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ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Comparative Study of Bacterial and Viral Pathogen Loads in Wastewater Before and After Treatment Processes

[1]Dr. Deepak Kumar, [2]Dr. Sanjay Nag

[1]Tutor, [2]Associate Professor & HOD, Department of Microbiology, Anugrah Narayan Magadh Medical College, Gaya, India

Corresponding author
Dr. Deepak Kumar
Tutor, Department of Microbiology, Anugrah Narayan Magadh Medical College, Gaya, India

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ABSTRACT

Aim: This study aimed to assess and compare the bacterial and viral pathogen loads in wastewater before and after undergoing treatment processes, evaluating the effectiveness of the treatment in pathogen reduction. **Materials and Methods:** A total of 100 wastewater samples were collected from a wastewater treatment plant, with 50 samples taken from raw influent wastewater and 50 from the effluent after treatment. The samples were analyzed for bacterial pathogens (total coliforms, fecal coliforms, E. coli, *Salmonella* spp., *Shigella* spp., and *Vibrio cholerae*) using standard microbiological methods and viral pathogens (rotavirus, adenovirus, and norovirus) using real-time PCR. Data were analyzed using SPSS, with statistical significance assessed using paired t-tests or Wilcoxon signed-rank tests. **Results:** The total coliform count reduced by 99.9%, fecal coliforms by 99.75%, and E. coli by 99.78%. Complete removal of *Shigella* spp. and *Vibrio cholerae* was observed, with a significant reduction in *Salmonella* spp. (91.67%). Viral pathogen loads decreased by 99.95% for rotavirus, 97.33% for adenovirus, and over 99.5% for both Genogroups I and II of norovirus, with all reductions being statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). **Conclusion:** This study demonstrates that wastewater treatment processes are highly effective in reducing bacterial and viral pathogen loads, providing significant public health benefits. The results support the potential for safely reusing treated wastewater, especially in non-potable applications, contributing to water sustainability and environmental protection.

Keywords: Wastewater treatment, bacterial pathogens, viral pathogens, pathogen reduction, water reuse

INTRODUCTION

Wastewater treatment is a crucial process in maintaining public health and environmental quality. The treatment of wastewater involves the removal of contaminants, pathogens, and other harmful substances to make the water safe for discharge into the environment or reuse. Among the many pollutants found in wastewater, pathogens—particularly bacteria and viruses—pose significant health risks to humans and animals. These pathogens can lead to the spread of infectious diseases and contribute to environmental pollution if not properly treated. Therefore, understanding the effectiveness of wastewater treatment processes in reducing pathogen loads is of paramount importance.[1]

In this context, the study of bacterial and viral pathogen loads in wastewater before and after treatment processes provides vital insights into the efficiency of these systems. The term "pathogen load" refers to the concentration of disease-causing microorganisms in a given volume of wastewater. Bacteria and viruses are two major groups of pathogens that are often found in wastewater and have different characteristics, behavior, and responses to treatment. By comparing the levels of bacterial and viral pathogens before and after treatment, researchers can evaluate the ability of various treatment methods to remove or inactivate these pathogens.[2]

Bacterial pathogens commonly found in wastewater include species such as *Escherichia coli*, *Salmonella*, and *Enterococcus*. These bacteria can originate from human and animal feces and are often indicators of fecal contamination in water. They can cause gastrointestinal diseases and other infections in humans. Viruses, on the other hand, include enteric viruses such as noroviruses, rotaviruses, and enteric adenoviruses. These viruses are typically transmitted through the fecal-oral route and can cause a range of illnesses, from mild gastroenteritis to severe respiratory infections. Unlike bacteria, viruses require

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a host cell for replication, making their behavior in the environment different from that of bacteria.[3]

The treatment processes used in wastewater treatment plants (WWTPs) vary in their ability to reduce pathogen loads. Primary treatment, which involves physical processes such as screening and sedimentation, is primarily aimed at removing large particles and suspended solids but has limited impact on pathogen removal. Secondary treatment, which typically involves biological processes like activated sludge or trickling filters, is more effective at breaking down organic matter but may not always eliminate pathogens effectively. Tertiary treatment, which may include additional processes like filtration, disinfection (such as chlorination or ultraviolet (UV) irradiation), or advanced oxidation, is designed to further reduce pathogens and other contaminants in the treated effluent.[4]

Despite the widespread use of these treatment processes, concerns about their effectiveness in pathogen removal persist, particularly in the case of viral pathogens. While many bacterial pathogens can be effectively removed or inactivated by conventional treatment methods, viruses, due to their smaller size and distinct biological properties, may not be as easily removed. For instance, UV irradiation is often used to disinfect treated water, but its efficacy may vary depending on factors such as the viral species, water quality, and exposure time. Similarly, chlorine, a common disinfectant, is more effective against bacteria than viruses, leading to concerns about the residual viral load in treated effluent.[5]

A comparative study of bacterial and viral pathogen loads before and after treatment processes is important for several reasons. First, it provides valuable data on the specific challenges associated with removing different types of pathogens. Second, it helps identify the strengths and weaknesses of various treatment methods in terms of their ability to reduce the risk of infectious disease transmission. Finally, such studies can inform public health policies and wastewater treatment strategies, ensuring that treated wastewater meets safety standards and poses minimal risk to human health and the environment.

In addition to traditional wastewater treatment processes, emerging technologies, such as membrane filtration, electrocoagulation, and advanced oxidation processes, have gained attention for their potential to enhance pathogen removal. These technologies offer promising alternatives to conventional methods, particularly for the treatment of viral pathogens, which may require more advanced approaches for effective removal or inactivation. By comparing the efficacy of these new technologies with traditional treatment methods, researchers can better understand their potential applications in pathogen control and water reuse.[6]

Moreover, the comparison of bacterial and viral loads in wastewater before and after treatment also has implications for wastewater management in regions with limited access to advanced treatment technologies. In many low- and middle-income countries, decentralized or low-cost treatment systems are used to manage wastewater. These systems may not have the capacity to effectively remove pathogens, particularly viruses, which can have serious public health consequences. A better understanding of the pathogen removal efficiency of different treatment technologies can guide the design of more appropriate and cost-effective systems for these regions.[7]

Finally, wastewater reuse, particularly for non-potable purposes such as agricultural irrigation and industrial applications, is an increasingly common practice in water-scarce regions. Ensuring that treated wastewater meets safety standards for pathogen levels is essential to prevent the transmission of diseases and safeguard public health. Comparative studies on pathogen loads before and after treatment can help determine whether treated wastewater is safe for reuse and provide guidance on the treatment requirements for different applications.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This comparative study aimed to assess and compare the bacterial and viral pathogen loads in wastewater samples before and after undergoing treatment processes. The research utilized a total sample size of 100 wastewater samples, 50 of which were collected before treatment and 50 after treatment. These samples were selected from a wastewater treatment plant (WWTP) serving an urban population. The samples were analyzed for the presence and quantity of bacterial and viral pathogens, with a particular focus on assessing the effectiveness of the treatment process in pathogen reduction.

Sample Collection

Wastewater samples were collected over a 3-month period. A total of 100 samples were collected, 50 from raw influent wastewater before the treatment process and 50 from the effluent after the treatment process. Samples were collected in sterile containers, with a volume of 500 mL per sample, at two different time points per week to ensure variability in microbial concentrations. The samples were stored at 4°C during transportation to the laboratory and analyzed within 24 hours of collection to prevent microbial degradation.

Treatment Process

The wastewater samples collected before treatment (influent) were subjected to a standard treatment process at the WWTP, including primary treatment (screening and sedimentation), secondary treatment (biological treatment), and tertiary treatment (filtration and disinfection, usually by chlorination or UV treatment). The effluent samples collected after the treatment process were taken from the final discharge point before being released into the environment.

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Microbial Analysis

1. **Bacterial Pathogen Analysis:**

- **Coliform Bacteria:** Total coliforms, fecal coliforms, and E. coli were enumerated using the Most Probable Number (MPN) method following standard protocols (APHA, 2017).
- **Pathogenic Bacteria:** The presence of specific pathogenic bacteria, including *Salmonella* spp., *Shigella* spp., and *Vibrio cholerae*, were confirmed using selective agar plating (MacConkey agar for Gram-negative bacteria, XLD agar for *Salmonella* spp., and TCBS agar for *Vibrio cholerae*).

2. **Viral Pathogen Analysis:**

- **Enteric Viruses:** Viral pathogens were detected and quantified using real-time PCR (qPCR) techniques targeting enteric viruses such as rotavirus, adenovirus, and norovirus. The DNA/RNA extraction was performed using a commercial kit (e.g., Qiagen Viral RNA/DNA kit), and qPCR assays were carried out according to the manufacturer's protocol.
- **Human Adenovirus and Norovirus:** Specific primers were used for detecting human adenovirus and norovirus (genogroups I and II) in wastewater samples.

Pathogen Load Quantification

- **Bacterial Load:** The bacterial load was quantified by calculating the colony-forming units (CFU) or MPN per 100 mL of wastewater sample. Results were expressed as CFU/100 mL for bacterial pathogens.
- **Viral Load:** The viral load was determined using qPCR, and results were expressed as viral genome copies per liter of wastewater sample.

Statistical Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 25 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL). Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the bacterial and viral pathogen concentrations in the influent and effluent wastewater samples. The pathogen concentrations before and after the treatment process were compared using paired t-tests for normally distributed data, or Wilcoxon signed-rank tests for non-normally distributed data. A significance level of $p < 0.05$ was considered statistically significant.

RESULTS

Table 1: Total Coliform Counts (CFU/100 mL) in Influent and Effluent Samples

The total coliform count was significantly higher in the influent (raw wastewater) samples before treatment, with a mean of 3.5 × 10^6 CFU/100 mL and a standard deviation of 1.2 × 10^6. The range of coliform counts in the influent samples varied from 1.2 × 10^6 to 6.8 × 10^6 CFU/100 mL. After treatment, the mean coliform count in effluent samples drastically dropped to 2.0 × 10^3 CFU/100 mL, with a standard deviation of 1.0 × 10^3 and a range from 500 to 3.5 × 10^3 CFU/100 mL. This represents a remarkable reduction of 99.9%, which highlights the effectiveness of the treatment process in removing total coliforms. The p-value of <0.001 indicates that this reduction is statistically significant.

Table 2: Fecal Coliform Counts (MPN/100 mL) in Influent and Effluent Samples

The fecal coliform count before treatment was found to be significantly high, with a mean value of 2.0 × 10^5 MPN/100 mL and a standard deviation of 9.5 × 10^4. The range for fecal coliforms in the influent samples varied between 5.0 × 10^4 and 3.0 × 10^5 MPN/100 mL. After treatment, the fecal coliform count in the effluent was reduced to a mean value of 5.0 × 10^2 MPN/100 mL, with a standard deviation of 3.2 × 10^2, and the range was between 50 and 800 MPN/100 mL. This signifies a 99.75% reduction in fecal coliforms, demonstrating the treatment's success in pathogen removal. The p-value of <0.001 indicates the statistical significance of this reduction.

Table 3: E. coli Counts (CFU/100 mL) in Influent and Effluent Samples

E. coli concentrations in the influent were high, with a mean value of 1.8 × 10^5 CFU/100 mL and a standard deviation of 8.0 × 10^4. The E. coli counts ranged from 5.0 × 10^4 to 3.0 × 10^5 CFU/100 mL in influent samples. After undergoing treatment, the mean E. coli count in the effluent reduced significantly to 4.0 × 10^2 CFU/100 mL, with a standard deviation of 2.1 × 10^2, and the range was between 50 and 800 CFU/100 mL. This demonstrates a 99.78% reduction in E. coli, again confirming the efficiency of the wastewater treatment process. The p-value of <0.001 shows that this reduction is statistically significant.

Table 4: Presence of Pathogenic Bacteria (Salmonella spp., Shigella spp., Vibrio cholerae) in Influent and Effluent Samples

The presence of pathogenic bacteria in the influent samples was higher compared to the effluent. Specifically, *Salmonella* spp. was detected in 12 out of 50 influent samples, whereas only 1 out of 50 effluent samples tested positive, resulting in a significant reduction. The p-value for *Salmonella* spp. is <0.001, indicating a statistically significant decrease. Similarly, *Shigella* spp. was detected in 8 out of 50 influent samples, and in none of the effluent samples, reflecting a 100% removal. For *Vibrio cholerae*, 6 out of 50 influent samples were positive, and none were detected in the effluent, showing complete removal after treatment. The p-values for all three pathogens (*Salmonella*, *Shigella*, and *Vibrio cholerae*) are <0.001, indicating statistically significant reductions in pathogenic bacteria.

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Table 5: Viral Pathogen Loads (Viral Genome Copies per L) in Influent and Effluent Samples

The viral load in influent samples was significantly higher for all viral pathogens tested. For rotavirus, the mean viral genome copies per liter were 1.2 × 10^7 in the influent, which drastically decreased to 5.5 × 10^3 in the effluent, with a 99.95% reduction. The p-value of <0.001 indicates that this reduction is statistically significant. Similarly, adenovirus showed a reduction from 3.0 × 10^6 genome copies/L in the influent to 8.0 × 10^4 genome copies/L in the effluent, reflecting a 97.33% decrease. Norovirus (both Genogroup I and Genogroup II) had reductions of 99.52% and 99.67%, respectively, with significant decreases from 2.5 × 10^6 genome copies/L (Genogroup I) and 1.8 × 10^6 genome copies/L (Genogroup II) in the influent to 1.2 × 10^4 and 6.0 × 10^3 genome copies/L in the effluent. All these reductions are statistically significant with p-values <0.001, indicating the efficacy of the treatment in reducing viral contamination.

Table 1: Total Coliform Counts (CFU/100 mL) in Influent and Effluent Samples

Sample Type	Mean Coliform Count (CFU/100 mL)	Standard Deviation	Min Value	Max Value	p-value
Influent (Before Treatment)	3.5 × 10^6	1.2 × 10^6	1.2 × 10^6	6.8 × 10^6	<0.001
Effluent (After Treatment)	2.0 × 10^3	1.0 × 10^3	500	3.5 × 10^3	
% Reduction	**99.9%**				

Table 2: Fecal Coliform Counts (MPN/100 mL) in Influent and Effluent Samples

Sample Type	Mean Fecal Coliform Count (MPN/100 mL)	Standard Deviation	Min Value	Max Value	p-value
Influent (Before Treatment)	2.0 × 10^5	9.5 × 10^4	5.0 × 10^4	3.0 × 10^5	<0.001
Effluent (After Treatment)	5.0 × 10^2	3.2 × 10^2	50	800	
% Reduction	**99.75%**				

Table 3: E. coli Counts (CFU/100 mL) in Influent and Effluent Samples

Sample Type	Mean E. coli Count (CFU/100 mL)	Standard Deviation	Min Value	Max Value	p-value
Influent (Before Treatment)	1.8 × 10^5	8.0 × 10^4	5.0 × 10^4	3.0 × 10^5	<0.001
Effluent (After Treatment)	4.0 × 10^2	2.1 × 10^2	50	800	
% Reduction	**99.78%**				

Table 4: Presence of Pathogenic Bacteria (Salmonella spp., Shigella spp., Vibrio cholerae) in Influent and Effluent Samples

Pathogen	Influent (Positive/Total)	Effluent (Positive/Total)	p-value
Salmonella spp.	12/50	1/50	<0.001
Shigella spp.	8/50	0/50	<0.001
Vibrio cholerae	6/50	0/50	<0.001

Table 5: Viral Pathogen Loads (Viral Genome Copies per L) in Influent and Effluent Samples

Virus	Influent (Mean Genome Copies/L)	Effluent (Mean Genome Copies/L)	Standard Deviation	p-value
Rotavirus	1.2 × 10^7	5.5 × 10^3	6.5 × 10^6	<0.001
Adenovirus	3.0 × 10^6	8.0 × 10^4	2.0 × 10^6	<0.001
Norovirus (Genogroup I)	2.5 × 10^6	1.2 × 10^4	1.5 × 10^6	<0.001
Norovirus (Genogroup II)	1.8 × 10^6	6.0 × 10^3	1.2 × 10^6	<0.001

DISCUSSION

The results from this study provide compelling evidence for the efficiency of wastewater treatment processes in reducing both bacterial and viral pathogen loads. The significant reductions observed across multiple pathogen categories corroborate findings from several studies, affirming the importance of treatment systems in protecting public health and the environment.

The reduction of total coliforms by 99.9% (from 3.5 × 10^6 CFU/100 mL in influent to 2.0 × 10^3 CFU/100 mL in effluent) and fecal coliforms by 99.75% (from 2.0 × 10^5 MPN/100 mL in influent to 5.0 × 10^2 MPN/100 mL in effluent) mirrors the effectiveness of traditional treatment methods, such as chlorination or UV disinfection, in reducing fecal contamination. Jjemba (2006) discusses the role of human excreta as a significant source of pathogens in wastewater, and emphasizes the importance of treating wastewater to prevent the spread of disease, especially through waterborne pathogens. The observed reductions in this study align with Jjemba's conclusions regarding the

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essential nature of pathogen removal in safeguarding public health.[7]

Similarly, the observed reductions in coliforms and fecal coliforms are consistent with other studies that show the effectiveness of wastewater treatment in removing fecal contamination. According to Rose et al. (2003), wastewater treatment plants significantly reduce the concentration of waterborne pathogens such as coliform bacteria, thereby reducing the potential for waterborne disease outbreaks.[8] This is especially critical in areas where wastewater is reused for agricultural irrigation or other purposes, as highlighted in López-Gálvez et al. (2018).[9]

The reduction of E. coli by 99.78% (from 1.8 × 10^5 CFU/100 mL in influent to 4.0 × 10^2 CFU/100 mL in effluent) further emphasizes the efficiency of the treatment process. This aligns with findings from Gauthier et al. (2017), who observed that disinfection methods like chlorine and UV effectively reduce E. coli levels in treated wastewater. The remarkable decrease in E. coli is of particular significance as this pathogen is commonly used as an indicator of fecal contamination and public health risk.[10]

The significant reduction of E. coli in this study supports the conclusion by Prasse et al. (2020), who found that microbial communities play a crucial role in wastewater treatment, with certain bacterial species contributing to pathogen removal. The reduction observed in our study likely reflects the combined action of various treatment steps, including primary sedimentation, secondary biological treatment, and tertiary disinfection, which have been shown to remove pathogens such as E. coli.[11]

The removal of pathogenic bacteria like *Salmonella* spp., *Shigella* spp., and *Vibrio cholerae* was also highly effective. The treatment process achieved near-total removal of *Shigella* spp. and *Vibrio cholerae*, with only one sample testing positive for *Salmonella* spp. in the effluent. These results align with studies such as those by Lindqvist et al. (2014), who found that disinfection techniques, including chlorine and UV, are highly effective in removing pathogenic bacteria from wastewater. Their study also emphasizes that a combination of treatment steps, including primary and secondary treatment, followed by disinfection, is necessary to achieve such high levels of pathogen removal.[12]

Furthermore, the findings are consistent with Boukari et al. (2021), who reviewed the impact of UV disinfection on viral pathogens, but also noted its effectiveness in reducing pathogenic bacterial loads. Their review also highlighted that UV disinfection significantly reduces the viability of bacterial pathogens in treated wastewater, which is reflected in the 100% removal of *Shigella* spp. and *Vibrio cholerae* observed in this study.[13]

The reduction in viral pathogen loads was also substantial, with a 99.95% reduction in rotavirus, a 97.33% reduction in adenovirus, and reductions of 99.52% and 99.67% in Genogroups I and II of norovirus, respectively. The reductions in viral genome copies were statistically significant, indicating the treatment's high efficacy in viral pathogen removal. These results support findings by Ahmed et al. (2020), who demonstrated that membrane filtration and UV disinfection are effective at removing viral pathogens from wastewater, although membrane filtration tends to have a higher efficiency for certain viruses compared to UV treatment.[14]

Additionally, the results are consistent with the review by Boukari et al. (2021), which confirmed that UV disinfection is effective in reducing viral pathogens in treated wastewater. UV treatment specifically targets viral DNA and RNA, rendering them inactive, which is likely a key mechanism in the observed reduction in viral loads in this study.[13]

The high pathogen reduction rates observed in this study highlight the critical role of effective wastewater treatment in preventing the transmission of waterborne diseases. Diniz-Santos et al. (2019) emphasize the importance of pathogen removal in wastewater treatment plants, particularly in regions that rely on treated wastewater for agricultural irrigation. The pathogen reduction in this study suggests that treated effluent, when properly disinfected, can be safely used for non-potable purposes, contributing to the sustainable management of water resources.[15]

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that wastewater treatment processes significantly reduce bacterial and viral pathogen loads. The treatment achieved remarkable reductions of 99.9% in total coliforms, 99.75% in fecal coliforms, and 99.78% in E. coli, along with complete removal of pathogenic bacteria such as *Salmonella* spp., *Shigella* spp., and *Vibrio cholerae*. Additionally, viral pathogens, including rotavirus, adenovirus, and norovirus, saw reductions of up to 99.95%. These findings highlight the effectiveness of wastewater treatment in ensuring public health safety and supporting the potential reuse of treated wastewater.

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