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Applications of Nanotechnology in Crop Improvement: New Era of Sustainable Agriculture

Pradip Kumar[1,*], Neetu Kumari[2], Vinita Dheeran[3]

Abstract

Nanotechnology is revolutionizing agriculture by providing inventive solutions for crop improvement and sustainable farming practices. It represents a transformative force in agriculture, promising to improve productivity, yield, sustainability, and food security. This review paper focused on the certain advantages of nanoscience and nanotechnology in enhancing agricultural productivity, disease management, and food safety. By manipulating different materials and objects at the nanoscale, researchers can develop advanced tools such as smart sensors and targeted delivery systems that improve nutrient absorption and combat plant pathogens. By integrating these nanotechnological devices or sensors into farming practices, farmers can utilize nanosensors for real-time monitoring of soil and crop health. The utilization and incorporation of nanoparticles in fertilizers and pesticides improve soil structure, nutrient availability, water management, and enhance their effectiveness with targeted delivery system which simultaneously offers a chance of reduced adverse environmental impacts. Furthermore, recent developments in genetic manipulation through gene editing technologies are streamlined through nanotechnology, enables precision farming, allowing for optimal resource allocation based on real-time data. This review highlights the potential applications and implications of nanostructured materials to improve soil health, water management, and crop resilience against climate change. Additionally, gene editing technologies like CRISPR can be integrated with nanotechnology for precise modifications, leading to crops with better nutritional profiles and disease resistance. Overall, the integration of nanotechnology in agriculture emphasizes its role in addressing food safety concerns in the context of a growing global population and presents significant opportunities to eliminate food security challenges while encouraging sustainable practices.

Keywords: Nanotechnology, Crop Improvement, Sustainable Agriculture, Precision Farming, Food Safety, Soil Health, Water Management, Gene Editing, Nutritional Quality

***Author for Correspondence**
Pradip Kumar
E-mail: panwarpradeepp@gmail.com

[1]Assistant Professor, Department of Biotechnology, C.C.S. University, Meerut, Uttar Pradesh, India.
[2]Research Associate, Basic and Applied Sciences Education Association, Meerut, Uttar Pradesh, India.
[3]Associate Professor, Department of Botany, M.M.H. College, Ghaziabad, Uttar Pradesh, India.

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INTRODUCTION

The revolutionary potential of nanotechnology spans various sectors, including healthcare, textiles, materials, information technology, and energy. Products such as antimicrobial bandages, transparent sunscreens, stain-resistant fabrics, and self-cleaning surfaces illustrate its practical applications [1]. A notable introduction of nanotechnology in agriculture has been published in 2003 by the Department of Agriculture's Roadmap of U.S., which indicated that it could radically alter food production, processing, packaging, and consumption (Figure 1) [2, 3]. The market for nanotechnology was valued at approximately $7.6 billion in 2003, yet its full potential in agriculture remains largely untapped

[4]. The agricultural and food sectors have yet to fully harness the transformative potential of nanotechnology. This innovative technology could bring about significant changes by offering advanced solutions for treating diseases at the molecular level, swiftly identifying pathogens, and improving plants' nutrient absorption capabilities [5]. Additionally, smart sensors and delivery systems are poised to help farmers tackle viruses and various plant diseases [6–8]. Soon, nanostructured catalysts are expected to enhance the effectiveness of pesticides, herbicides, and weedicides, enabling the use of smaller quantities [9].

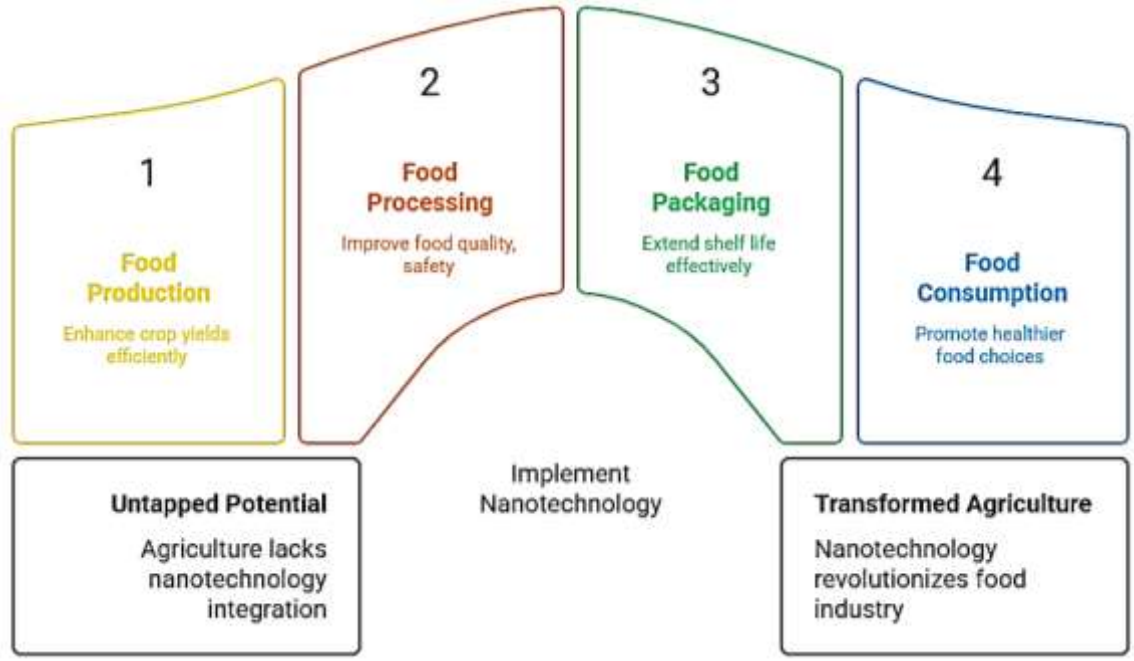

Figure 1. Broad application area of nanotechnology in agriculture.

Nanotechnology has a great potential to enhance the agricultural productivity in a sustainable manner while using healthy agricultural practices more effectively and decrease the change of toxic by-products formation which can develop as threat to the environment or human health [10–13]. Nanotechnology-based biosensors deployed in crop fields and in the plants to monitor all conditions of soils, growth, and disease vectors, can expand the concept of precision farming in which productivity and yield can be improved while providing inputs (*i.e.*, fertilizer, pesticide, irrigation, etc.) and conditions (*i.e.*, temperature, solar radiation) only in precise levels necessary [2–3]. Similarly, nanotube sensors implanted in the skin of farm animals can detect expression levels of hormone or unusual amounts of antibodies, thereby helping to optimize breeding procedures and to initiate veterinary interventions before the onset of diseases that can hamper growth [14]. Similar to nanomedicinal applications, pesticides, herbicides and weedicides can be formulated with nanoparticles to enhance the effectiveness of the active ingredients and allow targeted delivery and release, consequently minimizing the required dosage per application and reduce the overflow of the chemicals [15–17].

NANOTECHNOLOGY IN SOIL MANAGEMENT

Soil health is critical for sustainable agriculture, and nanotechnology offers inventive and cutting-edge methods for soil management. Nanoparticles can boost the soil structure, enhance nutrient availability, and promote beneficial microbial activity. For example, nanosilica has been shown to improve soil aeration and water retention, leading to better crop yields [18–19]. Furthermore, nano-encapsulated fertilizers can provide nutrients in a controlled manner, minimizing runoff and ensuring that crops receive the right nutrients at the right time [20].

Water Management and Irrigation

Efficient water use is an important part of sustainable agriculture. Nanotechnology applications in irrigation systems can offers to significant improvements in water management. Advance automative irrigation systems that incorporate nanosensors can monitor soil moisture levels in real-time, allowing farmers to apply water only, when necessary [2, 21]. Additionally, nanotechnology can enhance water purification processes, making it easier to reuse wastewater for irrigation [22].

Enhancing Crop Resilience

Nanotechnology can help crops withstand environmental stresses such as water scarcity, brininess, and pests. Nanoparticles offer the enhanced uptake of critically required nutrients, making plants more resilient to adverse conditions [1, 15]. For instance, Jabbar and Azeem (2023) [23] demonstrated that the use of iron nanoparticles can boost the growth, and productivity of crops like tomatoes, even under challenging conditions. This capability is highly useful to resolve the issue of rapid climate change, where crops will face increasingly unpredictable weather patterns.

PRECISION FARMING

Precision farming aims to enhance the crop yields while reduce the inputs such as fertilizers and pesticides through advanced monitoring of environmental conditions. This approach utilizes technologies like GPS and remote sensing to optimize resource application, ultimately reducing waste and lowering production costs [24, 25]. Although fully integrated systems are still in development, the incorporation of nanotechnology is anticipated to enhance future precision farming practices (Figure 2) [26].

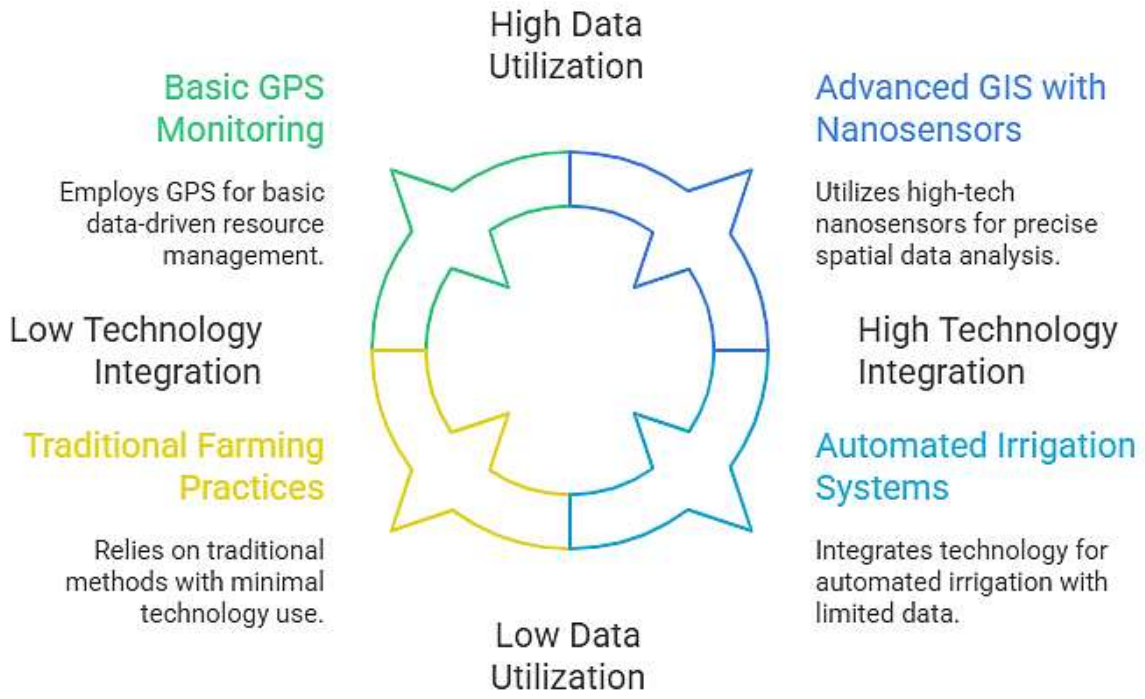

Figure 2. Integration of technology for precision farming.

Data-Driven Decision Making

The acceptance of precision farming techniques is heavily reliant on the collection and analysis of the data. Nanotechnology can facilitate the development of advanced data collection tools, including nanosensors that monitor various soil and crop parameters. These nanosensors can be useful in providing real-time data on soil moisture, nutrient levels, and pest populations, which ultimately enables the farmers to make better decisions about resource allocation [14, 27]. By integrating this data with machine learning algorithms, agriculture sector can refine their practices for improved efficiency and productivity.

Geographic Information Systems (GIS)

Geographic Information Systems (GIS) play an important role in precision farming by allowing farmers to analyze spatial data related to their fields. When combined with nanotechnology, GIS can enhance the fidelity of precision in routine agriculture practices. For example, to identify the patterns and trends on soil conditions, data can be collected by the deployment of nanosensors across the agriculture field and can then be examined using GIS software [18, 21]. This information can help the farmers optimize planting schedules, irrigation practices, and fertilizer applications.

CROP IMPROVEMENT

Nanotechnology also plays an important role in crop genetic modification (Figure 3). Routine methods of mutation have been supplemented by nanotechnology, which allows for more precise alterations at the atomic level. For example, researchers at Chiang Mai University utilized nanotechnology to develop a new rice variety by altering the genetic makeup of traditional rice through targeted atomic modifications [1]. This method provides a more controlled approach to crop improvement, reducing the likelihood of unintended consequences associated with traditional genetic modification techniques.

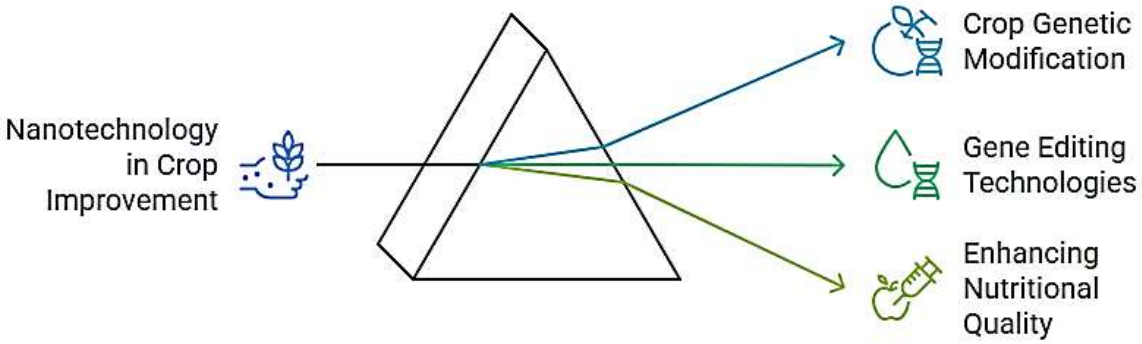

Figure 3. Multifaceted role of nanotechnology in crop improvement.

Gene Editing Technology

Recent breakthroughs in gene editing technologies have opened new avenues for crop improvement. Nanotechnology can upgrade the delivery of gene-editing tools to plant cells, improving the efficiency and impact of these techniques. For instance, engineered nanoparticles can carry CRISPR components directly into plant cells, allowing for precise modifications to the genome without the need for complex transformation methods [23, 28]. This capability has the potential to accelerate the development of desirable traits of crop plants, such as improved resistance to diseases or improved nutritional profiles.

Enhancing Nutritional Quality

Nanotechnology can also be utilized to enhance the nutritional quality of crops. By encapsulating essential nutrients within nanoparticles, researchers can improve the bioavailability of these nutrients when consumed [21]. This application is particularly relevant in addressing malnutrition issues in developing countries, where access to nutrient-rich foods may be limited.

PLANT DISEASE DIAGNOSTICS

Effective disease management in crops is often hindered by the inability to accurately detect pathogens at critical stages (Figure 4). Nanotechnology facilitates rapid diagnostics through the development of nano-based kits that can identify viral strains and optimize the progression of diseases. This technology allows for initial stage and rapid disease detections, reducing crop losses and minimizing environmental impact [29].

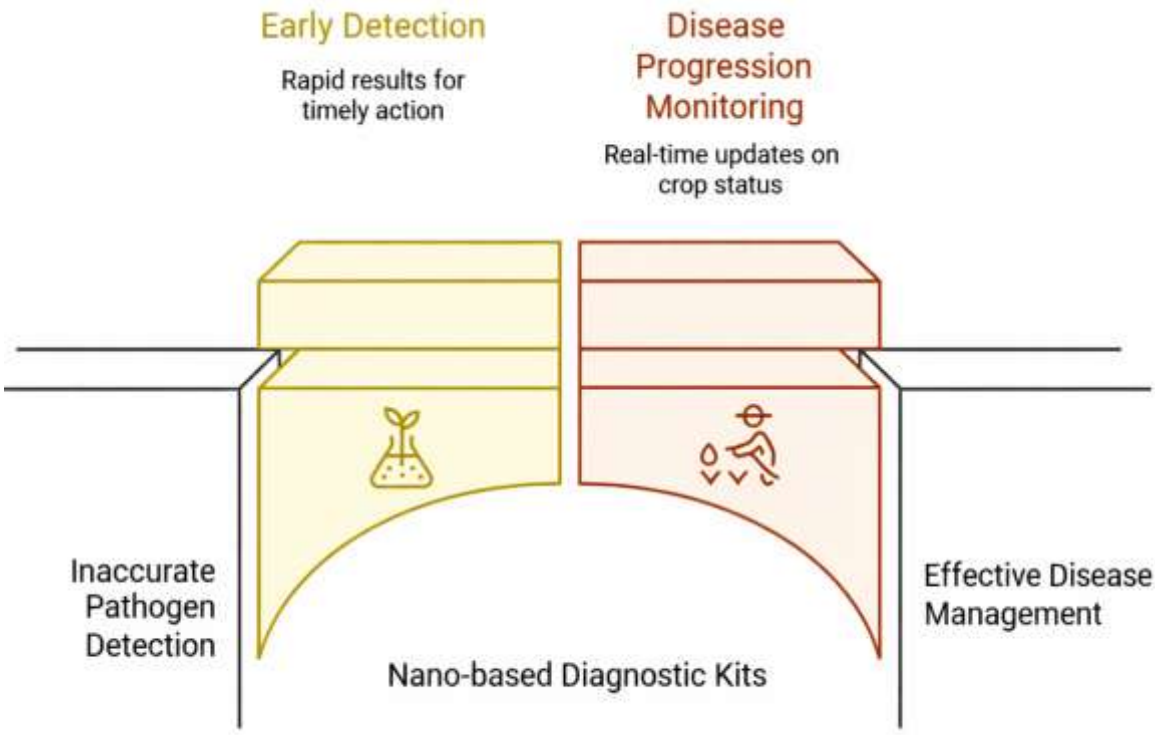

Figure 4. Nano-based plant disease diagnostics tools and kits for rapid detection.

Premature Detection of Plant Diseases

Premature detection of plant diseases is significant for effective management and control. Nano-based diagnostic tools can provide farmers with rapid results, allowing them to take action before diseases spread [30]. For instance, advancements in nanobiosensors have enabled the detection of specific pathogens in soil and plant tissues, providing crucial information for disease prevention strategies (Gonzalez-Melendi et al., 2008) [15]. This capability not only reduces the reliance on chemical treatments but also promotes more sustainable agricultural practices.

Monitoring Disease Progression

In addition to early detection, nanotechnology can facilitate the monitoring of disease progression in crops. By utilizing nanosensors that can detect changes in plant health indicators, farmers can receive real-time updates on the status of their crops [11, 14, 31]. This information can help guide management decisions, such as the timing of pesticide applications or the implementation of cultural practices to mitigate disease spread.

HORMONE AND ANTIBIOTIC DELIVERY

Controlled release systems utilizing nanotechnology can protect sensitive drugs during transportation to target sites within plants (Figure 5). These systems enhance drug stability and solubility, improving the effectiveness of treatments against various plant diseases [7, 32].

TARGETED DELIVERY OF GROWTH REGULATORS

Nanotechnology can enable the targeted delivery of plant hormones and growth regulators, promoting optimal growth and development. For example, engineering of nanoparticles can turn them to release hormones in response to specific environmental triggers, ensuring that plants receive the necessary growth signals when they need them most [15, 27]. This level of precision can enhance the crop yields and robust the overall plant health.

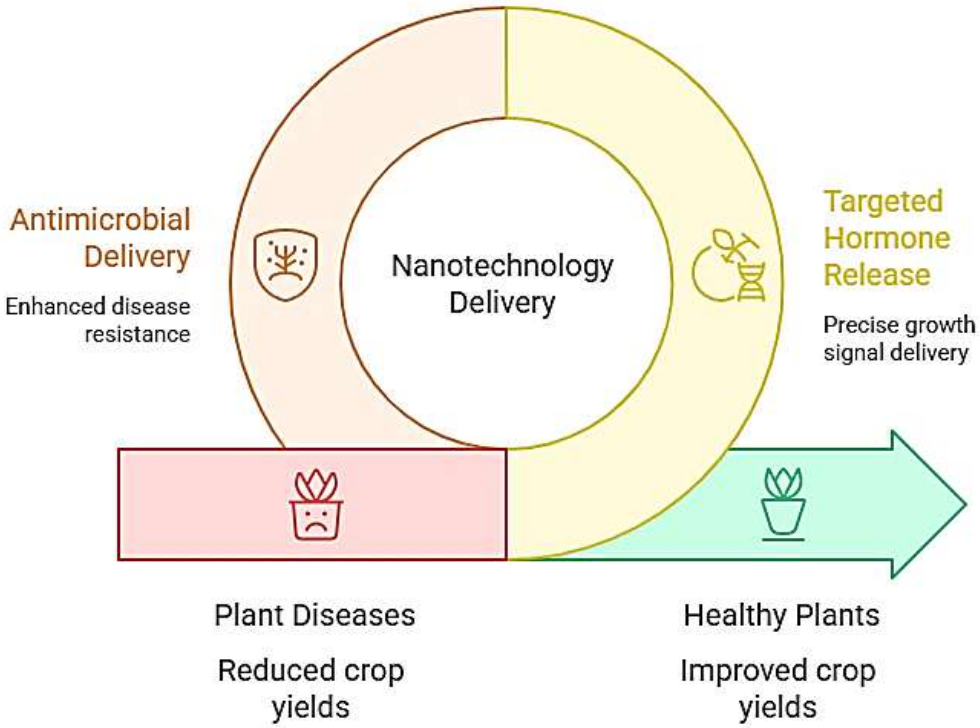

Figure 5. *In vivo* nano-based targeted material delivery in plants.

Improved Resistance to Plant Diseases

Along with growth regulators, nanotechnology can be used to deliver antimicrobial compounds to plants, enhancing their resistance to diseases. By encapsulating these compounds in nanoparticles, researchers can improve their stability and efficacy, permitting for controlled disease management [16, 20]. This procedure reduces the requirement for chemical pesticides as well as it offers to reduce the environmental impact associated with their use.

NANOPARTICLES IN FERTILIZERS

Nanoparticles can enhance fertilizer efficiency, leading to reduced environmental accumulation of harmful substances (Figure 6). This application significantly improves the nutrient absorption and also promotes sustainable agricultural practices [19–20].

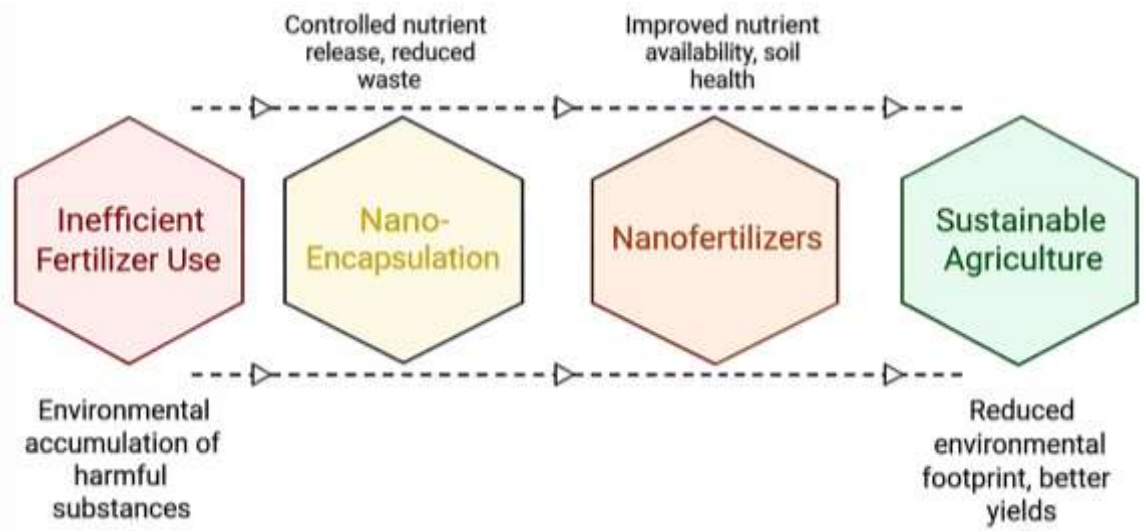

Figure 6. Nano-fertilizers for crop improvement.

Nano-Encapsulated Fertilizers

Nano-encapsulated fertilizers offer several advantages over traditional formulations. By controlling the release of nutrients, these fertilizers can ensure that plants receive the accurate amount of nutrients at the accurate time, reducing waste and eliminate the risk of leaching into groundwater [23]. This approach improves crop yields as well as it also contributes to more sustainable farming practices.

Enhancing Soil Fertility

Nanotechnology offers to boost the soil fertility through the development of precised nanofertilizers. These fertilizers can improve nutrient availability and promote beneficial microbial activity in the soil, leading to healthier crops and improved soil health [18, 21]. By incorporating nanotechnology into fertilizer formulations, farmers can achieve better results with fewer inputs, ultimately reducing their environmental footprint.

FOOD INDUSTRY APPLICATIONS

The integration of nanoapproaches in the food industry focuses on enhancing food safety and quality (Figure 7). Innovations include the use of nanoscale materials for packaging, which can improve shelf life and prevent spoilage [29]. Additionally, nano-biosensors can monitor food safety by detecting pathogens and contaminants, ensuring higher standards of food security [25, 30].

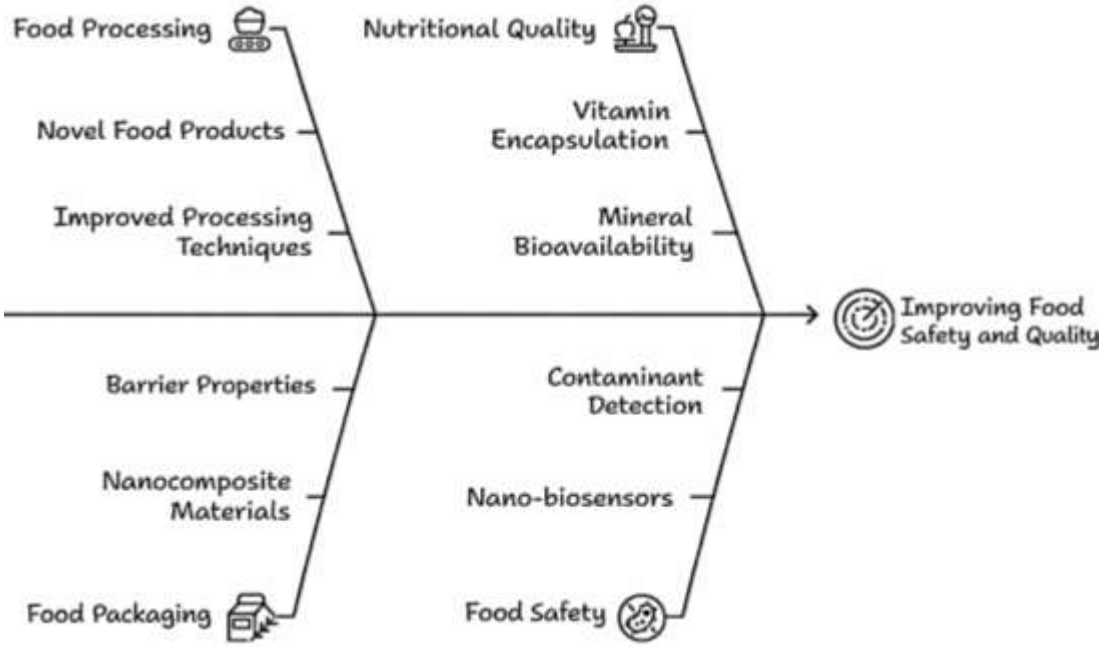

Figure 7. Food safety and quality improvement with nanotechnology.

Food Processing and Safety

Nanotechnology plays a distinctive role in food processing by equipping the production of ideal food products and improving existing processing techniques. For example, nanostructured materials can be employed in the formulation of functional foods that provide health benefits beyond basic nutrition [22]. Furthermore, nano-filters can remove undesirable compounds from food and beverages, enhancing safety and quality.

Food Packaging Innovations

Innovations in food packaging through nanotechnology can significantly increase the storage and consumption time of food items. The development of nanocomposite materials provides improved barrier properties against gases and moisture, thereby preventing spoilage [19]. These materials can help reduce food waste and enhance consumer confidence in food safety.

Enhancing Nutritional Quality

Nanotechnology holds promise for enhancing the nutritional quality of consumable items. The bioavailability of the vitamins, minerals and other essential bioproducts can be increased by encapsulating within different types of nanoparticles and it ultimately allows the consumers to gain fullest health advantages [21]. This application is particularly relevant in addressing public health issues associated to nutrient deficiencies.

CONCLUSION

Nanotechnology holds great promise for revolutionizing agriculture and food production. By enhancing crop productivity, improving disease management, and ensuring food safety, it could significantly beneficial to futuristic approaches of agricultural sector. To realize its full potential, it is essential to thoroughly explore the ongoing research and developments in this field. As we move forward, it is also necessary to counter any potential risk associated with the implementation of nanotechnological tools and products in the agricultural field while maximizing its benefits for food safety, nutritional security and environmental sustainability.

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