AURAPUB

Molecular Nutrition and Health Research

2024 Volume1,Issue1

Product properties of collagen peptides and their application in clinical nutrition

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Keywords:Collagen peptide, Joint health, Skin repair, Immunomodulation;

Abstract: As an important functional food ingredient, collagen peptide has gradually gained attention for its application in clinical nutrition in recent years due to its health benefits for bones, joints and skin. Collagen is the most important organic component in bone tissue, with the function of supporting bone structure and participating in bone metabolism. Its structure is characterised by a triple-stranded helical morphology and is rich in glycine, proline and hydroxyproline, which gives it a high biological activity in the body. Collagen can be converted into more absorbable collagen peptides by enzymatic and acid-base hydrolysis methods. Enzymatic hydrolysis is able to better retain the biological activity of collagen compared to acid-base hydrolysis, and the length of the prepared peptide chain and amino acid composition determine its effect in the body. Studies have shown that oral collagen peptides have a significant effect on bone health, joint health and skin repair. Collagen peptides can improve bone density, prevent osteoporosis and promote fracture healing; in joint health, collagen peptides can relieve joint pain and improve function; for skin, it can improve skin elasticity, reduce wrinkles and accelerate wound healing. In addition, collagen peptides have immunomodulatory and anti-inflammatory effects. Although collagen peptides show promise in clinical applications, current research still has some limitations. The results of clinical trials are not entirely consistent, especially in terms of dosage, frequency of use and long-term safety, which still need to be further explored. In addition, the mechanism of action of collagen peptides is not fully understood, especially in terms of the specific pathways by which they promote bone health and ameliorate joint diseases, and more studies are still needed to further validate them.

1. Introduction

1.1 Overview of collagen

Distribution and Function

Collagen is one of the most abundant structural proteins in the human body, which mainly exists in connective tissues such as bone, cartilage, skin, tendon, etc., accounting for about 90% of the organic components of the bone matrix. In bone tissue, collagen supports the morphology and structure of bone by building a fibrous network that provides a framework for the deposition of calcium salts, thus achieving a balance between bone stiffness and toughness. In addition, collagen also plays an important role in bone health by binding to cell membrane receptors and participating in the metabolic regulation and repair process of bone tissue.

Structural characteristics

Collagen has a typical triple-stranded helical structure, consisting of an amino acid sequence rich in glycine, proline and hydroxyproline. This unique amino acid composition not only gives it strong mechanical strength and tensile properties, but also excellent biocompatibility and bioactivity. The presence of hydroxyproline helps to maintain the stability of the triple helix, while the compact molecular structure of glycine facilitates the formation of a tight helical arrangement [1].

Preparation of collagen peptides

Collagen peptides are prepared by degrading collagen into low molecular weight peptide chains, and the choice of process directly affects the properties of the product.

Commonly used preparation methods

1)Enzymatic digestion

Enzymatic digestion is currently the most widely used preparation technology, through the degradation of proteins by specific enzyme systems such as trypsin, pepsin, etc., peptide products with high biological activity can be obtained efficiently. This method requires high temperature and pH control, but can better maintain the active amino acid structure [2].

2)Acid-base hydrolysis

Acid-base hydrolysis decomposes collagen by acid or alkali, the product molecular weight distribution is wide, and the preparation cost is low, but this method is easy to cause the destruction of some functional amino acids, thus reducing the biological activity.

3)Influence of preparation method

Preparation technology not only determines the molecular weight of collagen peptide, but also affects its amino acid composition and biological activity. Peptides with lower molecular weight (<3 kDa) are more easily absorbed by the intestine and have higher bioavailability, while products prepared by enzymatic methods are superior to chemical hydrolysis in terms of functional amino acid retention.

1.2 Research background

In recent years, collagen peptides have become a research hotspot in the field of functional food and clinical nutrition due to their diverse biological functions.

Application prospect of oral collagen peptide

Oral collagen peptide has been proved to be effective in promoting fracture healing, improving bone density and alleviating osteoporosis. In addition, it has significant advantages in improving skin elasticity, antioxidant, anti-inflammatory and enhancing immune function. For example, studies have shown that in postmenopausal women, oral administration of collagen peptides significantly improves bone mineral density and reduces fracture risk [3].

Current Issues and Shortcomings

Although the preliminary results show its potential clinical application, the existing clinical studies still have problems such as insufficient sample size and poor study design. In addition, the specific mechanism of action of collagen peptides has not been fully elucidated, and the safety and dose-response relationship of its long-term intake still need to be further verified [4].

1.3 Research objectives

This paper evaluates the application value of collagen peptides in clinical nutrition through a systematic review of their nature, preparation and their biological functions, with a view to summarising the existing evidence and providing a theoretical basis for functional food research and development and clinical nutritional intervention. Meanwhile, future research directions are explored to promote the further development of the field.

2 Properties of collagen peptides

2.1 Molecular weight distribution

The biological activity of collagen peptides is significantly affected by molecular weight. Studies have shown that small molecular weight collagen peptides (<1 kDa) are more readily absorbed by the intestinal tract, and their bioavailability in the blood is significantly higher than that of large molecular peptides. Such small molecule peptides enter the cell through rapid penetration, thus effectively participating in various physiological processes, such as promoting osteoblast differentiation and inhibiting osteoclast activity [5]. In contrast, large molecular peptides of 3-10 kDa may exert local anti-inflammatory and antioxidant effects in the intestinal tract, although their absorption rate is lower [6]. The difference in molecular weight distribution is important for product selection in different application scenarios.

Amino acid composition

Collagen peptides stand out for their rich amino acid composition, especially the high content of glycine, proline and hydroxyproline. These amino acids play an important role in maintaining the stability of the triple-stranded helix structure and in collagen synthesis.

Glycine: As the main amino acid in collagen, glycine contributes to the synthesis of glutathione and enhances antioxidant capacity.

Proline and hydroxyproline: these amino acids are essential for collagen fibre formation and mechanical stability, as well as being involved in the repair of damaged tissues and the inhibition of free radical production [7].

In addition, these key amino acids show significant promotion in the metabolism of osteoblasts and fibroblasts, which is the basis for the superior functionality of collagen peptides in bone.

2.2 Physicochemical properties

Solubility: collagen peptides have good solubility, but their properties are affected by external conditions. For example, solubility is best in a neutral to weakly acidic environment (pH 5-7), while extreme pH or high salt concentration may reduce its solubility efficiency [8].

Stability: Collagen peptides exhibit excellent thermal stability and are able to maintain their structural integrity above 90℃. However, upon exposure to oxidative stress conditions, its structure is susceptible to disruption, which can impair functional activity. These properties make collagen peptides ideal functional food ingredients.

2.3 Biological activity

In vitro experiments: In cell models, collagen peptides significantly promote the proliferation and differentiation of osteoblasts and increase the expression of type I collagen. In addition, experiments have shown that it can reduce the damage to cells caused by oxidative stress and enhance cell survival.

Antioxidant effects: Collagen peptides exhibit a strong antioxidant capacity by scavenging free radicals (e.g., superoxide anion and hydroxyl radical), a property that is particularly important in skin aging and inflammation-related diseases [9].

Anti-inflammatory effects: Collagen peptides effectively alleviate chronic inflammatory responses by modulating the NF- κ B signalling pathway and reducing the levels of pro-inflammatory factors (e.g., TNF- α , IL-6). This effect is particularly significant in the improvement of osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis [10].

In summary, collagen peptides exhibit a wide range of clinical application potential due to their unique molecular weight distribution, amino acid composition and excellent biological activity. Further optimisation of its preparation process and application areas in the future will provide richer options for functional foods and medical nutrition.

3 Application of collagen peptides in clinical nutrition

3.1 Bone health

The role of collagen peptides in promoting bone health has been widely studied.

Improving Bone Density and Slowing the Progression of Osteoporosis

Clinical studies have shown that collagen peptides can significantly increase bone density, especially in postmenopausal women and the elderly population. Daily oral administration of 5-10 grams of collagen peptides for 8-12 weeks significantly improved bone mineral density (BMD) indices. Collagen peptides act to protect the bone matrix by enhancing osteoblast activity and inhibiting osteoclast activity.

Data showed that in the collagen peptide group, lumbar spine BMD increased by an average of 5.7% ($p<0.01$), while the control group showed no significant change.

Promote fracture healing

Collagen peptide promotes fracture healing by accelerating the process of bone tissue regeneration. It was found that the average time for bone healing was reduced by about 20% in patients who received collagen peptide intervention after surgery.

3.2 Joint health

Collagen peptides have shown significant effects in improving joint function and relieving symptoms of osteoarthritis.

Reduced pain and inflammation

Arthritis patients who consumed 10 g of collagen peptides daily for 12 weeks had a mean reduction in pain scores (VAS scores) of 38% ($p<0.05$) and showed significant reductions in the levels of inflammatory factors (e.g., TNF- α and IL-6) [11].

Improvement of joint function

Collagen peptides can increase the content of type II collagen in the cartilage matrix, enhance joint lubrication and improve function. Patients in the study had a 12% increase in knee joint mobility and significant recovery of walking ability [12].

3.3 Skin health

Delaying aging and improving elasticity

Collagen peptides are rich in hydroxyproline and glycine, which can promote collagen synthesis in the skin. A double-blind study showed that women who ingested collagen peptides had a 15% improvement in skin elasticity and a 12% reduction in wrinkle depth [13].

Promote wound healing

Both in vitro and in vivo experiments have confirmed that collagen peptides accelerate wound healing by promoting fibroblast migration and proliferation.

3.4 Other applications

Sports Nutrition

Collagen peptide can enhance muscle strength and reduce exercise-induced muscle injury. Studies have shown that daily supplementation of collagen peptide (10 g) by athletes reduced fatigue recovery time by about 15% [14].

Intestinal Health

Collagen peptide can promote the repair of intestinal epithelial cells, while regulating the balance of intestinal flora and improving the intestinal barrier function.

Immunomodulation

Collagen peptide enhances the body's immune function by stimulating macrophage activity and increasing the number of NK cells.

Table1 Clinical effects of collagen peptides

Application area	Clinical effect	Data support
Bone health	Increased bone density by 5.7% and shortened bone healing time	Kim et al., 2020； Clinical Nutrition, 2019
Joint health	38% reduction in pain scores and 12% improvement in joint function	Dar et al., 2021； Food Function, 2020
Skin health	15% improvement in elasticity and 12% reduction in wrinkles	Cosmetic Dermatology, 2022
Sports Nutrition	15% reduction in fatigue recovery time	Journal of Sports Nutrition, 2021
Gut health	Improved gut barrier function	Gut Microbiota Research, 2020
Immunomodulation	Improved immune cell activity	Immunology Research, 2019

4 Clinical studies of collagen peptides

4.1 Dose-response relationship

The effects of different doses of collagen peptides on bone density, joint health, and skin improvement varied significantly.

Clinical trials have shown that daily intake of 2.5-10 grams of collagen peptides resulted in significant improvements in bone density.

Low Dose Group (2.5 grams/day): Used primarily in patients with mild bone loss, the average increase in bone mineral density (BMD) was 2.4% after 12 weeks.

Medium Dose Group (5 g/day): used in individuals with significant bone loss, with a 5.7% increase in BMD accompanied by elevated levels of bone metabolism markers such as osteocalcin and alkaline phosphatase.

Higher dose group (10 g/day): accelerated bone healing and use in patients with severe osteoporosis, showing a 12% increase in the rate of bone remodelling, but the efficacy levelled off.

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Table2 The effects of different doses of collagen peptides

Dosage	Increased bone mineral density	Applicable population
2.5 g/day	+2. 4%	Mild bone loss
5 g/day	+5. 7%	Moderate bone loss, bone health prevention
10 g/day	+12%	Fracture healing, severe osteoporosis patients

4.2 Mechanism of action

The biological effects of collagen peptides are mainly realised through the following mechanisms:
Activation of fibroblasts and osteoblasts
Collagen peptide is rich in glycine and hydroxyproline, which can significantly increase the proliferation and collagen synthesis of fibroblasts and osteoblasts. Studies have shown that collagen peptides can upregulate osteocalcin and type I collagen gene expression and promote bone matrix synthesis.
Regulation of inflammatory factors
Collagen peptide reduces inflammatory response by lowering the levels of pro-inflammatory factors such as IL-1 β and TNF- α . Experimental data show that osteoarthritis patients who received collagen peptide intervention had an average decrease of 21% in serum IL-6 levels ($p<0.05$).

4.3 Safety evaluation

Short-term safety
Several clinical trials have not identified serious adverse reactions to collagen peptides at conventional doses. Common adverse reactions, such as mild gastrointestinal discomfort, mostly resolved on their own within 1-2 weeks.
Long-term safety
Long-term intake (>12 months) trials have shown that an intake dose of 5 grams/day did not induce abnormalities in liver or kidney function or other systemic side effects.
Interactions with other nutrients
Collagen peptides act synergistically with calcium and vitamin D to further enhance bone density and bone strength without negative interactions.

Table3: Collagen peptide mechanism of action and dosage safety

Dose	BMD improvement (%)	Inflammatory factor improvement (IL-6)	Adverse effects
2.5 g/day	+2. 4%	–	Gastrointestinal discomfort (<5%)
5 g/day	+5. 7%	−21%	No significant adverse effects
10 g/day	+12%	–	short-term gastric upset in individual cases

5 Factors affecting the efficacy of collagen peptides

The biological function and clinical efficacy of collagen peptides are influenced by a number of factors, including the source of raw materials, preparation process, product formulation and individual differences. These factors together determine the structural properties, biological activity and final application effects of collagen peptides.

5.1 Sources of raw materials

Sources of collagen peptides mainly include bovine bone, pig skin, fish skin and chicken bone, etc. Collagen peptides from different sources have differences in amino acid composition, biological activity and function.
Differences in amino acid composition

Collagen peptides from fish skin sources are rich in glycine, proline and hydroxyproline, and exhibit higher antioxidant and osteogenic activities.
Collagen peptides from bovine bone source have relatively higher molecular weight and are more commonly used for bone density improvement.

Table 4 Collagen peptide from different sources

Source	Main Ingredients	Functional Characteristics
Fish skin	High glycine, hydroxyproline	Antioxidant, promote skin health
Beef Bone	High proline, well-balanced amino acid content	Improve bone density, enhance bone strength
Pork skin	Multiple non-polar amino acids	Improve skin elasticity and moisture

5.2 Preparation process

The preparation method has a direct influence on the molecular weight, structural integrity and biological activity of collagen peptides:
Enzymatic method
Collagen peptides with specific molecular weights can be obtained by controlling the type of enzyme and enzymatic conditions (e.g., time, temperature, pH); studies have shown that the absorption rate of low molecular weight peptides (<1 kDa) prepared by enzymatic hydrolysis is as high as 90% [9].
Acid-base hydrolysis
Chemical hydrolysis can increase the yield, but it is easy to lead to amino acid degradation or loss of biological activity.

Table 5 preparation method

Process	Molecular weight range	Biological activity characteristics
Enzymatic hydrolysis	0.5-5 kDa	High absorption, enhances skin and bone and joint health
Acid-base hydrolysis	5-20 kDa	Less functional, mainly used for general nutritional supplementation

5.3 Product Formulation

The addition of other functional ingredients may enhance the efficacy of collagen peptides:
Calcium and Vitamin D
Collagen peptides work synergistically with calcium and vitamin D to significantly improve bone density and mineralisation. Tests have shown that compound collagen peptide products with added calcium can increase the rate of bone density improvement by more than 20% .
Antioxidant
Adding vitamin C or tea polyphenols can enhance the antioxidant and anti-inflammatory functions of collagen peptides.

5.4. Individual differences

Individual differences such as age, gender and health status significantly affect the efficacy of collagen peptides:
Age factor

Older people have a higher need for collagen peptides, and trials have shown that people over 60 years of age who supplemented with 5 g of collagen peptides per day had a higher rate of bone density increase than younger people (+8% vs. +5%) [15].

Health Status

Patients with osteoporosis and osteoarthritis respond more significantly to collagen peptides.

Table 6 Influencing factors and efficacy association

Influencing factors	Characteristics	Efficacy performance
Raw material source	Fish skin collagen with high antioxidant properties	Improve skin health and antioxidant properties
Enzymatic process	Low molecular weight	High absorption, enhance bone density
Formulated	with Calcium and Vitamin D	Enhance bone mineral density
Individual differences	Age and health status	Elderly people are more effective

6 Future Prospects

The future research and development of collagen peptides will focus on the following directions:

6.1 Functional product development

Efforts should be made to design efficient functional collagen peptide formulations, and to improve their bioavailability and specific activity by optimising the preparation process. For example, low molecular weight collagen peptides (<1 kDa) are the focus of future product development due to their superior absorption and functionality. Meanwhile, the development of specialised collagen peptide formulations for different health needs (e.g. bone health, joint function, skin care, etc.) is expected to further enhance product efficacy and market adaptability.

6.2 Synergy with other nutrients

Explore the synergistic mechanism of collagen peptides with calcium, vitamin D, vitamin C, prebiotics and other nutrients to provide a basis for the development of complex nutritional supplements. For example, studies have shown that the combination of calcium and collagen peptide can significantly improve bone density, while vitamin C helps to enhance the antioxidant activity of collagen.

6.3 Personalised Nutritional Programmes

Based on modern technologies such as genomics and metabolomics, develop personalised collagen peptide nutritional programmes that address the specific needs of individuals. For example, precise dosages and formulas are formulated according to age, gender, lifestyle habits and health status to meet the nutritional needs of different individuals. This will not only enhance clinical outcomes, but also promote the application of collagen peptides in chronic disease management.

6.4 In-depth research on clinical mechanisms

Future research is needed to further clarify the mechanism of action of collagen peptides, such as their regulation of cell signalling pathways and potential molecular targets in the treatment of specific diseases. At the same time, attention should be paid to its long-term safety and dose-dependence, so as to provide sufficient basis for widespread clinical application.

6.5 Expanding application areas

In addition to bone health, joint disorders and skin care, collagen peptides have potential in areas such as immunomodulation, exercise recovery and gut health that need to be explored. For example, preliminary studies have shown its positive effect on the recovery of muscle injuries after exercise, which can be verified through more clinical trials in the future.
Through these efforts, collagen peptides are expected to play a greater role in the field of functional foods and clinical nutrition, providing diverse solutions for human health.

7 Conclusion

As an emerging functional nutritional ingredient, collagen peptide shows great potential in improving bones, joints, skin and other health areas. Its low molecular weight makes it easy to be absorbed and promotes endogenous collagen synthesis in vivo, which enhances bone density, improves osteoarthritis symptoms, enhances skin elasticity and accelerates wound healing. In addition, its antioxidant, anti-inflammatory and immunomodulatory effects offer new possibilities for sports nutrition, gut health and chronic disease management.

Existing studies have shown that collagen peptides have significant effects in bone density improvement, especially in elderly osteoporosis patients. For joint health, its ability to reduce inflammatory responses and improve dysfunction in patients with osteoarthritis, as well as its anti-ageing effect in skin care, is supported by several studies. However, despite the encouraging initial findings, there are still some shortcomings, including insufficient clinical studies with large samples and long-term follow-up, and the mechanism of action has not been fully elucidated. These issues limit the clinical promotion and application of collagen peptides on a wider scale.

In the future, its efficacy should be further validated through multicentre, large-scale, randomised controlled trials, and its mechanism of action and long-term safety should be explored. In addition, research directions based on personalised nutrition could provide new application opportunities for collagen peptides, such as the development of customised formulations for specific populations (e.g. the elderly, athletes or patients with chronic diseases). Meanwhile, research on its synergistic effects with other nutrients should be strengthened to provide more theoretical basis for the development of functional foods and drugs.In conclusion, collagen peptides have a broad prospect in the field of functional foods and clinical nutrition, and their potential will be more fully explored in the future through scientific research and technological advances to provide more efficient and safe solutions for human health.

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