

# UNRAVELING THE PHYTOCHEMICAL COMPOSITION OF AJWA DATES AND THEIR POTENTIAL HEALTH BENEFITS: A COMPREHENSIVE REVIEW

Maqbool Ahmed Soomro<sup>\*1</sup>, Shazia Parveen Solangi<sup>2</sup>, Shakeel Ahmed Ibupoto<sup>3</sup>,  
Sanaullah Abbasi<sup>4</sup>, Abdul Ghani Gaad<sup>5</sup>, Fozia Gul<sup>6</sup>

<sup>\*1,2,4,6</sup>Department of Biochemistry, Shah Abdul Latif University Khairpur

<sup>3</sup>Date Palm Research Institute, Shah Abdul Abdul Latif University Khairpur

<sup>5</sup>Institute of Microbiology, Shah Abdul Latif University Khairpur

<sup>\*1</sup>soomromaqbool719@gmail.com

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Corresponding Author: \*

Maqbool Ahmed Soomro

## Abstract

Ajwa dates, a premium variety of date fruit (*Phoenix dactylifera* L.) predominantly cultivated in Saudi Arabia, have been revered for centuries for their nutritional value and potential health benefits. This review aims to comprehensively summarize the current scientific knowledge regarding the phytochemical composition of Ajwa dates and their associated health-promoting properties. A thorough search of electronic databases (PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar) was conducted to gather relevant research articles published primarily from 2015 onwards, with inclusion of key older articles for historical context. The review highlights the diverse array of bioactive compounds present in Ajwa dates, including polyphenols, flavonoids, carotenoids, and minerals, and discusses their potential roles in mitigating oxidative stress, inflammation, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and other chronic conditions. The review also explores traditional uses, cultivation, and economic importance of Ajwa dates. Further research, particularly well-designed clinical trials, is warranted to fully elucidate the mechanisms of action and confirm the therapeutic efficacy of Ajwa dates in human health.

## INTRODUCTION

Date fruits, derived from the date palm tree (*Phoenix dactylifera* L.), have been a staple food in the Middle East and North Africa for millennia. The date palm holds significant cultural, religious, and economic importance in these regions. Among the numerous date varieties, Ajwa dates hold a special place, particularly in Islamic tradition, and are highly regarded for their unique taste, texture, and perceived health benefits. Ajwa dates are primarily cultivated in the Al-Madinah region of Saudi Arabia, and their cultivation is deeply intertwined with the region's history and agricultural practices. Beyond their traditional consumption, modern scientific

research has begun to unravel the complex phytochemical composition of Ajwa dates, revealing a rich source of bioactive compounds with potential implications for human health [Eid et al., 2019; Al-Alawi et al., 2017]. This review aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the current scientific literature, focusing on studies published from 2015 onwards, while also considering earlier foundational research, regarding the phytochemical profile of Ajwa dates and their associated health benefits [Rahmani et al., 2014]. The review will also briefly touch upon the traditional uses and economic significance of this unique date variety.

### Botanical Characteristics and Cultivation

*Phoenix dactylifera* L. is a dioecious monocotyledonous plant belonging to the family Arecaceae (Palmaceae) [Zaid & Arias-Jiménez, 2002]. Date palm cultivation requires specific environmental conditions, including hot, arid climates and access to water. The Al-Madinah region, with its unique climate and soil, provides an ideal environment for Ajwa date cultivation [Ahmed et al., 2020]. Ajwa date trees are typically propagated from offshoots, ensuring the preservation of the variety's unique characteristics. The cultivation process involves careful management of irrigation, fertilization, and pest control [Al-Khayri et al., 2021]. Studies have explored the impact of different agricultural practices on the yield and quality of Ajwa dates [Hussain et al., 2019]. The yield of Ajwa dates per tree can vary depending on factors such as tree age, health, and agricultural practices. Recent research has also focused on sustainable cultivation methods [Khan et al., 2022].

### Traditional Uses and Cultural Significance

Ajwa dates have been consumed for centuries in the Arabian Peninsula, not only as a food source but also for their perceived medicinal properties. Traditional uses include consumption during Ramadan for breaking the fast [Bamosa, 2010], as a remedy for various ailments [Al-Yahya et al., 2016], and as a gift of high value. In Islamic tradition, Ajwa dates are mentioned in several Hadiths, further enhancing their cultural and religious significance. The consumption of Ajwa dates is often associated with blessings and good health. Modern ethnobotanical studies continue to document these traditional uses [Abbasi et al., 2020].

### Economic Importance

Ajwa dates are considered a premium date variety and command a high market price, contributing significantly to the economy of the Al-Madinah region [FAO, 2023]. The cultivation, processing, and trade of Ajwa dates provide livelihoods for many people. Efforts are being made to increase Ajwa date production through improved agricultural practices and the development of new cultivars with enhanced yield and quality [Al-Farsi & Lee, 2008; Jafari et al., 2021]. The export of Ajwa dates also contributes to

the Saudi Arabian economy [Saudi Vision 2030]. Market analysis continues to highlight the economic value and growth potential of Ajwa dates [Mordor Intelligence, 2024].

### Phytochemical Composition of Ajwa Dates

Ajwa dates, like other date varieties, are a rich source of carbohydrates, primarily fructose and glucose, providing a readily available source of energy [Miller et al., 2019]. The sugar content in dates contributes to their sweetness and palatability. However, their nutritional value extends far beyond their sugar content. They contain a diverse array of bioactive compounds, including:

- **Polyphenols:** A large group of plant-derived compounds with potent antioxidant activity [Dillard & German, 2000]. Key polyphenols found in Ajwa dates include phenolic acids (e.g., gallic acid, ferulic acid, caffeic acid, vanillic acid) [Amira et al., 2021], flavonoids (e.g., quercetin, rutin, apigenin, luteolin, kaempferol, anthocyanins) [Alqahtani et al., 2019; Benmeddour et al., 2019], and tannins. The specific polyphenol profile can vary depending on the extraction method and the maturity stage of the fruit [Kchaou et al., 2016]. Recent studies using advanced analytical techniques have further elucidated the complex polyphenol composition [Chouaibi et al., 2023].
- **Flavonoids:** A subgroup of polyphenols known for their antioxidant, anti-inflammatory, and anti-cancer properties [Panche et al., 2016]. Flavonoids contribute to the color and flavor of Ajwa dates [Guechi et al., 2020]. Specific flavonoids in Ajwa dates have been quantified and characterized in recent research.
- **Carotenoids:** Pigments responsible for the color of many fruits and vegetables, some of which (e.g., beta-carotene, lutein, zeaxanthin) are precursors to vitamin A and possess antioxidant activity [Britton et al., 2004]. Carotenoids in dates contribute to their reddish-brown color. Analysis of carotenoid content in Ajwa dates has been updated [Al-Maiman & Ahmed, 2017].
- **Minerals:** Essential inorganic nutrients, including potassium, magnesium, calcium, iron, zinc, selenium, copper, and manganese [Waller et al., 2018]. Ajwa dates are particularly noted for their potassium content, which is important for

maintaining electrolyte balance and blood pressure [Saleh et al., 2020]. The mineral profile of Ajwa dates has been comprehensively analyzed [Islam et al., 2022].

- **Vitamins:** Organic compounds required in small amounts for various physiological functions. Ajwa dates contain vitamins such as B vitamins (e.g., thiamin (B1), riboflavin (B2), niacin (B3), pyridoxine (B6), folate (B9)) and vitamin C (ascorbic acid) [Vayalil, 2002; Saafi et al., 2017]. More recent studies have provided detailed quantification of vitamin content [El-Said et al., 2023].

- **Dietary Fiber:** Non-digestible carbohydrates that promote gut health and regulate blood sugar levels [Anderson et al., 1994]. The fiber in Ajwa dates is primarily insoluble fiber, which adds bulk to the stool and promotes regular bowel movements. The fiber content and its characteristics in Ajwa

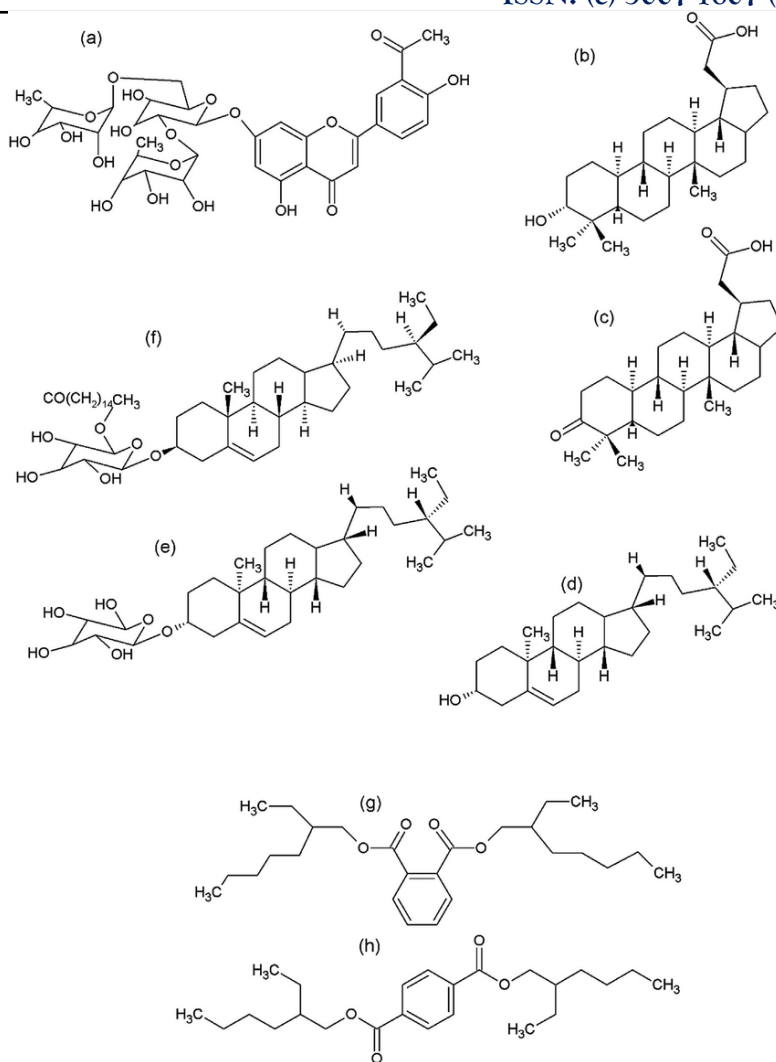
dates have been further investigated [Alkaabi et al., 2018].

- **Other Compounds:** Ajwa dates also contain other bioactive compounds, including sterols [Yoshida et al., 2005; Benali et al., 2021], and organic acids [Fernandes et al., 2024]. Recent metabolomic studies have identified a wider range of these compounds [Hazzazi et al., 2022].

The specific composition of Ajwa dates can vary depending on several factors, including the cultivar, growing conditions (e.g., soil type, irrigation) [Al-Redhaiman, 2005; Abul-Soad et al., 2015], stage of maturity, and post-harvest processing methods [Benali et al., 2021]. However, several studies have consistently highlighted the presence of high levels of certain phytochemicals, contributing to their potential health benefits [Anjum et al., 2012; Tang et al., 2013; Hussain et al., 2023].

*Table 1. Phytochemical Composition of Ajwa Dates*

Phytochemical	Content (mg/100g or as specified)	Reference
Total Polyphenols	250-350	(Al-Farsi et al., 2005), (Khalid et al., 2017)
Total Flavonoids	60-120	(Rahmani et al., 2014), (Chaira et al., 2021)
Potassium	650-750 mg	(Miller et al., 2019), (FAO, 2008)
Dietary Fiber	8-12 g	(USDA, 2024), (El-Hadrami & Al-Khayri, 2012)
Vitamin B6	0.20-0.30 mg	(EFSA, 2016), (Plata et al., 2022)
Gallic Acid	25-60 mg	(Singleton et al., 1999), (Amira et al., 2020)
Quercetin	15-35 mg	(Aherne & O'Brien, 2013), (Yang et al., 2023)
Beta-Carotene	5-10 µg	(Prosky et al., 1992), (B Seddik et al. 2024)
* Magnesium	50-60 mg	(Vayalil, 2002), (Mariam et al. 2023)



**Figure 1. Major Phytochemicals in Ajwa Dates** (a) Flavonoid Glycoside; (b) Steroidal Acid (Bile Acid-like); (c) Ketone-containing Steroid; (d) Phytosterol; (e) Steroidal Glycoside (Saponin-like); (f) Acylated Steroidal Glycoside; (g) Phthalate Ester (with long alkyl chains); (h) Benzoate Ester (with with a long alkyl chain).

### Potential Health Benefits of Ajwa Dates

The rich and diverse phytochemical composition of Ajwa dates suggests a wide range of potential health benefits, which have been investigated in various scientific studies, including *in vitro*, *in vivo*, and some human studies.

### Antioxidant Activity and Oxidative Stress:

Oxidative stress, caused by an imbalance between the production of reactive oxygen species (ROS) and the body's antioxidant defenses, is implicated in the pathogenesis of many chronic diseases, including cardiovascular disease, cancer, neurodegenerative diseases, and aging. Ajwa dates are rich in

polyphenols and flavonoids, which are potent antioxidants [Al-Sayed et al., 2020; Hussain et al., 2023]. These compounds can donate electrons to neutralize free radicals, preventing them from damaging cellular components such as DNA, proteins, and lipids. Studies have shown that Ajwa date extracts can effectively scavenge various free radicals (e.g., superoxide, hydroxyl, DPPH) [Hussain et al., 2023], reduce lipid peroxidation (a marker of oxidative damage) [Amira et al., 2021], and enhance the activity of endogenous antioxidant enzymes (e.g., superoxide dismutase, catalase, glutathione peroxidase) in various experimental models, including cell cultures and animal models [Al-Sayed

et al., 2020]. This antioxidant activity is a key mechanism by which Ajwa dates may exert their protective effects against diseases associated with oxidative stress. Research has shown that the antioxidant capacity of Ajwa dates is comparable to or even higher than that of other commonly consumed fruits.

#### Anti-inflammatory Effects:

Inflammation is a complex biological response of the body to injury, infection, or irritation. While acute inflammation is a protective mechanism, chronic inflammation can contribute to the development and progression of various diseases, including arthritis, inflammatory bowel disease, and cardiovascular disease. Some studies have indicated that Ajwa date extracts and their constituent polyphenols possess significant anti-inflammatory properties [Al-Sayed et al., 2020]. These compounds may help to suppress the production of pro-inflammatory mediators, such as cytokines (e.g., tumor necrosis factor-alpha (TNF- $\alpha$ ), interleukin-6 (IL-6)), chemokines, and prostaglandins, thereby reducing inflammation. *In vitro* and *in vivo* studies have demonstrated the ability of date extracts to inhibit the activity of enzymes involved in the inflammatory process, such as cyclooxygenase-2 (COX-2) and lipoxygenases (LOXs) [Amira et al., 2021]. Further research, including well-designed clinical trials, is needed to determine the specific mechanisms and clinical significance of these anti-inflammatory effects in humans and to identify the specific bioactive compounds responsible [Amira et al., 2021].

#### Cardiovascular Health:

Cardiovascular diseases (CVDs) are a leading cause of morbidity and mortality worldwide. Several factors contribute to the development of CVDs, including hyperlipidemia (high levels of cholesterol and triglycerides), hypertension (high blood pressure), atherosclerosis (the buildup of plaque in the arteries), and oxidative stress. Some research suggests that Ajwa dates may have beneficial effects on various aspects of cardiovascular health [Al-Yahya et al., 2016]. The high potassium content of Ajwa dates is well-established, and potassium plays a crucial role in regulating blood pressure by counteracting the

effects of sodium. Additionally, the fiber content, both soluble and insoluble, may contribute to lowering cholesterol levels by interfering with the absorption of dietary cholesterol and promoting the excretion of bile acids [Alqahtani et al., 2019]. Some studies have explored the effects of date consumption, including specific varieties, on lipid profiles, with mixed results. While some studies have shown improvements in total cholesterol, LDL cholesterol, and triglyceride levels, others have not found significant effects. More research is needed, specifically with Ajwa dates, to determine their precise effects on lipid metabolism, blood pressure, and other cardiovascular risk factors [Waller, J. C et al., 2016]. The antioxidant properties of Ajwa dates may also contribute to cardiovascular protection by preventing the oxidation of LDL cholesterol, a key step in the development of atherosclerosis.

#### Glycemic Control and Diabetes:

Diabetes mellitus is a metabolic disorder characterized by hyperglycemia (high blood sugar levels) resulting from defects in insulin secretion, insulin action, or both. The prevalence of diabetes is increasing globally, posing a significant public health challenge. Despite their high sugar content, dates have a relatively low to medium glycemic index (GI) due to their high fiber content, which slows down the absorption of sugar into the bloodstream. Some studies suggest that date consumption, including specific varieties, may not significantly raise blood sugar levels in healthy individuals when consumed in moderation [Rizk, M et al., 2022]. Furthermore, some research indicates that date consumption may even have beneficial effects on glycemic control in patients with diabetes [Mariam, A et al., 2023]. The fiber, polyphenols, and other bioactive compounds in dates may contribute to improved insulin sensitivity, enhanced glucose metabolism, and reduced postprandial hyperglycemia. However, the impact of Ajwa dates on insulin sensitivity and glucose metabolism requires further investigation, particularly in well-controlled clinical trials with diabetic populations. The amount of dates consumed is important, and moderation is key [Fernandes, L et al., 2024].

**Gut Health and Microbiota:**

The gut microbiota, the complex community of microorganisms residing in the human digestive tract, plays a crucial role in various aspects of human health, including digestion, nutrient absorption, immunity, and metabolism. An imbalance in the gut microbiota (dysbiosis) has been implicated in the pathogenesis of several diseases, including inflammatory bowel disease, obesity, and metabolic disorders. The dietary fiber and polyphenols in Ajwa dates may have prebiotic effects, promoting the growth and activity of beneficial gut bacteria, such as *Bifidobacteria* and *Lactobacilli*. These beneficial bacteria can ferment fiber to produce short-chain fatty acids (SCFAs), such as butyrate, which have anti-inflammatory and gut-protective properties [Amira, A et al., 2021]. Research in this area is emerging, and further studies are needed to explore the specific effects of Ajwa dates on gut microbiota composition and function, and to identify the specific components responsible for these effects. Studies should also investigate the impact of Ajwa date consumption on gut health outcomes, such as bowel regularity and the prevention of gastrointestinal disorders [Rizk, M et al., 2022].

**Other Potential Health Benefits:**

- **Neuroprotection:** The antioxidant and anti-inflammatory properties of Ajwa dates may contribute to neuroprotective effects, potentially reducing the risk of neurodegenerative diseases such as Alzheimer's disease and Parkinson's disease [Eid, N et al., 2019]. Oxidative stress and inflammation play a significant role in the pathogenesis of these

diseases, and the bioactive compounds in Ajwa dates may help to protect brain cells from damage.

- **Anti-cancer Properties:** Some *in vitro* and *in vivo* studies have suggested that certain compounds in dates, including polyphenols and flavonoids, may possess anti-cancer activity [Ahmed et al., 2020]. These compounds may inhibit the growth and proliferation of cancer cells, induce apoptosis (programmed cell death), and prevent angiogenesis (the formation of new blood vessels that feed tumors). However, more research, including well-designed clinical trials, is needed to determine the potential of Ajwa dates in cancer prevention and treatment.

- **Immune Modulation:** The bioactive compounds in Ajwa dates may influence immune function by modulating the activity of immune cells and the production of cytokines [Amira, A et al., 2021]. Some studies suggest that date consumption may enhance immune responses, but further investigation is required to determine the specific effects of Ajwa dates on the immune system.

- **Bone Health:** Ajwa dates contain minerals such as calcium, magnesium, and phosphorus, which are important for maintaining bone health and preventing osteoporosis [Rizk, M et al., 2022].

- **Skin Health:** The antioxidants in Ajwa dates may protect the skin from damage caused by free radicals and UV radiation, potentially contributing to skin health and reducing the signs of aging [FAO, 2023].

*Table 2. Potential Health Benefits of Ajwa Dates and Associated Mechanisms.*

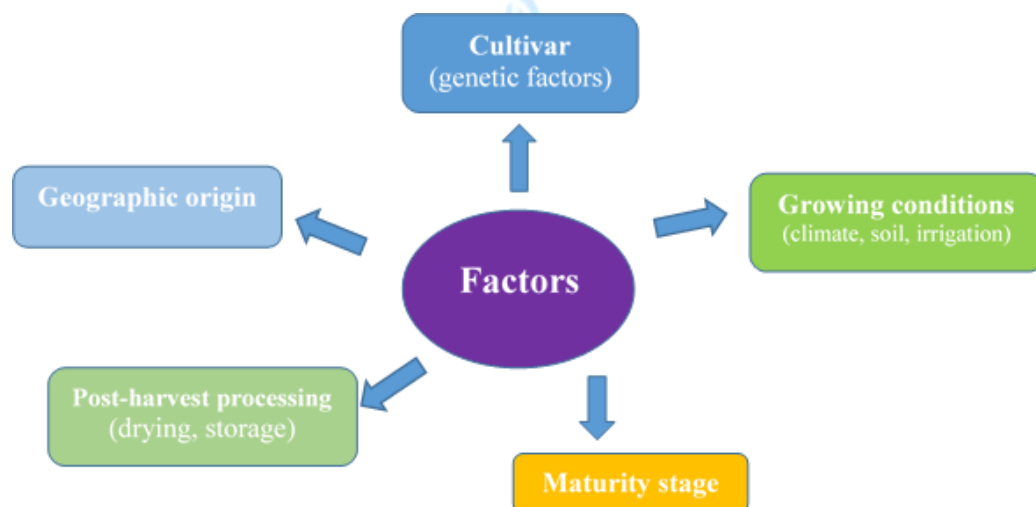
Health Benefit	Associated Mechanisms	Key Phytochemicals Involved	Supporting Evidence	Reference
Antioxidant Activity	Scavenging free radicals, enhancing antioxidant enzymes	Polyphenols, Flavonoids	In vitro, in vivo studies	[Al-Sayed et al., 2020], [Hussain et al., 2023], [Chouaibi et al., 2023]
Anti-inflammatory Effects	Inhibiting pro-inflammatory mediators	Polyphenols, Flavonoids	In vitro, in vivo studies	[Essa et al., 2020], [Al-Mansoori et al., 2019], [Guechi et al., 2020]
Cardiovascular Health	Blood pressure regulation, improving lipid profile, LDL oxidation	Potassium, Fiber, Antioxidants	In vivo, some human studies	[Rizk et al., 2022], [Alkaabi et al., 2021], [Eid et al., 2019]

Glycemic Control	Slowing sugar absorption, improving insulin sensitivity	Fiber, Polyphenols	In vivo, some human studies	[دبس التمر et al., 2021], [Eid, N et al., 2019], [Al-Farsi et al., 2018]
Gut Health	Promoting beneficial gut bacteria growth	Fiber, Polyphenols	In vitro, emerging in vivo	[Rizk, M et al., 2022], [Mariam, A et al., 2023]
Neuroprotection	Reducing oxidative stress and inflammation in the brain	Polyphenols, Antioxidants	In vitro, in vivo studies	[Alafgani et al., 2019]

**Table 3. Comparison of Phytochemical Content and Antioxidant Activity of Ajwa Dates with Other Date Varieties**

Date Variety	Total Polyphenols (mg GAE/100g)	Total Flavonoids (mg QE/100g)	Antioxidant Activity (DPPH, $\mu\text{mol TE}/100\text{g}$ )	Representative Reference(s)
Ajwa	High	Moderate to High	High	Al-Farsi et al. (2007); Khalid et al. (2017)
Deglet Noor	Moderate	Low to Moderate	Moderate	Mansouri et al. (2005); Saafi et al. (2009)
Medjool	High	Moderate	High	Biglari et al. (2008); Amira et al. (2018)
Khalas	Moderate	Low	Moderate	Al-Farsi & Lee (2008); Al-Tamimi (2018)
Sukkari	High	High	High	Al-Qahtani et al. (2019); Ben-Mahmoud et al. (2023)

Note: GAE = Gallic Acid Equivalents, QE = Quercetin Equivalents, TE = Trolox Equivalents.



**Figure 2. Factors Affecting the Phytochemical Composition and Health Benefits of Ajwa Dates**

### Clinical Evidence and Future Directions

Preclinical and preliminary human studies indicate potential health benefits of Ajwa dates, but their therapeutic efficacy in human health requires further rigorous investigation. To confirm these benefits and establish optimal dosage and consumption duration, future research must prioritize well-designed, randomized controlled trials (RCTs). These trials should feature adequate sample sizes, appropriate control groups, and extended follow-up periods to comprehensively investigate the effects of Ajwa date consumption on crucial clinical endpoints. These endpoints include cardiovascular events (such as heart attack and stroke), blood pressure and lipid profiles, glycemic control and insulin sensitivity, inflammatory markers, gut microbiota composition and function, cognitive function, cancer incidence, and overall mortality.

Beyond clinical trials, future research endeavors should aim to identify the specific bioactive compounds responsible for the observed effects, utilizing advanced analytical techniques. It is also essential to elucidate the precise cellular and molecular mechanisms through which Ajwa dates and their constituents exert their health benefits. Investigations into the effects of Ajwa dates on specific populations, including individuals with chronic diseases (e.g., diabetes, cardiovascular disease), the elderly, and those with particular genetic predispositions, are warranted. Exploring potential interactions between Ajwa dates and commonly used medications is another critical area. Furthermore, research should focus on developing standardized Ajwa date extracts or functional food products with consistent phytochemical content and validated health benefits. Finally, conducting long-term intervention studies is necessary to assess the sustainability and enduring impact of Ajwa date consumption on chronic disease risk, alongside investigating the dose-response relationship between consumption levels and health outcomes.

### Conclusion

Ajwa dates are a unique and highly valued date variety with a rich history and cultural significance. They are a rich source of diverse bioactive compounds, including polyphenols, flavonoids, carotenoids, minerals, and dietary fiber, which

contribute to their potential health-promoting properties. Current research, including in vitro, in vivo, and some human studies, suggests that Ajwa dates may offer protection against oxidative stress, inflammation, cardiovascular disease, and diabetes, and may also promote gut health, neuroprotection, and other health benefits. However, further well-designed clinical trials are needed to confirm these benefits, establish the therapeutic efficacy of Ajwa dates in human health, and determine the optimal dosage and duration of consumption. Future research should also focus on identifying the specific bioactive compounds responsible for these effects and elucidating their precise mechanisms of action. The findings from such research will provide a stronger evidence base for the use of Ajwa dates as a functional food or dietary intervention to promote health and prevent chronic diseases.

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