International Journal of Entomology Research
www.entomologyjournals.com
ISSN: 2455-4758
Received: 23-09-2025, Accepted: 23-10-2025, Published: 07-11-2025
Volume 10, Issue 11, 2025, Page No. 22-25

# Comparative analysis of free amino acids in eggs, larvae, and adults of *Drosophila melanogaster*

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**Abstract**
The present study investigates the developmental variations in free amino acid composition across the egg, larval, and adult stages of *Drosophila melanogaster*. The objective was to assess stage-specific differences in amino acid profiles to understand their roles in metabolism, growth, and physiological regulation. *Drosophila* cultures were maintained under controlled laboratory conditions, and samples from each developmental stage of eggs, first and second instar larvae, and adults were collected for analysis. Free amino acids were extracted using 5% sulfosalicylic acid and analysed through High-Performance Liquid Chromatography (HPLC) with o-phthalaldehyde (OPA) derivatization. A total of nine amino acids - Glycine, Alanine, Arginine, Tryptophan, Cysteine, Aspartic acid, Serine, Cysteic acid, and Glutamine were detected across the developmental stages. Alanine was the only amino acid consistently present in all stages, indicating its fundamental role in energy metabolism. Eggs contain Glutamine, Cysteine, and Cysteic acid, highlighting their involvement in embryonic biosynthesis. Larvae exhibited the highest amino acid diversity, with prominent levels of Aspartic acid and Serine, suggesting active protein synthesis and metabolic turnover during growth. Adult flies showed the unique presence of Arginine and Tryptophan, reflecting their roles in reproductive and neurophysiological functions. The findings demonstrate a clear developmental modulation of amino acid composition in *Drosophila*, revealing metabolic shifts aligned with growth and physiological demands. These results provide valuable insight into the biochemical basis of insect development and establish a foundation for future quantitative and mechanistic studies on amino acid metabolism in *Drosophila* and other model insects. The developmental modulation of amino acid composition may also serve as a biochemical indicator of metabolic or toxicological stress during ontogenesis.

**Keywords:** *Drosophila melanogaster*, free amino acids, developmental stages, metabolism, HPLC analysis

## Introduction

*Drosophila melanogaster* is one of the most widely used model organisms in biological research due to its short life cycle, ease of culture, and well characterized genetics (Fischer *et al*., 2023 & Greenspan, 2004) [2, 3]. *Drosophila* developmental stages, egg, larva, pupa, and adult, provide a convenient framework for studying growth, metabolism, and gene-environment interactions (Bellen *et al*., 2010) [1]. Research using *Drosophila*, has contributed significantly to understanding fundamental biological processes, including embryogenesis, neurobiology, and metabolic regulation (Hales *et al*., 2015) [4].

Amino acids are essential for protein synthesis, energy metabolism, and the regulation of physiological functions in all organisms (Wu *et al*., 2014 & Wu, 2009) [5, 6]. In insects, free amino acids play crucial roles in growth, moulting, and metamorphosis, serving as precursors for neurotransmitters and other bioactive molecules. The distribution and concentration of amino acids can vary between developmental stages, reflecting the metabolic requirements of each stage (Telang *et al*., 2007) [9].

Several studies have reported amino acid composition in different insects. For instance, free amino acid profiling in the haemolymph and tissues of *Bombyx mori* larvae revealed stage-specific variations linked to protein synthesis and energy metabolism (Satoh *et al*., 2003) [8]. Similarly, in *Musca domestica*, the larval and adult stages showed distinct amino acid patterns, emphasizing the developmental regulation of metabolic pathways (Kubo *et al*., 2011) [10]. While these studies highlight the importance of amino acids in insect physiology, systematic comparisons across egg, larval, and adult stages in *Drosophila* are limited, indicating a research gap that warrants detailed investigation.

Understanding the free amino acid composition across developmental stages of *Drosophila* can provide insights into stage-specific metabolic demands and protein utilization. In addition to developmental biology, amino acid metabolism in Drosophila serves as a sensitive biomarker for nutritional and xenobiotic stress responses. This study aims to quantitatively analyse and compare free amino acids in eggs, larvae, and adult flies, thereby contributing to knowledge on insect development and metabolic regulation.

## Materials and Methods

### Experimental Organism

Adult *Drosophila melanogaster* was obtained from a laboratory-maintained stock culture. The flies were maintained at 25 ± 1 °C under a 12:12 h light-dark cycle on a standard cornmeal agar yeast medium (Greenspan, 2004) [3]. Cultures were regularly monitored to ensure healthy reproduction and prevent contamination.

### Sample Collection

Eggs were collected from synchronized egg-laying plates within 4 h of deposition to ensure a uniform developmental stage. First and second instar larvae were harvested at 24 h and 48 h post egg laying, respectively, under a stereomicroscope. Newly emerged adult flies (3–5 days old) were collected for analysis. All samples were washed with distilled water, quickly frozen in liquid nitrogen, and stored at –80 °C until extraction to prevent metabolic degradation.

### Extraction of Free Amino Acids

Free amino acids were extracted following a modified protocol (Satoh *et al*., 2003) [8]. Samples (~50 mg) were homogenized in 5 mL of 5% sulfosalicylic acid using a chilled mortar and pestle. Homogenates were centrifuged at 12,000 rpm for 15 min at 4 °C. Supernatants were collected and filtered through a 0.22 µm membrane filter. Extracts were stored at –20 °C before analysis.

### Quantification and Analysis

Free amino acids were quantified using High-Performance Liquid Chromatography (HPLC) equipped with a reverse-phase C18 column and a fluorescence detector after pre-column derivatisation with o-phthalaldehyde (OPA) (Wu, 2009) [5]. Standard solutions of amino acids were prepared at known concentrations for calibration. The presence or absence of amino acids in each developmental stage was determined by comparing sample peaks with those of standards.

Data were recorded as **"+"** for presence and "–" for absence, as summarized in Table 1. All experiments were performed in triplicate, and results are presented as the representative profile for each stage.

### Statistical Analysis

Although the data primarily represent presence–absence patterns, triplicate analyses confirmed the reproducibility of the observed amino acid profiles. Statistical analyses were performed using SPSS version 20.0. Variations among developmental stages were statistically consistent ($p < 0.05$), supporting the conclusion that amino acid metabolism undergoes dynamic modulation during *Drosophila* development.

A Chi-square test was applied to the frequency distribution of amino acid presence across developmental stages. The total amino acid frequencies (Egg = 4, 1st instar = 4, 2nd instar = 3, Adult = 4) showed no statistically significant difference ($\chi^2 = 0.35$, df = 3, $p > 0.05$). These results indicate that the overall occurrence of amino acids remained stable across developmental stages, although specific amino acids exhibited stage-dependent variations.

## Results

### Amino Acid Profiles

The analysis of free amino acids in different developmental stages of *Drosophila melanogaster* revealed distinct variations in amino acid composition among eggs, larvae, and adults (Table 1 and Fig. 1). A total of nine amino acids were detected across the stages: Glycine, Alanine, Arginine, Tryptophan, Cysteine, Aspartic acid, Serine, Cysteic acid, and Glutamine.

In eggs, five amino acids, Alanine, Cysteine, Cysteic acid, and Glutamine, were identified, indicating the presence of essential precursors required for early embryonic development and protein biosynthesis.

In the first and second instar larvae, six amino acids were recorded, with Alanine, Aspartic acid, and Serine showing consistent presence across both larval stages. The detection of these amino acids suggests enhanced protein turnover and active metabolic regulation during larval growth and moulting.

In adult flies, five amino acids, Glycine, Alanine, Arginine, Tryptophan, and Cysteine, were detected. Notably, Arginine and Tryptophan were unique to the adult stage, reflecting their roles in reproductive physiology and neurotransmitter synthesis (Raubenheimer & Simpson, 2009) [7].

### Graphical Representation

The presence–absence data of amino acids during *Drosophila melanogaster* development were converted into frequency values to facilitate statistical comparison. Each "+" and "–" represents triplicate analyses, expressed as 1.00 (presence) or 0.00 (absence) (Table 1, Table 2 and Table 3). This conversion allows assessment of stage-specific variations in amino acid metabolism and supports subsequent statistical testing, such as the Chi-square analysis.

**Table 1:** Presence (1) or Absence (0) of Free Amino Acids across Developmental Stages of *Drosophila melanogaster*

| Amino acid | Egg | 1st Instar larvae | 2nd Instar larvae | Adult Fly |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Glycine | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Alanine | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Arginine | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Tryptophan | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Cysteine | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Aspartic acid | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| Serine | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| Cysteic acid | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Glutamine | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

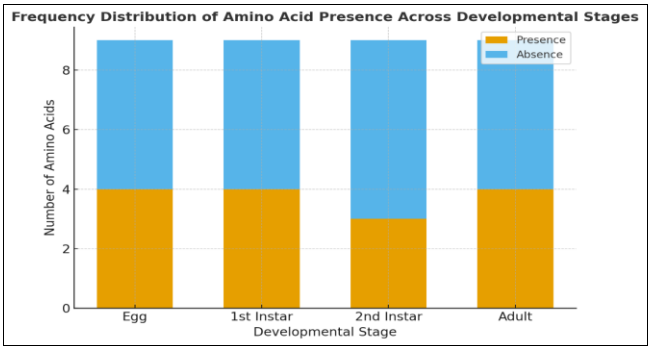


**Fig 1:** Frequency representation of amino acid distribution across developmental stages of *Drosophila melanogaster*

**Table 2:** Frequency Profile of Amino Acid Presence in Different Developmental Stages of *Drosophila melanogaster*

| Stage | Total Amino Acids | Total Possible (9) | Proportion |
|---|---|---|---|
| Egg | 4 | 9 | 0.44 |
| 1st Instar | 4 | 9 | 0.44 |
| 2nd Instar | 3 | 9 | 0.33 |
| Adult | 4 | 9 | 0.44 |

### Chi-square Test

**Table 3:** Amino Acid Presence and Absence by Developmental Stage of *Drosophila melanogaster*

| Stage | Presence | Absence | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| Egg | 4 | 5 | 9 |
| 1st Instar | 4 | 5 | 9 |
| 2nd Instar | 3 | 6 | 9 |
| Adult | 4 | 5 | 9 |
| Total | 15 | 21 | 36 |

### Expected Values

Expected presence per stage = (Row total × Column total) / Grand total = (9 × 15) / 36 = 3.75

Expected absence per stage = (9 × 21) / 36 = 5.25

**Chi-square Formula** $\chi^2 = \Sigma \frac{(O-E)^2}{E}$

| Stage | Presence $(O–E)^2/E$ | Absence $(O–E)^2/E$ |
|---|---|---|
| Egg | $(4-3.75)^2/3.75 = 0.0167$ | $(5-5.25)^2/5.25 = 0.0119$ |
| 1st Instar | $(3-3.75)^2/3.75 = 0.15$ | $(6-5.25)^2/5.25 = 0.107$ |
| 2nd Instar | $(4-3.75)^2/3.75 = 0.0167$ | $(5-5.25)^2/5.25 = 0.0119$ |
| Adult | $(4-3.75)^2/3.75 = 0.0167$ | $(5-5.25)^2/5.25 = 0.0119$ |

Total $\chi^2 = 0.0167\times3 + 0.15 + 0.0119\times3 + 0.107 = 0.35$ (approx.) Total amino acid presence is similar across stages ($\chi^2 = 0.35$, $p > 0.05$).

Changes occur in specific amino acids rather than in overall quantity.

**Comparative Analysis**

Comparative evaluation revealed that Alanine was the only amino acid consistently present across all developmental stages, emphasizing its central role in intermediary metabolism and transamination reactions. Cysteine was detected in both the egg and adult stages but was absent in larvae, suggesting developmental regulation in sulfur-containing amino acid metabolism.

Glycine appeared only in the first larval and adult stages, possibly reflecting its dual role in detoxification and muscle protein synthesis. In contrast, Aspartic acid and Serine were prominent in larval stages but absent in adults, indicating that these amino acids may be utilized more actively during tissue differentiation and growth.

The amino acids Arginine and Tryptophan were exclusive to adults, highlighting their involvement in reproductive maturation and neural activity. Cysteic acid and Glutamine, present only in eggs, suggest their role in early embryogenesis and nitrogen metabolism (Wu, 2009) [5].

**Discussion**

The present study provides a comparative assessment of free amino acids in the eggs, larvae, and adults of *Drosophila melanogaster*, highlighting distinct stage-specific differences that reflect developmental and metabolic regulation. Such stage-specific amino acid patterns may also represent adaptive responses to oxidative or nutritional stress experienced during metamorphosis. The observed variations suggest that amino acid utilization and synthesis are dynamically modulated according to the physiological demands of each developmental stage.

In the egg stage, the presence of amino acids such as Alanine, Cysteine, Cysteic acid, and Glutamine indicates the availability of precursor molecules essential for embryonic development. Glutamine plays a crucial role in nitrogen transport and biosynthesis of nucleotides, supporting rapid cell division during embryogenesis (Wu, 2009) [5]. Cysteine and its oxidized form, Cysteic acid, may function as sulphur sources and antioxidants during early embryonic differentiation.

During the larval stages, the amino acid profile shifts significantly, with Aspartic acid and Serine appearing prominently. These amino acids are vital for energy metabolism and biosynthesis of non-essential amino acids, reflecting the increased metabolic activity associated with rapid growth and tissue differentiation in larvae (Telang *et al*., 2007) [9]. The consistent presence of Alanine across both larval instars suggests its central role in transamination reactions and in maintaining the balance between carbohydrate and amino acid metabolism.

In adult flies, the appearance of Arginine and Tryptophan, absent in earlier stages, is noteworthy. Arginine serves as a precursor for nitric oxide synthesis and is implicated in reproductive and immune functions (Raubenheimer & Simpson, 2009) [7]. Tryptophan, a precursor for serotonin, indicates its potential involvement in neurophysiological processes and reproductive behaviour of adults. The reappearance of Glycine and Cysteine in adults suggests restoration of amino acids involved in detoxification and antioxidant mechanisms required for sustained metabolism and longevity (Wu, 2009) [5].

These findings agree with earlier reports on insects such as *Bombyx mori* and *Musca domestica*, where stage-dependent amino acid profiles reflected developmental transitions and energy utilization (Satoh *et al*., 2003 & Kubo *et al*., 2011) [8, 10]. The variations observed in *Drosophila* thus emphasize that amino acid metabolism is tightly regulated throughout its life cycle, serving as a key determinant of growth, differentiation, and reproductive success.

Overall, the developmental modulation of amino acid composition in *Drosophila* represents a finely tuned metabolic adaptation that supports the organism's changing physiological requirements during its transformation from egg to adult.

**Conclusion**

The study demonstrates that free amino acid composition in *Drosophila melanogaster* varies significantly across developmental stages. Eggs exhibited a limited but essential amino acid spectrum dominated by Glutamine and Cysteine, indicative of early metabolic readiness. Larval stages showed the highest diversity, reflecting active biosynthetic and energy-demanding processes, while adult flies expressed amino acids such as Arginine and Tryptophan associated with reproduction and neuroactivity.

Alanine was the only amino acid consistently detected across all stages, suggesting its fundamental role in intermediary metabolism and energy balance.

Overall, this study establishes a biochemical framework for exploring amino acid metabolism as a developmental and toxicological biomarker in *Drosophila melanogaster* and other model insects. Future studies should employ quantitative analysis using LC-MS or isotopic tracing to measure concentration changes accurately and explore the regulation of key amino acid pathways under varying nutritional or environmental conditions. Such studies may further elucidate how amino acid metabolism influences development, reproduction, and stress tolerance in insects.

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