

Corn Silk: A Sustainable Source of Bioactive Compounds for Functional Foods

*Nikita Mishra¹ and Yogendra Kumar Jyoti²

¹Dr. Rajendra Prasad Central Agricultural University, Pusa, Samastipur, Bihar

²Department of Agricultural Processing and Food Engineering, CAET, OUAT, Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India

*Corresponding Author's email: nikitamishra@rpcau.ac.in

When we think of corn, the golden kernels usually steal the spotlight. But the soft, silky strands that we peel off and throw away — known as corn silk — are emerging as a surprising treasure trove of health-promoting compounds. Once considered agricultural waste, corn silk is now gaining attention as a valuable ingredient for functional foods and nutraceutical products. Corn silk is the long, shiny, thread-like fibres found on the top of corn ears. Botanically, it is the stigma and style of the female flower of the maize plant (*Zea mays* L.). Traditionally, it has been used in herbal medicine for centuries, particularly in Asia and South America, for treating urinary and kidney-related ailments. Modern research, however, is uncovering much broader benefits.

Nutritional and Bioactive Components

Corn silk is packed with **bioactive compounds** that contribute to its functional properties. These include:

- **Flavonoids** (like maysin, luteolin, and apigenin) – known for their antioxidant effects
- **Phenolic acids** – which help combat inflammation
- **Vitamins** such as A, C, E, and K
- **Minerals** like potassium, calcium, and magnesium
- **Polysaccharides and proteins** – contributing to energy and metabolism

This rich composition makes corn silk a natural functional ingredient capable of promoting health beyond basic nutrition.

Functional and Therapeutic Benefits

1. Antioxidant and Anti-inflammatory Properties

Corn silk extracts exhibit strong free radical scavenging activity, reducing oxidative stress and cellular damage. The phenolic and flavonoid compounds play a crucial role in modulating inflammatory pathways and preventing chronic degenerative diseases.

2. Diuretic and Nephroprotective Effects

Traditionally, corn silk has been used as a natural diuretic to manage urinary tract infections and kidney disorders. Recent studies confirm its ability to enhance urinary excretion of sodium and chloride ions, supporting renal detoxification and preventing kidney stone formation.

3. Antidiabetic Potential

Experimental evidence suggests that corn silk polysaccharides and flavonoids contribute to blood glucose regulation by improving insulin sensitivity and pancreatic β -cell function. Thus, corn silk may serve as a natural adjuvant in the management of diabetes mellitus.

4. Cardiovascular Health

By lowering serum cholesterol and triglyceride levels, corn silk extract may exert a cardioprotective effect. Its antioxidant components also support vascular health by preventing lipid peroxidation and endothelial dysfunction.

Applications in Functional Foods

The growing consumer demand for natural, health-promoting ingredients has encouraged food scientists and manufacturers to explore novel ways of utilizing corn silk in functional food formulations. With its rich composition of flavonoids, phenolic acids, and essential nutrients, corn silk offers opportunities for incorporation into a wide range of value-added food and nutraceutical products.

1. Herbal Teas and Infusions

Corn silk has a long history of use in traditional medicine as a natural diuretic and detoxifying agent. When brewed as tea or infusion, it imparts a mild, pleasant flavor and delivers bioactive compounds such as maysin and luteolin, which contribute to its antioxidant and nephroprotective effects. In Asian countries such as China, Korea, and Indonesia, corn silk tea is already marketed as a functional beverage that promotes kidney health, reduces water retention, and helps regulate blood pressure. This application aligns well with the growing consumer preference for plant-based, caffeine-free health beverages.

2. Functional Beverages

Beyond traditional infusions, corn silk extracts can be incorporated into modern ready-to-drink functional beverages designed to support detoxification, hydration, and metabolic balance. The natural flavonoids and phenolics in corn silk can act as natural preservatives by reducing oxidative degradation, thereby improving shelf life and stability. Additionally, combining corn silk extract with other functional ingredients such as lemon, ginger, or green tea extracts can enhance both sensory appeal and synergistic health benefits, making it a promising ingredient for wellness and sports drinks.

3. Extract Powders and Capsules

The development of standardized corn silk extracts in powder or capsule form is gaining popularity in the nutraceutical industry. Such extracts are typically concentrated and standardized for flavonoid or polysaccharide content, ensuring consistent bioactivity. These formulations are convenient for consumers and can be targeted for specific health functions such as blood sugar control, kidney support, or antioxidant supplementation. Encapsulation also protects sensitive compounds from oxidation, improving bioavailability and stability during storage.

4. Bakery and Snack Fortification

Corn silk powder or extract can be incorporated into bakery products (breads, cookies, muffins) and snack formulations (extruded products, bars) to enhance their nutritional and functional profiles. The inclusion of corn silk adds dietary fiber, phenolic compounds, and antioxidants, contributing to improved oxidative stability and potential health benefits without significantly altering sensory properties. Moreover, the use of corn silk as a natural antioxidant source in processed foods can help reduce the reliance on synthetic additives, aligning with clean-label and sustainable food trends. Research is ongoing to optimize incorporation levels to balance nutritional enhancement and sensory acceptance.

Researchers are now exploring how corn silk extracts can be integrated into modern food systems without affecting taste or texture, offering a sustainable way to reuse agricultural by-products.

Sustainability and Economic Potential

Utilizing corn silk aligns with the concept of zero-waste agriculture. Instead of discarding it, food industries can extract valuable compounds, creating new income streams for farmers and reducing environmental waste. Thus, corn silk serves both economic and ecological functions in a sustainable food chain.

Conclusion

Corn silk, once discarded as an agricultural by-product, has emerged as a valuable natural resource with immense potential in the fields of functional foods, nutraceuticals, and sustainable food innovation. Growing scientific evidence highlights that corn silk is rich in a wide array of bioactive compounds — including flavonoids, phenolic acids, vitamins, minerals, and polysaccharides — that collectively contribute to its antioxidant, diuretic, anti-inflammatory, antidiabetic, and cardioprotective properties. The integration of corn silk into food and health systems offers a multidimensional advantage. From a nutritional perspective, it provides compounds that help combat oxidative stress, regulate metabolism, and support kidney and cardiovascular health. From an industrial viewpoint, it offers opportunities for value addition, waste reduction, and product diversification, aligning perfectly with the principles of circular bioeconomy and sustainable agriculture. Despite these promising attributes, the large-scale utilization of corn silk in the food sector is still in its early stages. There remains a pressing need for advanced research to optimize extraction and purification methods, ensure standardization of bioactive content, and improve bioavailability and stability of its active compounds during processing. Moreover, extensive toxicological and clinical studies are essential to establish safe and effective dosage levels for human consumption.

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