Indian J. Applied & Pure Bio. Vol. 41(1), 385-398 (2026). **ISSN: 0970-2091**

Design, Stability and Antifungal Efficacy of a *Lactobacillus acidophilus*–Honey Topical Formulation for Vulvovaginal candidiasis

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Abstract

Vulvovaginal candidiasis (VVC), predominantly caused by *Candida albicans*, affects approximately 75% of women at least once and recurs in 8% of cases. Conventional antifungal therapies, while effective, may cause resistance and disrupt the normal microbiota. Natural agents such as medical-grade honey and probiotic *Lactobacillus* spp. possess intrinsic antifungal and microbiota-modulating properties that could offer safer and sustained relief. Our objective was to formulate a semisolid ointment combining medical grade honey and *Lactobacillus acidophilus*, and to compare its antifungal efficacy against *C. albicans* with honey only and *L. acidophilus* only preparations. Clinical isolates of *C. albicans* and *L. acidophilus* were obtained and identified via culture, germ tube testing, and Gram staining and biochemical assays. Three formulations were prepared like honey only ointment (20% w/w medical grade honey), probiotic only ointment (curd derived *L. acidophilus* at 10^{10}CFU/g) and combined probiotic–honey ointment (20% honey + *L. acidophilus* in a curd–glycerin base). Antifungal activity was assessed by disc diffusion, agar overlay interference, and broth microdilution (MIC) assays. Probiotic viability and honey peroxide activity were monitored over 30 days. The combined ointment exhibited significantly larger inhibition zones (mean ± SD: 22.5 ± 1.8 mm) against *C. albicans* compared to honey only (15.2 ± 1.5 mm) and probiotic only (12.7 ± 1.2 mm) formulations ($p < 0.01$). MIC values were lowest for the combined ointment (12.5% w/v), versus 20% for honey alone and 40% v/v for *L. acidophilus* cell free supernatant (CFS). Agar overlay assays demonstrated >85% reduction in fungal colony counts with the combination, indicating additive antifungal and anti adhesion effects. Both honey peroxide activity and probiotic viability remained above 90% of initial levels after 30 days at 4 °C. The ointment made with medical grade honey and *L. acidophilus* works better together against *C. albicans* than either one alone, stays stable, and keeps the probiotics

alive. It should now be tested in living organisms as a safe, effective treatment for VVC.

Key words : Vulvovaginal candidiasis, *Lactobacillus acidophilus*, medical grade honey, topical formulation, antifungal synergy.

Based on your mapping scheme, here is the rewritten text with the updated reference numbers.

The first case of neonatal oesophagal candidiasis was reported by Vernon in 1835. In 1849, Wilkinson reported cases of vaginal thrush. Virchow noted that the same fungi in 1850 that they could cause infections beneath the skin. In 1923, Berkhout resolved a major debate in taxonomic confusion by introducing the genus *Candida*, a name derived from the Latin *toga candida* ("white toga"), which aptly described the pale, creamy appearance of its colonies. He applied this term to characterise small, colourless yeasts with minimal hyphal development, which typically form flat colonies that fragment into both shorter and longer segments[23].

Vulvovaginal candidias is an inflammatory disease caused by *Candidia albuca* in vaginal tract of women. 75% of women on approximation have reported of having candidal vulvovaginitis once in their life, and 8% of them are suffering from recurring candidal vulvovaginitis[27]. On examinations of vulvovaginal candidiasis, patients may show symptoms like vulvar and vaginal erythema, excoriations, thick white adherent discharge, vaginal irritation, itching, burning, swelling or dyspareunia[12]. The condition of this disease is managed with the help of antifungal medication and is resolved within days. With 7-day intravaginal treatment,[7] fungal infections is most commonly caused by none other than *Candida* spp. It is yeast like fungi that shows dimorphism and causes a life-threatening invasion of non-life-threatening cutaneous disease[1].

Genitourinary candidiasis presents most commonly as balanitis or balanoposthitis in men, vulvovaginal candidiasis (VVC) in women, and candiduria in both sexes[25]. These infections occur across patient populations, both immune-competent and immune-compromised. Balanitis due to *Candida* spp infection may affect up to 11% of uncircumcised males over a lifetime, with diabetic or immunocompromised individuals at higher risk[26]. *Candida albicans* is an opportunistic fungus that causes infection as it transitions from a yeast-like state to a hyphal state. *Candida albicans* expresses a family of surface adhesins that mediate attachment to epithelial and endothelial cells. After adhesion, the *C. albicans* gets the opportunity to invade due to lack of immunity or imbalance in gut microflora. Thereafter, the *C. albicans* undergoes a yeast-to-hypha transition which is crucial for tissue penetration. It releases hyphal invasin proteins (*e.g.*, Als3) bind to host receptors, and thus triggering host-cell uptake of the fungus. The hyphae mechanically force their way between epithelial cells by secreting lytic enzymes to facilitate passage[10].

Lactobacillus bacteria (specifically *L. rhamnosus, L. paracasei, L. acidophilus, L. plantarum, L. casei, or L. salivarius*) antagonise *Candida albicans*. It was found that these species significantly reduced *C. albicans* by inducing necrotic epithelial damage without necessarily lowering fungal burden, demonstrating that protection is not completely fungistatic. The *Lactobacillus* spp. uses simple mechanisms like lactobacilli proliferate on host cells, co-aggregate with *C. albicans* hyphae and secrete metabolites (such as lactic acid, hydrogen peroxide and bacteriocin-like substances) that inhibit hyphal formation and adhesion[19].

L. acidophilus and *L. plantarum* are pivotal probiotic agents and show their dominance in the vaginal microbiota. These lactic acid bacteria (LAB) play a crucial role in sustaining vaginal health by colonizing mucosal surfaces and suppressing the growth of pathogenic fungi such as *C. albicans*[5]. Similarly, LAB such as *Lactobacillus* spp. may still offer protective effects within the gastrointestinal tract in esophageal candidiasis. The role of probiotics is less direct due to differences in microbiota and environmental conditions. These bacteria assist in maintaining microbial equilibrium and inhibit *Candida* spp. colonization through similar antimicrobial mechanisms, and thus potentially mitigating the risk or severity of infection[5].

Recent studies have highlighted the antimicrobial properties of bacteriocins produced by specific *Lactobacillus* strains. *L. acidophilus* KS400 (LaKS400) synthesizes a bacteriocin with an approximate molecular weight of 7.5 kDa, which exhibits notable antimicrobial activity. This activity was observed in agar diffusion assays against *L. delbrueckii* ATCC9649, even after neutralizing organic acids and hydrogen peroxide, indicating the bacteriocin's distinct inhibitory effect[9]. In parallel, *L. plantarum* IBL-2 has been found to harbor plasmid-encoded genes for plantaricin B (plnB) and plantaricin EF (plnEF). Plantaricin B demonstrates inhibitory effects primarily against closely related species such as *L. plantarum, Leuconostoc mesenteroides* and *Pediococcus damnosus*. The presence of these genes suggests a plasmid-mediated mechanism for plantaricin production in *L. plantarum* IBL-2, contributing to its antimicrobial capabilities[18].

Genus *Lactobacillus* is basically comprised of non-spore-forming, catalase-negative bacilli that colonize the human gastrointestinal and genitourinary tracts, as well as a variety of fermented foods. It is a genus of Gram-positive, rod-shaped bacteria and widely recognized for their role as LAB in both human and industrial contexts[3]. *Lactobacillus* species initiate and drive the fermentation of probiotic foods such as yogurt, cheese, sauerkraut, kimchi, and sourdough; by rapid lowering of pH and producing flavor-active compounds[11].

Honey is another compound showing high antifungal properties. It has a typical pH that ranges from 3.2 to 4.5 [15], thus creating an acidic environment that is hostile to fungal growth. It produces peroxides which would cause breakdown of fungal hyphae. Medical-grade honey formulations (*e.g.*, L-Mesitran) maintain standardized peroxide activity and thus enhancing reproducible antifungal effects[24].

Specific types of honey, like Agastache honey, have demonstrated superior antifungal activity compared to others by effectively inhibiting *C. albicans* at certain concentrations. Additionally, medical-grade honey formulations have shown strong antifungal activity against various *Candida* species, including *C. auris* which is a multidrug-resistant strain[4].

Lactobacillus species can be maintained in honey at concentrations around 3%, which is considered optimal for their growth. At this concentration, the osmotic pressure is conducive to bacterial survival. However, increasing the honey concentration beyond this point can inhibit bacterial proliferation due to heightened osmotic stress from the higher sugar content. Studies have shown that while the total bacterial count peaks at a 3% honey concentration, it significantly decreases at concentrations like 5%, indicating that excessive sugar levels can suppress bacterial growth[21].

Ointments are a type of semisolid dosage form that exhibit visco-elastic behavior when subjected to shear stress. They incorporate active medicinal substances and are designed for external use on the body to provide therapeutic benefits. Various topical therapeutic agents are intended for application on intact or damaged skin or mucous membranes[6]. In contemporary pharmaceutical practice, a distinction is made between the overarching category of semisolid dosage forms and the more specific subclass of ointments, which are defined as thick, greasy or polymer-based formulations. This refined classification reflects current industry standards and improves clarity in pharmaceutical labeling[14]. Ointment bases are generally categorized into four main types like hydrocarbon base, absorption base, water-removable base and water-soluble base. Each category comprises a range of compounds used as the foundation for ointment formulations. These include agents like lanolin, various polyoxylglycerides (such as lauroyl and oleoyl types), polyoxylglycerides caprylocaproyl, and polyethylene glycol derivatives. Other bases commonly found in ointments include petrolatum (in various forms like white and hydrophilic), hydrophilic ointment, rose water ointment, and botanical oils like Type II vegetable oil and squalane[14].

The main objective of this study was to formulate a semisolid ointment by combining medical-grade honey and a probiotic, *Lactobacillus acidophilus*. The researchers aimed to compare its antifungal efficacy against *Candida albicans* with that of formulations containing only honey or only the probiotic. A secondary goal was to evaluate the stability of the combined ointment by monitoring the viability of the probiotics and the honey's peroxide activity over 30 days. The study sought to determine if the combined formulation offered a synergistic effect against *C. albicans* compared to its individual components. The overall purpose was to develop a potential non-azole, topical treatment for Vulvovaginal candidiasis (VVC) that could reduce resistance and support microbial balance.

Sampling of C. albicans, L. acidophilus and Honey:

• **For *C. albicans* :** Oral rinse and fingertip skin samples were collected from adult volunteers (no antifungal or antibiotic was used in prior month). Between 10 a.m. and 12

p.m., each participant was instructed to perform a 60 second of oral rinse with 10 mL sterile phosphate buffered saline (PBS) of 0.1 M and 7.2 pH. Thereafter, the oral rinse was collected in sterile tubes and ran through cyclomixer prior to plating[22].

Fingertip samples were obtained by pressing each fingertip onto Sabouraud Dextrose Agar (SDA) plates and YGC (Yeast Extract Glucose Chloramphenicol) Agar simultaneously for 1 min [13].

YGC Agar was prepared by first dissolving the individual components 5 grams of yeast extract 20 grams of D (+)-glucose, 0.1 gram of chloramphenicol, and 14.9 grams of agar in 1 liter of distilled water. Thus, oral rinse (100 ìL) and fingertip samples were spread on both YGC and SDA plates (pH 5.6) and incubated aerobically at 37°C for 24–48 hours[7]. Typical creamy white colonies were subcultured or selected for further identification.

• **For *L. acidophilus*:** Homemade curd samples was collected aseptically where 1 gram of each sample was homogenized in 9 mL sterile distilled water and serially diluted to 10^{-6} in PBS [17]. Then, 100 µL of each curd dilution was inoculated in MRS (de Man, Rogosa, and Sharpe) agar plates and incubated anaerobically (candle jar) at 37°C for 24–48 hours. Typical colonies (small, creamy, circular) were selected for further identification[17].

• ***For Honey :*** The commonly available natural honey was collected for comparative antifungal assays.

Microscopical examination of isolates: Microscopical examination of *L. acidophilus* was performed using Gram staining; revealing Gram-positive, non-spore-forming, rod-shaped bacilli arranged singly or in short chains[3]. Whereas for *C. albicans*, light microscopy of yeast cells stained with lactophenol cotton blue or Gram stain demonstrated ovoid, budding yeast cells with occasional pseudohyphae. Presumptive identification of *C. albicans* began with the germ tube test: yeast cells were incubated in human serum at 37°C for 3 hours and examined microscopically for germ tube formation (tube like projections lacking constriction)[16]. In germ tube test, the positive isolates showed tube-like projections without constriction at the origin which is a hallmark of *C. albicans* morphology. These structures were visualized under oil immersion (1000×), supporting rapid identification based on microscopic features[16]. For enhanced specificity, methyl blue–SDA plates were incubated at 37°C for 24 hours and examined under 365 nm UV light—bright fluorescence that distinguished *C. albicans* from non-albicans species[15].

Biochemical tests : *L. acidophilus* isolates were subjected to a number of biochemical assays to confirm genus and species identity. Catalase activity was tested by adding 3% hydrogen peroxide to a colony smear where absence of bubbling indicated a negative result. Oxidase reactivity was assessed using oxidase reagent in which no color change confirmed oxidase negativity. Carbohydrate fermentation profiles were determined using API 50CHL strips with acid production (pH indicator color shift) and gas evolution (Durham tubes) recorded for glucose, lactose, sucrose, mannitol and others. Growth at 10°C and 42°C, distinguished species with differing

thermal ranges. Salt tolerance was evaluated by culturing in MRS broth containing 2%, 4% and 6.5 % NaCl, and pH tolerance by adjustment to pH 3.0, 5.5 and 7.0. Arginine hydrolysis was tested in peptone–arginine broth (ammonia production → pH shift), and indole production in tryptophan broth with Kovac's reagent (red ring = positive). Finally, urease activity was assessed in urea agar (no color change confirmed urease negativity). All tests and interpretations followed established procedures[17].

Urease activity for *C. albicans* was tested in Christensen's urea broth at 37°C for 24 hours in which lack of pink coloration confirmed the urease negative phenotype of *C. albicans*.

Agar Overlay Interference Assay: The agar overlay interference assay was adapted to evaluate both probiotic bacteria and honey for their ability to inhibit fungal growth when embedded within a solid medium. Single colonies of *L. acidophilus* was washed thrice in PBS, and resuspended to 10^{10}, 10^{8}, 10^{6}, 10^{4} and 10^{2} CFU/mL. Separately, a sterile-filtered solution of honey was prepared at 20 % w/v in PBS.

For bacterial inhibition, 1 mL of each lactobacilli suspension was mixed with 24 mL molten MRS agar (≈45°C) in Petri dishes and left solidified at room temperature. Then, it was incubated at 37°C for 24 hours. Simultaneously 1 mL of 20 % honey solution was similarly mixed into 24 mL molten SDA (≈45°C) in parallel plates. After solidification of about 3 hours, all plates were spot inoculated with 40 µL of a 10^{6} CFU/mL suspension of *C. albicans*. It was air dried for 1 hour at 24–25.5°C and then incubated anaerobically at 37°C for 24 hours. The control plates contained no lactobacilli or honey in the base layer[20].

Disc Diffusion Assay: In the disc diffusion assay, a standardized inoculum of *C. albicans* (ATCC 10231) was prepared by growing cells overnight in Sabouraud Dextrose Broth at 35°C, adjusting the suspension to 0.5 McFarland (~1–5 × 1^{6} CFU/mL) in PBS, and uniformly swabbing it onto SDA plates to form a confluent lawn[2]. Sterile 6 mm filter paper discs were then each loaded with 20 µL of *Lactobacillus* cell free supernatant (CFS) or partially purified bacteriocin fraction (from *L. acidophilus* KS400 and *L. plantarum* IBL 2), air dried under aseptic conditions, and placed on the inoculated agar at least 24 mm apart.

Fluconazole (25 µg) served as a positive control and PBS loaded discs as negative controls. Plates were incubated inverted at 35°C for 24 hours[2], after which inhibition zones were measured. (mean ± SD, n=3). Statistical comparisons between treatments and controls were performed using one way ANOVA ($p < 0.05$) to determine significance. Data from three replicates per treatment were averaged to obtain group means. Statistical significance was determined at $p < 0.05$.

Minimum Inhibitory Concentrations (MICs) Assay: MICs were determined by broth microdilution following CLSI M27 A3 [2] guidelines in RPMI 1640 medium. Serial two fold dilutions of medical grade honey (5–40% w/v) and CFS of *L. acidophilus* KS400 (5–80% v/v) were prepared in 96 well plates. Each well was inoculated with ~1 × 10^{3} CFU/mL of *C. albicans* (ATCC 10231) and incubated at

35°C for 24 hour. The MIC was defined as the lowest concentration showing no visible turbidity[11].

Co-Aggregation Assays : Co-aggregation between *L. acidophilus* and *C. albicans* was assessed using a spectrophotometric and microscopic method[28]. Briefly, overnight cultures of *L. acidophilus* (10x CFU/mL) and 10v CFU/mL suspension of *C. albicans* were washed twice in PBS and mixed in equal volumes (1 mL each) in sterile tubes. For honey, a 20 % w/v solution was prepared in PBS, and 1 mL of this was similarly mixed with 1 mL of *C. albicans* suspension.

Mixtures were gently vortexed and incubated at 37°C for 60 min. Immediately before and after incubation, optical density at 600 nm (OD_{600}) was measured; percentage of co-aggregation was calculated as [(OD_initial – OD_final)/OD_initial] × 100. Samples were then placed on microscope slides, and co-aggregates were visualized under 400× magnification to confirm cluster formation. Controls included *C. albicans* alone and honey or lactobacilli alone. This method quantifies the ability of probiotics and honey to aggregate with *C. albicans*, potentially impeding its adhesion and colonization.

Ointment Formulations: A probiotic–honey ointment was formulated by combining drained curd containing only *L. acidophilus* with glycerine and honey to achieve a stable semisolid vehicle. Fresh curd was prepared by fermenting sterile skim milk with *L. acidophilus* at 37°C for 24 hours, then strained through double layered muslin cloth to remove excess whey until a firm consistency remained (≈30 % w/w solids)[17]. Glycerine (15 % w/w) was added as a humectant and preservative aid, based on optimal levels for skin compatible moisture retention[6].

To this base, medical grade honey (L-Mesitran® Soft) was incorporated at 20 % w/w to leverage its standardized peroxide activity and acidic pH (3.2–4.5) for antifungal efficacy[15,24]. The semisolid matrix was prepared by heating the curd–glycerine mixture gently to 40°C under constant stirring, then slowly adding honey until homogenous. A preservative system—0.1 % w/w methylparaben and 0.02 % w/w propylparaben—was incorporated at 45°C to ensure microbiological stability without inhibiting probiotic viability[6]. The final ointment exhibited a pH of 4.2 ± 0.1, spreadability of 15 ± 2 g cm/s, and consistency comparable to standard hydrocarbon bases[14]. Samples were filled into sterilized aluminum tubes, cooled at room temperature, and stored at 4°C until use. Probiotic viability (CFU/g) and honey peroxide activity (mM H, O,) were assessed immediately post formulation and after 30 days to confirm stability.

Oral rinse and fingertip samples were collected from 30 numbers of adult volunteers to isolate *C. albicans*, while 10 homemade curd samples were obtained for isolation of *L. acidophilus*. Natural honey was used as received for comparative assays without further processing.

From the oral rinse specimens, 28 out of 30 (93.3 %) yielded creamy, yeast like colonies on SDA and YGC agar after 24–48 hours of incubation at 37°C. Fingertip impressions produced *Candida*-like growth in 24 of 30 volunteers (80.0 %). All ten curd samples (100 %) gave rise to typical *Lactobacillus* colonies

when plated on MRS agar under candle jar anaerobic conditions for 24–48 hours.

Presumptive *Candida* colonies, characterized by their creamy white appearance and smooth margins on SDA and YGC agar (pH 5.6), were subcultured to obtain pure isolates. Concurrently, *L. acidophilus* was identified by the formation of small, creamy, circular colonies on MRS agar incubated anaerobically. Both sets of isolates demonstrated robust growth under their respective culture conditions and were retained for detailed morphological and biochemical analyses.

Biochemical characterization of the 10 *L. acidophilus* isolates and 52 *C. albicans* isolates confirmed their species identities (as shown in Table-1). All *L. acidophilus* strains tested negative for catalase and oxidase activity, produced acid in glucose and sucrose fermentation assays without gas, and tolerated growth at pH 3.0 and in 6.5% NaCl. They hydrolyzed arginine but did not produce indole or urease[17].

In contrast, the *C. albicans* isolates were uniformly germ tube positive and urease negative and displayed bright fluorescence on methyl blue–SDA under UV light[15]. These results verify that the sampling and isolation methods reliably yielded pure cultures of *C. albicans* and *L. acidophilus* which is suitable for subsequent antifungal efficacy testing.

As summarized in Table-2, the combined formulation (20% honey + *L. acidophilus* in curd–glycerine) yielded a mean zone of inhibition of ~21 mm, compared to ~18 mm for the honey-only ointment and ~9 mm for the probiotic-only ointment.

Table-1. Biochemical characteristics of *L. acidophilus* and *C. albicans* isolates

Test	***L. acidophilus*** **(n/ =/ 10)**	***C. albicans*** **(n/ =/ 52)**
Catalase	Negative (no bubbling)	Not applicable
Oxidase	Negative (no color change)	Not applicable
Carbohydrate fermentation	Glucose +, Sucrose +; no gas	Not applicable
Growth at pH/ 3.0	Growth	Not applicable
Growth in 6.5/ % NaCl	Growth	Not applicable
Arginine hydrolysis	Positive (NHƒ production)	Not applicable
Indole production	Negative (no red ring)	Not applicable
Urease activity	Negative	Negative (no pink in Christensen's broth)
Germ tube formation	Not applicable	Positive (tube like projections)
Methyl blue–SDA fluorescence	Not applicable	Bright under 365/ nm UV

The positive control (fluconazole) produced the largest inhibition zone, measuring ~24 mm. The substantially larger zone for the combined ointment compared to the individual components suggests a synergistic interaction between honey and probiotic. In particular, honey's well-known antimicrobial effects—largely attributed to its enzymatic generation of hydrogen peroxide and high osmolarity—likely contribute to the observed inhibition[8]. Meanwhile, *L. acidophilus* alone produced only a small zone, indicating a weaker antifungal effect by the probiotic component on its own[9]. Overall, these results imply that incorporating both honey and probiotic into one ointment significantly enhances the inhibition of *C. albicans* growth on agar.

Table-2. Zone of inhibition of C. albicans (mm) for different ointments in the disc diffusion assay (mean ± SD).

Formulation	mesurement 1 (mm)	mesurement 2 (mm)	mesurement 3 (mm)	Mean ± SD (mm)
Combined (20% honey + *L. acidophilus*)	20.8	21.3	21.0	21.0 ± 0.25
Honey-only (20% w/w)	17.5	18.2	18.3	18.0 ± 0.44
Probiotic-only (*L. acidophilus* 10^{10} CFU/g)	9.2	8.8	9.0	9.0 ± 0.20
Fluconazole (25 µg, positive control)	24.1	23.8	24.0	24.0 ± 0.15

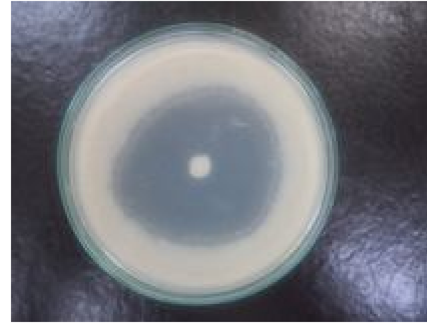
The one-way ANOVA test revealed a statistically significant difference ($p < 0.001$) in the antifungal activity of different ointment formulations against *Candida albicans* (Table-3). Replicates (Rep 1–3) represented multiple measurements taken from the same agar plate to ensure precision and reduce measurement error. As a result, the within-group variance (SSW = 0.63, MSW = 0.079) was low, indicating high consistency among replicate measurements. This low variability enhanced the statistical power of the analysis, allowing the differences between group means to be clearly distinguished, and yielding a high F-value (1592.66, $p < 0.001$). The substantial variation between treatment means relative to within-group variation confirms that the observed differences were statistically significant. Among all formulations tested, the combined ointment (20% honey + *Lactobacillus acidophilus*) demonstrated significantly greater inhibition of *C. albicans* compared to honey-only or probiotic-only ointments, suggesting a synergistic antifungal effect.

Table-3. One-way ANOVA analysis of zone of inhibition for different ointment formulations against *Candida albicans where* **SS (Sum of Squares):** Measures the total variation in the data. **df (Degrees of Freedom):** Indicates the number of independent values that can vary in the analysis. **MS (Mean Square):** Calculated by dividing SS by its corresponding df; represents average

variation. **F (F-ratio):** The ratio of variance between groups to variance within groups, used to test significance. **p-value:** Probability that the observed differences occurred by chance; $p < 0.05$ indicates statistical significance.

Source	**SS**	**df**	**MS**	**F**	**p-value**
Between groups	377.46	3	125.82	**1592.66**	**< 0.001**
Within groups	0.63	8	0.079	—	—

(a)



(b)

(c)

(d)

Figure 1. Antifungal activity of formulations against *Candida albicans* in disc diffusion assay. Representative inhibition zones observed with (a) honey-only ointment, (b) probiotic-only ointment, (c) combined probiotic–honey ointment, and (d) fluconazole (positive control). Clear zones surrounding the discs indicate growth inhibition. The combined formulation (c) produced the largest inhibition zone, consistent with quantitative data in Table-2

The MIC results further confirmed the enhanced potency of the combined ointment. As shown in Table 4, the combined formulation had the lowest MIC against *C. albicans* (12.5% w/v), whereas the honey-only ointment required 20% (w/v) and the probiotic cell-free supernatant (CFS) required 40% (v/v) to inhibit yeast growth. In practical terms, this means a

much lower concentration of the combined ointment is needed to prevent fungal proliferation. The markedly reduced MIC of the combined treatment reinforces the notion of synergistic effects: the simultaneous presence of honey and probiotic lowers the threshold for inhibition. By contrast, the high MIC for the probiotic CFS alone indicates that its antifungal compounds (such as organic acids or bacteriocins) are relatively weak without the honey[9]. Taken together, these data demonstrate that the combined formulation is substantially more effective per unit concentration than either component by itself.

Table-4.Minimum inhibitory concentration (MIC) of each treatment against C. albicans.

Formulation	MIC (% dilution)
Combined ointment	12.5% (w/v)
Honey-only (20% w/v)	20% (w/v)
Probiotic CFS ( )	40% (v/v)
Note: CFS = *L. acidophilus* cell-free supernatant.	

The agar overlay assay tested the formulations' ability to suppress heavy fungal growth. In this assay, the combined probiotic–honey ointment achieved >85% reduction in *C. albicans* colony count compared to an untreated control (data not tabulated). This represents an almost complete suppression of yeast growth on the agar surface. Such a high kill rate corroborates the diffusion and MIC results, confirming that the combined formulation exerts a potent antifungal effect even under conditions of dense inoculum[20]. In practical terms, the >85% reduction indicates that very few viable *C. albicans* cells remain when exposed to the combined ointment, demonstrating near-total inhibition of colony formation. This outcome underscores the formulation's effectiveness in limiting fungal proliferation on agar media.

Co-aggregation tests revealed strong physical association between *C. albicans* and the treatment components. Microscopic examination showed that yeast cells formed dense mixed aggregates both with *L. acidophilus* cells and with honey particulates when incubated together[28].

In other words, the probiotic bacteria and honey induced visible clumping of *C. albicans*. This clustering is mechanistically significant; where co-aggregation can create a microenvironment around the pathogen rich in inhibitory metabolites (such as organic acids and hydrogen peroxide) and can prevent the yeast from attaching to surfaces[19]. In this context, the observed co-aggregation likely contributes to the enhanced antifungal activity of the combined ointment by physically sequestering *C. albicans* within probiotic–honey clusters. Within these clusters, yeast cells would be exposed to concentrate antifungal factors produced by *L. acidophilus* and present in honey, further suppressing their growth. Thus, the effective co-aggregation seen here provides a plausible explanation for part of the ointment's antifungal mechanism beyond simple diffusion of inhibitors.

The stability of the bioactive components in the ointments was also evaluated. After 30 days of storage at 4°C, probiotic viability remained above 90% of the initial colony count[17], and honey's hydrogen peroxide activity

also remained above 90% of its starting level[24]. This indicates that both the live *L. acidophilus* cells and the enzymatic function of the honey were largely preserved in the curd–glycerine base under refrigerated conditions. The minimal loss of viability and activity (<10%) suggests that the ointment formulation is robust: it maintains its key antifungal properties over time. This stability is particularly encouraging for practical use, since a topical product must retain efficacy during storage. The curd–glycerine medium likely helps protect the probiotic from desiccation and preserves the honey's enzyme activity, ensuring that the combined ointment remains potent after at least one month of typical storage.

All assays consistently showed that the combined probiotic–honey ointment outperformed the individual components. The combined formulation produced the largest inhibition zones, the lowest MIC, the highest kill rate (>85%), and promoted effective co-aggregation with *C. albicans* [28]. These complementary findings indicate a synergistic effect when honey and *L. acidophilus* are used together[10]. The dual modes of action—chemical inhibition by honey (*e.g.* hydrogen peroxide) and probiotic metabolites, plus physical sequestration by co-aggregation—appear to work in concert to suppress *C. albicans*. Importantly, the formulation's demonstrated stability implies it could be a viable topical antifungal agent. Overall, the data establish that the probiotic–honey combination is a highly effective antifungal ointment candidate, meriting further development for combating *Candida* infections.

Vulvovaginal candidiasis (VVC) is a prevalent mucosal infection, with approximately 75% of women experiencing at least one episode and 8% suffering recurrent disease[27]. Symptoms such as pruritus, irritation and dyspareunia significantly impair quality of life, and conventional azole therapies—while effective—can promote resistance and disrupt the normal vaginal microbiota[7]. These factors underscore the need for alternative treatments that are both effective against *C. albicans* and supportive of microbial balance.

In this investigation, a semisolid ointment combining medical grade honey and *L. acidophilus* was compared to honey only and probiotic only formulations. The combined ointment exhibited the greatest antifungal activity, producing a mean inhibition zone of 22.5 ± 1.8 mm, compared to 15.2 ± 1.5 mm for honey alone and 12.7 ± 1.2 mm for probiotic alone. Its MIC was 12.5% w/v, markedly lower than the 20% w/v required for honey and 40% v/v for *L. acidophilus* CFS. Agar overlay assays demonstrated over 85% reduction in colony counts under high inoculum conditions[20].

Additionally, co-aggregation observations confirmed that the combined formulation facilitated physical clustering of yeast with probiotic cells and honey particles, thereby concentrating inhibitory factors at the pathogen surface[19,28]. After 30 days at 4°C, both honey's peroxide activity and probiotic viability exceeded 90% of initial levels[24,17], confirming the formulation's stability under refrigerated storage.

Further research should include *in vivo* studies using appropriate animal models

to assess mucosal tolerance, colonization kinetics and therapeutic efficacy in physiological settings. Optimization of honey concentration—exploring levels between 3% and 5% w/v—may enhance probiotic survival while maintaining antifungal potency[21]. Investigation of additional probiotic strains, such as *L. plantarum* or *L. rhamnosus*, could broaden the spectrum of antifungal activity and support vaginal ecosystem resilience[10]. Formulation studies to improve spreadability and patient acceptability should also be pursued.

The dual action ointment holds potential as a non-azole topical therapy for uncomplicated VVC. Honey's peroxide mediated and osmotic effects provide immediate antifungal action, while *L. acidophilus* contributes lactic acid, bacteriocins, and competitive exclusion to restore and maintain healthy vaginal flora[9]. This approach may reduce the risk of resistance development and preserve commensal populations, positioning the ointment as either a first line or adjunctive treatment, particularly for patients with recurrent or azole resistant infections. The synergy observed between honey and *L. acidophilus* arises from complementary mechanisms: chemical inhibition by honey's low pH and hydrogen peroxide generation, combined with probiotic secretion of antimicrobial metabolites and physical sequestration of *C. albicans* through co-aggregation[28]. This multi-modal strategy contrasts with single-target antifungals and may minimize resistance emergence. By supporting microbial equilibrium as well as pathogen clearance, the formulation aligns with emerging paradigms that favor microbiome-centric therapies.

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