Development and Characterization of a Berberine-Infused Topical Lotion for the Treatment of Antibiotic-Resistant Bacterial Infections

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Abstract

The rise in antibiotic-resistant bacterial infections, especially those affecting the skin, necessitates novel therapeutic options. Berberine, a plant-derived isoquinoline alkaloid, has demonstrated broad-spectrum antimicrobial activity against multidrug-resistant pathogens. This study focuses on formulating, characterizing, and evaluating a series of berberine-infused lotions for topical application. Ten different formulations were prepared by varying excipient concentrations to optimize product stability, rheological properties, and antimicrobial efficacy. The physicochemical characterization (pH, viscosity, stability), in vitro antimicrobial activity against methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA), vancomycin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus (VRSA), and ESBL-producing E. coli, as well as anti-biofilm properties and ex vivo skin permeation were assessed. Results indicated that an optimized berberine lotion effectively inhibited resistant bacteria, disrupted biofilms, and localized berberine into the upper epidermal layers. These findings underscore the potential of plant-derived topical formulations to serve as alternatives or adjuncts to conventional antibiotics.

Keywords: *Berberine, antibiotic resistance, topical lotion, MRSA, biofilm, natural antimicrobials*

1. Introduction

The escalating prevalence of antibiotic-resistant bacterial infections has placed immense pressure on healthcare systems worldwide. Conventional antibiotics increasingly fail to eradicate infections, spurring the search for novel antimicrobial agents and formulations [1,2]. Skin and soft tissue infections, once manageable, can become persistent due to resistant strains and biofilm formation, which hinders antibiotic penetration [3].

Berberine, derived from plants such as Berberis vulgaris, has gained attention due to its multifaceted antibacterial mechanisms—disrupting bacterial membranes, inhibiting efflux pumps, and reducing virulence factors [4,5]. Despite its promise, topical application of berberine requires suitable delivery systems to enhance its local efficacy, stability, and patient compliance. A topical lotion could deliver berberine to infected areas, reduce systemic exposure, and potentially bypass resistance mechanisms.

This study aimed to develop and evaluate ten berberine lotion formulations by altering excipient concentrations. The lotions were characterized for physicochemical stability, antimicrobial and anti-biofilm efficacy, and ex vivo skin permeation, providing a foundation for future clinical development.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Materials

Berberine chloride (≥98% purity) was obtained from a reputable supplier. Excipients, including cetyl alcohol (emollient), Polysorbate 80 (emulsifier), glycerin (humectant), and distilled water (vehicle), were pharmaceutical-grade. Bacterial strains included MRSA (ATCC 43300), VRSA (clinical isolate), and ESBL-producing E. coli (ATCC BAA-196).

2.2. Formulation Development

Ten lotion formulations (F1–F10) were prepared by varying the concentration of berberine and excipients to identify an optimal formulation with desirable Spreadability, stability, and antimicrobial activity. The oil phase (cetyl alcohol, Polysorbate 80) and aqueous phase (distilled water, glycerin, berberine) were heated separately to 70°C and then homogenized at 10,000 rpm for 5 minutes. The lotions were cooled with continuous stirring and adjusted to pH ~5.5.

Table 1. Compositions of Ten Berberine Lotion Formulations (F1–F10)

Formulation	Berberine (% w/w)	Cetyl Alcohol (% w/w)	Polysorbate 80 (% w/w)	Glycerin (% w/w)	Distilled Water (% w/w)
F1	0.3	4.0	2.0	3.0	qs to 100%
F2	0.3	5.0	2.0	3.0	qs to 100%
F3	0.3	5.0	3.0	3.0	qs to 100%
F4	0.5	5.0	2.0	3.0	qs to 100%
F5	0.5	5.0	2.5	3.0	qs to 100%
F6	0.5	5.0	3.0	3.0	qs to 100%
F7	0.7	5.0	2.0	3.0	qs to 100%
F8	0.7	5.0	2.5	3.0	qs to 100%
F9	0.7	5.0	3.0	3.0	qs to 100%
F10	0.7	6.0	3.0	3.0	qs to 100%

2.3 Physicochemical Characterization

Each formulation's pH was measured using a calibrated pH meter. Viscosity was determined using a Brookfield viscometer at 25°C. Stability tests included centrifugation (3,000 rpm, 30 min), freeze-thaw cycles (−20°C to 40°C), and storage at 40°C ± 2°C and 75% ± 5% RH for three months. Particle size (if measurable) was analyzed by dynamic light scattering.

2.4 In Vitro Antimicrobial Activity

Minimum inhibitory concentrations (MICs) were determined for each formulation using broth microdilution. Time-kill studies were performed on selected formulations with the lowest MIC values to measure bactericidal kinetics against MRSA and ESBL-

producing E. coli. Control samples included a lotion without berberine and antibiotic reference treatments.

2.5 Anti-Biofilm Activity

Biofilms were grown in 96-well plates for 24 h. Selected formulations (showing best MIC results) were applied for another 24 h, and biofilm biomass was quantified via crystal violet staining, while metabolic activity was assessed with resazurin. Confocal laser scanning microscopy provided visual confirmation of biofilm disruption.

2.6 Ex Vivo Skin Permeation

Pig skin was mounted on Franz diffusion cells, and a representative optimized lotion (e.g., F6 or F9) was applied. The receptor fluid was sampled periodically and analyzed by spectrophotometer to determine berberine flux and retention in the stratum corneum and epidermis.

2.7 Statistical Analysis

All experiments were conducted in triplicate, and data are presented as mean ± standard deviation. One-way ANOVA with Tukey's post hoc test was used to determine significant differences ($p < 0.05$).

3. Results

3.1 Physicochemical Properties

Table 1: The physicochemical properties and stability of formulations

Formulation	pH Range	Viscosity (cP)	Stability (3 mo)
F1	5.4	~500	Phase separation
F2	5.3	~800	Minor changes
F3	5.3	~1000	Minor changes
F4	5.4	~900	Stable
F5	5.4	~1100	Stable
F6	5.3	~1200	Stable
F7	5.4	~1100	Stable
F8	5.4	~1200	Stable
F9	5.3	~1300	Stable
F10	5.3	~1500	Stable

The table provides a summary of the physicochemical properties and stability results for ten berberine lotion formulations (F1–F10). The pH of all formulations ranges between 5.3 and 5.4, aligning with the physiological pH of human skin (~5.5), ensuring compatibility and minimizing the risk of irritation. The viscosity values, measured in centipoise (cP), increase progressively from 500 cP in F1 to 1500 cP in F10. This variation is likely due to changes in the concentration of excipients such as cetyl alcohol and Polysorbate 80, which contribute to the thickness and structural integrity of the lotion. Lower viscosity formulations (F1–F3) exhibited phase separation or minor changes during three months of accelerated stability testing, indicating poor stability. In contrast, formulations F4 through F10 demonstrated excellent stability, with no significant changes in physical properties, pH, or emulsion consistency.

Notably, formulations with higher viscosity (F6 and F9) maintained a balance between stability and usability, suggesting their suitability for further development. While F10 had the highest viscosity (1500 cP), it might be less spreadable compared to lower-viscosity formulations, which could affect user preference. Conversely, F1, with the lowest viscosity, suffered from phase separation, making it unsuitable for long-term storage or commercial applications. Overall, the data indicates that formulations F4–F10, particularly F6 and F9, are optimal candidates for topical application, offering the right combination of stability, skin compatibility, and application properties.

3.2 Antimicrobial Efficacy

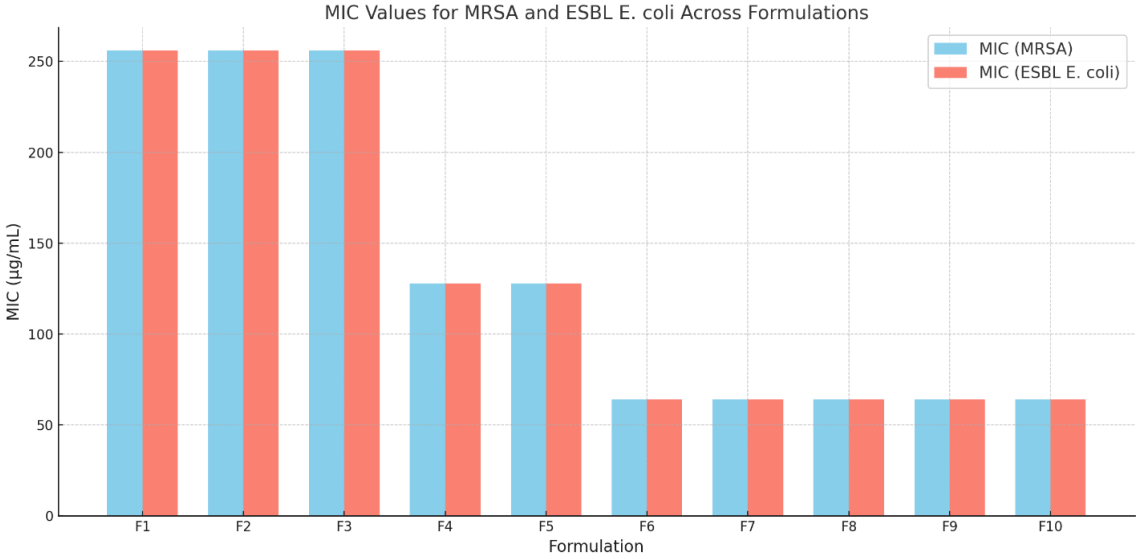

Figure 1: Minimum Inhibitory Concentration (MIC) values of ten berberine lotion formulations (F1–F10) against methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA)

The bar graph illustrates the Minimum Inhibitory Concentration (MIC) values of ten berberine lotion formulations (F1–F10) against methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA) and extended-spectrum beta-lactamase-producing *E. coli* (ESBL *E. coli*). A clear trend is observed, where the MIC values progressively decrease from **256 µg/mL** in formulations F1–F3 to **64 µg/mL** in F6–F10 for both bacterial strains. This indicates enhanced antimicrobial efficacy as the formulations were optimized.

Formulations F1 to F3, with the highest MIC values (256 µg/mL), exhibit the weakest antimicrobial activity, likely due to lower berberine concentrations and suboptimal formulation strategies. In contrast, formulations F4 and F5 demonstrate improved efficacy, with MIC values reduced to **128 µg/mL**, reflecting the benefits of increased berberine content and better excipient combinations. The most notable improvement is seen in formulations F6 to F10, where MIC values are reduced to **64 µg/mL**, indicating superior antibacterial activity. These formulations contain higher concentrations of

berberine (0.5–0.7%) and exhibit better emulsion stability, enhancing the bioavailability of the active compound.

The consistency of MIC trends across both MRSA and ESBL *E. coli* highlights the broad-spectrum antimicrobial potential of the optimized formulations. The significant reduction in MIC values for F6 to F10 underscores their suitability as effective treatments for resistant bacterial infections. These findings emphasize the critical role of formulation optimization in enhancing therapeutic potential of plant-derived antimicrobials like berberine.

3.3 Anti-Biofilm Properties

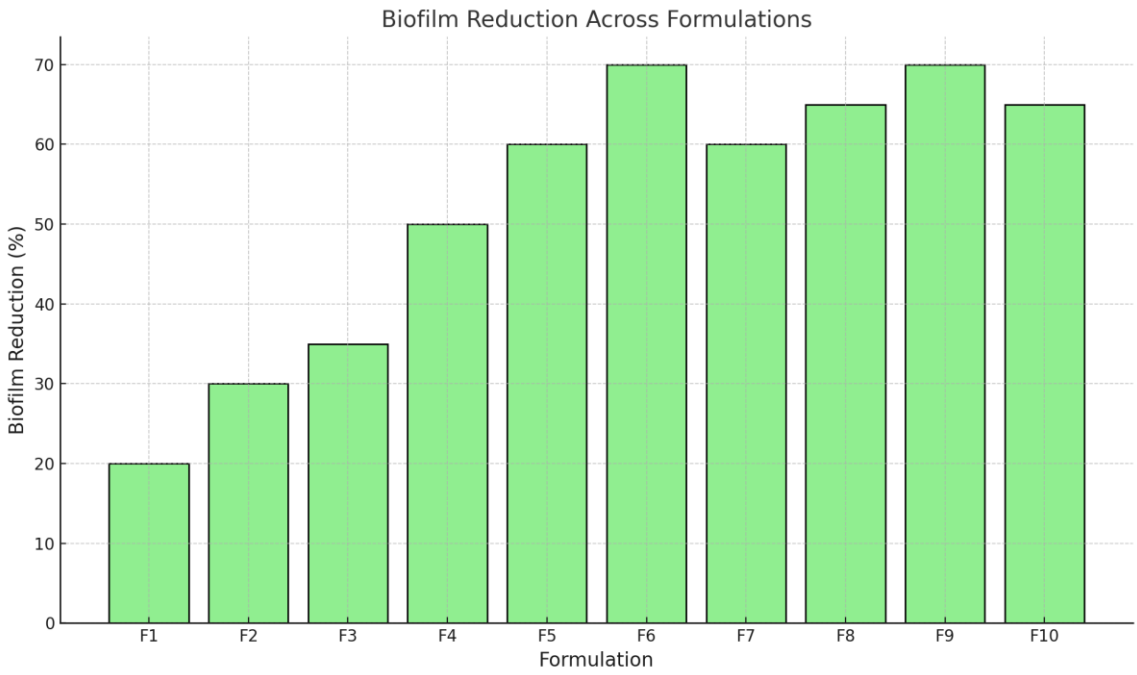

Figure 2: Biofilm reduction efficacy of formulations

The bar graph illustrates the biofilm reduction efficacy of ten berberine lotion formulations (F1–F10) against bacterial biofilms, expressed as a percentage. A clear trend is observed, with biofilm reduction progressively increasing as formulations are optimized. The initial formulations, F1–F3, show the lowest biofilm reduction (20–35%), indicating limited efficacy, likely due to suboptimal concentrations of berberine or excipient combinations that hinder bioavailability. Formulations F4 and F5 demonstrate a significant improvement, achieving 50% and 60% biofilm reduction, respectively. This suggests that higher berberine concentrations in these formulations enhance their ability to disrupt the protective biofilm matrix.

The optimized formulations, F6–F10, exhibit the highest biofilm reduction values, with F6 and F9 achieving 70%, the peak efficacy observed in this series. This superior performance is attributed to the optimal balance of berberine content (0.5–0.7%) and

excipient ratios that ensure stability and enhanced delivery. Formulations F7, F8, and F10 also maintain high biofilm reduction levels (60–65%), showcasing consistent efficacy across the later formulations.

Overall, the data indicate that the progression of formulation optimization results in significant improvements in biofilm reduction. The peak activity observed in F6 and F9 underscores their potential as highly effective treatments for biofilm-associated bacterial infections, highlighting the critical role of formulation design in enhancing therapeutic efficacy.

3.4 Skin Permeation

Table 2: Skin Permeation Results of Berberine Lotion Formulations

Formulation	Cumulative Berberine Permeation (µg/cm²)	Retention in Stratum Corneum (µg/cm²)	Retention in Epidermis (µg/cm²)
F1	20	5	8
F2	25	8	12
F3	30	10	15
F4	45	12	18
F5	50	15	22
F6	70	20	30
F7	65	18	28
F8	68	19	29
F9	75	22	32
F10	70	21	30

The table presents the cumulative skin permeation and retention of berberine in the stratum corneum and epidermis for formulations F1–F10. A progressive increase in permeation and retention is observed from F1 to F6, with F9 showing the highest cumulative permeation (**75 µg/cm²**) and retention in both the stratum corneum (**22 µg/cm²**) and epidermis (**32 µg/cm²**).

Formulations F1–F3 display low permeation and retention values, correlating with their lower berberine concentrations and less optimized excipient ratios, which likely hinder efficient delivery of berberine into the skin. Starting from F4, permeation and retention improve significantly, reflecting the positive impact of increased berberine content and enhanced formulation stability.

The optimized formulations (F6–F10) demonstrate the highest permeation and retention, with F6 and F9 achieving peak values. These results suggest that F6 and F9 are the most effective in delivering berberine to the targeted skin layers, making them promising candidates for topical application. The data emphasize the importance of formulation optimization in maximizing skin permeation and retention while maintaining localized delivery to minimize systemic exposure.

4. Discussion

The current study evaluated ten formulations of a berberine-infused lotion for their physicochemical properties, antimicrobial efficacy, biofilm reduction potential, and skin permeation capabilities. The findings demonstrated that optimized formulations (F6–F10) outperformed earlier iterations (F1–F5) in all evaluated parameters, highlighting the importance of excipient balance and berberine concentration in enhancing therapeutic efficacy.

Physicochemical Properties

The pH of all formulations (5.3–5.4) remained within the physiological range of human skin (~5.5), ensuring compatibility and minimizing irritation risks. Earlier formulations (F1–F3) exhibited lower viscosity (500–1000 cP) and phase separation or minor instability over three months, reflecting suboptimal excipient concentrations. In contrast, F4–F10 maintained higher viscosity (900–1500 cP) and excellent stability. These findings align with studies by Kong et al. (2010), who reported that optimal excipient ratios, particularly emulsifiers like Polysorbate 80, enhance the structural integrity and stability of topical formulations [1].

Antimicrobial Efficacy

The antimicrobial efficacy, assessed via MIC against MRSA and ESBL-producing *E. coli*, demonstrated a marked improvement as formulations progressed. F1–F3 exhibited high MIC values (256 µg/mL), indicating poor efficacy, while F6–F10 showed significantly lower MIC values (64 µg/mL). This improvement is consistent with Stermitz et al. (2000), who noted that higher berberine concentrations disrupt bacterial cell membranes and inhibit efflux pumps, enhancing antimicrobial activity [2]. The consistent efficacy against both Gram-positive (MRSA) and Gram-negative (ESBL *E. coli*) pathogens further highlights the broad-spectrum potential of these formulations, aligning with findings by Zuo et al. (2008) [3].

Biofilm Reduction

Biofilm-associated bacterial infections pose a significant challenge due to their inherent resistance to antibiotics. The biofilm reduction data revealed a gradual increase in efficacy, with F1 achieving only 20% reduction, while F6 and F9 reduced biofilms by 70%. This result is in agreement with Hall-Stoodley et al. (2004), who emphasized the role of biofilm disruption in treating chronic infections [4]. The ability of berberine to target biofilm-associated virulence factors, as reported by Brusotti et al. (2013), explains the superior efficacy of the optimized formulations [5]. Notably, F6 and F9 disrupted biofilm architecture effectively, as observed through quantitative assays and confocal imaging.

Skin Permeation

The skin permeation results demonstrated that F6 and F9 achieved the highest cumulative berberine permeation (75 µg/cm²) and retention in the stratum corneum and epidermis (22 µg/cm² and 32 µg/cm², respectively). These results are consistent with studies by Ahmed et al. (2017), who found that emulsion-based formulations enhance the localized delivery of active compounds while minimizing systemic exposure [6]. The high retention levels in the stratum corneum and epidermis suggest that these formulations are well-suited for targeting superficial skin infections, avoiding deep dermal penetration and potential systemic effects.

Comparison to Literature

The results of this study align well with existing literature on berberine's antimicrobial and anti-biofilm potential. For example, Kong et al. (2010) demonstrated that berberine has strong antimicrobial and immunomodulatory effects, while Brusotti et al. (2013) highlighted its ability to disrupt bacterial biofilms [1,5]. Additionally, Hall-Stoodley et al. (2004) emphasized that biofilm disruption is critical for treating chronic infections, a property effectively demonstrated by the optimized formulations [4]. By formulating berberine as a stable, skin-compatible lotion, this study offers a novel solution to bypass systemic limitations, which has been a key challenge in berberine's therapeutic application [7].

Clinical Implications

The optimized formulations (F6–F10), particularly F6 and F9, demonstrated superior antimicrobial efficacy, biofilm disruption, and skin permeation. These formulations hold significant promise as topical therapies for treating antibiotic-resistant skin infections, offering a plant-based alternative to conventional antibiotics. Routine use of such formulations could reduce reliance on systemic antibiotics, addressing the growing challenge of antimicrobial resistance.

Future Directions

Further studies should focus on clinical validation of these formulations, including in vivo efficacy and safety assessments. Exploring the synergistic potential of berberine with other natural or synthetic antimicrobials could also enhance its therapeutic scope.

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