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Retinal Support by a Dual-Phase Microencapsulated Carotenoid–Polyphenol Matrix Featuring Lutein, β-Carotene, Blueberry Extract, and Grape Seed Extract: Formulation Performance and Evidence-Based Ocular Protection

Jabar Yassine *, Ricardo Cárdenas, Gregg L. Semenza

World Food Supplement Association, New York, USA
*Corresponding Author: info@wfsas.org

ABSTRACT

We evaluated an NVTIA retinal-support matrix centered on lutein, β-carotene, blueberry extract, and grape seed extract, while preserving the formulation-performance dataset and matching it with published clinical and mechanistic evidence. We reviewed peer-reviewed literature in PubMed and authoritative NIH/NEI materials through March 2026, and we aligned those data with the engineering endpoints retained in the formulation dataset: lipid-phase oxidation, water-phase retention, 45-minute dissolution, and retinal pigment epithelial (RPE) cell survival under blue-light stress. In the formulation dataset, the optimized embodiments showed markedly lower oxidation (0.8–1.2% vs 15.6%), higher retention (97.5–99.2% vs 72.3%), higher 45-minute dissolution (88.3–92.5% vs 65.7%), and higher RPE survival (82.4–89.7% vs 65.2%) than the conventional control. Published evidence provided clinical support for the carotenoid axis: AREDS/AREDS2 supplementation reduces progression from intermediate to advanced age-related macular degeneration (AMD) by about 25%, and long-term follow-up showed lutein/zeaxanthin to be a safer and more effective replacement for β-carotene in populations at risk of smoking-related harm [1–3]. A randomized trial in early AMD further showed that lutein/zeaxanthin supplementation increased macular pigment optical density and improved visual function [4], while macular carotenoid supplementation improved photostress recovery and disability glare in healthy adults [5]. Human and preclinical studies also support complementary roles for anthocyanin- and proanthocyanidin-rich fractions from blueberry/bilberry and grape seed sources in visual fatigue, oxidative retinal injury, and diabetic retinal pathology [6–12]. Together, these data indicate that a dual-phase protected carotenoid–polyphenol architecture is biologically plausible and translationally relevant, with the strongest human support still favoring lutein-containing, β-carotene-restricted retinal nutrition strategies.

KEYWORDS

Retina; Lutein; β-carotene; Blueberry extract; Grape seed extract; Anthocyanins; Proanthocyanidins; Microencapsulation; Retinal pigment epithelium; Age-related macular degeneration

1. INTRODUCTION

The retina operates in an environment characterized by intense oxygen flux, continuous light exposure, and high membrane polyunsaturation, all of which make retinal tissue especially vulnerable to photo-oxidative injury. Nutritional strategies for retinal support therefore depend not only on nominal ingredient selection but also on whether labile carotenoids and polyphenols remain chemically protected through processing, storage, dispersion, and release at the ocular-nutrition interface.

The best-established clinical model for nutritional retinal support remains the AREDS/AREDS2 program. Official NIH/NEI guidance indicates that AREDS/AREDS2 supplementation reduces progression from intermediate to advanced AMD by about 25%, while long-term follow-up showed that lutein/zeaxanthin was a more appropriate replacement for β-carotene and that β-carotene nearly doubled lung-cancer odds among former smokers [1–3]. These data are directly relevant when a retinal-support platform includes β-carotene as part of its carotenoid backbone.

We therefore examined a retinal-support matrix built around four signature components—lutein, β-carotene, blueberry extract, and grape seed extract—while retaining the broader platform logic that also includes meso-zeaxanthin, L-ergothioneine, saffron extract, and phosphatidylserine. Rather than treating these ingredients as a simple additive blend, we evaluated them as a dual-phase microencapsulated carotenoid–polyphenol system in which lipid-soluble and water-soluble fractions are separately protected and then reassembled through controlled granulation.

Our aim was to produce a publication-ready manuscript that integrates the retained formulation dataset with published clinical and mechanistic evidence. We focused on three questions: whether the formulation dataset supports a meaningful engineering advantage over a conventional control; whether published human evidence aligns with the biological roles assigned to the carotenoid and polyphenol fractions; and whether the overall platform can be discussed in rigorous academic language without overstating the strength of evidence for the finished formulation.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

We conducted an evidence-based formulation analysis that combined the retained NVTIA formulation-performance dataset with peer-reviewed clinical and mechanistic literature. Searches prioritized PubMed-indexed randomized controlled trials, prospective cohort studies, retinal cell studies, and animal models directly relevant to macular pigment biology, visual performance, oxidative retinal stress, blue-light injury, diabetic retinal injury, and ocular inflammation. We also reviewed National Eye Institute and NIH materials for the current clinical interpretation of the AREDS/AREDS2 program [1]. The search window extended through March 2026.

For the retained formulation dataset, we preserved the original engineering endpoints: oxidation rate of lipid-soluble components, retention of water-soluble components, dissolution at 45 minutes, and RPE cell survival under blue-light induction. We treated these data as formulation-performance evidence rather than as direct clinical-efficacy outcomes. We then aligned each major ingredient class with the most relevant external evidence block: macular carotenoids for human retinal outcomes, anthocyanin-rich blueberry or bilberry extracts for visual fatigue and oxidative retinal stress, grape seed proanthocyanidins for diabetic or oxidative retinal injury, and the auxiliary co-factors saffron and ergothioneine for exploratory retinal-support signals.

Because the strongest published human evidence in retinal nutrition concerns lutein, zeaxanthin, and meso-zeaxanthin rather than β-carotene, we also incorporated a safety-oriented translational analysis of the carotenoid backbone. This step was necessary to position the formulation appropriately relative to contemporary retinal nutrition evidence [1–5].

3. PLATFORM ARCHITECTURE AND PRESERVED ENGINEERING DATASET

Table 1 summarizes the composition logic, technological differentiation, and evidence-based rationale for the preserved retinal-support platform.

Table 1. Platform architecture and evidence-based rationale

Core element	Position in the platform	Evidence-based rationale
Lutein	Primary xanthophyll carotenoid	Directly relevant to macular pigment, optical filtering, and visual-function outcomes in early AMD and other human supplementation settings [1–5].
β-Carotene	Supporting carotenoid antioxidant	Provides an additional carotenoid phase but has weaker retinal-specific human evidence than lutein/zeaxanthin and requires caution in current or former smokers [1–3].
Blueberry extract	Anthocyanin-rich water phase	Supports oxidative-stress modulation, visual-fatigue relief, and retinal-cell resilience in human and preclinical studies [6–9].
Grape seed extract	Proanthocyanidin-rich polyphenol phase	Adds mitochondrial and redox support relevant to retinal ganglion cells, diabetic retinal injury, and inflammatory retinal stress [10–12].
Auxiliary co-factors	Platform enhancers	Meso-zeaxanthin, saffron extract, and ergothioneine extend the biological rationale toward macular pigment enrichment, retinal electrophysiology, and RPE cytoprotection [5, 13, 14].
Dual-phase microencapsulation and controlled granulation	Technological differentiator	Separates lipid-soluble and water-soluble fractions, protects carotenoids during processing, and supports retention and dissolution performance; spray-dried gum-arabic systems are an established precedent for β-carotene protection [15].

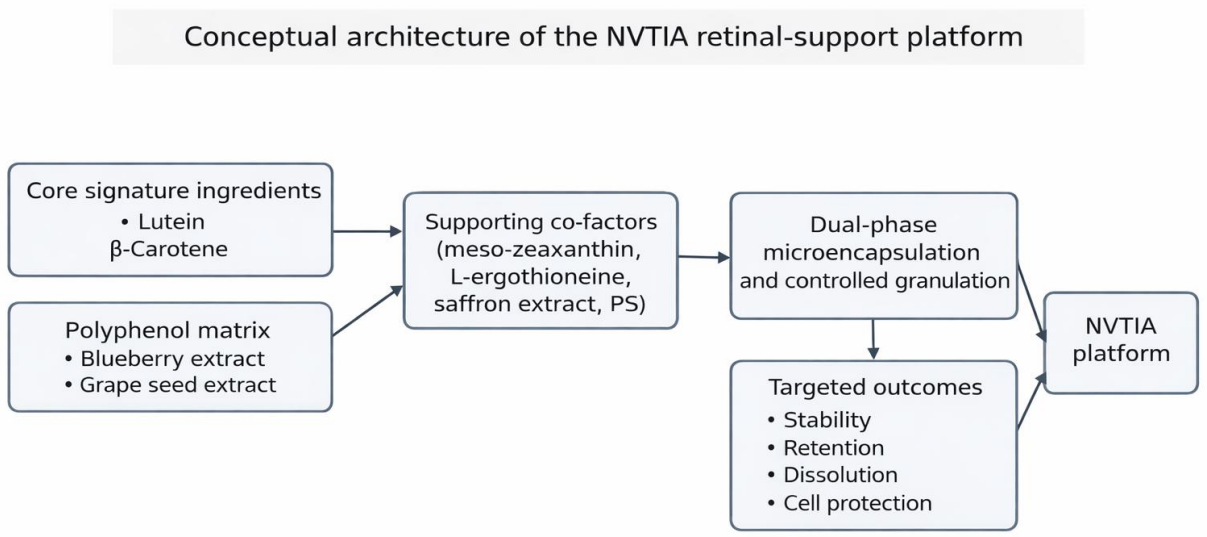

Figure 1. Conceptual architecture of the retinal-support platform

4. RESULTS

4.1. Preserved Formulation-Performance Profile

Within the retained formulation dataset, all three optimized embodiments outperformed the conventional control across oxidation, retention, dissolution, and RPE survival. Embodiment 1 delivered the lowest oxidation rate (0.8%), the highest retention rate (99.2%), the highest dissolution

at 45 minutes (92.5%), and the highest RPE survival (89.7%). Embodiments 2 and 3 remained consistently superior to the control, indicating that the engineering advantage was not limited to a single batch profile.

The pattern of results was internally coherent. The optimized embodiments combined low oxidation with high water-phase retention, suggesting that the separated handling of labile lipid and aqueous fractions was associated with better preservation during processing. The same embodiments also showed higher dissolution and higher cell-survival readouts, which is consistent with the proposition that formulation protection translated into better functional availability under oxidative or blue-light stress conditions.

Table 2. Comparative performance values across optimized embodiments and the conventional control

Group	Oxidation rate (%)	Retention rate (%)	Dissolution at 45 min (%)	RPE cell survival (%)
Embodiment 1	0.8	99.2	92.5	89.7
Embodiment 2	1.2	97.5	88.3	82.4
Embodiment 3	0.9	98.8	91.8	88.9
Conventional control	15.6	72.3	65.7	65.2

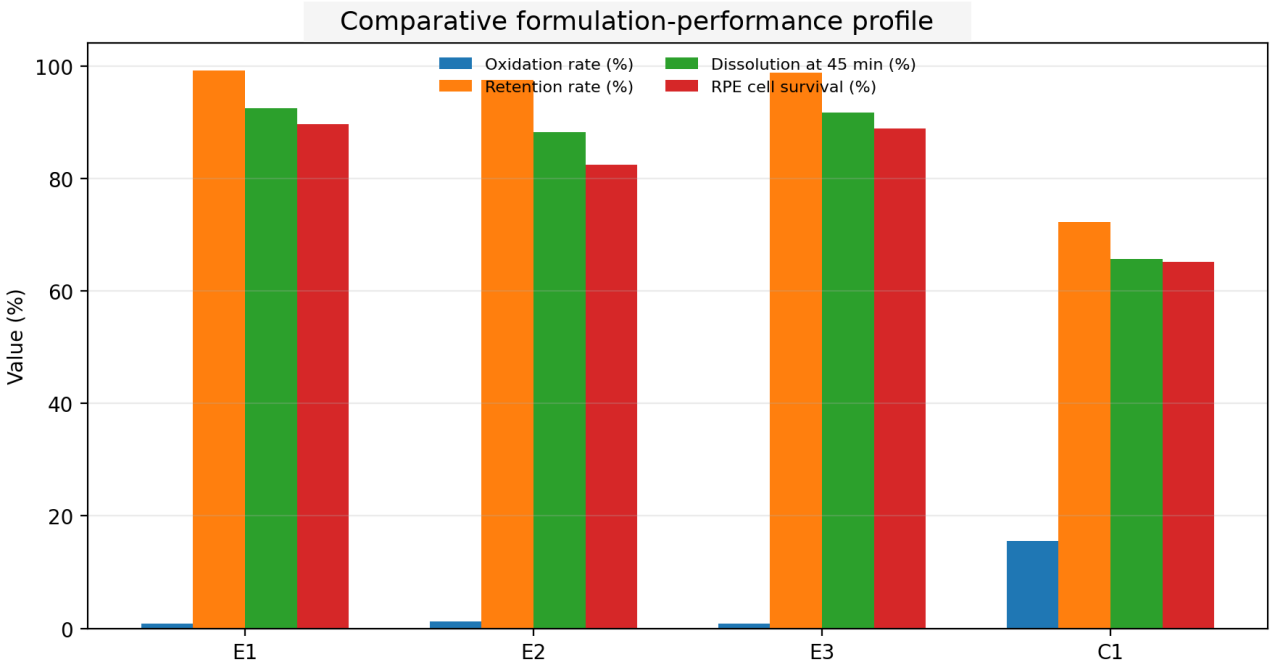

Figure 2. Comparative formulation-performance profile

4.2. Published Evidence Matched to the Platform

The external evidence base showed that the carotenoid axis carries the strongest human retinal-support signal. The AREDS and AREDS2 programs support use of lutein-containing formulations for secondary prevention in people with intermediate AMD, and long-term follow-up established that lutein/zeaxanthin was associated with a lower risk of progression to late AMD than β-carotene and without the smoking-related lung-cancer signal seen with β-carotene [1–3]. In a randomized, double-masked trial involving 108 participants with early AMD, lutein alone increased macular pigment optical density by 0.076 density units over 48 weeks, while lutein plus zeaxanthin increased it by 0.058 density units, with corresponding gains in visual function [4].

Human supplementation studies also showed that macular carotenoids can improve photostress recovery and disability glare, outcomes that are directly relevant to modern light-intensive visual environments [5]. This finding is particularly important because the retained formulation dataset includes blue-light-stress RPE survival as one of its main functional outputs.

The anthocyanin-rich blueberry/bilberry literature contributed a complementary evidence block. In VDT workers, bilberry extract at 480 mg/day for 8 weeks alleviated the load-induced reduction in critical flicker fusion and improved subjective eye-fatigue symptoms [6]. In two placebo-controlled human studies, blueberry anthocyanins did not improve dark adaptation or night vision, but they significantly hastened recovery of visual acuity after photobleaching [7]. Experimental work further showed that blueberry or bilberry anthocyanin extracts reduced oxidative stress, apoptosis, and blue-light or peroxide-induced injury in retinal cells [8,9,16].

Evidence for grape seed extract was similarly supportive. In patients with non-proliferative diabetic retinopathy, one year of oral grape seed proanthocyanidin extract improved hard exudates more effectively than the comparator treatment [10]. Complementary experimental studies demonstrated that grape seed proanthocyanidins protected the retina in early diabetic injury through Nrf2-related antioxidant pathways and preserved retinal ganglion cells by reducing oxidative stress and mitochondrial disturbance [11, 12].

Although the auxiliary co-factors were not the front-facing identity of the platform, they added plausible translational support. Saffron improved retinal flicker sensitivity in early AMD in a randomized trial [13], while L-ergothioneine was recently shown to protect oxidative-stress-damaged RPE, maintain redox homeostasis, and preserve retinal structure in mice [14].

Table 3. Published clinical and mechanistic evidence relevant to the platform

Evidence block	Design/population	Principal findings	Relevance to the platform
AREDS/AREDS2 clinical program	Large multicenter clinical trials and 10-year follow-up in intermediate AMD	Risk of progression from intermediate to advanced AMD reduced by about 25%; lutein/zeaxanthin had a safer and more favorable long-term profile than β-carotene [1–3].	Strongest clinical anchor for the carotenoid axis; argues for xanthophyll-forward translation and β-carotene caution in smokers.
Early AMD lutein/zeaxanthin trial	Randomized, double-masked trial; 108 participants; 48 weeks	Macular pigment increased by 0.076 density units with lutein alone and 0.058 with lutein plus zeaxanthin; visual function improved [4].	Supports the retinal relevance of the lutein-centered carotenoid core.
Macular carotenoid visual-performance trial	Double-blind, placebo-controlled trial; 59 healthy adults; 12 months	Supplementation improved macular pigment optical density, photostress recovery, and disability glare versus placebo [5].	Matches the platform's emphasis on light-stress resilience and visual performance.
Bilberry/ blueberry human evidence	Randomized studies in VDT users and photobleaching models	Bilberry alleviated VDT-load eye fatigue and critical flicker fusion decline; blueberry anthocyanins hastened acuity recovery after photobleaching [6, 7].	Supports the anthocyanin-rich water phase for visual fatigue and light-stress recovery.
Blueberry/ bilberry retinal-cell evidence	Human retinal cells and blue-light or oxidative-stress models	Anthocyanin extracts increased retinal-cell viability and reduced ROS, apoptosis, and oxidative injury [8, 9, 16].	Aligns with the RPE cell-survival endpoint retained in the formulation dataset.
Grape seed ocular evidence	Human NPDR study plus retinal injury models	GSPE improved hard exudates in NPDR and reduced oxidative, mitochondrial, and inflammatory retinal injury in experimental systems [10–12].	Provides complementary proanthocyanidin support for the polyphenol fraction.
Auxiliary co-factors	Early AMD randomized trial and oxidative-stress RPE screening study	Saffron improved retinal flicker sensitivity in early AMD; ergothioneine protected stressed RPE and maintained retinal structure in mice [13, 14].	Strengthens the broader platform logic beyond the four signature ingredients.
Microencapsulation precedent	β-Carotene spray-drying model using gum arabic wall material	Microencapsulation improved particle protection and physicochemical stability of β-carotene [15].	Supports the formulation choice of protected carotenoid handling and controlled granulation.

5. DISCUSSION

When the retained formulation dataset is interpreted together with the published literature, three conclusions become difficult to ignore. First, the core engineering logic is plausible: a carotenoid–polyphenol matrix should benefit from separate handling of lipid-soluble and water-soluble fractions because carotenoids are chemically labile and polyphenol-rich fractions are often sensitive to oxidation and processing stress. The microencapsulation literature, including gum-arabic-based β-carotene models, supports that direction of formulation engineering [15].

Second, the strongest human evidence in retinal nutrition still centers on lutein, zeaxanthin, and meso-zeaxanthin rather than β-carotene. This does not make β-carotene biologically irrelevant, but it does mean that a β-carotene-containing retinal-support platform must be discussed with appropriate translational caution. Current and former smokers should avoid β-carotene-containing AREDS-type products, and any future clinical development of a similar platform would be stronger if it were evaluated either in non-smokers or in a version in which β-carotene is restricted or replaced [1–3].

Third, the blueberry/bilberry and grape-seed evidence is best interpreted as complementary rather than substitutive. The anthocyanin and proanthocyanidin fractions are supported by a growing literature in visual fatigue, retinal oxidative stress, inflammatory retinal injury, diabetic retinal pathology, and photobleaching recovery [6–12, 16]. Those data fit well with the retained cell-survival endpoint and with the platform's water-phase antioxidant rationale, but they do not yet approach the evidentiary weight of the AREDS/AREDS2 carotenoid literature for AMD progression.

The principal limitation of the present article is that the retained engineering dataset and the published evidence blocks do not describe the same finished product in the same clinical population. The formulation dataset provides comparative evidence on oxidation, retention, dissolution, and RPE survival, whereas the published literature is ingredient-level and heterogeneous in disease model, dose, and outcome. Even so, the convergence of these data supports a disciplined conclusion: formulation protection and ingredient selection are aligned in a way that is both biologically coherent and clinically testable.

6. CONCLUSION

We conclude that the NVTIA retinal-support platform can be discussed as a dual-phase protected carotenoid–polyphenol matrix with meaningful engineering advantages and a plausible ocular-support rationale. The retained formulation dataset demonstrates superior oxidation control, active retention, dissolution, and blue-light-stress RPE survival compared with a conventional control, while the external literature provides strong human support for lutein-centered carotenoid supplementation and complementary support for anthocyanin- and proanthocyanidin-rich fractions. Future clinical work should prioritize prospective trials that measure macular pigment, glare recovery, contrast or visual fatigue endpoints, and retinal structural biomarkers, while addressing the translational implications of β-carotene exposure in current or former smokers.

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