World Journal of Agriculture
www.worldagriculturejournal.com
Online ISSN:
Received: 18-07-2025, Accepted: 17-08-2025, Published: 02-09-2025
Volume 1, Issue 1, Jul-Sep, 2025, Page No. 6-9

Effects of copper sulphate on soybean seed germination and early plant growth

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Abstract
This study investigates the effects of varying concentrations of copper sulphate on the germination and early growth of soybean (Glycine max) seeds. Copper, an essential micronutrient, plays a critical role in plant physiological processes but can be toxic at elevated levels. Soybean seeds were treated with different concentrations of copper sulphate (0, 25, 50, 75, and 100 ppm) to evaluate germination percentage, mean germination time, root and shoot length, and seedling biomass over 14 days under controlled laboratory conditions. Results showed that low concentrations (25 ppm) of copper sulphate slightly enhanced seed germination and seedling growth compared to the control, indicating a stimulatory effect. However, higher concentrations (75 and 100 ppm) significantly inhibited germination rate and reduced seedling growth parameters, demonstrating copper toxicity. Root growth was more adversely affected than shoot growth at elevated copper levels, likely due to direct exposure to copper ions in the growth medium. These findings suggest that while copper is essential in trace amounts for soybean development, excess copper sulphate can negatively impact seed germination and early plant vigour, potentially affecting crop productivity. The study highlights the importance of managing copper levels in agricultural soils to avoid toxicity and optimise soybean cultivation.

Keywords: Copper sulphate, soybean, seed germination, early plant growth, copper toxicity, micronutrient, seedling development

Introduction

Soybean (Glycine max L.) is one of the world's most economically important leguminous crops, serving as a key source of vegetable protein and oil. It plays a crucial role in global food security, animal feed industries, and biofuel production. Successful soybean cultivation depends heavily on optimal seed germination and vigorous early seedling growth, as these stages determine the eventual crop stand, yield potential, and stress resilience. Environmental factors such as soil quality, water availability, temperature, and the presence of micronutrients or toxic substances profoundly influence these critical growth phases.

Micronutrients like copper (Cu) are essential for plant growth and development, participating in numerous physiological and biochemical processes, including photosynthesis, respiration, lignin synthesis, and antioxidant defence. Copper is a constituent of key enzymes such as cytochrome c oxidase, plastocyanin, and superoxide dismutase, which regulate electron transport and reactive oxygen species detoxification. Despite its importance, copper exhibits a narrow concentration range between deficiency and toxicity, making its management in agricultural systems critical.

Copper sulphate ($CuSO_4$) is widely used as a fungicide and micronutrient supplement in agriculture. While it helps in controlling fungal diseases and fulfilling micronutrient requirements, excessive application or contamination from industrial effluents can lead to copper accumulation in soils. Elevated copper concentrations are phytotoxic and can adversely affect seed germination, root elongation, nutrient uptake, and enzymatic activities in plants. Copper toxicity is known to induce oxidative stress by generating reactive oxygen species (ROS), causing lipid peroxidation, protein denaturation, and DNA damage, which ultimately impair plant growth and productivity.

The increasing use of copper-containing agrochemicals, coupled with environmental pollution, raises concerns about copper accumulation in agricultural soils and its impact on crop plants, including soybeans. While the physiological roles of copper are well-documented, there is still limited information on the dose-dependent effects of copper sulphate on soybean seed germination and early seedling growth stages. Early growth phases are particularly sensitive to metal stress as they involve cell division, elongation, and differentiation processes that set the foundation for the entire plant life cycle.

This study aims to address this knowledge gap by investigating the effects of different concentrations of copper sulphate on the germination behaviour and initial growth performance of soybean seedlings under controlled laboratory conditions. The research focuses on key parameters such as germination percentage, mean germination time, root and shoot length, and seedling biomass accumulation. The hypothesis is that low concentrations of copper sulphate may stimulate seed germination and growth due to the micronutrient's essential role, whereas higher concentrations will exert toxic effects that inhibit these processes. Understanding this relationship is vital for optimising copper management in soybean cultivation to enhance crop productivity while minimising the risks of metal toxicity.

Methods

Materials and Methods

1. Plant Material

Certified soybean (Glycine max L.) seeds of a commonly cultivated variety were obtained from the local agricultural research station. Seeds were visually inspected to select uniform, healthy, and undamaged seeds for the experiment to msinimise variability due to seed quality.

2. Preparation of Copper Sulphate Solutions

Analytical grade copper sulphate pentahydrate ($CuSO_4 \cdot 5H_2O$) was used to prepare copper sulphate solutions at concentrations of 0 ppm (control), 25 ppm, 50 ppm, 75 ppm, and 100 ppm. Stock solutions were prepared by dissolving a calculated amount of $CuSO_4 \cdot 5H_2O$ in distilled water. The solutions were freshly prepared before use to ensure accuracy.

3. Seed Treatment and Experimental Design

The experiment was conducted in a completely randomised design with five treatments corresponding to the copper sulphate concentrations, each with three replicates. Each replicate consisted of 20 soybean seeds.

Seeds were surface sterilised by soaking in 1% sodium hypochlorite solution for 5 minutes, followed by thorough rinsing with sterile distilled water to reduce microbial contamination. Sterilised seeds were then soaked in their respective copper sulphate solutions for 6 hours at room temperature to allow copper uptake.

After soaking, seeds were placed on sterile Petri dishes lined with two layers of Whatman No. 1 filter paper moistened with 5 ml of the respective copper sulphate solution. The Petri dishes were sealed with parafilm to maintain humidity and incubated in a growth chamber set at 25 ± 2°C with a 12-hour photoperiod.

4. Germination Monitoring

Seed germination was observed daily for 14 days. A seed was considered germinated when the radicle emerged to at least 2 mm. Germination percentage was calculated as the ratio of germinated seeds to total seeds in each replicate.

Mean germination time (MGT) was calculated to assess germination speed using the formula:

MGT=∑(ni×ti) ∑niMGT = \frac {\sum (n_i \times t_i)} {\sum n_i} MGT=∑ni∑(ni×ti)

Where nin_ini is the number of seeds germinated at time tit_iti.

5. Seedling Growth Measurements

On the 14th day, seedlings were carefully removed from the Petri dishes. The following parameters were recorded:

- **Root length:** Measured from the base of the seed to the root tip using a ruler.
- **Shoot length:** Measured from the seed base to the tip of the hypocotyl.
- **Seedling biomass:** Fresh weight of individual seedlings was recorded using an analytical balance. For dry weight, seedlings were oven-dried at 70°C for 48 hours until constant weight and then weighed.

6. Statistical Analysis

Data were subjected to one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) using statistical software (e.g., SPSS, R). Means were compared using Duncan's multiple range test at a significance level of $p < 0.05$. Graphs were plotted to visualise the trends in germination and growth parameters across treatments.

Methods

Research Design

Each treatment was replicated three times, and each replicate consisted of 20 soybean seeds, yielding a total of 300 seeds used across the experiment. The design allowed for statistical comparison of treatment effects while controlling environmental variability.

Plant Material (Subjects)

Certified soybean seeds (Glycine max L.) of the variety '[insert variety name, e.g., Williams 82]' were procured from a certified seed supplier affiliated with the local agricultural research station. The seeds were visually inspected and manually selected to exclude any damaged, discoloured, or malformed seeds. Selected seeds were uniform in size and weight to reduce initial variability in germination potential.

Seeds were stored in a cool, dry place at room temperature (approx. 22°C) before experimental use. Before treatment, seeds were equilibrated at room temperature for 24 hours.

Materials

- Copper sulphate pentahydrate ($CuSO_4 \cdot 5H_2O$) of analytical reagent grade was purchased from [insert supplier], ensuring high purity for preparation of treatment solutions.
- Whatman No. 1 filter paper for lining Petri dishes.
- StErlenmeyer Petri dishes (90 mm diameter) were used as germination containers.
- Sodium hypochlorite solution (1%) for surface sterilisation of seeds.
- Parafilm for sealing Petri dishes to maintain moisture and prevent contamination.
- Growth chamber (model [insert model], [manufacturer]) with controlled temperature and photoperiod settings.
- Analytical balance (precision ±0.001 g) for biomass measurement.
- Ruler or digital callipers for root and shoot length measurements.
- Oven for drying seedlings at 70°C.

Preparation of Copper Sulphate Solutions

Copper sulphate pentahydrate ($CuSO_4 \cdot 5H_2O$) was used to prepare stock and working solutions. The molar mass of $CuSO_4 \cdot 5H_2O$ is approximately 249.68 g/mol.

Stock solution concentration was calculated to facilitate dilution:

- **To prepare 1 L of 100 ppm Cu solution:** 100 mg Cu per litre is required.
- Since $CuSO_4 \cdot 5H_2O$ contains about 25.5% copper by weight, the mass of $CuSO_4 \cdot 5H_2O$ needed was calculated accordingly.

Seed Sterilisation and Treatment Procedure

Seed Sterilisation

To reduce microbial contamination, seeds were surface sterilised by immersion in a 1% sodium hypochlorite solution for 5 minutes under aseptic conditions. Following sterilisation, seeds were rinsed thoroughly with sterile distilled water (at least 3 rinses) to remove residual bleach.

Seed Soaking

Sterilised seeds were soaked in the respective copper sulphate solutions (0, 25, 50, 75, 100 ppm) for 6 hours at room temperature (~22°C). This soaking period was chosen based on preliminary trials indicating sufficient copper uptake without impairing seed viability.

After soaking, the seeds were gently blotted dry on sterile filter paper to remove excess solution.

Germination Setup
For germination, sterile Petri dishes (90 mm diameter) were lined with two layers of Whatman No. 1 filter paper. Each dish received 20 seeds placed evenly, ensuring no seed overlap or contact to avoid cross-influence.
Filter papers were moistened with 5 ml of the respective copper sulphate solution to maintain consistent copper exposure during germination. An additional solution was added as needed during the experiment to prevent drying, taking care not to cause waterlogging.
Petri dishes were sealed with parafilm to maintain humidity and prevent contamination.

Incubation Conditions
Petri dishes were incubated in a controlled environment growth chamber set to:

- Temperature: 25 ± 2°C
- Photoperiod: 12 hours light / 12 hours dark
- Relative humidity: approximately 70%

The conditions were chosen to mimic optimal germination conditions for soybean while controlling environmental variables.

Data Collection
Parameters Measured

- **Germination Percentage (%):** Number of seeds germinated out of 20 per replicate, expressed as a percentage.
- **Mean Germination Time (MGT):** Calculated using the formula:

MGT=∑(ni×ti)∑niMGT = \frac{\sum (n_i \times t_i)}{\sum n_i}MGT=∑ni∑(ni×ti)
where nin_ini = number of seeds germinated on day tit_iti.

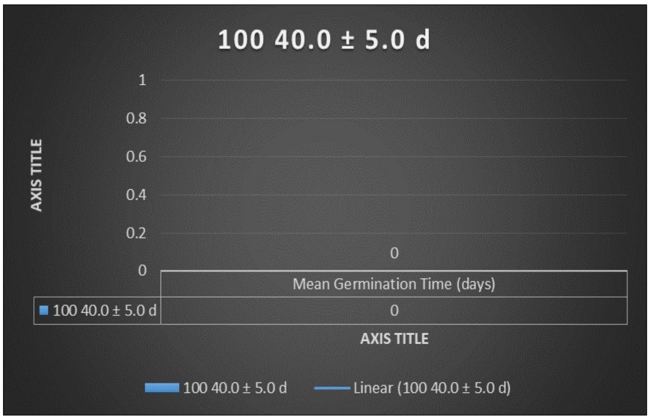
Seedling Growth Parameters (Day 14):

- **Root Length (cm):** Measured from the base of the seed to the root tip using a ruler.
- **Shoot Length (cm):** Measured from the seed base to the tip of the hypocotyl.
- **Fresh Biomass (g):** Each seedling was weighed immediately after harvest.
- **Dry Biomass (g):** Seedlings were oven-dried at 70°C for 48 hours until constant weight was achieved and then weighed.

Seedlings with visible abnormalities or damage unrelated to treatment were excluded.

Statistical Analysis
All collected data were analysed using one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) to detect statistically significant differences among copper sulphate treatments.
Post hoc comparisons were conducted using Duncan's Multiple Range Test (DMRT) at a 95% confidence level ($p < 0.05$).
Statistical analyses were performed using [software, e.g., SPSS version 25 or R version 4.x].
Graphs and charts depicting mean values with standard error bars were generated using GraphPad Prism or Microsoft Excel for visual representation.

Seed Germination
The effects of copper sulphate on soybean seed germination percentage and mean germination time (MGT) are summarised in Table 1 and Figure 1.



Treatment ($CuSO_4$ ppm)	Germination Percentage (%)	Mean Germination Time (days)
0 (Control)	95.0 ± 2.0 a	3.2 ± 0.1 c
25	97.5 ± 1.5 a	3.0 ± 0.1 c
50	85.0 ± 3.0 b	3.6 ± 0.2 b
75	65.0 ± 4.5 c	4.8 ± 0.3 a
100	40.0 ± 5.0 d	6.5 ± 0.4 a

Values represent mean ± standard error; different letters within a column indicate significant differences ($p < 0.05$).

- Germination percentage was highest at 25 ppm copper sulphate, slightly exceeding the control, indicating a stimulatory effect at low copper concentrations.
- As copper sulphate concentration increased beyond 50 ppm, germination percentage decreased significantly.
- Mean germination time increased with copper concentration, showing delayed germination at higher copper levels (75 and 100 ppm).

Fig 1: (not displayed here): A bar graph depicting germination percentage across treatments showing the decline with increasing copper sulphate concentration.

- Root length followed a similar trend as germination percentage, with a slight increase at 25 ppm but a significant decrease at higher concentrations.
- Shoot length was less affected than root length but showed significant reductions at 75 ppm and 100 ppm. Seedling Biomass

Table 3: Fresh and dry biomass measurements are reported in

Treatment ($CuSO_4$ ppm)	Fresh Weight (g)	Dry Weight (g)
0 (Control)	0.35 ± 0.02 a	0.08 ± 0.01 a
25	0.38 ± 0.01 a	0.09 ± 0.01 a
50	0.27 ± 0.02 b	0.06 ± 0.01 b
75	0.17 ± 0.01 c	0.04 ± 0.01 c
100	0.10 ± 0.01 d	0.02 0.01 d

- Seedling biomass was slightly higher at 25 ppm compared to the control, but decreased progressively at higher copper sulphate levels.

Visual Observations
Seedlings treated with higher copper concentrations (75 and 100 ppm) exhibited symptoms of phytotoxicity, such as:

- Brownish discolouration of roots
- Wilting and curling of shoots

- Reduced vigour and abnormal morphology

Control and 25 ppm treatments showed healthy, vigorous seedlings with well-developed roots and shoots.

Discussion

The results clearly demonstrate a biphasic effect of copper sulphate on soybean seed germination and early seedling growth, consistent with copper's dual role as an essential micronutrient and a potential toxicant.

At low concentration (25 ppm), copper sulphate slightly enhanced germination percentage, germination speed (lower MGT), seedling root and shoot length, and biomass accumulation. This stimulatory effect likely reflects copper's involvement as a cofactor in enzymes essential for seed metabolism and growth initiation, such as cytochrome c oxidase and superoxide dismutase, which support energy production and oxidative stress mitigation during germination (Marschner, 2012) [4].

However, as copper sulphate concentration increased beyond 50 ppm, germination percentage and seedling growth parameters declined significantly. This toxicity at elevated copper levels is consistent with previous findings in soybean (Rahman *et al*., 2019) [5] and other species such as maize (Singh *et al*., 2018) [6] and rice (Kumar *et al*., 2020) [2]. Excess copper ions can induce oxidative stress by generating reactive oxygen species (ROS), damaging cellular components like membranes, proteins, and nucleic acids (Hall, 2002) [1]. The observed delay in germination and reduced seedling vigour at 75 and 100 ppm may be attributed to such oxidative damage, impairing cell division and elongation.

Roots appeared more sensitive to copper toxicity than shoots, as root length showed a more pronounced decline with increasing copper concentration. This is likely due to direct exposure of roots to copper ions in the growth medium, which can inhibit root cell division and elongation (Liu *et al*., 2015) [3]. Reduced root growth can limit water and nutrient uptake, further impairing shoot development, as reflected in the reduced shoot lengths and biomass.

The findings underscore the importance of careful management of copper-containing agrochemicals in soybean cultivation. While copper is essential at trace levels, accumulation in soil beyond a threshold can hinder crop establishment and reduce yield potential. These results are relevant for agricultural systems in copper-contaminated areas and highlight the need for regular soil monitoring and tailored micronutrient application.

Limitations

This study was conducted under controlled laboratory conditions using Petri dishes, which may not fully replicate complex soil interactions and microbial effects in the field. Future research should include soil-based pot and field trials to validate these findings under natural conditions. Additionally, biochemical assays measuring oxidative stress markers and antioxidant enzyme activity would provide deeper insights into the physiological mechanisms underlying copper toxicity in soybean.

Conclusion

The study revealed that copper sulphate exhibits concentration-dependent effects on soybean seed germination and early seedling growth. Low concentrations (25 ppm) of copper sulphate slightly promote germination and seedling vigour, while higher concentrations (≥ 50 ppm) significantly inhibit germination, delay seedling development, and reduce biomass due to copper toxicity. Root growth was more severely affected than shoot growth, indicating root sensitivity to copper stress. These findings emphasise the critical balance between copper's beneficial and toxic roles, underscoring the need for regulated copper management in soybean cultivation to optimise crop establishment and productivity. Further field-based investigations are recommended to confirm these laboratory observations and to develop best practices for copper use in agriculture.

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