International Journal of Advance and Applied Research
Peer Reviewed | International Open Access Journal
ISSN: 2347-7075 | Impact Factor – 8.141 | *Website:* https://ijaar.co.in/
Volume-13, Issue-4 | March – April 2026

Original Article

Comparative Efficacy of Scorpion Toxin in Combination with Entomopathogenic Fungi Toxin Against Some Insect Pests

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Manuscript ID: IJAAR-130424
ISSN: 2347-7075
Impact Factor – 8.141

Volume - 13
Issue - 4
March – April 2026
Pp. 143 - 150

Submitted: 22 Mar. 2026
Revised: 04 Apr. 2026
Accepted: 06 Apr. 2026
Published: 10 Apr. 2026

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Quick Response Code:

Website: https://ijaar.co.in/

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.20272201

DOI Link:
https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20272201

Abstract:

The rapid development of resistance among insect pests to conventional chemical pesticides has emerged as a major challenge to global agricultural sustainability, necessitating the exploration of innovative, eco-friendly, and biologically efficient pest management strategies. In this context, the present study investigates the comparative efficacy of scorpion-derived neurotoxins and entomopathogenic fungal toxins, both as standalone agents and in integrated combinations, against selected economically significant insect pests.

Scorpion toxins, particularly insect-selective neurotoxins, function by targeting voltage-gated ion channels in the insect nervous system, leading to rapid paralysis, disruption of neuromuscular coordination, and eventual mortality. In contrast, entomopathogenic fungi such as Beauveria bassiana *and* Metarhizium anisopliae *infect insect hosts through cuticular penetration, followed by internal proliferation and secretion of secondary metabolites and toxins that impair physiological and metabolic processes. While both agents independently exhibit significant insecticidal properties, their combined application—especially through genetically engineered fungal strains expressing scorpion toxin genes—has been shown to produce synergistic effects.*

The study adopts an experimental and analytical framework, integrating laboratory-based observations with insights derived from existing scientific literature. Key parameters such as mortality rate, median lethal time (LT_{50}), feeding inhibition, and behavioral changes were considered to evaluate comparative performance. The results indicate that the combined treatment significantly enhances virulence, accelerates the infection cycle, and reduces the time required to achieve lethal outcomes compared to individual treatments. Additionally, the integrated approach induces pronounced sub-lethal effects, including reduced feeding activity and impaired mobility, thereby minimizing crop damage even prior to insect mortality.

Furthermore, the study underscores the advantages of this biotechnological intervention in terms of specificity, environmental safety, and compatibility with integrated pest management (IPM) systems. Unlike conventional pesticides, the combined use of scorpion toxins and entomopathogenic fungi reduces the risk of environmental contamination, non-target toxicity, and resistance development. However, despite its promising potential, several challenges remain, including issues related to large-scale production, formulation stability, regulatory approval, biosafety concerns, and potential ecological impacts on non-target organisms.

The findings of this study suggest that the integration of scorpion neurotoxins with entomopathogenic fungi represents a significant advancement in *the field of biological pest control. It offers a sustainable and effective alternative to chemical pesticides, aligning with global efforts toward environmentally responsible agriculture. The paper concludes by emphasizing the need for further research focusing on field-level validation, genetic optimization, risk assessment, and commercialization strategies to fully harness the potential of this innovative biocontrol approach.[1]*

Keywords: Scorpion Toxin Entomopathogenic Fungi; Bioinsecticides; Integrated Pest Management; Insect Neurotoxins; Sustainable Agriculture.

How to cite this article:
Dr. Suman Kumari (2026). Comparative Efficacy of Scorpion Toxin in Combination with Entomopathogenic Fungi Toxin Against Some Insect Pests. International Journal of Advance and Applied Research, 13(4), 143 - 150. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20272201

Introduction:

Insect pests constitute one of the most critical constraints to global agricultural productivity, leading to substantial crop losses, reduced yield quality, and significant economic damage worldwide. It is estimated that a considerable proportion of annual agricultural output is lost due to pest infestations, particularly in developing countries where effective pest management strategies are often limited.[1] Traditionally, chemical pesticides have been the primary means of controlling insect populations due to their immediate effectiveness and ease of application. However, their prolonged and indiscriminate use has resulted in several adverse consequences, including the development of pesticide resistance, environmental contamination, bioaccumulation in food chains, and detrimental effects on non-target organisms such as beneficial insects, soil microorganisms, and even human health.[2]

In response to these growing concerns, there has been an increasing shift toward environmentally sustainable and biologically based pest management strategies. Among these, biological control methods have gained considerable attention due to their eco-friendly nature, specificity, and long-term effectiveness. One promising avenue in this domain involves the use of venom-derived peptides, particularly scorpion neurotoxins, which exhibit high specificity toward insect nervous systems.

Scorpion venom is a complex mixture of bioactive compounds, including peptides that selectively target voltage-gated ion channels in insects. These neurotoxins, especially those affecting sodium channels, disrupt normal nerve impulse transmission, resulting in rapid paralysis and eventual death of the insect host.[3] Importantly, many of these toxins exhibit a high degree of selectivity for insects, making them relatively safe for mammals and other non-target organisms. This specificity enhances their potential as candidates for the development of novel bioinsecticides.

Parallel to this, entomopathogenic fungi have emerged as effective biological control agents in integrated pest management systems. Species such as *Beauveria bassiana* and *Metarhizium anisopliae* are widely studied for their ability to infect a broad range of insect hosts. These fungi initiate infection through adhesion of spores to the insect cuticle, followed by germination, penetration, and proliferation within the host body. During this process, they secrete a variety of enzymes and secondary metabolites that degrade host tissues and interfere with physiological functions, ultimately leading to death.[4] The advantages of entomopathogenic fungi include host specificity, environmental safety, and the ability to persist in natural ecosystems.

Recent advances in molecular biology and genetic engineering have facilitated the integration of these two biological approaches. Specifically, the development of genetically modified fungal strains capable of expressing scorpion toxin genes represents a significant innovation in pest control technology. This approach combines the rapid neurotoxic action of scorpion venom with the natural infection and delivery mechanisms of fungi, thereby enhancing overall efficacy.

Against this backdrop, the present study aims to comparatively evaluate the efficacy of scorpion toxins, entomopathogenic fungi, and their combined application against selected insect pests. The study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of their individual and synergistic effects, thereby contributing to the development of sustainable and efficient pest management strategies.

Literature Review:

The existing body of literature provides substantial evidence supporting the potential of scorpion toxins and entomopathogenic fungi as effective biological control agents. Scorpion-derived neurotoxins have been extensively studied for their high specificity and potent insecticidal properties. These peptides selectively bind to ion channels in insect nervous systems, particularly sodium and potassium channels, leading to disruption of nerve signaling and rapid immobilization.[3] Several studies have demonstrated that these toxins are highly effective against a wide range of insect pests while exhibiting minimal toxicity toward vertebrates, thereby making them suitable candidates for bioinsecticide development.

Research on entomopathogenic fungi further reinforces their importance in sustainable pest management. These fungi act as natural pathogens of insects and have been successfully used in various agricultural systems. Their mode of action involves direct penetration of the insect cuticle, followed by internal colonization and secretion of toxins that disrupt metabolic and physiological processes.[4] Unlike chemical pesticides, these fungi are biodegradable, environmentally safe, and capable of self-propagation under favorable conditions.

A significant breakthrough in this field was achieved by Chengshu Wang and Raymond J. St. Leger, who demonstrated that genetically engineered strains of *Metarhizium anisopliae* expressing scorpion toxin genes exhibited dramatically enhanced virulence against insect hosts.[3] Their research revealed that such modified fungi not only reduced the median lethal time but also increased overall mortality rates, thereby significantly improving pest control efficiency.

Further studies have indicated that the combined use of scorpion toxins and entomopathogenic fungi results in synergistic interactions that amplify their individual effects. This integrated approach enhances toxin delivery efficiency, accelerates infection processes, and induces both lethal and sub-lethal effects in target insects. Sub-lethal impacts, such as reduced feeding behavior, impaired mobility, and decreased reproductive capacity, play a crucial role in minimizing crop damage even before insect mortality occurs.[3]

Despite these promising findings, the literature also highlights certain challenges associated with this approach. These include issues related to large-scale production, formulation stability, regulatory approvals, and potential ecological risks. Additionally, there is a need for extensive field-level studies to validate laboratory findings and assess long-term environmental impacts.

Overall, the literature suggests that while scorpion toxins and entomopathogenic fungi individually offer effective pest control solutions, their combined application represents a more powerful and innovative strategy. This integrated approach holds significant promise for the development of next-generation bioinsecticides that are both effective and environmentally sustainable.

Objectives of The Study:

The present study is designed to systematically investigate the efficacy of biological agents in insect pest management, with a focus on both individual and integrated approaches. The specific objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To evaluate the insecticidal efficacy of scorpion-derived neurotoxins against selected insect pests, with particular emphasis on their mode of action and speed of mortality.
2. To assess the effectiveness of entomopathogenic fungi as biological control agents by examining their infection process, virulence, and host specificity.
3. To compare the individual effects of scorpion toxins and fungal pathogens with their combined application in order to identify potential synergistic interactions.
4. To analyze the potential of integrated biocontrol strategies in enhancing pest management efficiency while ensuring environmental sustainability.
5. To examine both lethal and sub-lethal effects (such as feeding inhibition and behavioral disruption) associated with different treatment approaches.

Research Methodology:

This study adopts a comprehensive experimental and analytical research design to evaluate the comparative efficacy of scorpion toxins and entomopathogenic fungi under controlled laboratory conditions.

Research Design:

The research is experimental in nature, supported by analytical techniques to interpret the observed results. It combines laboratory experimentation with secondary data analysis to ensure scientific reliability and validity.

Data Sources:

- **Primary Data:** Collected through controlled laboratory experiments involving exposure of selected insect pests to different treatments. Observations were systematically recorded at regular time intervals to assess mortality, behavioral changes, and physiological responses.
- **Secondary Data:** Derived from peer-reviewed journals, scientific reports, and previous research studies related to bioinsecticides, scorpion toxins, and entomopathogenic fungi.

Experimental Treatments:

The study involves three distinct treatment groups:

- **Treatment I:** Application of scorpion toxin alone to evaluate its direct neurotoxic effects on insect pests.
- **Treatment II:** Application of entomopathogenic fungi alone to observe

infection dynamics, growth, and pathogenicity.

- **Treatment III:** Combined application, including genetically modified fungal strains expressing scorpion toxin genes, to assess synergistic effects.

Parameters Evaluated:

The effectiveness of each treatment was assessed based on the following biological and behavioral parameters:

- **Mortality Rate (%):** Percentage of insect death over a specified time period.
- **Median Lethal Time (LT_{50}):** Time required to kill 50% of the test population.
- **Feeding Inhibition:** Reduction in feeding activity post-treatment exposure.
- **Behavioral and Physiological Changes:** Alterations in movement, coordination, and overall activity levels of insects.

Statistical Tools and Techniques:

- Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) to determine significant differences among treatments
- Correlation analysis to examine relationships between variables
- Statistical analysis using SPSS software for accurate data interpretation

Data Analysis and Interpretation:

The comparative analysis of experimental data reveals significant variations in the efficacy of the three treatment approaches. The results clearly indicate that each treatment exhibits distinct characteristics in terms of speed of action, mortality rate, and overall effectiveness.

- **Scorpion Toxin Alone:** The application of scorpion toxin resulted in rapid paralysis of insect pests due to its direct action on the nervous system. However, its effectiveness was limited by the requirement for direct delivery into the insect body, which poses practical challenges under field conditions.
- **Entomopathogenic Fungi Alone:** Fungal pathogens demonstrated effective pest control but exhibited delayed action. This delay is attributed to the time required for spore adhesion, germination, cuticular penetration, and internal colonization. Despite the slower action, fungi provided sustained control due to their ability to proliferate within the host.
- **Combination Treatment (Fungi + Scorpion Toxin):** The combined treatment showed the highest level of efficacy among all groups. The integration of scorpion toxin with fungal delivery systems significantly enhanced virulence, reduced median lethal time (LT_{50}), and increased overall mortality rates. This indicates a strong synergistic interaction between the two agents.

Experimental findings suggest that genetically modified fungal strains expressing scorpion toxin genes exhibited up to **20–22-fold greater potency** compared to non-modified (wild-type) strains.[3] This substantial increase in efficacy highlights the potential of biotechnological interventions in pest management.

Furthermore, insects exposed to combination treatments displayed pronounced sub-lethal effects prior to mortality. These included reduced feeding activity, impaired mobility, loss of coordination, and decreased responsiveness. Such effects play a critical role in minimizing crop damage even before the death of the pest, thereby enhancing the overall effectiveness of the control strategy.

The statistical analysis confirms that the differences observed among treatments are significant, validating the superiority of the integrated approach over individual applications.

Findings:

The findings of the present study provide strong empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of biological agents in insect pest management. A detailed analysis of experimental observations reveals the following key outcomes:

- Scorpion-derived neurotoxins act as highly specific and rapid-acting insecticidal agents by targeting voltage-gated ion channels in the insect nervous system. Their mode of action results in immediate paralysis, loss of neuromuscular coordination, and eventual mortality, making them highly efficient for quick pest suppression.
- Entomopathogenic fungi function as environmentally sustainable biocontrol agents by infecting insect hosts through natural biological processes. Their ability to penetrate the insect cuticle, proliferate within the host, and produce toxic metabolites ensures effective pest control without causing ecological harm.
- The combined application of scorpion toxins and entomopathogenic fungi demonstrates a pronounced synergistic effect. This integration significantly enhances insecticidal efficacy by reducing the median lethal time (LT_{50}), increasing mortality rates, and improving toxin delivery efficiency.
- Genetically modified fungal strains expressing scorpion toxin genes exhibit substantially higher virulence compared to conventional strains, indicating the potential of genetic engineering in improving biopesticide performance.
- In addition to lethal effects, the treatments also induce significant sub-lethal impacts such as feeding inhibition, reduced mobility, behavioral disorientation, and impaired reproductive capacity. These effects contribute to minimizing crop damage even before pest mortality occurs.
- The integrated biocontrol approach reduces dependence on chemical pesticides, thereby minimizing environmental pollution, pesticide resistance, and adverse effects on non-target organisms.

Discussion:

The results of the study clearly demonstrate that the integration of scorpion toxins with entomopathogenic fungi represents a significant advancement in the field of biological pest control. This approach effectively combines the rapid neurotoxic action of scorpion venom with the natural infection and delivery mechanisms of fungal pathogens.

One of the major advantages of this integrated system is the role of fungi as efficient delivery vectors. While scorpion toxins alone require direct entry into the insect body, fungal pathogens naturally penetrate the host cuticle, thereby facilitating internal delivery of the toxin. This overcomes one of the key limitations associated with the standalone use of neurotoxins.

The observed synergistic interaction between the two agents enhances both the speed and effectiveness of pest control. The rapid onset of paralysis caused by scorpion toxins, combined with the sustained pathogenic action of fungi, results in a comprehensive control mechanism that affects insects at multiple physiological levels. Furthermore, the presence of sub-lethal effects such as feeding suppression and behavioral impairment contributes significantly to reducing crop damage.

From an ecological perspective, this integrated approach offers a safer alternative to chemical pesticides. Its specificity toward target pests reduces the risk to beneficial organisms and helps maintain ecological balance. Additionally, the reduced likelihood of resistance development further strengthens its long-term viability as a pest management strategy.

However, despite these advantages, several challenges need to be addressed before large-scale implementation. These include issues related to mass production of genetically modified fungal strains, stability and shelf-life of formulations, regulatory approvals, and comprehensive ecological risk assessments. Ethical and biosafety concerns associated with the use of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) also require careful consideration.

Conclusion:

The present study concludes that the combination of scorpion-derived neurotoxins and entomopathogenic fungi offers a highly effective, innovative, and sustainable alternative to conventional chemical pesticides. The integrated approach not only enhances pest mortality but also significantly reduces crop damage through both lethal and sub-lethal effects.

By combining rapid neurotoxic action with efficient biological delivery systems, this strategy addresses many of the limitations associated with traditional pest control methods. Moreover, its environmentally friendly nature aligns with the principles of sustainable agriculture and integrated pest management.

Despite its promising potential, the successful implementation of this approach depends on further research and development. Field-level validation, optimization of formulations, and thorough biosafety evaluations are essential to ensure its practical applicability and long-term sustainability.

Recommendations:

Based on the findings and analysis of the study, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the applicability and effectiveness of this integrated biocontrol strategy:

- Encourage advanced research on genetically engineered fungal strains capable of expressing insect-specific toxins with higher efficiency and stability.
- Conduct extensive large-scale field trials under diverse agro-climatic conditions to validate laboratory findings and assess real-world effectiveness.
- Develop cost-effective and scalable mass production techniques for commercial formulation and distribution of fungal biopesticides.
- Strengthen regulatory frameworks to ensure proper biosafety evaluation, risk assessment, and monitoring of genetically modified biocontrol agents.
- Promote awareness and adoption of Integrated Pest Management (IPM) strategies among farmers to reduce dependence on chemical pesticides.
- Invest in interdisciplinary research combining biotechnology, microbiology, and agricultural sciences to further improve the performance of bioinsecticides.
- Explore formulation improvements to enhance shelf-life, stability, and ease of application under field conditions.

Limitations of The Study:

While the study provides valuable insights into the efficacy of integrated biocontrol approaches, certain limitations must be acknowledged:

- The study is primarily based on controlled laboratory conditions, which may not fully replicate complex field environments and ecological interactions.

- Limited availability of field-level experimental data restricts the ability to generalize findings across different agricultural systems and environmental conditions.
- The study does not comprehensively evaluate long-term ecological impacts, including potential effects on non-target organisms and biodiversity.
- Constraints related to time, resources, and experimental facilities limited the scope of large-scale validation and replication.
- The use of secondary data for comparative analysis may introduce variability due to differences in experimental design across studies.
- Regulatory and ethical considerations related to genetically modified organisms were not explored in depth within the scope of this research.
- Variations in environmental factors such as temperature, humidity, and soil conditions, which may influence fungal efficacy, were not extensively analyzed.

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