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Blockchain-Integrated AI Systems for Contamination Prediction in Ready-to-Eat Foods: A Systematic Review

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Abstract: ***The integration of blockchain and artificial intelligence (AI) technology is an emerging approach to enhancing traceability and contamination prediction in the ready-to-eat (RTE) food industry. This systematic review evaluates the current research on blockchain-integrated AI systems, examining their applications in food safety, supply chain transparency, and contamination risk prediction. A comprehensive analysis of reports, articles, and case studies assesses the effectiveness, challenges, and future prospects of these technologies. The findings highlight blockchain-AI integration as a promising solution for RTE food safety while identifying key gaps in scalability, interoperability, and regulatory compliance. This review provides a framework for future research and practical implementation in the food industry.***

Keywords: Food safety, Foodborne illness, Food traceability, Blockchain technology, Contamination prediction, Ready-to-eat foods (RTE), Predictive analytics, Machine learning (ML), Regulatory compliance, Food supply chain

1. Introduction

Ready-to-eat (RTE) foods are a growing segment of the global food market, valued for their convenience and accessibility. However, their susceptibility to contamination and the complexity of their supply chains poses significant challenges to food safety and traceability (Marvin, & Bouzembrak., 2020). Recent breakthroughs in blockchain technology and artificial intelligence (AI) have demonstrated potential in addressing these challenges through the implementation of real-time tracking, enhanced data transparency, and predictive analytics (Kshetri, 2023). This systematic review examines the incorporation of blockchain and AI technologies in the traceability of ready-to-eat (RTE) foods and contamination prediction, evaluating their effectiveness, limitations, and potential for future adoption.

2. Methodology

This review adhered to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses guidelines, otherwise known as PRISMA, to maintain a rigorous and transparent methodology. An extensive search was carried out across academic databases, such as PubMed, IEEE Xplore, and Scopus., using keywords such as "blockchain," "AI," "traceability," "contamination prediction," and "ready-to-eat foods." Studies published between 2011 and 2025 were included, with a concentration on articles that are peer reviewed, papers presented at conferences, as well as industry reports. A total of 78 studies which met the criteria for inclusion were analyzed for their contributions to the field.

3. Overview of Ready-to-EAT (RTE) Foods

a) Definition and Importance in Modern Food Systems

Ready-to-eat (RTE) foods refer to food products that are packaged and prepared for immediate consumption without the need for cooking or further preparation. These foods are convenient, widely accessible, and highly demanded in modern society due to fast-paced lifestyles (Kearney, 2010). The rise in consumer demand for RTE foods is driven by changing consumer preferences, the need for convenience, and a growing population (Kearney, 2010). RTE foods encompass various products, including sandwiches, salads, pre-packaged fruits, and ready-to-eat meals.

The importance of RTE foods in food systems is significant due to their role in providing convenient, nutritious options for consumers, particularly in urbanized areas where time constraints make traditional meal preparation less feasible (Liu et al., 2023). RTE foods are an integral part of global food systems, supporting economies, providing jobs, and satisfying the modern need for convenience.

b) Challenges Related to Contamination and Food Safety

Despite their importance, RTE foods face considerable challenges in terms of contamination and food safety. Contamination in RTE foods can occur at multiple stages, including during harvesting, processing, packaging, and distribution. Biological contaminants, such as bacteria (e.g., *Salmonella* and *E. coli*), viruses, and parasites, are significant threats to food safety (Kearney, 2010). Chemical contaminants, including pesticides, heavy metals, and food additives, are also risks that require monitoring and regulation (Cavadini et al., 2000).

The risks associated with contamination in RTE foods are compounded by the absence of further processing by consumers, which means that consumers have little control over the safety of these products after purchase. As a result, food safety measures must be robust and capable of detecting contamination as early as possible to mitigate health risks (López-Gálvez et al., 2022).

4. Background and Context

a) Food Contamination: Types and Sources

Food contamination is a significant concern in the production and consumption of ready-to-eat (RTE) foods. Contamination can occur at multiple points along the food supply chain, including harvesting, processing, packaging, and distribution (Onyeka et al., 2023). There are three main categories of contamination in food: biological, chemical, and physical (IntechOpen, 2022).

- **Biological Contamination**: This is one of the most common forms of contamination in RTE foods. It is caused by microorganisms such as bacteria, viruses, and fungi, which can lead to foodborne illnesses. Common pathogens found in RTE foods include *Salmonella*, *E. coli*, and *Listeria monocytogenes* (Li et al., 2024). These pathogens can proliferate under favorable conditions (e.g., improper storage, temperature abuse).
- **Chemical Contamination**: Chemical contaminants include pesticides, heavy metals, and food additives that exceed safety limits, as well as insecticides, and pesticides from poor water quality (Jaishi, 2024). These contaminants can enter the food supply through improper agricultural practices, environmental pollution, and processing (Lebelo et al., 2021). For example, residues of pesticides used on fruits and vegetables can remain in RTE products if not washed or treated properly.
- **Physical Contamination**: Physical contamination in food occurs when foreign objects such as glass, plastic, or metal fragments are present in food products. These can result from packaging issues, equipment malfunction, or improper handling during food production (Patel et al., 2023).

b) Common Contaminants in RTE Foods

The most common contaminants in RTE foods are pathogens, spoilage agents, and toxins (Lebelo et al., 2021).

- **Pathogens**: *Salmonella*, *E. coli*, *Listeria*, and *Campylobacter* are among the top pathogens associated with RTE food contamination. These pathogens can cause foodborne diseases that result in significant health risks, including gastrointestinal illness, food poisoning, and in severe cases, death (Onyeka et al., 2023).
- **Spoilage Agents**: These microorganisms cause the deterioration of food products, leading to changes in flavor, texture, and appearance. Spoilage agents include certain strains of bacteria, yeasts, and molds (Li et al., 2024).
- **Toxins**: Certain bacteria, such as *Staphylococcus aureus* and *Clostridium botulinum*, can produce toxins that are harmful even if the bacteria are no longer present in the food (Patel et al., 2023).

5. Current Approaches to Contamination Prediction and Monitoring

a) Traditional Methods

Traditional methods of contamination prediction and monitoring primarily focus on microbiological testing and manual inspections. Some common traditional methods include:

- **Microbiological Testing**: This method involves culturing food samples on specific media to detect the presence of pathogens. However, microbiological tests often take several days to provide results, which limits their effectiveness in preventing contamination outbreaks (IntechOpen, 2022). These tests are also limited by their inability to predict contamination in real-time.
- **Sensors and Physical Inspections**: Traditional methods also rely on physical inspections of food products, as well as temperature and humidity sensors. These sensors are commonly used to ensure that RTE foods are stored and transported at safe temperatures to prevent microbial growth (Patel et al., 2023). However, physical inspections can be subjective and prone to human error.

b) Limitations of Current Prediction Systems

Although traditional methods have been the backbone of food safety monitoring, they have significant limitations:

- **Slow Response Times**: Microbiological testing methods are time-consuming and may not provide actionable information in real-time, which can lead to delays in identifying contamination events (Onyeka et al., 2023).
- **Limited Sensitivity and Specificity**: Traditional sensors and testing methods may not detect all types of contamination, especially when contamination levels are low (IntechOpen, 2022).
- **High Costs**: Continuous microbiological testing and physical inspections require substantial resources, which may not be feasible for all food producers (Li et al., 2024).

6. The Role of AI in Food Safety

a) Introduction to AI Applications in Food Contamination Prediction

Artificial Intelligence (AI) refers to the development of systems that can perform tasks requiring human intelligence, such as decision-making, problem-solving, and pattern recognition. In food safety, AI may be applied to predict contamination risks and identify potential sources of contamination (Liu et al., 2023). AI systems use historical data, real-time sensor information, and machine learning algorithms to analyze food safety threats and predict contamination events.

Applications of AI in food contamination prediction have gained significant traction in recent years. Machine learning models, such as supervised learning and neural networks, are trained on large datasets to predict contamination patterns based on environmental factors, processing conditions, and supply chain data (Kudashkina et al., 2022). For instance, AI can analyze environmental factors such as temperature, humidity, and storage conditions to predict microbial growth in RTE foods (LeCun, 2022).

b) Benefits of AI in Food Safety Monitoring

AI offers numerous benefits for food safety monitoring, including enhanced accuracy and efficiency in detecting contamination. By continuously monitoring food safety parameters, AI systems can identify contamination risks earlier than traditional methods, which rely on manual inspections and limited sampling (López-Gálvez et al., 2022). AI's ability to analyze large volumes of data in real time allows for proactive interventions, ensuring that contamination risks are mitigated before they reach consumers.

The predictive capabilities of AI also improve food safety management, enabling food producers and supply chain operators to allocate resources effectively. Additionally, AI systems can learn and adapt over time, improving their

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predictions as more data is collected (Haenlein & Kaplan, 2019). This adaptability ensures that AI can be applied to diverse food safety challenges and continuously evolve to address emerging threats.

7. Blockchain Technology in the Food Industry

a) Blockchain Fundamentals and Applications in Traceability, Transparency, and Security

Blockchain technology is a decentralized digital ledger that records transactions across a distributed network. Each block in the blockchain contains data that is securely linked to previous blocks, making it immutable and transparent (Haenlein & Kaplan, 2019). In the food industry, blockchain is primarily used for enhancing traceability, transparency, and security throughout the supply chain.

Blockchain enables real-time tracking of food products from farm to table, ensuring that all stages of the supply chain are visible and verifiable. This level of transparency is critical in managing food safety, as it allows stakeholders to trace contamination events back to their source and take corrective action swiftly (Kudashkina et al., 2022). For instance, blockchain can verify the authenticity of certifications such as organic or fair trade, ensuring that food products meet safety standards (Liu et al., 2023).

b) Benefits of Integrating Blockchain for Supply Chain Monitoring

Integrating blockchain technology into the food supply chain provides several benefits, including improved security and trust. Because blockchain is decentralized and immutable, it reduces the risk of fraud and tampering with food safety data (Liu et al., 2023). By providing a transparent record of each transaction, blockchain enhances accountability and trust among consumers and food producers alike.

Blockchain also allows for the real-time monitoring of food conditions, such as temperature and humidity, which are critical for maintaining food safety during transportation and storage. Sensors embedded in food packages can upload data to the blockchain, providing an accurate record of environmental conditions throughout the product's journey (LeCun, 2015). This data is crucial for identifying contamination risks that arise from improper handling or storage.

8. Need for Integration of AI & Blockchain

a) AI's Predictive Capabilities and Blockchain's Secure Data Management

The integration of AI and blockchain technology presents a powerful solution for contamination prediction and food safety monitoring. AI's ability to predict contamination risks using machine learning models complements blockchain's secure data management, creating a system that not only predicts potential risks but also ensures that the data used for predictions is accurate and tamper-proof (Liu et al. 2023).
Blockchain ensures that AI's predictions are based on verifiable, immutable data, which increases the credibility of contamination forecasts. Moreover, blockchain can provide the transparency needed for stakeholders to trust the AI-driven decisions and interventions suggested by the system (Kudashkina et al., 2022). By combining these technologies, the food industry can create a fully integrated, transparent, and efficient system for managing food safety.

b) Potential of Integrated Systems for Contamination Prediction

Integrated AI-blockchain systems offer substantial potential in improving food safety and contamination prediction. These systems allow for real-time, predictive insights into contamination risks, backed by secure and traceable data (Haenlein & Kaplan, 2019). For instance, an AI algorithm might predict a contamination risk based on environmental conditions, while blockchain provides a transparent, immutable record of those conditions, allowing stakeholders to trace the source of the contamination if it occurs.

Additionally, such integrated systems enable more efficient responses to contamination events. Rather than relying on slow, manual interventions, AI-powered blockchain systems can trigger automated alerts and responses when contamination risks are detected, minimizing the impact on food safety (Jordan & Mitchell, 2015). The ability to track contamination events in real time can also reduce food waste and improve the overall efficiency of the food supply chain.

9. Blockchain and AI in Food Safety

Blockchain technology offers a promising solution to overcome many of the limitations of traditional food safety monitoring systems. Blockchain is a decentralized and immutable digital ledger that allows for secure, transparent, and real-time tracking of food products across the entire supply chain (Patel et al., 2023).

- **Traceability**: Blockchain enables end-to-end traceability of food products from production to consumption. This can help identify the source of contamination quickly in the event of a food safety issue (Ellahi et al., 2023).
- **Transparency**: Blockchain allows all stakeholders in the food supply chain to access the same data, ensuring that information about food safety and quality is visible to producers, regulators, and consumers alike (Dazaklis et al., 2022).
- **Food Quality Assurance**: Blockchain also helps verify the authenticity and safety of food products by storing records of certifications, inspections, and testing results (Ding et al., 2023).

AI Techniques in Predicting Contamination

Artificial Intelligence (AI) offers powerful predictive capabilities for identifying and preventing food contamination. AI techniques, particularly machine learning (ML) and deep learning (DL), can analyze large datasets to identify patterns and predict contamination risks (Kumar et al., 2021).

Machine Learning (ML): ML algorithms can be trained on historical data to predict contamination events. For instance, ML models can analyze environmental factors like temperature and humidity, as well as transportation and storage conditions, to forecast potential contamination risks in RTE foods (Jordan & Mitchell, 2015).

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Deep Learning (DL): DL, a subset of machine learning, involves more complex algorithms that can learn from vast amounts of data and make more accurate predictions. DL models have been particularly useful in analyzing sensor data, such as real-time temperature and humidity readings, to predict spoilage or contamination (LeCun et al., 2015).

AI-Driven Sensor Networks: AI systems can enhance sensor networks by interpreting the data gathered by sensors, enabling real-time contamination detection. AI can process data faster and more accurately than traditional systems, providing timely alerts and responses (Patel et al., 2023).

Blockchain Technology in Food Traceability

Blockchain technology offers a decentralized and tamper-proof ledger for securely recording transactions, making it an ideal solution for enhancing traceability in food supply chains. Enablement of real-time tracking of RTE foods from farm to fork, blockchain systems can improve transparency and accountability (Tian, 2016). Walmart's pilot project using blockchain to track mangoes cut the time needed to trace product origins from days to seconds (Kshetri, 2018). Similarly, IBM Food Trust has demonstrated that blockchain has the potential to improve traceability in RTE food supply chains by giving stakeholders access to verified data (Supply Chain Digital, 2020). This transparency enables rapid identification of foodborne illness sources, contaminated products, reducing health risks and economic losses.

According to Tian (2016), The fusion of blockchain with food traceability systems is transforming the industry, elevating transparency, streamlining operations, and fortifying safety. With a simple QR code scan on packaging, consumers can unlock detailed product information about the product’s journey, including its origin, processing, and transportation conditions (Kamath, 2018). This level of transparency fosters brand loyalty and supports ethical sourcing practices. Additionally, blockchain technology mitigates food fraud by ensuring the authenticity of food products. Cases of mislabeling and counterfeiting can be prevented by storing verified records on a tamper-proof ledger, minimizing the likelihood of deception in the marketplace (Zhao et al., 2019).

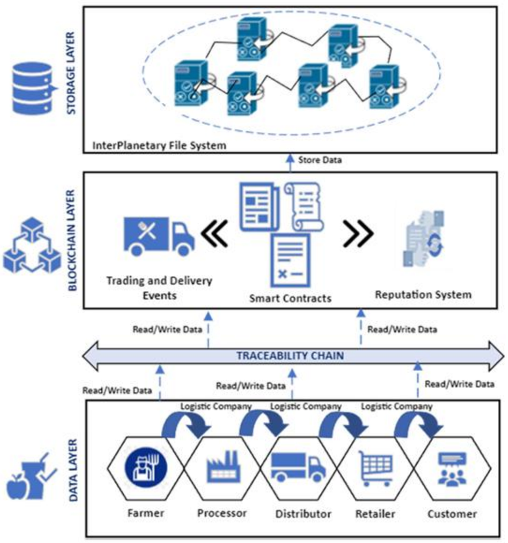

Figure 1: Blockchain traceability concept. Copyright, Sri Vigna Hema, & Annamalai Manickavasagan

AI Systems in Contamination Prediction

AI systems, particularly machine learning (ML) models, have been widely adopted for predicting contamination risks in RTE foods. These systems analyze large datasets, including environmental conditions, production processes, and historical contamination records, to recognize trends and anticipate possible risks (Tiwari et al., 2020). AI-driven systems utilize machine learning algorithms, predictive analytics, and big data detect trends and foresee potential food safety risks before they arise (Agbai, 2020). For instance, a study by Liu et al. (2021) created an AI model capable of precisely predicted Listeria contamination in RTE meats by analyzing temperature, humidity, and storage duration. Such predictive capabilities enable proactive interventions, reducing the risk of foodborne illnesses.

AI systems can detect anomalies and provide real-time alerts, allowing food producers to take preventive actions before contamination spreads (Wang et al., 2022). Furthermore, AI-driven predictive models enhance food safety by identifying trends and correlations that might go unnoticed using conventional approaches. For instance, AI can analyze historical outbreak data to predict when and where contamination risks are likely to emerge, thus enabling proactive interventions (Liu et al., 2022). This ability is especially valuable in high-volume food manufacturing., where complex supply chains increase the likelihood of contamination events. Advanced AI models can assess regulatory guidelines and ensure that food processing facilities adhere to industry standards, thereby reducing human error and enhancing food quality assurance (Motzer et. al, 2024).

Combining Blockchain and AI for Enhanced Food Safety

Merging blockchain with AI creates a powerful synergy for enhancing food safety and traceability. Blockchain serves as a tamper-proof and transparent ledger for securely storing critical data, while AI enhances the analysis and interpretation of this data for predictive insights (Ayan et al., 2022). Blockchain-AI system may enable real-time monitoring of RTE food supply chains and predicted contamination risks based on environmental and operational data. This integration not only improves traceability but also enhances decision-making and risk management.

A key advantage of merging blockchain with AI is the enhanced capability to monitor, trace and authenticate food products in real time. Blockchain records every transaction along the supply chain, creating a transparent and tamper-proof history of food items. AI, on the other hand, processes vast amounts of data to detect anomalies, predict contamination risks, and optimize logistics, thereby reducing food safety incidents (Wang et al., 2022). AI-driven machine learning models analyze data from blockchain transactions, identifying potential hazards before they escalate. For instance, by examining temperature fluctuations in cold chain logistics or detecting irregularities in supplier records, AI can flag potential risks, enabling proactive interventions (Kamath, 2018). This predictive approach minimizes foodborne illnesses and reduces economic losses caused by recalls and waste.

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Furthermore, the combination of blockchain and AI supports regulatory compliance by automating inspections and ensuring adherence to food safety standards. Smart contracts powered by blockchain can enforce compliance measures, while AI algorithms streamline reporting and auditing processes, reducing human error (Motzer *et. al*, 2024).

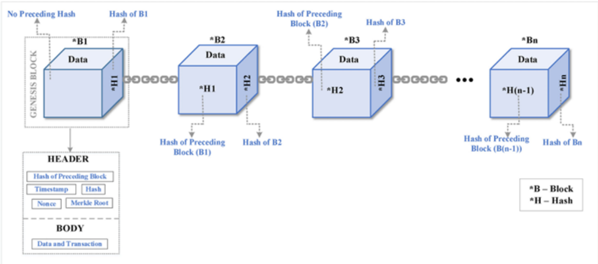

Figure 2: Block links of the hash in preceding blocks in a blockchain. Copyright, Sri Vigna Hema, & Annamalai Manickavasagan

10. Challenges and Limitations

Despite their potential, blockchain-integrated AI systems face several challenges. Scalability remains a significant issue, as the computational requirements for processing large datasets on blockchain networks can be prohibitive (Saberi et al., 2019). Seamless integration between various blockchain networks and current supply chain systems remains a significant hurdle to broad implementation (Kamilaris et al., 2019). Furthermore, regulatory frameworks for blockchain and AI in the food industry are still evolving, creating uncertainty for stakeholders (FAO, 2020).

11. Future Directions

Future research should prioritize overcoming the scalability and integration challenges of blockchain-AI technologies. Developing standardized protocols and frameworks for data sharing and integration will be critical for their successful implementation (Ellahi et al., 2023). Additionally, collaboration between industry stakeholders, policymakers, and researchers is essential to establish regulatory guidelines and encourage the implementation of these technologies in the ready-to-eat food industry.

12. Conclusion

Blockchain-integrated AI systems represent a promising solution for enhancing traceability and contamination prediction in the RTE food industry. Harnessing the transparency and security of blockchain alongside the predictive power of AI can revolutionize food safety and streamline supply chain operations. Yet, obstacles such as scalability, seamless integration, and regulatory compliance must be tackled to unlock their full potential. This review highlights the urgency of ongoing research and cross-sector collaboration to drive the widespread implementation of blockchain-AI solutions in the food industry.

The integration of blockchain and AI offers significant potential to improve food safety by enhancing contamination prediction and monitoring in real-time. AI's predictive power, combined with blockchain's ability to ensure data integrity and transparency, creates a powerful synergy that enhances food safety systems, decision-making, and accountability. Architectural models that integrate both technologies have proven successful in food safety applications, with several case studies demonstrating their effectiveness in contamination prediction. As both blockchain and AI technologies continue to evolve, their integration will play a critical role in ensuring the safety and quality of food products in the future.

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