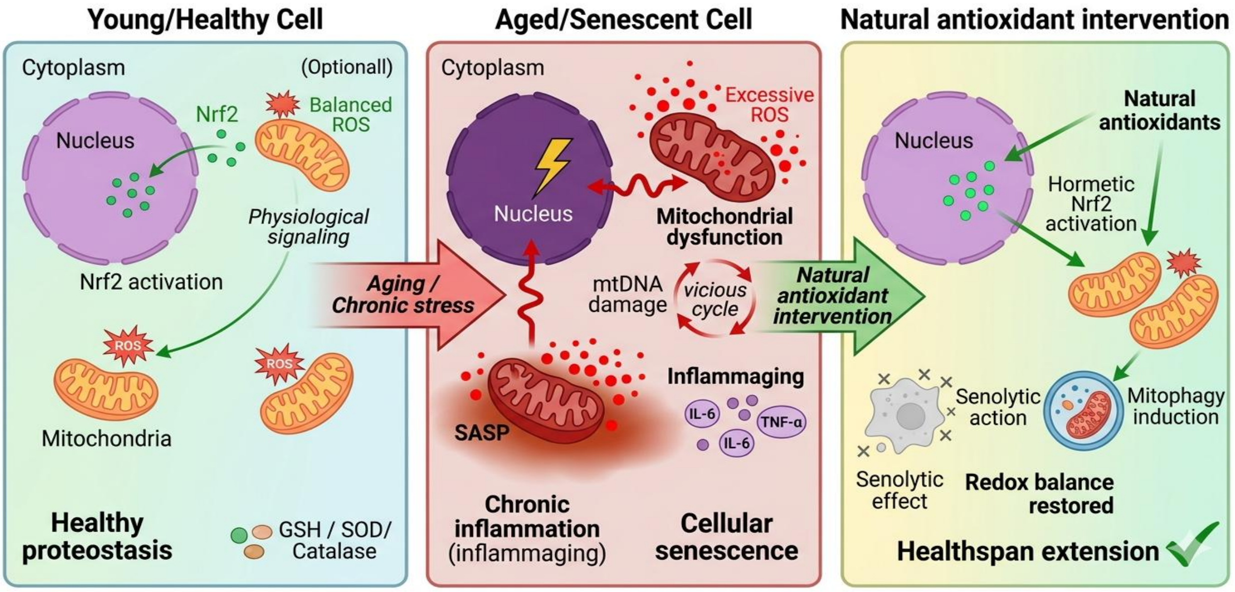


Figure 1: Schematic representation of oxidative stress, redox signaling, and the intervention of natural antioxidants across the aging continuum

2.2 Mitochondrial dysfunction and inflammaging

Mitochondria are both the primary source and primary target of ROS. With age, mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) mutations accumulate, impairing electron transport chain efficiency and increasing ROS leakage [7]. Damaged mitochondria that are not cleared via mitophagy release pro-inflammatory mitochondrial damage-associated molecular patterns (mtDAMPs), fueling a chronic, low-grade inflammatory state known as *inflammaging* [8]. This interplay between oxidative stress, mitochondrial dysfunction, and inflammation creates a vicious cycle that accelerates biological aging.

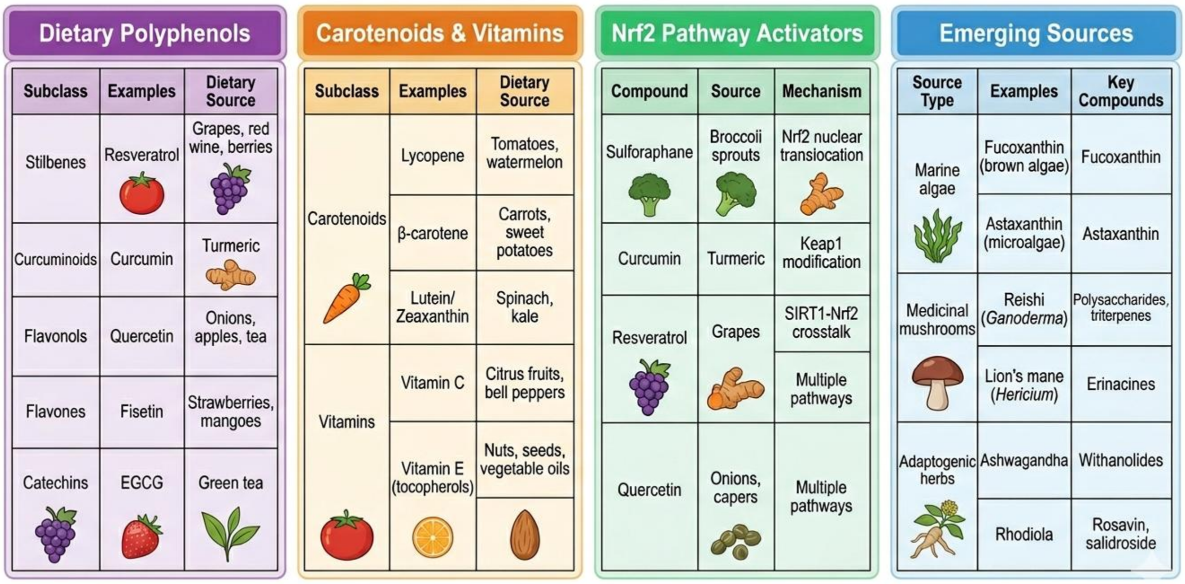
The oxidative stress theory of aging has evolved from a linear damage model to a dynamic framework involving redox signaling, mitochondrial dysfunction, and cellular senescence. As illustrated in **Figure 1**, young cells maintain balanced ROS production and Nrf2-mediated antioxidant defense. With aging, excessive mitochondrial ROS leads to DNA damage, inflammaging, and senescent cell accumulation. Natural antioxidants act as hormetic modulators—activating Nrf2, inducing mitophagy, and exerting senolytic effects—to restore redox balance and extend healthspan.

2.3 Limitations of the classical theory

Several observations challenge the linear model of "ROS → damage → aging." For instance, genetic manipulations that increase ROS production in model organisms do not consistently shorten lifespan, and antioxidant overexpression often fails to extend longevity [9]. Moreover, large-scale human trials with high-dose vitamins C and E have shown neutral or even harmful effects [10]. These findings suggest that timing, dose, cellular context, and redox balance are critical variables that classical theory inadequately addresses.

3. Major classes of natural antioxidants in aging research

Natural antioxidants are broadly classified into several major groups based on their chemical structure, source, and mechanism of action. As shown in Figure 2, these include dietary polyphenols (resveratrol, curcumin, quercetin, fisetin), carotenoids and vitamins (lycopene, vitamin C, vitamin E), Nrf2 pathway activators (sulforaphane), and emerging sources from marine algae, medicinal mushrooms, and adaptogenic herbs. Each class exhibits distinct bioavailability profiles and molecular targets, which are discussed in the following subsections.



Dietary Polyphenols

Subclass	Examples	Dietary Source
Stilbenes	Resveratrol	Grapes, red wine, berries
Curcuminoids	Curcumin	Turmeric
Flavonols	Quercetin	Onions, apples, tea
Flavones	Fisetin	Strawberries, mangoes
Catechins	EGCG	Green tea

Carotenoids & Vitamins

Subclass	Examples	Dietary Source
Carotenoids	Lycopene	Tomatoes, watermelon
	β-carotene	Carrots, sweet potatoes
	Lutein/ Zeaxanthin	Spinach, kale
Vitamins	Vitamin C	Citrus fruits, bell peppers
	Vitamin E (tocopherols)	Nuts, seeds, vegetable oils

Nrf2 Pathway Activators

Compound	Source	Mechanism
Sulforaphane	Broccoii sprouts	Nrf2 nuclear transiocation
Curcumin	Turmeric	Keap1 modification
Resveratrol	Grapes	SIRT1-Nrf2 crosstalk
		Multiple pathways
Quercetin	Onions, capers	Multiple pathways

Emerging Sources

Source Type	Examples	Key Compounds
Marine algae	Fucoxanthin (brown algae)	Fucoxanthin
	Astaxanthin (microalgae)	Astaxanthin
Medicinal mushrooms	Reishi (*Ganoderma*)	Polysaccharides, triterpenes
	Lion's mane (*Hericium*)	Erinacines
Adaptogenic herbs	Ashwagandha	Withanolides
	Rhodiola	Rosavin, salidroside

Figure 2: Classification of natural antioxidants

3.1 Dietary polyphenols

Polyphenols represent the largest and most studied group. Resveratrol (found in grapes and red wine) activates SIRT1 and mimics caloric restriction, extending lifespan in yeast, nematodes, and mice [11]. Curcumin (from turmeric) modulates NF-κB and Nrf2, reducing oxidative damage and amyloid aggregation in Alzheimer's models [12]. Quercetin and its combination with dasatinib have emerged as a potent senolytic pair, selectively eliminating senescent cells [13].

3.2 Carotenoids and vitamins

Lycopene (from tomatoes) and β-carotene exhibit singlet oxygen quenching activity. Vitamin C regenerates vitamin E and directly scavenges superoxide and hydroxyl radicals. However, clinical trials for cardiovascular and cognitive endpoints have been largely disappointing, likely due to poor tissue penetration and rapid renal clearance [14].

3.3 Endogenous antioxidant modulators

Rather than providing exogenous antioxidants, an alternative strategy involves upregulating the body's own defense systems. Sulforaphane (from broccoli sprouts) and sulforaphane glucosinolate are potent Nrf2 activators that induce glutathione S-transferase and NAD(P)H quinone oxidoreductase 1 [15]. Similarly, molecular hydrogen acts as a selective radical scavenger without disrupting essential ROS signaling [16].

3.4 Emerging sources

Marine algae (fucoxanthin, astaxanthin), medicinal mushrooms (Ganoderma lucidum, Hericium erinaceus), and adaptogenic herbs (Ashwagandha, Rhodiola rosea) are gaining attention for their dual antioxidant and anti-inflammatory properties [17]. These sources often contain synergistic mixtures that may overcome the limitations of single-compound approaches.

4. Current trends in mechanistic research

4.1 Nrf2/ARE pathway and hormesis

The Nrf2/ARE (antioxidant response element) pathway is the master regulator of cellular antioxidant defenses. Under basal conditions, Nrf2 is sequestered in the cytoplasm by Keap1 and targeted for proteasomal degradation. Upon exposure to mild oxidative stress or electrophilic compounds (including many natural antioxidants), Nrf2 translocates to the nucleus and upregulates over 200 cytoprotective genes, including heme oxygenase-1 (HO-1), superoxide dismutase (SOD), and catalase [18]. This hormetic mechanism explains why low doses of certain pro-oxidant phytochemicals can be protective while high doses are harmful.

4.2 Mitophagy and mitochondrial quality control

Mitophagy, the selective autophagic clearance of damaged mitochondria, declines with age. Natural antioxidants such as urolithin A (a gut metabolite of ellagitannins found in pomegranates) and spermidine induce mitophagy via the PINK1/Parkin pathway, improving mitochondrial function and extending healthspan in C. elegans and rodents [19]. Urolithin A has progressed to human trials with demonstrated improvements in muscle strength and mitochondrial biomarkers [20].

4.3 Senolytic and senomorphic effects

Cellular senescence is a state of irreversible cell cycle arrest accompanied by the senescence-associated secretory phenotype (SASP), which spreads inflammation to neighboring tissues. Natural flavonoids including fisetin (from strawberries), quercetin, and piperlongumine (from long pepper) have been identified as senolytic agents that preferentially kill senescent cells [21]. In aged mice, intermittent fisetin administration reduces senescent cell burden, reverses frailty, and extends median lifespan [22].

4.4 Longevity pathways: SIRT1, AMPK, mTOR

Natural antioxidants intersect with canonical longevity pathways. Resveratrol activates SIRT1 (a NAD+-dependent deacetylase), which in turn deacetylates PGC-1α and FOXO transcription factors, promoting mitochondrial biogenesis and stress resistance [23]. Metformin, though synthetic, shares mechanisms with natural guanidines found in French lilac. AMPK activation by berberine and quercetin inhibits mTOR, reducing protein synthesis and enhancing autophagy [24].

5. Preclinical and clinical evidence

5.1 Preclinical success across model organisms

In C. elegans, more than 50 natural compounds have been shown to extend mean lifespan, typically by 10–30%, through pathways involving DAF-16/FOXO and SKN-1/Nrf2 [25]. Drosophila melanogaster studies have confirmed similar effects with curcumin, resveratrol, and blueberry polyphenols. Rodent studies are more variable: while some show improved healthspan (cognitive function, grip strength, insulin sensitivity), lifespan extensions are modest (typically 5–15%) and often strain-dependent [26].

5.2 Clinical trials: Mixed and often disappointing

Human interventional trials have largely failed to replicate preclinical benefits. The Physicians' Health Study II (14,641 male physicians) found no effect of vitamin E or C on cardiovascular events or cognitive decline [10]. The AREDS2 trial showed minimal benefit of lutein/zeaxanthin for age-related macular degeneration [27]. However, targeted trials have shown promise: a 12-week urolithin A trial improved muscle endurance in older adults [20], and a senolytic pilot trial (dasatinib + quercetin) reduced senescent cell markers in patients with diabetic kidney disease [28].

5.3 The bioavailability barrier

The single greatest translational barrier is poor bioavailability. Most dietary polyphenols are extensively metabolized in the gut and liver into glucuronidated or sulfated conjugates, which have drastically reduced biological activity compared to the parent aglycone [29]. Peak plasma concentrations of free resveratrol after oral intake are typically <10 nM, far below the micromolar concentrations used in cell culture studies. The microbiome plays a critical role in converting polyphenols into absorbable and active metabolites, and interindividual variability in gut microbiota composition explains much of the heterogeneity in clinical responses [30].

6. Future prospects

Despite robust preclinical evidence, the translation of natural antioxidants into effective clinical interventions for aging has been limited by several fundamental barriers. As summarized in Figure 3, these include poor bioavailability, lack of validated biomarkers, potential pro-oxidant effects, and high interindividual variability. Emerging strategies—nanotechnology, gut microbiome modulation, personalized therapy, and AI-driven discovery—offer promising solutions to overcome these obstacles and enable the rational development of antioxidant-based anti-aging therapies.

6.1 Nanotechnology-based delivery systems

Nanocarriers such as liposomes, polymeric nanoparticles (PLGA), solid lipid nanoparticles, and dendrimers can protect antioxidants from premature metabolism, improve solubility, and enable targeted delivery to tissues such as the brain or mitochondria [31]. Curcumin-loaded nanoparticles have shown 10-fold higher oral bioavailability and enhanced cognitive protection in Alzheimer's rodent models [32]. Mitochondria-targeted antioxidants (e.g., MitoQ, SkQ1) are already in clinical trials for Parkinson's disease and liver disease.

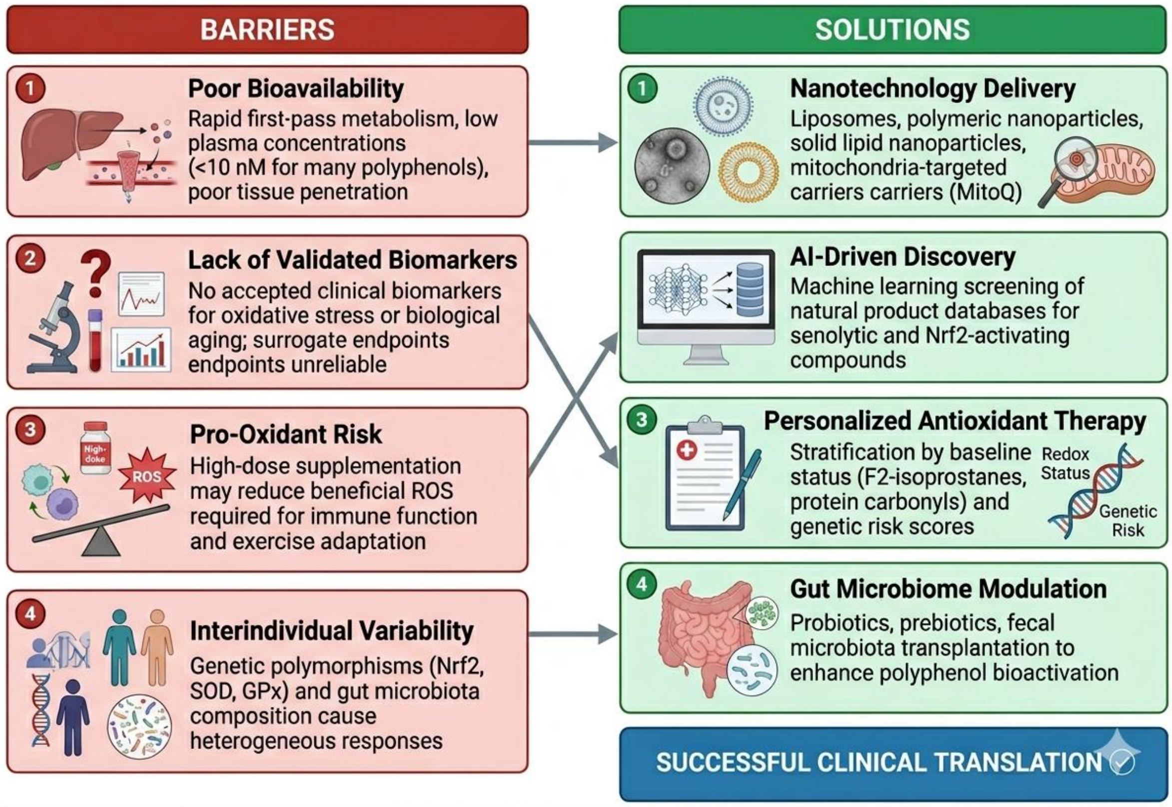


Figure 3: Translational barriers and future strategies for natural antioxidants in aging research

6.2 Gut microbiome modulation

Because the microbiome governs polyphenol bioactivation, strategies to modulate gut bacteria—including probiotics (Lactobacillus, Bifidobacterium), prebiotics, and fecal microbiota transplantation—could enhance antioxidant efficacy [33]. Personalized microbiome profiling may eventually guide which polyphenol is appropriate for which individual.

6.3 Personalized antioxidant therapy

Redox status varies substantially between individuals due to genetics (polymorphisms in Nrf2, SOD, GPx, CAT), age, diet, and disease state. Future approaches may stratify patients based on baseline oxidative stress biomarkers (e.g., F2-isoprostanes, protein carbonyls) or genetic risk scores, then prescribe specific antioxidant interventions [34].

6.4 AI-driven discovery of novel natural senolytics

Machine learning and deep learning models can rapidly screen natural product databases (e.g., the NPASS database of 35,000 natural products) for senolytic or Nrf2-activating properties. Recently, an AI model identified ginkgetin (from Ginkgo biloba) as a novel senolytic with potency comparable to dasatinib [35]. This approach will accelerate discovery and reduce reliance on serendipity.

7. Critical perspectives and safety considerations

Several caveats must be acknowledged. First, high-dose antioxidant supplementation can paradoxically exert pro-oxidant effects by reducing beneficial ROS required for immune function and exercise adaptation [36]. Second, antioxidant use may interfere with the health benefits of exercise or fasting-mimicking diets, both of which rely on transient ROS elevation to trigger hormetic adaptation [37]. Third, regulatory oversight of nutraceuticals remains inconsistent, with many marketed “anti-aging” products lacking rigorous evidence of efficacy or safety [38]. Future research must adopt higher standards, including randomized controlled trials with validated biomarkers of biological aging (e.g., epigenetic clocks, telomere length, or composite frailty indices) rather than chronological age or surrogate endpoints [39].

Conclusion

Natural antioxidants have traveled a long road from the simple free radical scavengers of the 20th century to the complex, pathway-modulating, senolytic agents of today’s research landscape. Current evidence supports their role in improving healthspan—particularly through Nrf2 activation, mitophagy induction, and senolysis—rather than dramatically extending maximum lifespan. The future of this field lies not in untargeted high-dose supplementation but in precisely engineered, bioavailable formulations guided by individual redox profiling, microbiome composition, and genetic background. Nanotechnology, AI-driven discovery, and rigorous clinical validation using modern biomarkers of aging will determine whether natural antioxidants fulfill their long-held promise as accessible, safe, and effective interventions for healthy human aging.

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