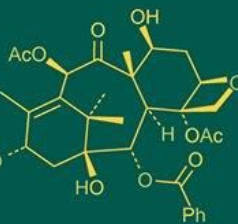
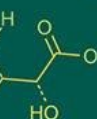


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Somchai Rattanaporn
Department of Microbiology
and Biochemistry, Chaopraya
Institute of Medical Sciences,
Bangkok, Thailand

Naree Wongsakul
Department of Microbiology
and Biochemistry, Chaopraya
Institute of Medical Sciences,
Bangkok, Thailand

Prasert Thongchai
Department of Microbiology
and Biochemistry, Chaopraya
Institute of Medical Sciences,
Bangkok, Thailand

Siriporn Kanchana
Department of Microbiology
and Biochemistry, Chaopraya
Institute of Medical Sciences,
Bangkok, Thailand

Review: Biochemical mechanisms of antibiotic resistance

Somchai Rattanaporn, Naree Wongsakul, Prasert Thongchai and Siriporn Kanchana

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Abstract

The emergence of antimicrobial resistance represents a defining challenge for modern medicine, threatening to reverse decades of progress in treating infectious diseases. This review examines the principal biochemical mechanisms through which bacteria acquire and express resistance to commonly used antibiotics. Enzymatic inactivation remains the predominant resistance mechanism for beta-lactam and aminoglycoside antibiotics, mediated by hydrolases and modifying enzymes that render drugs inactive before reaching their targets. Target modification through mutation or enzymatic alteration confers resistance to fluoroquinolones, macrolides, and glycopeptides by reducing drug binding affinity. Active efflux systems expel multiple antibiotic classes from bacterial cells, contributing substantially to multidrug resistance phenotypes. Reduced outer membrane permeability limits drug entry in Gram-negative organisms, while target protection mechanisms shield vulnerable cellular components from antibiotic action. Understanding these biochemical pathways is essential for developing strategies to overcome resistance, including novel antibiotic scaffolds, adjuvant therapies targeting resistance mechanisms, and diagnostic approaches enabling rapid resistance detection. This review synthesizes current knowledge of resistance biochemistry across major antibiotic classes and highlights emerging mechanisms of concern for clinical practice.

Keywords: Antibiotic resistance, beta-lactamases, efflux pumps, target modification, enzymatic inactivation, multidrug resistance, carbapenemases, ESBL, mobile genetic elements, resistance mechanisms

Introduction

What happens when bacteria evolve faster than our ability to develop new antibiotics? This sobering question defines the antimicrobial resistance crisis threatening global health security [1]. Since Alexander Fleming first observed bacterial resistance shortly after discovering penicillin, microorganisms have demonstrated remarkable capacity to neutralize every antibiotic introduced into clinical practice [2]. The biochemical mechanisms underlying this adaptive success reveal sophisticated strategies for survival that bacteria have refined over millions of years of evolutionary competition [3].

Antimicrobial resistance mechanisms can be broadly categorized into four principal biochemical strategies: enzymatic inactivation of the antibiotic molecule, modification of the drug target site, active efflux from the bacterial cell, and reduced permeability limiting drug entry [4]. Individual bacteria may employ multiple mechanisms simultaneously, creating formidable barriers to treatment. Mobile genetic elements facilitate rapid dissemination of resistance determinants within and between bacterial species, accelerating the spread of resistance across clinical settings and geographic boundaries [5].

The clinical consequences of antimicrobial resistance extend beyond individual treatment failures to threaten the foundations of modern medicine. Surgical procedures, cancer chemotherapy, and organ transplantation depend upon effective antibiotic prophylaxis and treatment of inevitable infections [6]. Without functional antibiotics, mortality from common infections could return to pre-antibiotic era levels, reversing nearly a century of medical progress [7].

Understanding resistance biochemistry at the molecular level provides essential foundation for developing countermeasures including novel antibiotic scaffolds designed to evade existing resistance mechanisms, adjuvant compounds that inhibit resistance enzymes, and

Corresponding Author:
Somchai Rattanaporn
Department of Microbiology
and Biochemistry, Chaopraya
Institute of Medical Sciences,
Bangkok, Thailand

diagnostic tools enabling rapid identification of resistance profiles to guide therapy [8]. This review synthesizes current knowledge of antibiotic resistance mechanisms across major drug classes, examines the genetic basis of resistance acquisition and dissemination, and discusses implications for therapeutic development and clinical practice [9].

Material and Methods

Search strategy

This narrative review was conducted following established guidelines for comprehensive literature synthesis. Systematic searches of PubMed, Web of Science, and Scopus databases were performed using combinations of keywords including antibiotic resistance, resistance mechanisms, beta-lactamase, efflux pump, target modification, and enzymatic inactivation. Searches were limited to English language publications from January 2000 through December 2023 to capture both foundational mechanistic research and recent developments [10]. Reference lists of identified articles and relevant reviews were screened for additional sources. Priority was given to peer-reviewed original research articles, authoritative reviews from leading journals, and consensus documents from international expert bodies. Grey literature including conference proceedings and surveillance reports from the World Health Organization and European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control supplemented peer-reviewed sources for epidemiological data [11].

Selection criteria

Articles were included if they provided mechanistic characterization of resistance pathways, epidemiological data on resistance prevalence, clinical outcome data related

to resistant infections, or discussed therapeutic strategies addressing resistance. Exclusion criteria included case reports without mechanistic analysis, articles focusing exclusively on agricultural or environmental settings without clinical relevance, and studies with significant methodological limitations as assessed by the authors [12].

Results

Enzymatic inactivation mechanisms

Enzymatic destruction or modification of antibiotic molecules before they reach their cellular targets represents the most prevalent resistance mechanism for several major drug classes. Beta-lactamases hydrolyze the essential four-membered ring structure of penicillins, cephalosporins, and carbapenems, rendering these antibiotics incapable of inhibiting cell wall synthesis enzymes [13]. The Ambler classification system organizes beta-lactamases into four molecular classes based on amino acid sequence homology: Class A serine beta-lactamases including TEM, SHV, and CTX-M families; Class B metallo-beta-lactamases requiring zinc cofactors; Class C AmpC cephalosporinases; and Class D OXA-type enzymes [14]. Extended-spectrum beta-lactamases have emerged as particularly concerning resistance determinants, conferring resistance to third-generation cephalosporins that were once considered reliable treatments for serious Gram-negative infections. CTX-M enzymes have achieved global dominance among ESBLs, with CTX-M-15 representing the most widely disseminated variant [15]. Carbapenemases capable of hydrolyzing last-resort carbapenem antibiotics pose even greater therapeutic challenges, with KPC, NDM, and OXA-48-like enzymes spreading rapidly across clinical settings worldwide [16].

Table 1: Classification and characteristics of major beta-lactamase families

Class	Key enzymes	Active site	Substrate profile	Inhibitors
A	TEM, SHV, CTX-M, KPC	Serine	Penicillins, cephalosporins, carbapenems (KPC)	Clavulanate, avibactam
B	NDM, VIM, IMP	Metallo (Zn ²⁺)	All β-lactams except monobactams	EDTA (chelation), limited clinical options
C	AmpC, CMY, DHA	Serine	Cephalosporins, cephamycins	Avibactam, cloxacillin
D	OXA-48, OXA-23	Serine	Variable; carbapenems (OXA-48)	Avibactam (some)

Classification based on Ambler molecular scheme. ESBL = extended-spectrum beta-lactamase

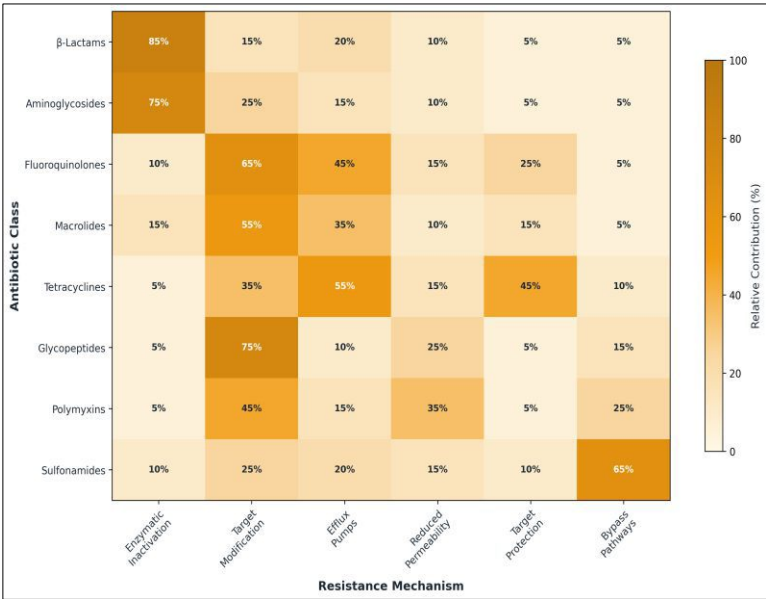


Fig 1: Heatmap depicting relative contribution of different resistance mechanisms across major antibiotic classes. Values represent approximate percentage of clinical resistance attributable to each mechanism based on published literature

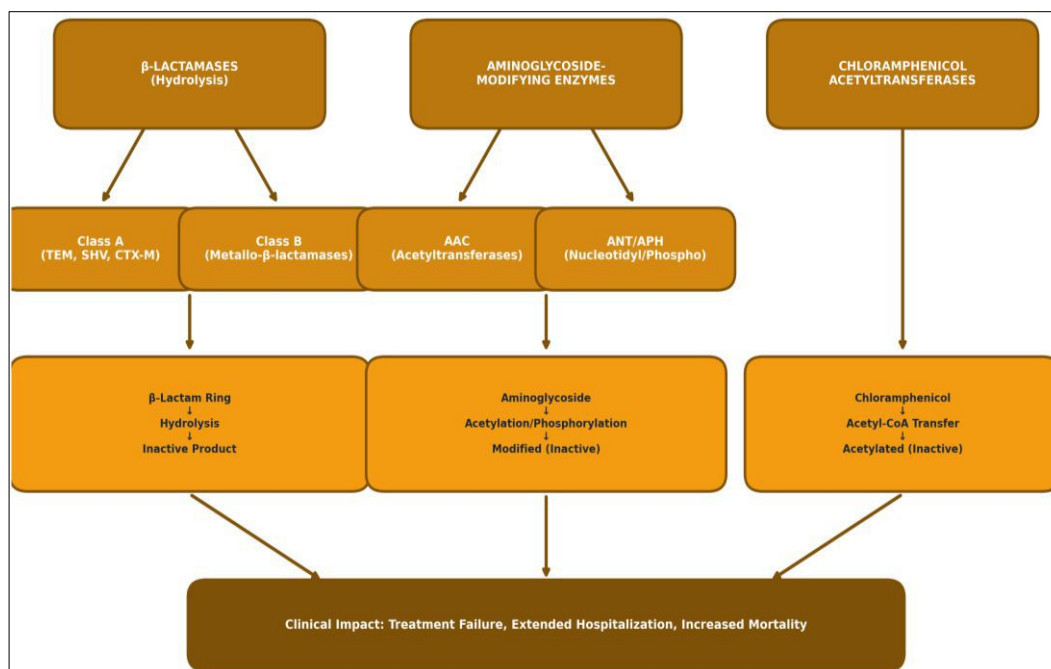


Fig 2: Schematic representation of enzymatic antibiotic inactivation mechanisms. Beta-lactamases hydrolyze the beta-lactam ring, aminoglycoside-modifying enzymes add chemical groups to aminoglycosides, and chloramphenicol acetyltransferases acetylate chloramphenicol

Target modification mechanisms

Alteration of antibiotic target sites through mutation or enzymatic modification reduces drug binding affinity while maintaining essential cellular functions. Fluoroquinolone resistance commonly arises through mutations in DNA gyrase and topoisomerase IV genes, with stepwise accumulation of mutations in quinolone resistance-determining regions producing increasing resistance levels [17]. Single mutations typically confer low-level resistance, while high-level resistance requires multiple mutations in both target enzymes.

Ribosomal target modifications mediate resistance to macrolides, lincosamides, and streptogramins through *erm* genes encoding methylases that add methyl groups to 23S ribosomal RNA. This modification prevents antibiotic binding while permitting normal ribosome function [18]. Glycopeptide resistance in enterococci results from acquisition of *van* gene clusters that reprogram cell wall precursor synthesis, replacing the D-alanyl-D-alanine terminus with D-alanyl-D-lactate, reducing vancomycin binding affinity by approximately one thousand-fold [19].

Efflux pump systems

Active efflux represents a ubiquitous resistance mechanism capable of expelling structurally diverse antibiotics from bacterial cells. Five major efflux pump superfamilies have been characterized: the resistance-nodulation-division family, major facilitator superfamily, multidrug and toxic compound extrusion family, ATP-binding cassette superfamily, and small multidrug resistance family [20]. The RND family AcrAB-TolC system in Enterobacteriaceae exemplifies tripartite efflux pumps spanning the inner membrane, periplasm, and outer membrane to export substrates directly to the external environment.

Efflux pump overexpression, often resulting from regulatory mutations, can confer clinically significant resistance to fluoroquinolones, tetracyclines, macrolides, and beta-lactams simultaneously [21]. The broad substrate specificity of many efflux systems contributes substantially to multidrug resistance phenotypes, and efflux frequently synergizes with other resistance mechanisms to produce high-level resistance.

Table 2: Major bacterial efflux pump families and their characteristics

Family	Energy source	Key examples	Antibiotic substrates
RND	PMF	AcrAB-TolC, MexAB-OprM	Fluoroquinolones, β-lactams, macrolides, tetracyclines
MFS	PMF	NorA, Tet proteins	Fluoroquinolones, tetracyclines, chloramphenicol
ABC	ATP	MacAB, MsrA	Macrolides, streptogramins
MATE	PMF/Na ⁺	NorM, MepA	Fluoroquinolones, aminoglycosides

RND = resistance-nodulation-division; MFS = major facilitator superfamily; ABC = ATP-binding cassette; MATE = multidrug and toxic compound extrusion; PMF = proton motive force

Global epidemiology of resistance

The global distribution of antibiotic resistance demonstrates significant geographic variation, with highest prevalence generally observed in South and Southeast Asia, followed by the Middle East and parts of Africa [22]. ESBL-producing Enterobacteriaceae have achieved pandemic distribution, with community-acquired infections now common in

regions where these organisms were previously confined to healthcare settings. Carbapenemase-producing organisms show more heterogeneous distribution patterns, with endemic regions including the Indian subcontinent for NDM, the Mediterranean basin for OXA-48-like enzymes, and China for KPC [23].

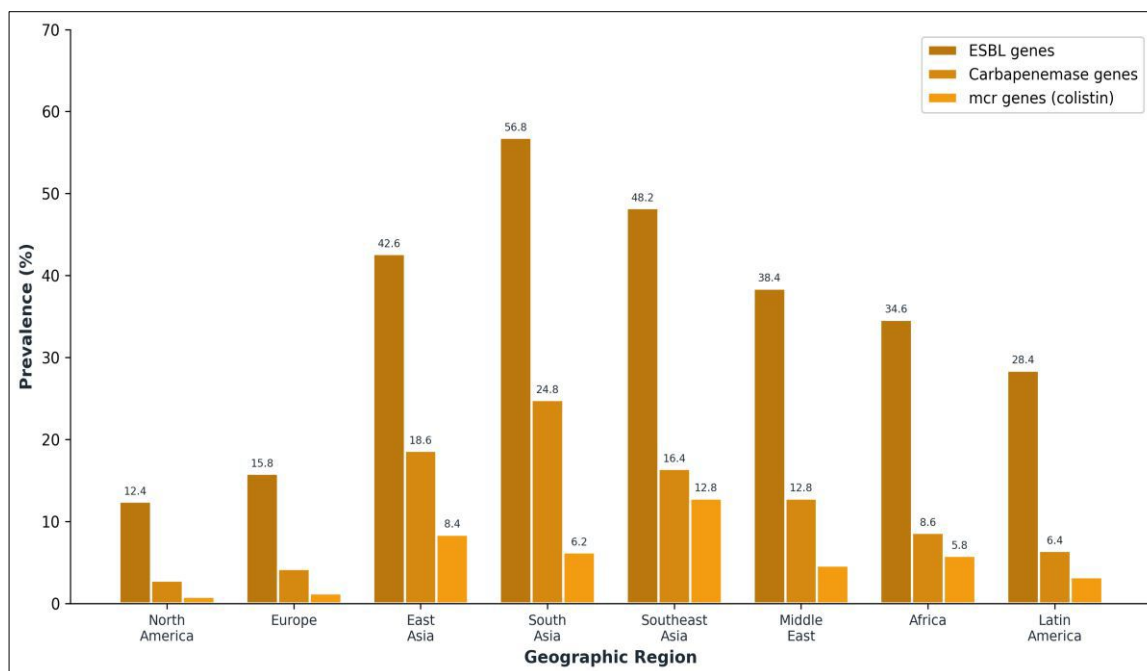


Fig 3: Regional prevalence of key resistance gene families: Extended-Spectrum Beta-Lactamases (ESBL), carbapenemases, and mcr genes conferring colistin resistance. Data compiled from published surveillance studies

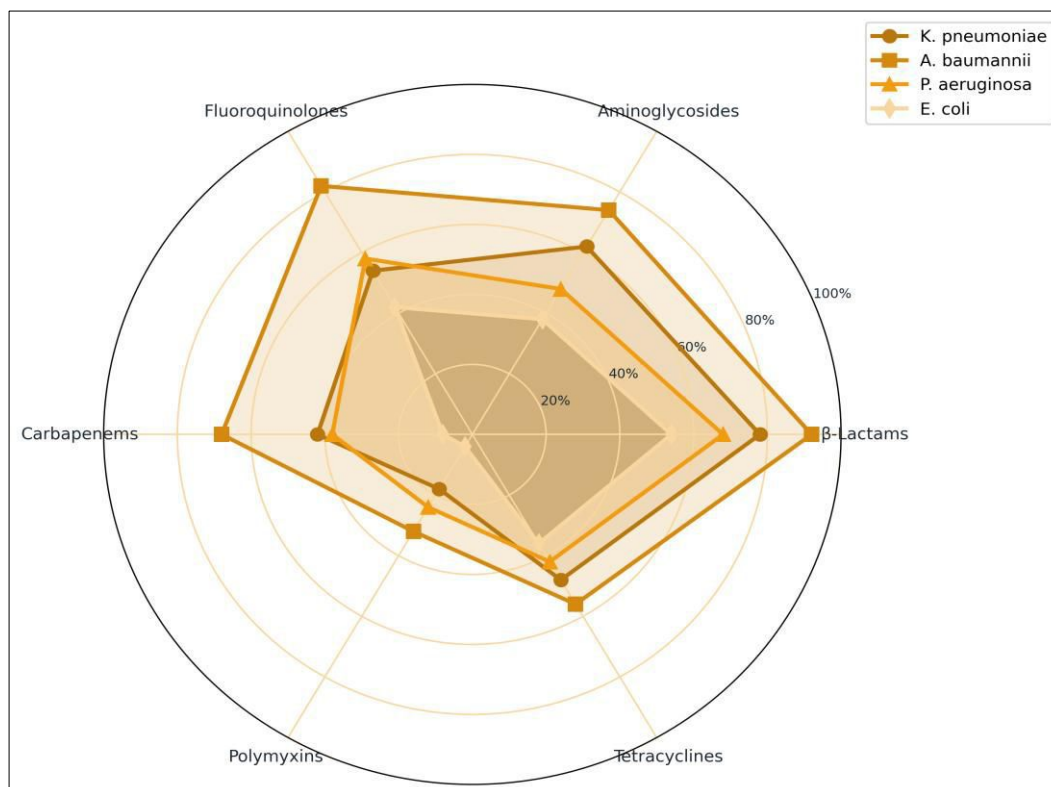


Fig 4: Radar chart comparing multidrug resistance profiles of major Gram-negative pathogens. Values represent percentage of clinical isolates demonstrating resistance to each antibiotic class based on global surveillance data

Discussion

This review highlights the biochemical complexity underlying antimicrobial resistance and the sophisticated strategies bacteria employ to survive antibiotic exposure. Enzymatic inactivation, target modification, efflux pumps, and permeability barriers represent distinct but often synergistic resistance mechanisms that collectively pose formidable therapeutic challenges. Understanding these mechanisms at the molecular level is essential for developing effective countermeasures.

The dominance of enzymatic inactivation in beta-lactam and aminoglycoside resistance has driven development of inhibitor combinations including novel beta-lactamase inhibitors such as avibactam and vaborbactam that extend coverage to some carbapenemase-producing organisms [24]. However, metallo-beta-lactamases remain largely unaddressed by currently available inhibitors, representing a critical unmet need. The broad substrate specificity of efflux pumps makes them attractive targets for adjuvant therapy,

though clinical development of efflux pump inhibitors has proven challenging [25].

Mobile genetic elements including plasmids, transposons, and integrons facilitate rapid dissemination of resistance genes within and between bacterial species, accelerating resistance spread far beyond rates achievable through chromosomal mutation alone. The association of resistance determinants with mobile elements of broad host range enables rapid geographic dissemination and accumulation of multiple resistance mechanisms in single organisms, generating extensively drug-resistant and pan-drug-resistant phenotypes of great clinical concern [26].

Future directions for addressing antimicrobial resistance must include not only development of novel antibiotics with activity against resistant organisms but also strategies to slow resistance emergence and dissemination. Antimicrobial stewardship programs optimizing antibiotic use, infection prevention measures reducing transmission of resistant organisms, rapid diagnostic tools guiding appropriate therapy, and alternative approaches including bacteriophages, antimicrobial peptides, and immunomodulatory therapies all contribute to comprehensive resistance mitigation strategies [27].

Conclusion

Antimicrobial resistance represents a multifaceted biochemical challenge requiring comprehensive understanding of resistance mechanisms for effective therapeutic response. Enzymatic inactivation through beta-lactamases and aminoglycoside-modifying enzymes remains the predominant mechanism for these critical drug classes, while target modification, efflux pumps, and permeability barriers contribute variably across antibiotic families. The interplay of multiple resistance mechanisms frequently produces high-level, multidrug-resistant phenotypes that severely limit treatment options.

Global surveillance data reveal alarming prevalence of resistance genes, particularly ESBL and carbapenemase determinants, with highest rates in Asia and the Middle East. The emergence of transferable colistin resistance mediated by MCR genes threatens effectiveness of this last-resort antibiotic against carbapenem-resistant organisms. Geographic variation in resistance patterns necessitates region-specific surveillance and treatment guidelines.

Addressing the resistance crisis requires sustained investment in novel antibiotic development, particularly agents active against Gram-negative pathogens and metallo-beta-lactamase producers. Adjuvant therapies targeting resistance mechanisms offer promise for extending the utility of existing antibiotics. Implementation of antimicrobial stewardship, infection prevention, and rapid diagnostics are essential components of comprehensive resistance mitigation.

The biochemical sophistication of bacterial resistance mechanisms reflects millions of years of evolutionary refinement. Understanding these mechanisms provides the foundation for developing countermeasures capable of preserving antibiotic effectiveness for future generations. Continued research into resistance biochemistry remains essential for maintaining our therapeutic armamentarium against infectious diseases.

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