

Analysis of Isoflavones in Food and Food Supplements

- ERASMUS KA220-HED - Cooperation partnerships in higher education
- Project no. 2023-1-RO01-KA220-HED-000164767
- Title: Partnership for innovation on the exchange of best practices and the design of joint collaborative initiatives at European level related to the awareness of the effects of contamination on human health
- Acronym: INNO-SAFE-LIFE



INTRODUCTION



Isoflavones are **polyphenolic secondary metabolites** from the **isoflavonoid subclass**.



Structurally resemble **17 β -estradiol**, enabling estrogen receptor modulation.



Function as **phytoestrogens**, **antioxidants**, and **signal molecules** in plants.



Increasingly studied for **nutraceutical**, **pharmacological**, and **toxicological** implications.



Isoflavones occupy an important intersection of nutrition and pharmacology. Their dual behavior—both as nutrients and endocrine-active compounds—makes accurate quantification vital for understanding their risk-benefit profile and for meeting regulatory compliance.

Chemical Classification and Structure

Core structure: **3-phenylchromen-4-one** backbone.

Major aglycones: **genistein, daidzein, glycitein**.

Typically exist as **β -glycosides** (genistin, daidzin).

Conversion via **acid or enzymatic hydrolysis** yields free aglycones.

Conjugation patterns determine solubility, polarity, and UV absorption.

Isoflavones' structural diversity influences their chromatographic behavior and biological activity. Analytical differentiation between glycoside and aglycone forms is essential, as processing or digestion can shift equilibrium between these states.

Biological Relevance

Bind selectively to **ER β** > **ER α** , modulating estrogenic responses.

Exhibit **anti-oxidative**, **anti-inflammatory**, and **anti-proliferative** effects.

Influence **lipid metabolism**, **bone mineralization**, and **endothelial function**.

Act as **chemopreventive agents** in certain hormone-dependent cancers.

The biological potency of isoflavones is concentration-dependent and influenced by metabolism to equol or other derivatives. Hence, establishing accurate food and supplement isoflavone profiles informs both nutritional research and clinical applications.

Sources and Natural Occurrence



Primary source: *Glycine max* (soybean).



Secondary sources: chickpea (*Cicer arietinum*), lentils (*Lens culinaris*), red clover (*Trifolium pratense*).



Concentration range: **1–3 mg/g dry weight** in soybeans.



Distribution depends on **cultivar**, **climate**, and **post-harvest processing**.



Isoflavone biosynthesis is part of the phenylpropanoid pathway. Environmental stressors and fermentation conditions alter isoflavone content, creating substantial variability that analytical methods must accommodate.

Role in Food Supplements

Used in **menopausal symptom relief** formulations.

Derived mainly from **soy** or **red clover extracts**.

Require **standardization** based on total isoflavone equivalents.

Analytical results guide **dosage form design** and **stability testing**.

Commercial supplements often contain concentrated extracts standardized to specific aglycone equivalents. However, manufacturing inconsistencies and degradation over time demand rigorous analytical verification.

Analytical Objectives

Quantitative determination of total and individual isoflavones.

Profiling of aglycone/glycoside ratios.

Detection of degradation or conjugation products.

Assessment of processing-induced transformations.

Compliance with EFSA/FDA content claims.

Analytical protocols must be sensitive enough to detect nanogram-level concentrations while differentiating between multiple structurally similar compounds in complex matrices. Regulatory compliance hinges on validated methods.

Sample Preparation Strategies

Homogenization ensures representative sampling.

Extraction solvents: aqueous methanol/ethanol (60–80%).

Hydrolysis: acid (HCl, H₂SO₄) or β -glucosidase enzyme.

Clean-up: solid-phase extraction (SPE) to remove matrix interferences.

Derivatization (optional): enhances detection in GC or LC-MS.

Sample prep dictates analytical reliability. Enzymatic hydrolysis is preferred for preserving molecular integrity, while SPE improves signal-to-noise ratios. For supplements, excipients may interfere, requiring tailored extraction conditions.

Extraction Optimization

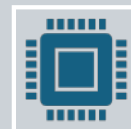
Technique	Mechanism	Advantages	Limitations
SLE	Solvent diffusion	Simple, inexpensive	Long extraction times
UAE	Cavitation effect	Rapid, low solvent use	Equipment-dependent
MAE	Microwave energy	High efficiency	Requires solvent compatibility
SFE	Supercritical CO ₂	Green, selective	High capital cost

Extraction optimization involves balancing yield, purity, and environmental impact. The shift toward green analytical chemistry favors SFE and UAE as sustainable alternatives to conventional solvent extraction.

Chromatographic Approaches



HPLC-DAD: Standard quantification method (C18 columns, 254–260 nm).



LC-MS/MS: Enhanced selectivity for co-eluting isomers.



UHPLC: Shorter run times, improved resolution.



Mobile phase: water–acetonitrile with formic acid gradient.



Retention influenced by **hydrophobic interactions** and **pKa**.



Chromatographic separation must account for structural isomerism among isoflavones. UHPLC offers superior efficiency, while tandem mass spectrometry provides molecular-level confirmation.

Detection and Quantification



UV/Vis: λ_{max} around 254 nm ($\pi \rightarrow \pi^*$ transitions).



Fluorescence: high sensitivity for low-concentration matrices.



ESI-MS/MS: quantification via multiple reaction monitoring (MRM).

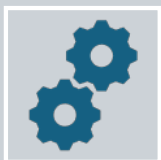


NMR: definitive structural elucidation for standards.



Mass spectrometry offers unparalleled specificity, allowing for accurate quantification even in the presence of co-extracted phenolics. MRM transitions for daidzein, genistein, and glycitein ensure targeted precision.

Calibration and Method Validation



Calibration curves constructed from **certified reference standards**.



Parameters:

Linearity ($R^2 \geq 0.999$)

LOD (0.01–0.05 mg/kg)

LOQ (0.05–0.2 mg/kg)

Accuracy (recovery 90–110%)

Precision (RSD < 5%)



Method validation confirms analytical performance. International guidelines (e.g., AOAC, ISO 17025) define acceptance criteria ensuring reproducibility across laboratories.

Analytical and Matrix Challenges



Isoflavones exhibit **thermal and photochemical instability**.



Co-elution with phenolic acids and lignans complicates separation.



Matrix effects suppress ionization in MS detection.



Need for **matrix-matched calibration** or **internal standards** (e.g., biochanin A).



Matrix suppression and co-elution remain major issues. Analysts mitigate these via sample dilution, isotope-labeled internal standards, and orthogonal detection techniques.

Technological Advances



LC-QTOF-MS: accurate mass profiling for untargeted analysis.



Metabolomics approaches: simultaneous detection of >100 phenolics.



Microextraction techniques: μ SPE, dispersive liquid-liquid microextraction (DLLME).



Green chemistry trend: minimal solvent and energy usage.



Cutting-edge MS technologies coupled with chemometric data processing are revolutionizing isoflavone research, enabling both targeted quantification and holistic metabolic profiling.

Quality Control Applications

Batch consistency in soy-based products.

Verification of supplement label claims.

Detection of adulteration or substitution.

Shelf-life and **degradation studies** via accelerated stability testing.

Analytical data underpin quality assurance and regulatory documentation. Routine batch testing ensures consumer trust and supports global trade compliance.

Regulatory and Standardization Framework

Codex Alimentarius: compositional guidelines.

EFSA (EU): assessment of health claim dossiers.

FDA (US): labeling under DSHEA framework.

Need for **harmonized analytical reference methods** globally.

Regulation of isoflavone-containing products remains fragmented. Harmonization between EFSA, FDA, and ISO standards is a critical step toward cross-border quality assurance.

Case Study: Soy-Based Foods



Comparison of **commercial soy milks**: 20–120 mg total isoflavones/100 mL.



Fermented soy products show **increased aglycone ratios** due to enzymatic conversion.



Industrial heating leads to **partial degradation of glycosides**.



Analytical profiling reveals how manufacturing affects isoflavone content. Fermentation enhances bioavailability, while heat processing may reduce total content—key considerations for nutritional labeling.

Data Processing and Interpretation

Quantitative data expressed as **mg isoflavone aglycone equivalents/100 g**.

Use of **chemometrics** (PCA, PLS-DA) to classify products by source.

Statistical validation via **ANOVA** or **t-tests**.

Integration into **nutritional databases** (USDA, Phenol-Explorer).

Data interpretation transcends mere quantification; multivariate analysis helps detect adulteration and identify origin-specific fingerprints. Incorporating results into databases supports global food composition knowledge.

Emerging Trends and Future Prospects



Nanotechnology-based sensors for rapid detection.



Paper-based microfluidics for field testing.



Integration of AI/ML for spectral deconvolution.



Broader inclusion of **isoflavone metabolites** (equol, O-DMA) in analyses.



Emerging portable and AI-driven systems promise real-time quality assessment. The future lies in coupling advanced analytics with computational modeling to predict bioavailability and health outcomes.

Conclusions

Isoflavone analysis integrates **analytical chemistry, food science, and regulatory compliance**.

Chromatography–mass spectrometry coupling remains the gold standard.

Standardization and **green analytical innovation** are key future goals.

Reliable quantification supports safe, transparent, evidence-based nutrition.

Isoflavones exemplify how chemical precision underpins nutritional science. Advances in analytical techniques continue to enhance reliability, sustainability, and consumer trust in functional foods and supplements.