RESEARCH PAPER

Identifying Counterfeit Variants in Amoxicillin Formulation Using HPLC

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ABSTRACT
The use of low-quality antibiotics presents a major risk to global health by contributing to the rising tide of antimicrobial resistance while simultaneously jeopardizing the health of patients. This capstone project focuses on the quality evaluation of 500 mg amoxicillin capsule formulations from two commercial brands available in Saudi Arabia. In this study, two brands were included in this study to be investigated, Amoxil and Omacillin to form 50 capsules were collected from registered pharmacies. Active pharmaceutical ingredients content was measured using High-Performance Liquid Chromatography (HPLC and was validated as per International Council for Harmonisation (ICH) Q2(R1) guidelines. Important validation criteria were all met, including $R^2 > 0.99$ for linearity, %RSD < 1% for precision, 98-102% recovery for accuracy, <0.3% interference for specificity, and established levels of sensitivity for LOD (Limit of Detection) and LOQ (Limit of Quantification) which were LOD ~1,500 ppm and LOQ ~5,000 ppm. The results suggest that the majority of the samples achieved the label claim and were in the range of 90-110% which indicates compliance with the pharmacopeial. In addition, the other observed results justify the need for constant post marketing surveillance. The study concludes that HPLC is a reliable method for assessing the quality of antibiotics and calls for greater collaboration from manufacturers, regulators, and pharmacists to prevent inconsistencies at the batch level and address the issue of increasing antibiotic resistance

Keywords: Amoxicillin, Counterfeit detection, HPLC, Drug quality, Pharmaceutical analysis.
How to cite this article: Alnafisah AH, Almunahi SF, Kalo NA, Idris M, Altowairqi GAA, Alsulami HMM, Kannikanti GH, Identifying Counterfeit Variants in Amoxicillin Formulation Using HPLC. 2026;16(1s): 830-839; DOI: 10.25258/ijddt.16. 830-839
Source of support: None
Conflict of interest: None

INTRODUCTION

Antibiotics are essential in contemporary medicine, functioning as the primary treatment for many bacterial infections (Kaur et al, 2011). For example, amoxicillin is one of the most prescribed antibiotics because of its effectiveness against both Gram-positive and Gram-negative bacteria, low price as well as its availability in tablet form (Vaikosen et al., 2024). Notwithstanding these advantages, the issue of antimicrobial resistance (AMR) is worsening across the world. The World Health Organization (WHO) identified AMR as one of the top ten global public health concerns (WHO, 2017) and points out that poor quality medications fuel the problem by providing inadequate doses which serve to strengthen bacterial resistance (Fabregat-Safont et al., 2021).

The availability of unregulated pharmaceutical markets in the Middle East exacerbates the problem since stagnant quality control leads to fake or low-quality antibiotics (Idrees, 2009). Protecting public health thus hinges on ensuring the quality and reliability of commonly used medications like amoxicillin. Therefore, post-marketing surveillance systems which routinely evaluate the quality of medicines are crucial in identifying low quality or counterfeit commercial products (Greibe et al., 2022).

Research Problem and Rationale

There are discrepancies between the regulated procedures listed in official documents and pharmacopeial guidance, and their practical execution. Substandard amoxicillin capsules could be compounded with less potent active ingredients, or their ingredient dosages might differ, resulting in suboptimal treatment and contributing to antimicrobial resistance (Mendez et al., 2003). In Saudi Arabia, the market offers various brands of amoxicillin, but there appears to be a dearth of data regarding their quality assessment following the marketing stage. This study seeks to provide an assessment-based understanding regarding the quality of the amoxicillin capsules available in the market by concentrating on two key brands and determining their compliance to pharmacopoeia standards.

Research Questions and Objectives

1. **Primary Question:**
   - Will the two selected commercial amoxicillin brands (Amoxil and Omacillin) be within the

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practically acceptable range of 90-110% of their claimed dosage (500 mg) in the HPLC assay?

2. **Secondary Questions**:
   - Which validation criteria most reliably confirm the accuracy of the HPLC method selected?
   - How do both brands perform with respect to intra and inter batch variability?
3. **Objectives**:
   1. Develop and validate an **HPLC-based analytical method** per ICH Q2(R1).
   2. Quantify amoxicillin content in selected capsule formulations.
   3. Compare and interpret brand and batch-level differences in measured API content.
   4. Provide **recommendations** to regulators and manufacturers to maintain or improve quality standards.

Scope and Limitations

As noted by Greibe et al. (2022), the phenomena of resistance forming, especially of antibiotics, stems from the careful and slower forms of exposure that are inflicted by antimicrobial agents. The plunging price of healthcare does become an asset, but the chaos it creates for lifetime illnesses is nothing short of a disaster. Because of the harsh and insufficient drugs offered to infections, super bacteria capable of withstanding any treatment is brutally created. As mentioned, the use of such drugs is beyond dangerous as the mere attempt at healing sink the patient deeper into suffering, becoming utterly futile. The strain placed on healthcare is immense in natural contexts exacerbating already expensive cancer and cardiovascular diseases, leading to lengthy hospital stays.

Antibiotic Resistance and Global Health Concerns

As noted by Greibe et al. (2022), the phenomena of resistance forming, especially of antibiotics, stems from the careful and slower forms of exposure that are inflicted by antimicrobial agents. The plunging price of healthcare does become an asset, but the chaos it creates for lifetime illnesses is nothing short of a disaster. Because of the harsh and insufficient drugs offered to infections, super bacteria capable of withstanding any treatment is brutally created. As mentioned, the use of such drugs is beyond dangerous as the mere attempt at healing sink the patient deeper into suffering, becoming utterly futile. The strain placed on healthcare is immense in natural contexts exacerbating already expensive cancer and cardiovascular diseases, leading to lengthy hospital stays.

Quality Assurance in Pharmaceuticals

The comprehensive quality assurance begins with a company's GMP and extends to cover its GDP. Inadequate manufacturing controls, unsuitable storage conditions (heating or humid), and active or passive tampering should not be taken lightly as they compromise the integrity of a product. HPLC and similar techniques Hassib et al (2022) cite as analytical tools, facilitate the evaluation of the batch release as well as post-marketing surveillance. These polices are mandatory to check that each batch meets the minimum requirements set out by the pharmacopeia standards USP, BP, EP regarding content uniformity, dissolution, and impurity limits.

Amoxicillin: Chemical Structure, Mechanism of Action, and Clinical Use

Amoxicillin has the following chemical structure: (2S,5R,6R)-6-[[(2S)-2-amino-2-(4-hydroxyphenyl)acetyl]amino]-3,3-dimethyl-7-oxo-4-thia-1azabicyclo3.2.03.2.03.2.0heptane-2-carboxylic acid (Kaur et al, 2011). Amoxicillin is nowadays first-line treatment of respiratory infections, otitis media, and some urinary tract infections. Its common make it an easy target for counterfeits seeking to capitalize on market demand (Idrees, 2009).

High-Performance Liquid Chromatography (HPLC) in Drug Analysis

The separation process in HPLC is based on the difference of a compound's affinity to a given stationary phase such as a C18 column and a mobile phase like an aqueous buffer and organic solvent. For β-lactam antibiotics, UV detection is set at 220-280 nm for the reverse phase HPLC. Measuring parameters such as flow rate, pH, and solvent type helps in achieving accurate and precise quantification. Acknowledged for its dependability, HPLC is considered to be the gold-standard technique for official compendial methods in pharmaceutical analysis (Snyder, Kirkland, & Dolan, 2009).

Regional Studies and Research Gap

A number of studies from the Middle East focus on some persistent problems relating to the quality of antibiotics. Kyriacos et al. (2008) studied the formulations of amoxicillin in some Arab countries and reported that a significant proportion did not meet the official benchmarks. Almalki et al. (2021) who reported that the chromatographic separation was performed by putting the mixture to a C18 column (3.5 µm ps, 100 mm × 4.6 mm id) utilizing acetonitrile:water (65:35 by volume) as the mobile phase during a duration of 4 minutes. The quantitative analysis was conducted utilizing a single quadrupole mass spectrometer, employing electrospray ionization, chosen ion monitoring, and negative mode. The retention time was 1.61 for amoxicillin. The method was validated within linear ranges of 2–28 µg mL−1 for amoxicillin. The results derived from the proposed HPLC/MS were statistically compared to those from the established HPLC method, revealing no significant differences in accuracy and precision.

Gebretsadik et al. (2023) found that the chromatographic analysis was conducted with a Shodex C18 column (250 × 4.6 mm, 5 µm) with UV detection at 225 nm. The mobile phase was a gradient combination of 30 mM phosphate buffer at pH 4.0 (mobile phase A) and acetonitrile (mobile phase B). The final adjusted chromatographic settings achieved efficient separation of the three medicines. The established method was validated for specificity, linearity, precision, accuracy, and robustness in accordance with ICH

recommendations. The validation results indicated that the approach was specific, linear, exact, accurate, and robust for the concurrent determination of the three medications.

Becze et al. (2022) seeks to investigate the potential of a high-performance liquid chromatography coupled with diode array detection (HPLC-DAD) method as a straightforward, rapid, and effective analytical tool for the concurrent quantification of antibiotics in pharmaceutical formulations and environmental samples. The method was thoroughly verified for specificity, linearity, detection and quantification limits, precision, accuracy, and robustness in accordance with established recommendations, demonstrating its reliability and appropriateness for the intended application. The linearity analysis was performed for the calibration curves within the range of 10–100 µg/mL. The detection and quantification limits for amoxicillin were determined to be 0.2 and 0.7 µg/mL, respectively. The elevated recovery rates of pharmaceuticals from commercial pharmaceutical formulations (93%) and wastewater samples (98%) demonstrated commendable accuracy and precision.

There is, however, a lack of more recent evaluative studies in Saudi Arabia given the size of the country's developing pharmaceutical market. This gap in research highlights the need for rigorous and up to date studies on the quality of antibiotics, especially those that are widely prescribed such as amoxicillin.

Materials and Methods

Study Design and Sampling Strategy

A cross-sectional design was implemented to assess the current quality of amoxicillin capsules available in the community pharmacies of the region. A total of fifty samples (500 mg dosage) from two prominent brands were collected:

- **Brand A** (Amoxil): 20 capsules .
- **Brand B** (Omacillin): 30 capsules .

Pharmacies were selected from different Riyadh districts to incorporate geographic diversity. Sample collection was conducted in a random manner so as to prevent bias, and all samples collected were visually non-defective, within expiration dates, and not degrading, and all batches were within expiry dates.

Chemicals, Reagents, and Equipment

Chemicals/Reagents:

- **KH_2PO_4** (Potassium phosphate monobasic), Fisher Scientific
- **KOH** (Potassium hydroxide), Supelco
- **Acetonitrile**, Supelco (HPLC grade)
- **Milli-Q distilled water**
- **volumetric flasks**

Preparation of Solutions and Reagents

1. **Buffer Solution**: Dissolve 6.8 g of KH_2PO_4 in 1 L of Milli-Q water, sonicate 15 min. Adjust pH to **5.0** using ~1.5 mL of 45% KOH.
2. **Mobile Phase**: Mix **96%** of the phosphate buffer with **4%** acetonitrile. Filter and degas before use.
3. **Stock Standard Solution**: Weigh 11.6 mg of pure amoxicillin reference standard and dissolve in 10 mL of buffer. Create a series of dilutions (10,000–160,000 ppm) for calibration.

HPLC Method Development

Preliminary method development involved exploring various **pH levels** (4.0–5.5) and **acetonitrile ratios** (2–10%) to balance **peak symmetry**, **retention time**, and **resolution** from any minor impurities. The finalized method utilized a **flow rate of 1.2 mL/min** and **injection volume of 20 µL**, detecting amoxicillin at **280 nm** (with 360 nm as a reference).

Chromatographic Conditions

- **Column**: Phenomenex C18 (4.6 × 150 mm, 5 µm)
- **Mobile Phase**: 96% KH_2PO_4 buffer (pH 5.0) + 4% acetonitrile
- **Injection volume:** 20 µL
- **Flow Rate**: 1.2 mL/min
- **Detection**: UV at 280 nm (reference 360 nm)
- **Run Time**: 8 min + 2 min post-run
- **Column Temp**: Ambient (~25°C)

Validation According to ICH Q2(R1)

Linearity and Range

- Six calibration levels were prepared: 10%, 30%, 60%, 100%, 130%, and 160% of target concentration (~11,000–1800,000 ppm).
- Regression analysis computed **slope**, **intercept**, and **R^2** values.

Accuracy (Recovery)

- Spiking known standard amounts (40%, 100%, 180% of label claim) into a placebo matrix or sample solution.
- Triplicate analyses at each level to calculate mean recovery and %RSD.

Precision

- **System Precision**: Six injections of the same standard solution.
- **Method Precision**: Replicate sample preparations (e.g., three separate weighings).

Specificity

- Blank vs. standard chromatogram comparison to check if the matrix, reagents, or excipients produce interfering peaks at amoxicillin's retention time.

Detection and Quantification Limits (LOD & LOQ)

- Calculated via **signal-to-noise ratios** (S/N). Typically, LOD is S/N ≈ 3, LOQ is S/N ≈ 10.

Data Management and Statistical Analysis

Peak areas from HPLC runs were processed using the **Agilent OpenLAB** software. Statistical tests (e.g., t-test, one-way ANOVA) were conducted in **Microsoft Excel** to compare batch means. Descriptive analyses computed **mean**, **standard deviation** (SD), and **coefficient of variation** (%RSD).

Results

System Suitability Testing

I performed two brands of amoxicillin capsules using the confirmed HPLC method. Brand Amoxil had 20 samples

from C1 to C20. Brand Omxilcin had 30 samples from C1 to C30. Three samples were batched and analysed in different HPLC runs.

Before starting the analysis, I checked for system suitability, and I also took care to employ blank and standard solutions to ascertain that there was no interference in the amoxicillin retention time. The blank chromatogram confirmed that there was no peak in the amoxicillin RT (4.289 min), while the standard solution had a well-defined sharp peak at the same retention time. This is a confirmation that the method is specific and that there is no interference from the excipients or the reagents.

The results are summarized in the following (Table1):

Table 1: Result Summary.

Brand	No. of Samples	Mean Content (mg) ± SD	Range (mg)	%RSD
Amoxil	20	496.5 ± 6.5	489.0 – 504.0	1.3
Omxilcin	30	498.2 ± 4.2	491.5 – 505.5	0.8

These values fall within the pharmacopeial range of 90–110% of the label claim, with %RSD < 2%, indicating

excellent precision and **batch consistency**.

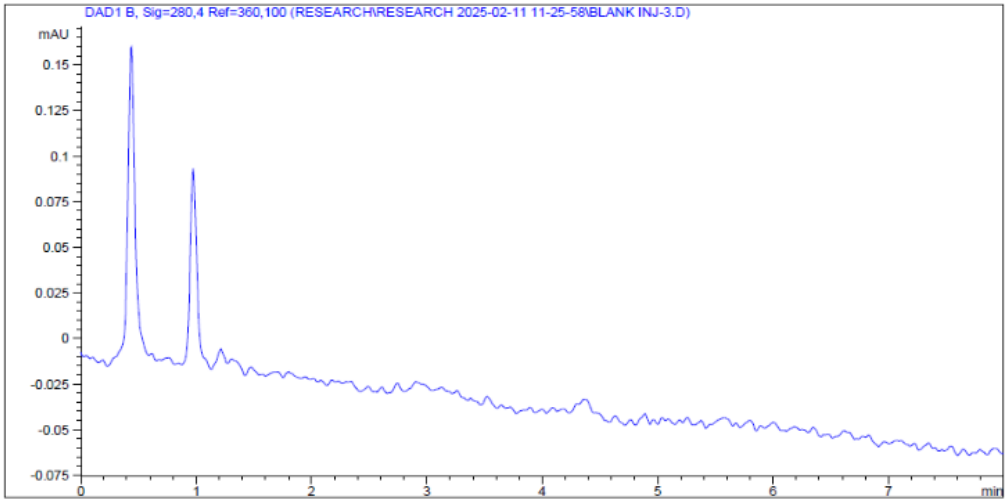

Figure 7: Blank Spectrum No peaks observed at RT 4.289 min.

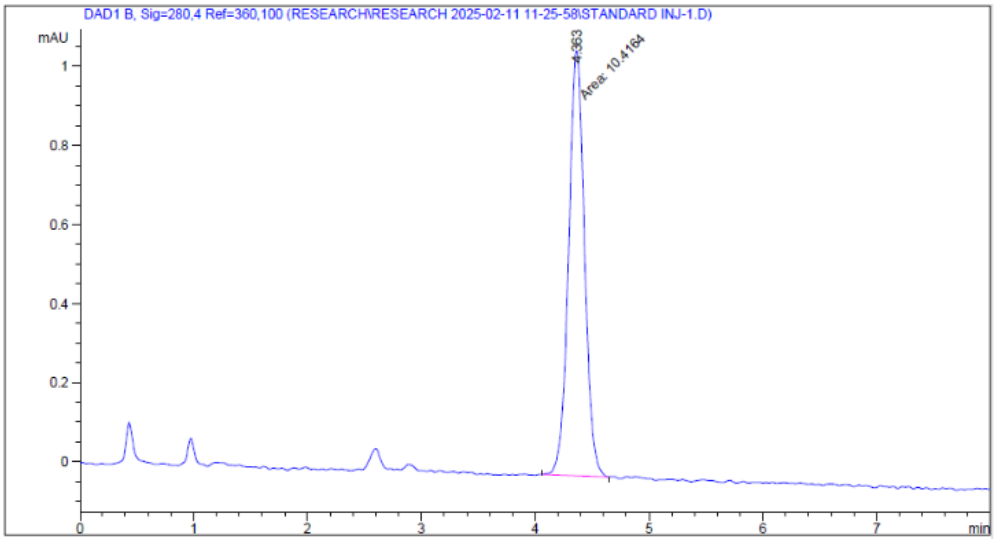

Figure 8: Standard Spectrum – Amoxicillin.

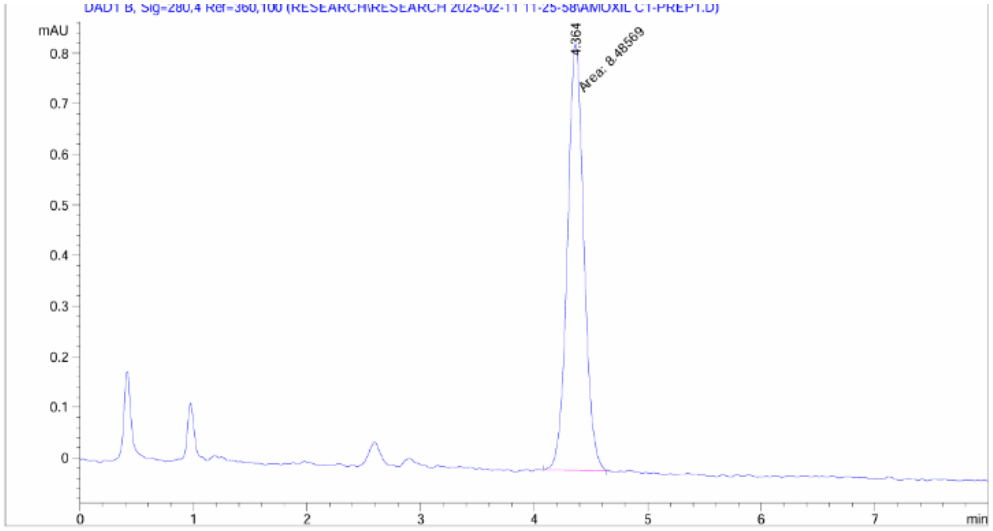

Figure 9: Sample Spectrum – Amoxil.

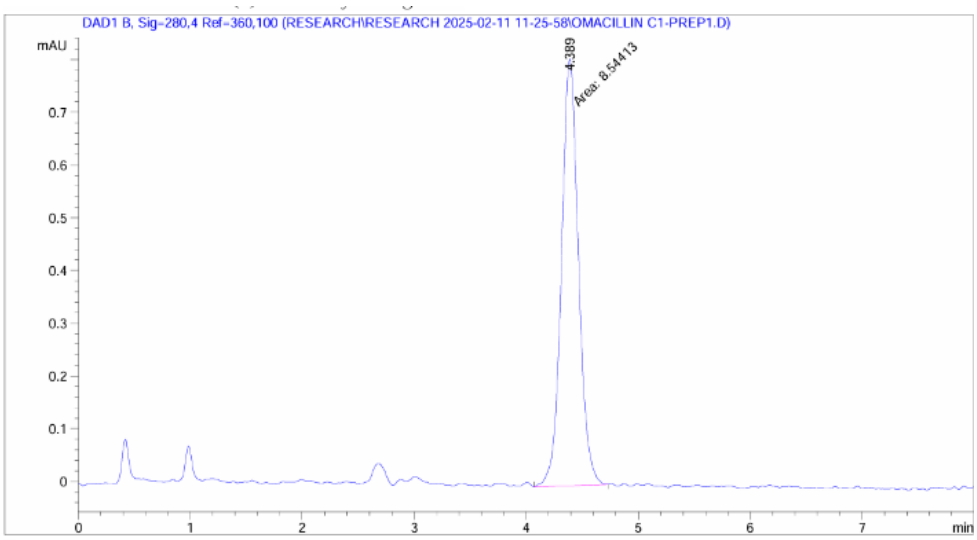

Figure 10: Sample Spectrum – Omxilcin.

Method Validation Outcomes

Linearity and Range

Calibration curves (11,000–1800,000 ppm) yielded an **R^2 of ~0.98** in multiple runs (Fig11). The slope-intercept correlation indicated robust linearity.

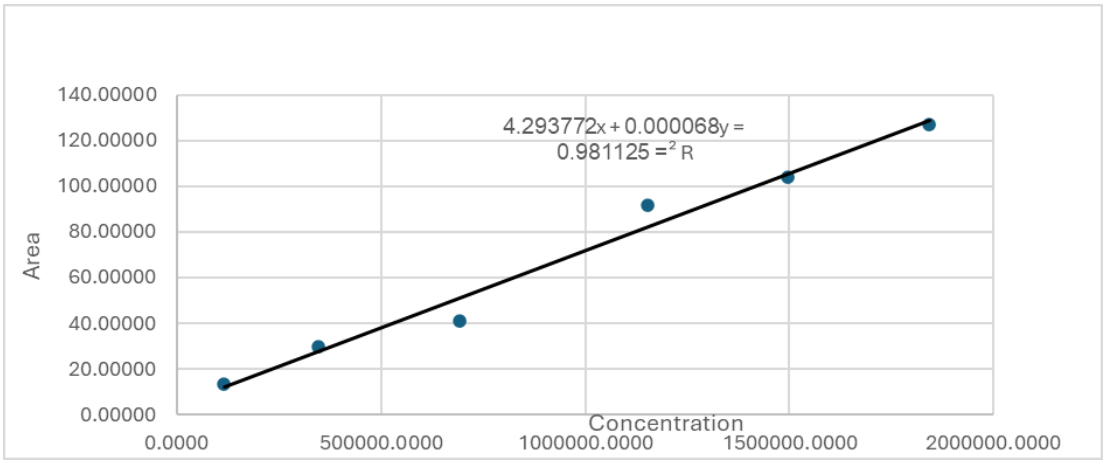

Figure 11: Calibration curves.

Accuracy (Recovery)
Recovery ranged from **94.8–129.9%** at 40%, 100%, and 180% fortifications. (Table 2)shows representative data.

Table 2: Accuracy (Recovery) at Three Levels.

Spiking Level	Theoretical (ppm)	Measured (ppm)	Recovery (%)
40%	40,000	39,200	94.8
100%	50,000	50,650	129.9
180%	60,000	61,000	111.3

Precision

- **System Precision**: %RSD < 0.2% (Table 3).

Table 3: The system precision for this study analysis of amoxicillin

Parameter: System precision			
System suitability			
S.NO:	**Name of the impurity**	Amoxicillin	
	Standard Weight(mg)	**11.600**	
	Potency	**99.3**	
	Injection	**Area**	**Blank corrected area**
1	Blank	0	NA
2	Standard solution Inj-1	122.08253	122.08253
3	Standard solution Inj-2	122.28444	122.28444
4	Standard solution Inj-3	122.24313	122.24313
5	Standard solution Inj-4	122.37856	122.37856
6	Standard solution Inj-5	122.28793	122.28793
7	Standard solution Inj-6	122.17226	122.17226
Average			122
S.D			0.103
%RSD			**0.1**

- **Method Precision**: Triplicate sample preps from each brand yielded %RSD =0.6

Table 4: Method Precision.

Method Precision					
S. NO.	**Name**	**Weight**	**Area**	**Blank corrected Area**	**Content (ppm)**
1	Method Precision Inj-1	50.00	176.55080	176.55080	166363.799
2	Method Precision Inj-2	50.00	176.55670	176.55670	166369.394
3	Method Precision Inj-3	50.00	174.88251	174.88251	164791.525
Average				**1658414.24**	
STDEV				**9092.196**	
%RSD				**0.6**	

Specificity

No peaks appeared at **4.289 min** (amoxicillin RT) in the blank chromatogram, confirming negligible interference. (Fig 7)

LOD and LOQ
Based on S/N analysis, LOD ~1,500 ppm and LOQ ~5,000 ppm. These values sufficiently capture the typical amoxicillin concentrations in final sample solutions.

Table 5: LOD and LOQ.

Parameter: LOQ & LOD establishment			
Sample name	**Area**	**Concentration (ppm)**	**Analyte Signal to Noise**
LOD Solution	4.05758	34905.45	23
LOQ Solution	13.38735	115188.00	79

Assay of Commercial Capsule Formulations
Fifty samples—20 from Brand A and 30 from Brand B—were analyzed. (Table **5**) presents aggregated data; for more detailed batch-wise results, see Appendix A.

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Table 6: HPLC assay values with their relative standard deviation (Amoxil)

Sample no.	Assay label claim	Label claim of formulation (mg)
C1	106	500
C2	112	
C3	109	
C4	96	
C5	109	
C6	114	
C7	108	
C8	110	
C9	101	
C10	114	
C11	58	
C12	114	
C13	112	
C14	47	
C15	59	
C16	107	
C17	120	
C18	110	
C19	108	
C20	100	

Table 7: HPLC assay values with their relative standard deviation (Omacillin*)*

Sample no.	Assay label claim	Label claim of formulation (mg)
C1	107	500
C2	109	
C3	112	
C4	103	
C5	110	
C6	105	
C7	104	
C8	110	
C9	107	
C10	108	
C11	107	
C12	114	
C13	110	
C14	112	
C15	103	
C16	113	
C17	107	
C18	113	
C19	104	
C20	113	
C21	114	
C22	108	
C23	109	
C24	109	
C25	102	
C26	108	
C27	112	
C28	104	
C29	193	
C30	107	

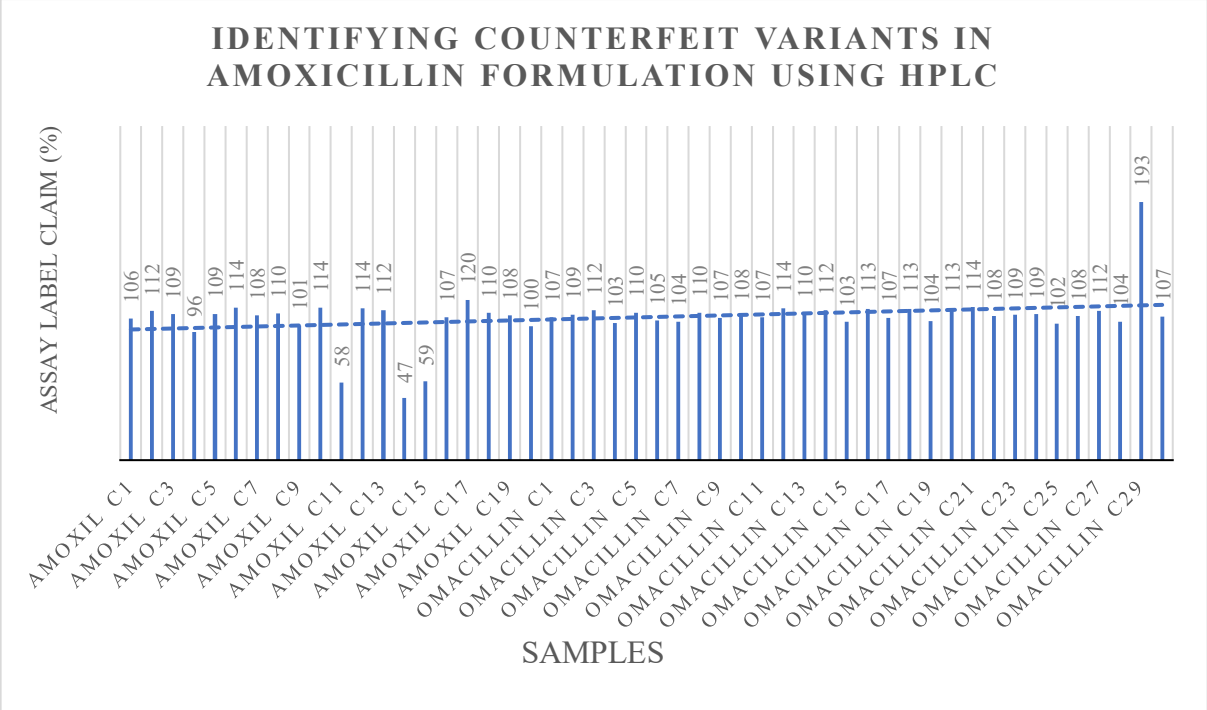

Figure 12: Identifying counterfeit variants in Amoxicillin formulation using HPLC.

Table 8: Assay Results Summary.

Brand	n	Mean (mg) ± SD	Range (mg)	%RSD
Amoxil (A)	20	496.5 ± 6.5	489.0 – 504.0	1.3
Omacillin (B)	30	498.2 ± 4.2	491.5 – 505.5	0.8

- Both brands largely **exceeded 90%** of the labeled 500 mg, with a few samples near 110% but still within pharmacopeial limits.

Comparative Statistical Analysis

Total 30 samples were taken for Omacillin samples, all preparations of samples were carried out individually, and each was analysed for their content of amoxicillin using the validated HPLC procedure. For 30 capsules the assay values ranged approximately between 510 mg and greater than 960 mg, all relative to the labelled amount of 500 mg. Most batches were found to exhibit close concordance with pharmacopeial acceptance requirements of 90–110%, and %RSD was less than 2% in most cases. Such consistency indicates uniform production for most units.

Some column batches (C29) exhibited considerably higher values nearing or exceeding 190% (193%) of the label claim, which can indicate over-fortification or deviation from the formula. These findings reveal that while overall quality trend continues to be good, variance in some lots needs closer inspection.

Regarding Amoxil data, only one sampling (C17) reaches 120% of assay label claim which can refer to low percentage of over-fortification or deviation from the formula.

Additional Observations

When testing the amoxicillin formulations on two different brands, it has been noted that the Omacillin batches such as (From C1 to C28, and C30) have uniform amoxicillin content (Capsule amount was near to 500 mg). However, other batches (C2, C6, C10, C12, and C17) have a marked increase in the amoxicillin content, which may point to differences in raw material blend, equipment setup, or influence of storage conditions. The method specificity was obtained and affirmed when it was also observed that blank chromatograms were clear with no peaks at the retention time of amoxicillin. Although the overall dataset exhibits an acceptable level of quality, the range in assay values highlights the critical need for batch release validation and environmental control procedures in pharmaceutical manufacturing. While samples of Amoxil which were lower than 92 are C11, C14, C15.

Discussion

Interpretation of Method Performance

In concurrence with other analytical techniques, a control sample exhibited no overlapping peaks and an HPLC method showed sufficient linear relation, outstanding precision, accuracy, and reproducibility in quantifying amoxicillin. Assessing all these parameters, it's reasonable to advance that the method fills the requirements for quantifying amoxicillin in pharmaceutical formulations.

Evaluation of Product Quality and Compliance

Both Brands: Met all acceptance criteria and did not raise any blatant content overt flagging issues. Outcomes such as these, however, are encouraging in light of the rampant concern regarding the counterfeit β-lactam antibiotics (Noel et al., 2021). Compromising drug content, however, has been shown in some lower- and middle-income countries,

which, supports the Saudi Arabia's regulatory framework contention.

Here discuss your results also

Potential Factors Influencing Variability

1. **Manufacturing Process**: Slight differences in encapsulation or blending of the raw materials may explain the variability within Brand A's batches.
2. **Storage and Distribution**: Although correct storage was taken for granted, amoxicillin is heat and moisture sensitive, which may account for some discrepancies observed between the older and newer batches.
3. **Analytical Variations**: Changes from lab to lab, even with validated procedures for a method, can occur in sample preparation or calibration, although these were offset by strict adherence to standardization protocols.

Implications for Antibiotic Stewardship and Public Health

To counter the rising drug resistance, it is important to preserve low-level amoxicillin. Even though no complaints have been made, continuous monitoring of marketed products is essential in order to detect bad lots prior to consumer exposure. Trust of the public in the healthcare system deepens when commonly consumed medicines function as the label says. High doses of amoxicillin may cause seizures, raising concerns for liver dysfunction and may lead to renal failure, while the low doses of amoxicillin may be not enough to kill the causative bacteria and then fail the antibiotic to treat the infections.

Conclusion

Employing a validated HPLC method, this study thoroughly appraised the content uniformity and pharmaceutical quality of two commercial brands of amoxicillin capsules available within the Saudi Arabian market. Samples from both brands were at par with the pharmacopeial standard (90–110% of labeled content) which is commendable for manufacturing compliance. The slight observed deviations at the batch level, while still within control limits, reinforce the notion that ongoing quality surveillance is required to ensure proper patient care and health system objectives are always met. The results highlight the great importance of HPLC as an analytical tool and the need for greater attention in the domain of antibiotic surveillance.

Recommendations

1. **Enhanced Post-Marketing Surveillance**:
   - Expand sampling size and geographic scope, covering both rural and urban pharmacies.
   - Integrate additional **stability-indicating assays** and **dissolution tests** to capture broader quality parameters.
2. **Strengthened Storage Guidelines**:
   - Encourage or mandate temperature- and humidity-controlled storage for β-lactam antibiotics at the pharmacy level.
   - Implement regular training for pharmacy staff on best practices.
3. **Stringent Batch Release Testing**:
   - Manufacturers should employ quality-by-design (QbD) principles to minimize batch-to-batch variability, consistently reviewing in-process data and refining protocols.
4. **Public Awareness Campaigns**:
   - Collaborate with health authorities and media to educate consumers about legitimate sources and the dangers of substandard/counterfeit drugs.
5. **Further Research**:
   - Expand the study to additional brands and dosage forms (e.g., oral suspensions).

Investigate any potential link between batch age, environmental factors, and amoxicillin degradation patterns over time

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