Exogenous Melatonin as a Protective Agent Against Heavy Metal Stress: Mechanisms of Tolerance and Growth Enhancement in Plants

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Abstract

Heavy metal contamination in agricultural soils has emerged as a critical environmental constraint affecting plant growth, productivity, and food safety worldwide. Exogenous melatonin, a multifunctional signaling molecule, has gained increasing attention as a promising protective agent that enhances plant tolerance to heavy metal stress. This paper reviews the physiological, biochemical, and molecular mechanisms through which melatonin mitigates heavy metal toxicity in plants. Melatonin improves antioxidant defense systems, regulates metal uptake and transport, enhances photosynthetic efficiency, and stabilizes cellular homeostasis under stress conditions. Additionally, it modulates gene expression associated with stress signaling pathways and chelation processes, thereby reducing metal-induced oxidative damage. The application of exogenous melatonin also contributes to improved plant growth, biomass accumulation, and yield stability under contaminated environments. Overall, melatonin represents an eco-friendly and effective strategy for improving plant resilience against heavy metal stress and ensuring sustainable agricultural productivity.

Keywords: Exogenous melatonin; heavy metal stress; oxidative stress; plant tolerance; antioxidant system; phytoremediation; stress signaling; plant growth enhancement.

I. Introduction

Heavy metal pollution in agricultural ecosystems has become a major global concern due to its persistent nature, toxicity, and ability to accumulate in soil and plant systems. Industrial activities, mining operations, excessive use of fertilizers and pesticides, and untreated wastewater irrigation are key contributors to the increasing levels of heavy metals such as cadmium (Cd), lead (Pb), arsenic (As), chromium (Cr), and mercury (Hg) in agricultural soils. These contaminants not only reduce soil fertility but also pose serious risks to crop productivity, ecosystem stability, and human health through food chain contamination[1]. Plants exposed to heavy metal stress experience a wide range of physiological and biochemical disturbances. These include inhibition of seed germination, reduction in root and shoot growth, disruption of nutrient uptake, impairment of photosynthesis, and overproduction of reactive oxygen species (ROS). Excess ROS leads to oxidative stress, which damages cellular membranes, proteins, lipids, and DNA, ultimately resulting in growth retardation and reduced yield. Although plants possess intrinsic defense systems such as antioxidant enzymes and metal-binding proteins, these mechanisms are often insufficient under severe or prolonged exposure.

In recent years, research has increasingly focused on the role of plant growth regulators and signaling molecules in improving stress tolerance. Among these, melatonin (N-acetyl-5-methoxytryptamine), an evolutionarily conserved indoleamine, has emerged as a multifunctional biomolecule with strong regulatory and protective roles in plants. Initially identified in animals, melatonin is now recognized in higher plants where it regulates growth, development, and responses to both biotic and abiotic stresses. Exogenous application of melatonin has been shown to significantly enhance plant tolerance to heavy metal stress by modulating antioxidant defense systems, improving photosynthetic performance, regulating ion homeostasis, and activating stress-responsive gene networks. Its unique ability to act as both a direct antioxidant and a signaling molecule makes it particularly effective in reducing metal-induced toxicity. Moreover, melatonin contributes to improved plant vigor, biomass production, and overall physiological stability under contaminated conditions. Given the increasing severity of heavy metal pollution and the need for sustainable agricultural solutions, understanding the protective role of exogenous melatonin is of great scientific and practical importance. This paper explores the mechanisms through which melatonin mitigates heavy metal stress and highlights its potential applications in enhancing plant growth and ensuring agricultural sustainability.

II. Heavy Metal Toxicity in Plants and Stress Responses

Heavy metal toxicity in plants occurs when elements such as cadmium (Cd), lead (Pb), arsenic (As), chromium (Cr), and mercury (Hg) accumulate in plant tissues at concentrations exceeding physiological thresholds. Unlike essential micronutrients, these metals have no known biological function and can severely disrupt normal cellular metabolism even at low concentrations. Their high persistence in soil and ability to enter plant systems through roots make them particularly harmful to agricultural productivity and food safety. One of the primary consequences of heavy metal exposure is the induction of oxidative stress[2]. Heavy metals interfere with electron transport chains in chloroplasts and mitochondria, leading to excessive production of reactive oxygen species (ROS) such as superoxide radicals, hydrogen peroxide, and hydroxyl radicals. These highly reactive molecules cause oxidative damage to lipids, proteins, and nucleic acids, resulting in membrane lipid peroxidation, enzyme inactivation, and DNA mutations. Consequently, cellular integrity and metabolic efficiency are significantly compromised. At the physiological level, heavy metal toxicity leads to reduced seed germination, inhibited root elongation, stunted shoot growth, and decreased biomass accumulation. Root systems are often the first to be affected, as they directly encounter contaminated soils. Metal-induced damage to root cell membranes also impairs water and nutrient uptake, leading to secondary deficiencies in essential elements such as iron (Fe), magnesium (Mg), and calcium (Ca). This nutritional imbalance further aggravates plant stress conditions.

Photosynthesis is particularly sensitive to heavy metal stress. Metals can disrupt chlorophyll biosynthesis, damage photosystem II, and impair stomatal regulation, resulting in reduced photosynthetic efficiency and energy production. This decline in photosynthetic performance directly affects plant growth and yield, making crops more vulnerable to environmental stressors. In response to heavy metal exposure, plants activate a range of defense mechanisms to maintain cellular homeostasis. These include enzymatic antioxidant systems such as superoxide dismutase (SOD), catalase (CAT), and peroxidases (POD), as well as non-enzymatic antioxidants like glutathione, ascorbate, and phytochelatins. Additionally, plants may compartmentalize metals into vacuoles or bind them with chelating molecules to reduce their toxicity. However, when metal concentrations exceed the detoxification capacity of these systems, oxidative damage becomes irreversible, leading to cellular dysfunction and growth inhibition.

III. Role of Exogenous Melatonin in Stress Alleviation

Exogenous melatonin plays a significant role in mitigating heavy metal–induced stress in plants by acting as both a potent antioxidant and a multifunctional signaling molecule. When applied externally, melatonin rapidly penetrates plant tissues and initiates a wide range of protective responses that help maintain cellular homeostasis under toxic metal exposure[3]. Its dual function allows it to directly neutralize reactive oxygen species (ROS) while also regulating stress-responsive metabolic and genetic pathways. One of the primary mechanisms through which melatonin alleviates stress is its strong antioxidant capacity. Melatonin and its metabolites can directly scavenge ROS such as superoxide radicals, hydrogen peroxide, and hydroxyl radicals, thereby reducing oxidative damage to lipids, proteins, and nucleic acids. Unlike many conventional antioxidants, melatonin undergoes a cascade reaction, meaning its breakdown products also retain antioxidant activity, providing sustained protection against oxidative stress.

In addition to direct ROS scavenging, exogenous melatonin enhances the plant's endogenous antioxidant defense system[4]. It upregulates key antioxidant enzymes including superoxide dismutase (SOD), catalase (CAT), ascorbate peroxidase (APX), and glutathione reductase (GR). This enzymatic activation strengthens the plant's internal defense network, improving its ability to detoxify ROS generated under heavy metal stress conditions. Melatonin also plays an important role in regulating heavy metal uptake, transport, and sequestration. It can reduce the translocation of toxic metals from roots to shoots by enhancing metal binding with chelating compounds such as phytochelatins and metallothioneins. Additionally, melatonin promotes compartmentalization of metals into vacuoles, thereby reducing their availability in metabolically active cellular compartments and minimizing toxicity. At the physiological level, melatonin improves photosynthetic efficiency under stress conditions. It helps maintain chlorophyll content, protects chloroplast structure, and stabilizes photosystem II activity. These effects contribute to sustained carbon assimilation and energy production, which are essential for growth and survival under contaminated environments. Furthermore, melatonin enhances stomatal regulation and water use efficiency, enabling plants to better adapt to stress-induced dehydration. Overall, exogenous melatonin acts as a comprehensive stress mitigator by integrating antioxidant defense, metal detoxification, and physiological regulation. Its ability to simultaneously influence multiple protective pathways makes it a highly effective agent for enhancing plant tolerance to heavy metal stress and supporting sustainable crop productivity in polluted environments.

IV. Mechanisms of Tolerance Induced by Melatonin

Exogenous melatonin enhances plant tolerance to heavy metal stress through a complex network of physiological, biochemical, and molecular mechanisms. Its action is not limited to a single pathway but involves coordinated regulation of antioxidant defense, metal homeostasis, gene expression, and hormonal signaling, ultimately leading to improved cellular protection and stress resilience. A key mechanism involves the modulation of antioxidant defense systems. Melatonin upregulates both enzymatic and non-enzymatic antioxidants, including superoxide dismutase (SOD), catalase (CAT), peroxidases (POD), ascorbate, and glutathione. This enhanced antioxidant capacity reduces excessive accumulation of reactive oxygen species (ROS), thereby preventing oxidative damage to cellular components such as membranes, proteins, and DNA. In addition, melatonin and its metabolites directly scavenge ROS, providing immediate protection during stress exposure.

Melatonin also plays a central role in regulating heavy metal uptake, transport, and sequestration. It reduces metal ion influx at the root level and restricts their translocation to aerial parts. This is achieved by enhancing the synthesis of metal-binding compounds such as phytochelatins and metallothioneins, which chelate toxic ions and facilitate their compartmentalization into vacuoles. This detoxification strategy minimizes the interaction of heavy metals with sensitive cellular machinery. At the molecular level, melatonin influences the expression of stress-responsive genes[5]. It activates genes involved in antioxidant defense, metal transporters, and detoxification pathways, while downregulating genes associated with stress-induced cellular damage. This transcriptional reprogramming enables plants to rapidly adapt to toxic environments and maintain metabolic balance under heavy metal stress.

Hormonal crosstalk is another important component of melatonin-induced tolerance. Melatonin interacts with key plant hormones such as auxins, gibberellins, abscisic acid (ABA), and ethylene to regulate growth and stress responses[6]. For instance, it can modulate ABA signaling to improve stomatal regulation and water conservation under stress conditions, while simultaneously supporting growth-promoting pathways mediated by auxins and gibberellins. Furthermore, melatonin contributes to the stabilization of cellular structures, particularly chloroplasts and mitochondria, which are highly sensitive to heavy metal toxicity. By protecting these organelles, melatonin ensures sustained photosynthetic activity and energy metabolism, which are critical for plant survival and recovery under stress conditions.

V. Growth Enhancement and Physiological Improvements

Exogenous melatonin not only alleviates heavy metal toxicity but also plays a significant role in promoting overall plant growth and improving physiological performance under stress conditions. Its application enhances multiple growth-related processes, enabling plants to maintain vigor, biomass production, and yield stability even in contaminated environments. One of the most prominent effects of melatonin is the stimulation of root architecture. It promotes root elongation, lateral root formation, and root hair development, which collectively increase the surface area for water and nutrient absorption. This improved root system enhances the plant's ability to access essential nutrients even when soil conditions are compromised by heavy metal contamination[7]. Melatonin also improves photosynthetic efficiency by protecting chlorophyll content and stabilizing chloroplast structure. It reduces chlorophyll degradation induced by oxidative stress and maintains the integrity of photosystem II, ensuring efficient light harvesting and energy conversion. As a result, plants exhibit higher rates of carbon assimilation, which directly contributes to improved biomass accumulation and growth performance. At the physiological level, melatonin enhances nutrient uptake and translocation by regulating ion transporters and maintaining membrane stability. This helps restore nutrient balance disrupted by heavy metals and supports essential metabolic processes[8]. Additionally, melatonin improves water use efficiency by regulating stomatal behavior, reducing excessive transpiration while maintaining adequate gas exchange for photosynthesis.

Another important aspect of melatonin-induced growth enhancement is its role in maintaining cellular membrane integrity. By reducing lipid peroxidation and oxidative damage, melatonin preserves membrane fluidity and functionality, ensuring proper transport of metabolites and signaling molecules within plant cells. This contributes to overall cellular stability under stress conditions[9]. Melatonin also influences carbohydrate metabolism by promoting the synthesis and allocation of sugars, which serve as energy sources and osmoprotectants. This metabolic adjustment supports growth processes and enhances plant resilience under heavy metal stress.

Conclusion

Exogenous melatonin has emerged as a highly effective and eco-friendly strategy for mitigating heavy metal stress in plants while simultaneously enhancing growth and physiological performance. Its multifunctional role encompasses direct scavenging of reactive oxygen species, activation of antioxidant defense systems, regulation of metal uptake and sequestration, and modulation of stress-responsive gene expression. Through these integrated mechanisms, melatonin significantly reduces oxidative damage and maintains cellular homeostasis under toxic metal exposure. In addition to its protective functions, melatonin contributes to improved plant productivity by enhancing root architecture, photosynthetic efficiency, nutrient acquisition, and water use efficiency. It also stabilizes cellular structures and supports metabolic balance, allowing plants to sustain growth even in contaminated environments. The interaction of melatonin with hormonal signaling pathways further strengthens its role as a key regulator of plant adaptation to stress conditions.

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