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# NEEM AS A PHYTOMEDICINE: From a Traditional Multipurpose Tree to a Standardized Herbal Product

**Anjali Gupta, Pramod Mishra, Sujeet Pratap Singh, Dr. Tarkeshwar Prasad Shukla**

SCPM College of Pharmacy, Haripur, Gonda, India.

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**ABSTRACT**

Neem (Azadirachta indica A. Juss.) is a tropical tree with an important place in traditional health practices and a broad research profile. Its leaves, bark, flowers, seeds and seed oil contain different groups of plant constituents, including limonoids and flavonoids. Experimental research has examined neem preparations for antimicrobial, antioxidant, anti-inflammatory and cancer-related biological effects. Yet neem is not one uniform medicine: the chemistry and safety of a leaf extract may differ from those of bark or seed oil. This review therefore focuses on the path from plant material to a reliable phytomedicine. It discusses botanical identity, phytochemistry, reported activities, extraction and formulation, quality control, safety, and the gap between laboratory findings and clinical use. Much of the evidence for several proposed benefits is preclinical, so results in cells or animals should not be presented as proof of efficacy in humans. Future progress depends on authenticated plant material, reproducible extracts, validated quality tests, careful toxicology and well-designed clinical trials.

**Keywords:** Azadirachta indica; neem; phytomedicine; limonoids; herbal formulation; standardization; quality control; safety

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Plants have been used in healthcare for generations and remain valuable starting points for pharmaceutical research. Phytomedicine refers broadly to medicinal preparations derived from plants or plant materials. Unlike a medicine containing one purified active ingredient, a plant extract may contain many chemicals in varying amounts. Growing conditions, harvesting, drying, storage and extraction can change the final composition. Thus, “natural” does not automatically mean safe, effective or consistent.

Neem, botanically known as Azadirachta indica A. Juss. and belonging to the family Meliaceae, is an evergreen tree native to the Indian subcontinent and cultivated in many tropical regions. Traditional practices use different parts of the tree for different purposes. Modern science has investigated its chemical diversity and biological effects. A useful pharmaceutical approach asks more than whether neem has a history of use: it asks which plant part and preparation may be useful, at what dose, by which route, and with what evidence and risk.

## 2. Review Methodology

This article is a narrative review intended for undergraduate pharmacy study. It draws on established reviews and research literature concerning neem’s phytochemistry, pharmacological investigation, product development and safety. Key search concepts for updating the review include “Azadirachta indica,” “neem phytochemistry,” “neem antimicrobial activity,” “neem toxicity” and “neem formulation,” using databases such as PubMed, Google Scholar and Scopus. The material is organized by topic rather than statistically pooled. This is not a systematic review: it does not claim exhaustive searching, formal risk-of-bias assessment or meta-analysis. Before submission, the student should update the search, record search dates and selection criteria, and verify every reference against its original publication.

## 3. Botanical Profile and Raw Material

Correct identification is the first step in herbal product development. Plant material should be authenticated by a qualified botanist or pharmacognosist, and a voucher specimen can be retained for reference. Leaves, bark, flowers, fruits, seeds and seed oil are chemically different and should not be considered interchangeable. Geographic origin, season of collection, maturity, drying temperature, storage and moisture exposure can affect quality. Poor handling may lead to degradation, contamination or inconsistent batches.

**4. Phytochemical Profile**

Neem contains several classes of secondary metabolites. Limonoids such as azadirachtin, nimbolide and related compounds are frequently discussed in neem research. Flavonoids, including quercetin, and other phenolic compounds have also been reported. The profile depends on the plant part and extraction method. Azadirachtin is especially known for insect-related effects; it should not be assumed to explain every medicinal activity attributed to neem.

For pharmaceutical purposes, simple colour-change tests are not enough to ensure consistency. Quality assessment may include botanical authentication, chromatographic fingerprints, validated assays for selected marker compounds, moisture and ash values, microbial-limit testing, and testing for heavy metals, pesticide residues and adulterants. Marker compounds help compare batches, but their presence alone does not prove clinical benefit.

**5. Reported Biological Activities**

**5.1 Antimicrobial activity**

Some neem extracts or constituents have shown activity against selected microorganisms in laboratory experiments. Outcomes can vary with the plant part, solvent, concentration, microorganism and method used. An inhibition zone in a laboratory test does not prove that a neem product can cure an infection in people. Clinical studies must assess benefit, appropriate delivery and safety for the intended use.

**5.2 Antioxidant and anti-inflammatory potential**

Research has explored whether neem preparations affect oxidative processes and inflammatory pathways. Such findings can guide further investigation, but chemical antioxidant tests and animal experiments do not by themselves establish prevention or treatment of human disease. Studies should use chemically characterized preparations, suitable controls and outcomes relevant to the proposed use.

**5.3 Skin and oral-care applications**

Neem has traditional uses in skin and oral care and is included in some products. Safety and performance depend on the specific formulation, concentration and pattern of use. Findings for one standardized preparation cannot automatically be applied to every neem product. Irritation or allergy may occur, so the finished product needs suitable safety evaluation.

**5.4 Anticancer research**

Selected neem compounds, including nimbolide, have been investigated in preclinical cancer research for possible effects on cell growth, apoptosis and signalling pathways. These are research leads, not proof that neem prevents or treats cancer in humans. Neem should not replace surgery, chemotherapy, radiotherapy, immunotherapy or other care recommended by an oncology team. Clinical benefit, dose, interactions and safety must be established in appropriate human studies before cancer-related claims are made.

**5.5 Agricultural and insect-related uses**

Neem seed constituents, particularly azadirachtin, are studied for effects on insect feeding and development and are used in some pest-management products. These applications are different from therapeutic use in humans. Agricultural formulations must not be used as medicines, and users should follow product labels and safety instructions.

**6. Extraction and Formulation**

A reproducible preparation requires a clearly described process. Depending on the material and intended use, methods may include maceration, infusion, decoction or controlled solvent extraction. Solvent type, plant-to-solvent ratio, extraction time, temperature and concentration steps should be recorded because these variables affect the extract's chemical profile.

Potential product formats include topical creams or gels and oral-care products, where appropriate to the intended use. Development tests may include appearance, pH, viscosity, content consistency, microbial quality, packaging compatibility and stability. Any product intended for swallowing requires particularly careful assessment of dose, systemic exposure, toxicity and drug interactions. Traditional use does not remove the need for modern quality and safety testing.

**7. Quality Control: The Bridge Between Plant and Medicine**

A major challenge in phytomedicine is batch-to-batch variation. Two products labelled "neem extract" may differ because they use different plant parts, solvents or manufacturing conditions. A quality specification should therefore identify the plant and plant part, define the extraction process, set acceptable limits for contaminants and use suitable chemical tests to monitor consistency. Stability studies should establish whether the product remains within specification throughout its shelf life. Clear labelling should state ingredients, route of use, storage instructions and relevant warnings.

**8. Safety and Precautions**

Neem should not be described as universally safe. Concentrated products and neem oil can be harmful if swallowed; serious poisoning has been reported after neem-oil ingestion, especially in children. Skin irritation or allergic reactions are also possible. Risk depends on the plant part, concentration, route and product quality. Pregnant or breastfeeding people, children, people with chronic illnesses and people taking medicines should seek qualified medical advice before using medicinal neem products. Do not ingest neem oil or use neem to delay professional diagnosis or evidence-based treatment. Suspected poisoning requires urgent medical assistance.

**9. Research Gaps and Future Scope**

Research priorities include better authentication of plant material, standardized extraction, validated chemical fingerprints, dose-response and toxicology studies, assessment of possible drug interactions and well-designed clinical trials. Investigators should distinguish findings from cells, animals and humans rather than combining them as if they offer equal evidence. Negative and inconclusive results should also be reported. Analytical chemistry and modern formulation methods may help improve consistency, but new delivery systems still require evidence of safety and benefit.

**10. Conclusion**

Neem is a chemically diverse plant with a long history of traditional use and substantial laboratory research. Its constituents offer useful leads for antimicrobial, inflammatory, insect-related and cancer-biology investigations. However, the evidence is not equally strong for every claimed use, and preclinical findings should not be described as proven human benefits. Botanical authentication, controlled extraction, validated quality testing and careful safety assessment are essential for dependable neem-based phytomedicines. The most promising path is to develop specific, standardized products and test them rigorously—not to assume that one plant preparation can safely treat many unrelated diseases.

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