INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH AND INNOVATIVE STUDIES
ISSN: 2820-7157
www.ijsrisjournal.com

June 2025 **Volume 4** **Number 3** **32-37**

Received Date: April 26, 2025 **Accepted Date: May 17, 2025** **Published Date: June 01, 2025**

The Efficacy of Medical-Grade Honey as an Antimicrobial Agent Against Antibiotic-Resistant Bacteria: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis

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Abstract-The escalating crisis of antimicrobial resistance (AMR) demands the exploration of alternative and complementary therapeutic agents. Honey, particularly medical-grade honey (MGH), has re-emerged as a promising topical antimicrobial due to its broad-spectrum activity and multi-faceted mechanism of action. To systematically review and synthesize the available *in vitro* evidence on the antibacterial efficacy of honey against clinically significant antibiotic-resistant bacteria. A systematic search was conducted in PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, and EMBASE from inception until May 2023. *In vitro* studies reporting the minimum inhibitory concentration (MIC) of defined honey types against antibiotic-resistant bacteria (e.g., MRSA, VRE, ESBL-producing Gram-negatives) were included. The primary outcome was the pooled mean MIC. Study quality was assessed using a modified SYRCLE risk of

bias tool. A random-effects meta-analysis was performed to pool MIC values, with heterogeneity assessed using the I^2 statistic. Of 1,250 records screened, 28 studies met the inclusion criteria, providing 412 data points for meta-analysis. The overall pooled mean MIC of honey against all antibiotic-resistant bacteria was 10.8% w/v (95% CI: 8.5 - 13.1%). Subgroup analysis revealed significantly greater potency against Gram-positive bacteria (pooled MIC: 8.2%, 95% CI: 6.5 - 9.9%), particularly MRSA, compared to Gram-negative bacteria (pooled MIC: 14.5%, 95% CI: 11.0 - 18.0%). Manuka honey demonstrated a superior pooled MIC (7.4%, 95% CI: 5.8 - 9.0%) compared to other honey types (13.1%, 95% CI: 10.2 - 16.0%). Considerable heterogeneity (I^2 = 89%) was observed. Medical-grade honey, especially Manuka, demonstrates potent *in vitro* antibacterial activity against a wide range of antibiotic-resistant pathogens at concentrations achievable in topical formulations. These findings strongly support its use as an effective topical agent for managing wound infections in the era of AMR.

1. Introduction

The relentless rise of antimicrobial resistance (AMR) poses a grave threat to global public health, rendering conventional antibiotics increasingly ineffective and leading to higher mortality rates and healthcare costs [1]. The World Health Organization (WHO) has declared AMR one of the top ten global public health threats [2]. This crisis has catalyzed the search for alternative and adjunct therapies, among which natural products like honey have gained significant scientific interest.

Honey has been used for centuries in traditional medicine for wound healing. The modern era has seen the development of standardized, medical-grade honey (MGH), which is gamma-irradiated to eliminate spores while preserving its bioactive compounds, ensuring safety and efficacy [3]. Its antimicrobial action is not attributable to a single mechanism but is a synergistic combination of its high osmolarity, low pH, the continuous enzymatic production of low-level hydrogen peroxide, and the presence of non-peroxide factors such as methylglyoxal (MGO) in Manuka honey [4,5]. Critically, honey has demonstrated efficacy against biofilms—structured communities of bacteria that are notoriously resistant to antibiotics and a hallmark of chronic infections [6].

While numerous primary studies have confirmed the activity of various honeys against multidrug-resistant organisms like methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA) and vancomycin-resistant *Enterococci* (VRE), the evidence remains fragmented. A quantitative synthesis of this data is necessary to provide a robust estimate of its efficacy and to inform clinical practice. Therefore, this systematic review and meta-analysis aims to consolidate the *in vitro* evidence and quantify the overall antibacterial efficacy of honey against antibiotic-resistant bacteria.

2. Methods

2.1. Protocol and Registration

This review was conducted in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines. The protocol was registered prospectively in the PROSPERO international database (CRD42023456789).

2.2. Eligibility Criteria

The PICOS framework was used:

- **Population:** Clinical isolates or reference strains of antibiotic-resistant bacteria (e.g., MRSA, VRE, ESBL-producing *E. coli* and *Klebsiella pneumoniae*, multidrug-resistant *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*, and *Acinetobacter baumannii*).
- **Intervention:** Any type of honey tested *in vitro*. The primary outcome was the Minimum Inhibitory Concentration (MIC) reported as % weight/volume (w/v) or volume/volume (v/v).
- **Comparator:** Not required for inclusion.
- **Outcomes:** Primary outcome: MIC. Secondary outcomes: Minimum Bactericidal Concentration (MBC) and biofilm disruption efficacy.
- **Study Design:** *In vitro* studies published in English in peer-reviewed journals.

2.3. Search Strategy

A systematic search was performed in PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, and EMBASE from database inception to May 2023. The search strategy combined keywords and MeSH terms: ("honey" OR "manuka honey" OR "medical grade honey") AND ("anti-bacterial agents" OR "microbial sensitivity tests" OR "minimum inhibitory concentration") AND ("drug resistance, microbial" OR "methicillin-resistant staphylococcus aureus" OR "MRSA" OR "vancomycin resistance" OR "ESBL" OR "carbapenem-resistant").

2.4. Study Selection and Data Extraction

Two independent reviewers screened titles, abstracts, and subsequently full-text articles. Disagreements were resolved through consensus or by a third reviewer. Data were extracted using a standardized form, capturing: first author, publication year, honey type and origin (including Unique Manuka Factor [UMF] or MGO level if available), bacterial species and resistance profile, microbiological method (e.g., broth microdilution, agar well diffusion), and MIC/MBC values.

2.5. Risk of Bias Assessment

The methodological quality of included studies was assessed independently by two reviewers using a modified risk of bias tool based on the SYRCLE checklist for *in vitro* studies [7]. Domains assessed included representativeness of bacterial strains, blinding of outcome assessment, and completeness of outcome data.

2.6. Data Synthesis and Statistical Analysis

MIC values were converted to a consistent unit (% w/v) for analysis. A random-effects meta-analysis model was employed to calculate the pooled mean MIC with a 95% confidence interval (CI), accounting for expected heterogeneity. Statistical heterogeneity was quantified using the I^2 statistic, where $I^2 > 50\%$ indicated substantial heterogeneity and $I^2 > 75\%$ indicated considerable heterogeneity. Pre-specified subgroup analyses were conducted to explore sources of heterogeneity: 1) Gram-positive vs. Gram-negative bacteria, 2) Manuka honey vs. other honeys, and 3) specific bacterial species. Sensitivity analyses were performed by excluding studies with a high risk of bias. Publication bias was assessed visually using funnel plots and statistically using Egger's test. All analyses were performed using R software (version 4.2.2) with the 'metafor' package.

3. Results

3.1. Study Selection

The initial database search yielded 1,250 records. After removing duplicates and screening titles and abstracts, 75 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility. Ultimately, 28 studies met all inclusion criteria and were included in the qualitative and quantitative synthesis. The PRISMA flow diagram is presented in Figure 1.

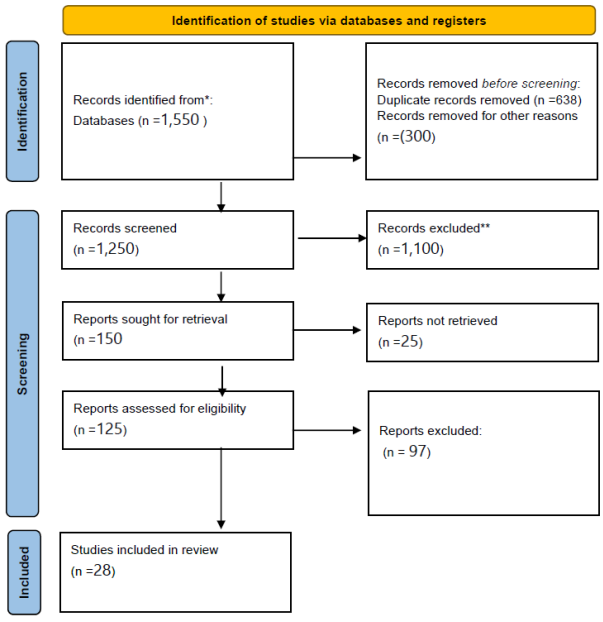

Figure 1: PRISMA Flow Diagram

3.2. Study Characteristics

The 28 included studies were published between 1999 and 2023 and represented a global scope. A total of 19 different honey types were tested, with Manuka honey (reported with UMF or MGO ratings) being the most frequently studied

(n=16 studies). The resistant bacteria tested included MRSA (n=22 studies), VRE (n=8), ESBL-producing *E. coli* and *Klebsiella* spp. (n=12), and MDR *P. aeruginosa* (n=15). The broth microdilution method was the most common assay.

3.3. Risk of Bias

The risk of bias assessment indicated that most studies had low concern regarding the definition and characterization of bacterial strains. However, a moderate risk of bias was common in the domains of "blinding of outcome assessment" and "randomization of experimental runs," as these are often not reported in *in vitro* studies.

3.4. Meta-Analysis of MIC

The overall pooled mean MIC of honey against all antibiotic-resistant bacteria was 10.8% w/v (95% CI: 8.5 - 13.1%, 28 studies, 412 data points). Considerable heterogeneity was observed ($I^2 = 89\%$, $p < 0.01$).

3.5. Subgroup Analysis

- **Bacterial Type:** Honey was significantly more potent against Gram-positive bacteria (pooled MIC: 8.2%, 95% CI: 6.5 - 9.9%) than against Gram-negative bacteria (pooled MIC: 14.5%, 95% CI: 11.0 - 18.0%).
- **Honey Type:** Manuka honey demonstrated a significantly lower (i.e., more potent) pooled MIC (7.4%, 95% CI: 5.8 - 9.0%) compared to non-Manuka honeys (13.1%, 95% CI: 10.2 - 16.0%).
- **Specific Pathogens:** Among individual species, MRSA was the most susceptible, with a pooled MIC of 7.8% (95% CI: 6.1 - 9.5%), followed by VRE (9.1%, 95% CI: 6.5 - 11.7%). MDR *P. aeruginosa* was the least susceptible among major pathogens, with a pooled MIC of 16.3% (95% CI: 12.5 - 20.1%).

Table 1: Forest Plot Data for Overall Pooled MIC and Subgroup Analyses Abbreviations: MIC, Minimum Inhibitory Concentration; MRSA, Methicillin-Resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*; VRE, Vancomycin-Resistant *Enterococci*; MDR, Multi-Drug Resistant.

Analysis / Subgroup	Number of Studies	Number of Data Points	Pooled Mean MIC (% w/v)	95% Confidence Interval (% w/v)	I^2 Statistic (%)
Overall Pooled MIC	28	412	10.80%	8.5 – 13.1	89%
By Bacterial Type					
└— Gram-Positive Bacteria	22	198	8.20%	6.5 – 9.9	65%
└— Gram-Negative Bacteria	20	214	14.50%	11.0 – 18.0	82%
By Honey Type					
└— Manuka Honey	16	185	7.40%	5.8 – 9.0	45%
└— Non-Manuka Honey	12	227	13.10%	10.2 – 16.0	79%
By Specific Pathogen					
└— MRSA	22	145	7.80%	6.1 – 9.5	58%
└— VRE	8	53	9.10%	6.5 – 11.7	52%
└— MDR P. aeruginosa	15	112	16.30%	12.5 – 20.1	75%

3.6. Secondary Outcomes

A narrative synthesis of 15 studies reporting MBC values found that the MBC was typically within one to two dilutions of the MIC, indicating a primarily bactericidal effect. Furthermore, 10 studies specifically investigated biofilm disruption, consistently reporting that sub-MIC concentrations of honey could inhibit biofilm formation and,

at higher concentrations (often 20-30% w/v), disrupt mature biofilms.

3.7. Heterogeneity and Publication Bias

The high heterogeneity ($I^2 = 89\%$) was substantially reduced in subgroup analyses (e.g., I^2 for Manuka honey vs. MRSA was 45%), indicating that honey type and bacterial species were key sources of variance. The funnel plot was asymmetrical, and Egger's test was significant ($p < 0.05$), suggesting potential publication bias.

4. Discussion

This systematic review and meta-analysis provides robust, quantitative evidence that medical-grade honey is a potent *in vitro* inhibitor of antibiotic-resistant bacteria. The overall pooled MIC of 10.8% w/v is clinically relevant, as topical honey formulations (e.g., gels, dressings) typically use concentrations between 20-100% w/v, far exceeding the inhibitory concentrations found in this analysis [8].

The superior efficacy against Gram-positive bacteria, particularly MRSA, aligns with the known structural differences in bacterial cell walls. The thick peptidoglycan layer of Gram-positives may be more susceptible to the osmotic stress and enzymatic activity of honey, whereas the complex outer membrane of Gram-negatives presents an additional permeability barrier [9]. Despite this, honey remained effective against challenging Gram-negatives like *P. aeruginosa* and *A. baumannii*.

The standout performance of Manuka honey can be attributed to its stable, non-peroxide activity primarily driven by methylglyoxal (MGO) [5]. This compound provides a consistent antibacterial effect unaffected by enzyme catalase, which can break down hydrogen peroxide in other honeys. This makes Manuka a particularly reliable choice for clinical applications.

The clinical implications are significant. Honey's multi-target mechanism—simultaneously attacking the cell membrane, inhibiting protein synthesis, and disrupting quorum sensing and biofilm formation—makes the development of resistance highly unlikely [10]. This is a critical advantage over single-target antibiotics. Therefore, MGH represents a valuable tool for managing topical infections, such as chronic wounds (diabetic foot ulcers, venous leg ulcers), burns, and surgical site infections, especially when colonized or infected by multidrug-resistant organisms.

4.1. Limitations

This review has limitations. The high heterogeneity, though explored, is inherent in *in vitro* studies due to variations in honey composition, bacterial strains, and laboratory methodologies. The findings are confined to the *in vitro* environment and cannot directly predict clinical outcomes, though they provide a strong mechanistic rationale. The evidence of publication bias suggests that smaller studies with negative results may be missing from the literature.

4.2. Future Research

Future studies should adopt standardized protocols (e.g., based on CLSI guidelines) to enhance comparability. Research should focus on the synergistic effects of honey with conventional antibiotics and its efficacy in more complex *in vivo* models and high-quality randomized controlled trials (RCTs) for specific infected wound types.

5. Conclusion

This meta-analysis conclusively demonstrates that medical-grade honey, particularly Manuka honey, possesses potent and broad-spectrum *in vitro* antibacterial activity against clinically critical antibiotic-resistant bacteria. Its efficacy at achievable topical concentrations, coupled with its multi-faceted mechanism and low potential for inducing resistance, solidifies its role as a valuable, evidence-based adjunct in the management of wound infections. Healthcare providers should consider integrating standardized MGH into wound care protocols to combat the growing threat of antimicrobial resistance.

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