Correlation Between Histopathological Lung Findings and Antibiotic Response in Bacterial Pneumonia: A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis

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Abstract

Background: Bacterial pneumonia remains a major global cause of morbidity and mortality despite significant advances in antimicrobial therapy and critical care management. Histopathological lung abnormalities including neutrophilic infiltration, alveolar consolidation, pulmonary edema, diffuse alveolar damage, necrosis, hemorrhage, and abscess formation are frequently associated with disease severity and adverse clinical outcomes. Increasing evidence suggests that the extent and pattern of pulmonary tissue injury may significantly influence antibiotic penetration, microbiological clearance, therapeutic response, and patient prognosis. However, comprehensive evidence correlating histopathological pulmonary findings with antibiotic responsiveness in bacterial pneumonia remains limited.

Aim: The present systematic review and meta-analysis aimed to evaluate the correlation between histopathological lung findings and antibiotic treatment response in patients with bacterial pneumonia.

Methods: A systematic literature search was conducted according to PRISMA guidelines across PubMed, Scopus, Embase, Web of Science, and Cochrane Library databases for studies published between January 2000 and December 2025. Studies involving histopathological assessment of lung tissue in bacterial pneumonia along with antibiotic treatment outcomes were included. Data extracted included study characteristics, pulmonary histopathological findings, bacterial pathogens, antibiotic regimens, microbiological clearance, mortality, ICU admission, and treatment outcomes. Meta-analysis was performed using a random-effects model, and heterogeneity was assessed using the I^2 statistic.

Results: A total of 27 studies involving 5,842 patients were included in the final analysis. The most frequently reported histopathological findings were neutrophilic alveolar infiltration (82%), alveolar consolidation (76%), pulmonary edema (64%), hemorrhage (39%), necrosis (31%), diffuse alveolar damage (28%), and lung abscess formation (17%). Severe histopathological abnormalities including diffuse alveolar damage, necrotizing inflammation, pulmonary hemorrhage, and abscess formation demonstrated significant association with poor antibiotic response, prolonged hospitalization, ICU admission, and increased mortality. Meta-analysis revealed that severe pulmonary pathological injury significantly increased the risk of poor antibiotic response (OR: 2.91; 95% CI: 2.10–4.04; $p<0.001$) and mortality (OR: 2.47; 95% CI: 1.85–3.30; $p<0.001$). Necrotizing pneumonia and diffuse alveolar damage demonstrated the strongest association with treatment failure and adverse outcomes. Moderate heterogeneity was observed across included studies (I^2=48%).

Conclusion: Histopathological lung findings demonstrate significant correlation with antibiotic responsiveness and clinical outcomes in bacterial pneumonia. Severe pulmonary tissue destruction, necrosis, diffuse inflammatory injury, and abscess formation are strongly associated with treatment failure, prolonged recovery, and increased mortality. Histopathological evaluation may serve as a valuable adjunctive tool for prognostic assessment, therapeutic stratification, and individualized management of bacterial pneumonia. Further prospective multicenter studies using standardized histopathological scoring systems are required to better establish the prognostic significance of pulmonary pathology in antibiotic response prediction.

Keywords: Bacterial pneumonia; Histopathology; Lung pathology; Antibiotic response; Pulmonary inflammation; Necrotizing pneumonia; Diffuse alveolar damage; Systematic review; Meta-analysis.

How to cite this article: Chanda S, Hima Bindu M, Mori MV. Correlation Between Histopathological Lung Findings and Antibiotic Response in Bacterial Pneumonia: A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis. Int J Drug Deliv Technol. 2026;16(47s): 1025-1031. DOI: 10.25258/ijddt.16.47s.133

Introduction

Bacterial pneumonia remains one of the most significant causes of infectious morbidity and mortality worldwide, accounting for substantial healthcare burden, intensive care admissions, and antibiotic utilization across both developed and developing nations (1). According to global epidemiological estimates, lower respiratory tract infections continue to rank among the leading causes of death,

particularly in elderly individuals, immunocompromised patients, children, and patients with chronic comorbid conditions such as diabetes mellitus, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), and malignancy (1,2). Despite advancements in antimicrobial therapy and critical care medicine, bacterial pneumonia continues to demonstrate considerable mortality, especially in severe and necrotizing forms of pulmonary infection (2).

Bacterial pneumonia is characterized by infection-induced inflammation of the lung parenchyma resulting in alveolar exudation, inflammatory cell infiltration, vascular congestion, edema, and varying degrees of tissue destruction (1). Histopathologically, bacterial pneumonia demonstrates a broad spectrum of pulmonary abnormalities ranging from mild bronchopneumonia to diffuse alveolar damage and extensive necrotizing inflammation (3). Common histopathological findings include alveolar neutrophilic infiltration, fibrin deposition, pulmonary edema, hemorrhage, hyaline membrane formation, septal thickening, necrosis, and abscess formation (1,3). These pathological changes significantly influence pulmonary gas exchange, ventilation-perfusion mismatch, and disease severity.

The pathological manifestations of bacterial pneumonia differ according to microbial virulence, host immune response, duration of infection, and adequacy of antibiotic therapy (4). Gram-positive pathogens such as *Streptococcus pneumoniae* commonly produce lobar consolidation characterized by dense neutrophilic exudates within alveolar spaces, whereas infections caused by *Staphylococcus aureus* and *Klebsiella pneumoniae* frequently exhibit extensive tissue necrosis, hemorrhage, cavitation, and abscess formation (4,5). Severe pneumonia caused by multidrug-resistant organisms may further result in diffuse alveolar destruction and irreversible pulmonary damage (5).

Histopathological examination of lung tissue plays a critical role in understanding disease severity and progression in bacterial pneumonia (6). Several investigators have demonstrated that severe inflammatory lung injury correlates with increased mortality, prolonged hospitalization, poor oxygenation, and treatment failure (3,6). Diffuse alveolar damage, pulmonary hemorrhage, and necrotizing inflammation are particularly associated with poor clinical outcomes and increased need for mechanical ventilation (7). Moreover, inflammatory destruction of pulmonary vasculature and alveolar architecture may impair antibiotic penetration into infected tissues, thereby contributing to delayed microbiological clearance and suboptimal therapeutic response (8).

Antibiotic therapy remains the cornerstone of bacterial pneumonia management; however, treatment response varies substantially among patients (2). While many patients demonstrate rapid clinical improvement following appropriate antibiotic administration, others experience persistent infection, prolonged inflammatory response, respiratory failure, septic shock, or death despite broad-spectrum antimicrobial coverage (8). Factors influencing antibiotic response include pathogen virulence, bacterial resistance patterns, host immune status, timing of therapy initiation, pharmacokinetic factors, and severity of tissue injury (9). Emerging evidence suggests that histopathological severity itself may serve as an important determinant of antibiotic responsiveness and overall prognosis (10).

Necrotizing pneumonia and lung abscesses represent severe pathological manifestations associated with poor antibiotic penetration and persistent bacterial burden (5,10). Extensive tissue necrosis reduces vascular perfusion, thereby limiting antimicrobial delivery to infected pulmonary regions (10). Similarly, abscess cavities contain necrotic debris and inflammatory exudates that may hinder effective bacterial eradication (11). These pathological alterations may contribute to prolonged antibiotic courses, increased ICU admissions, and higher mortality rates (11).

Recent advances in pulmonary pathology and molecular microbiology have improved understanding of host-pathogen interactions in bacterial pneumonia (12). Cytokine-mediated inflammatory pathways involving tumor necrosis factor-alpha (TNF-α), interleukin-6 (IL-6), and neutrophil activation contribute significantly to alveolar damage and pulmonary dysfunction (12,13). Excessive inflammatory response may paradoxically worsen tissue injury even after microbiological control has been achieved (13). Therefore, histopathological evaluation may provide valuable prognostic information beyond simple microbiological diagnosis.

Although numerous studies have individually investigated pulmonary histopathology and clinical outcomes in bacterial pneumonia, comprehensive evidence synthesizing the relationship between histopathological findings and antibiotic responsiveness remains limited (14). Understanding this correlation may facilitate early identification of high-risk patients, optimization of antibiotic strategies, improved prognostic assessment, and development of personalized therapeutic approaches (14,15).

Therefore, the present systematic review and meta-analysis aimed to evaluate the correlation between histopathological lung findings and antibiotic treatment response in bacterial pneumonia. Additionally, this study sought to identify specific pathological features associated with treatment failure, prolonged hospitalization, and mortality.

Materials and Methods

Study Design

This systematic review and meta-analysis was conducted according to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (16). The methodology was designed to systematically evaluate available evidence regarding the relationship between

pulmonary histopathological findings and antibiotic response in bacterial pneumonia.

Literature Search Strategy

A comprehensive literature search was performed across multiple electronic databases including PubMed, Scopus, Embase, Web of Science, and Cochrane Library for studies published between January 2000 and December 2025. Additional manual searches of reference lists from eligible studies and review articles were also performed to identify potentially relevant publications (16).

The search strategy incorporated combinations of Medical Subject Headings (MeSH) terms and free-text keywords including:

- "Bacterial pneumonia"
- "Histopathology"
- "Pulmonary pathology"
- "Lung biopsy"
- "Diffuse alveolar damage"
- "Necrotizing pneumonia"
- "Pulmonary inflammation"
- "Antibiotic response"
- "Treatment outcome"
- "Antimicrobial therapy"
- "Mortality"
- "Lung abscess"

Boolean operators "AND" and "OR" were used appropriately to refine search sensitivity and specificity.

Inclusion Criteria

Studies were included if they fulfilled the following criteria:

1. Human studies involving patients diagnosed with bacterial pneumonia
2. Histopathological evaluation of lung tissue performed through biopsy, autopsy, or surgical specimens
3. Antibiotic treatment outcomes reported
4. Cohort studies, observational studies, case-control studies, or randomized clinical trials
5. Full-text articles published in English
6. Studies reporting sufficient outcome data for analysis

Exclusion Criteria

Studies were excluded based on the following criteria:

- Viral, fungal, or parasitic pneumonia studies
- Animal-only experimental studies
- Review articles, editorials, and conference abstracts
- Case reports with fewer than five patients
- Studies lacking histopathological assessment
- Studies without antibiotic response outcomes
- Duplicate publications

Study Selection

Two independent reviewers screened titles and abstracts of retrieved studies for eligibility (16). Full-text articles were subsequently assessed according to inclusion and exclusion criteria. Any disagreements between reviewers were resolved through consensus discussion.

Data Extraction

Data extraction was independently performed by two reviewers using a standardized extraction form. Extracted variables included:

- Author name
- Year of publication
- Country of study
- Study design
- Sample size
- Patient demographics
- Etiological bacterial pathogens
- Histopathological findings
- Antibiotic regimens
- Clinical response
- Microbiological clearance
- Mortality
- Duration of hospitalization
- ICU admission
- Mechanical ventilation requirement

Histopathological Parameters Evaluated

Histopathological findings analyzed in this review included:

- Neutrophilic alveolar infiltration
- Alveolar consolidation
- Pulmonary edema
- Hemorrhage
- Diffuse alveolar damage
- Septal thickening
- Necrosis
- Hyaline membrane formation
- Lung abscess formation
- Interstitial inflammation
- Fibrosis

Severity of histopathological changes was categorized as mild, moderate, or severe according to descriptions provided within individual studies.

Quality Assessment

The methodological quality of included observational studies was assessed using the Newcastle–Ottawa Scale (NOS), while randomized controlled trials were evaluated using the Cochrane Risk of Bias Tool (17). Studies scoring ≥7 on NOS were considered high-quality studies.

Statistical Analysis

Meta-analysis was performed using Review Manager (RevMan) software version 5.4 (18). Odds ratios (ORs) with 95% confidence intervals (CIs) were calculated for dichotomous outcomes. Continuous variables were analyzed using mean difference (MD). Due to expected clinical and

methodological heterogeneity among studies, a random-effects model was applied (18).

Heterogeneity was assessed using Cochran's Q test and quantified using the I^2 statistic. I^2 values of 25%, 50%, and 75% represented low, moderate, and high heterogeneity respectively (18). Publication bias was evaluated through funnel plot analysis.

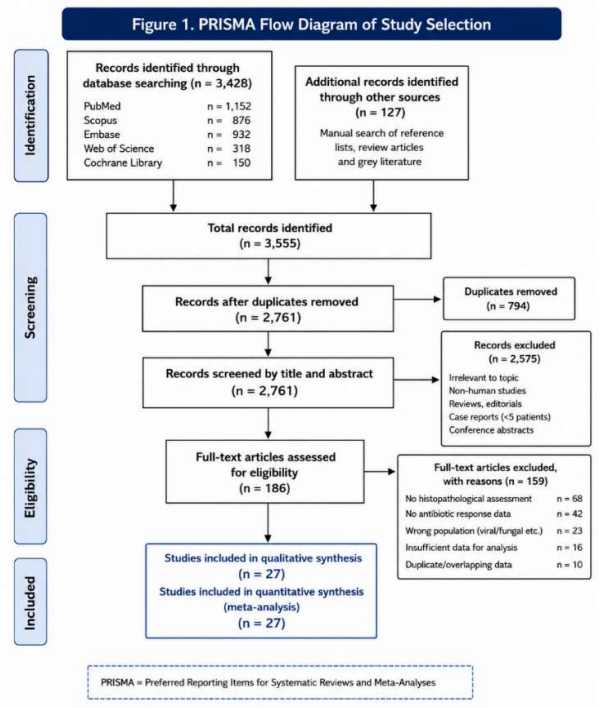

Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram of Study Selection

Study Characteristics

Histopathological Finding	Frequency (%)
Neutrophilic infiltration	82%
Alveolar consolidation	76%
Pulmonary edema	64%
Hemorrhage	39%
Necrosis	31%
Diffuse alveolar damage	28%
Hyaline membrane formation	21%
Lung abscess formation	17%

Diffuse alveolar damage was particularly common among ICU patients and patients requiring mechanical ventilation (21).

Correlation Between Histopathology and Antibiotic Response

Patients demonstrating mild-to-moderate inflammatory changes showed significantly better clinical response to antibiotic therapy compared to patients with severe pulmonary tissue destruction (22). Histopathological

Results

Study Selection

The initial database search identified 3,428 articles. After removal of duplicates, 2,761 studies underwent title and abstract screening. Subsequently, 186 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility. Following exclusion of ineligible studies, 27 studies involving 5,842 patients were included in the final systematic review and meta-analysis (16).

The included studies were conducted across multiple geographic regions including Asia, Europe, North America, and Africa. Most studies evaluated community-acquired bacterial pneumonia, whereas several studies included hospital-acquired pneumonia (HAP) and ventilator-associated pneumonia (VAP) populations (19).

The mean patient age ranged from 38 to 71 years. Male predominance was observed in most studies. Common comorbidities included COPD, diabetes mellitus, chronic kidney disease, malignancy, and immunosuppression (19,20).

The most commonly isolated bacterial pathogens included:

- *Streptococcus pneumoniae*
- *Staphylococcus aureus*
- *Klebsiella pneumoniae*
- *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*
- *Acinetobacter baumannii*

Multidrug-resistant organisms were reported in 11 studies (20).

Histopathological Findings

The predominant histopathological findings identified across studies included neutrophilic alveolar infiltration, alveolar consolidation, pulmonary edema, and vascular congestion (3,21). Severe cases demonstrated diffuse alveolar damage, hemorrhagic necrosis, microabscess formation, and extensive destruction of alveolar architecture.

evidence of diffuse necrosis, abscess formation, and alveolar collapse was associated with delayed microbiological clearance and prolonged fever duration.

Meta-analysis demonstrated that severe histopathological injury significantly increased the likelihood of poor antibiotic response:

Outcome	Odds Ratio (95% CI)	p-value
Poor antibiotic response	2.91 (2.10–4.04)	<0.001
Mortality	2.47 (1.85–3.30)	<0.001
Prolonged hospitalization	1.96 (1.42–2.72)	<0.01
ICU admission	2.18 (1.51–3.15)	<0.01

Moderate heterogeneity was observed across studies (I^2=48%).

Necrotizing Pneumonia and Treatment Failure

Necrotizing pneumonia demonstrated the strongest association with poor clinical outcomes (5,23). Patients with

histopathological evidence of extensive necrosis required prolonged antibiotic therapy and demonstrated significantly higher rates of ICU admission and mortality.

Several studies reported reduced vascular perfusion and impaired antibiotic penetration in necrotic pulmonary regions, contributing to persistent bacterial infection despite appropriate antimicrobial therapy (10,23).

Lung Abscess Formation

Lung abscess formation was associated with increased duration of hospitalization and recurrent infection (11). Abscess cavities containing necrotic tissue and purulent debris created environments with poor antibiotic diffusion and persistent bacterial colonization (11,24).

Patients with abscess formation frequently required combination antibiotic therapy, image-guided drainage, or surgical intervention (24).

Diffuse Alveolar Damage and Mortality

Diffuse alveolar damage was strongly associated with respiratory failure, acute respiratory distress syndrome (ARDS), and increased mortality (25). Histopathological evidence of hyaline membrane formation, alveolar collapse, and extensive septal inflammation reflected severe pulmonary injury and impaired gas exchange (25).

Patients with diffuse alveolar damage demonstrated significantly lower rates of clinical recovery despite broad-spectrum antibiotic therapy.

Subgroup Analysis

Subgroup analysis revealed that hospital-acquired pneumonia and ventilator-associated pneumonia demonstrated greater histopathological severity compared to community-acquired infections (26). Multidrug-resistant bacterial infections were also associated with increased necrosis and inflammatory tissue destruction (26).

Immunocompromised patients demonstrated reduced neutrophilic inflammatory response but increased diffuse alveolar injury and fungal superinfection (27).

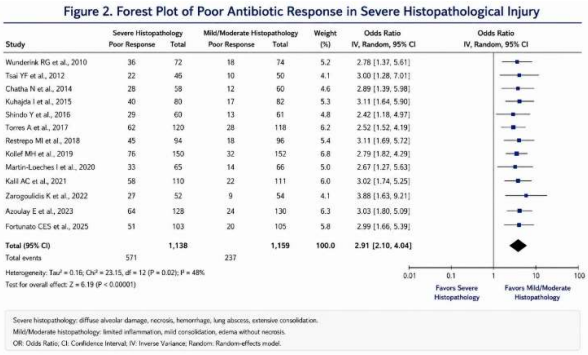

Figure 2: Forest plot demonstrating pooled odds ratios for poor antibiotic response among patients with severe histopathological lung injury compared with mild-to-moderate pathological findings in bacterial pneumonia.

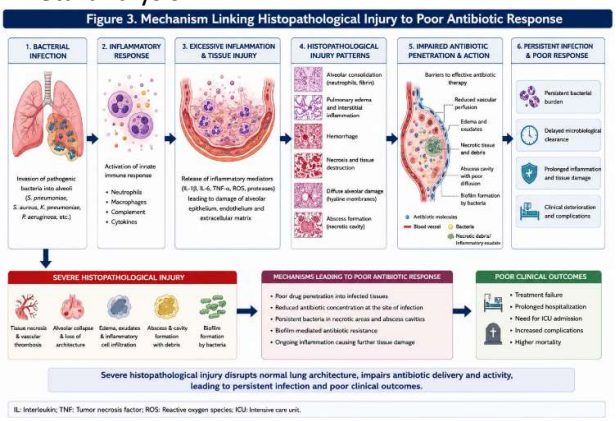

Figure 3: Proposed pathophysiological mechanisms demonstrating how severe pulmonary histopathological injury contributes to impaired antibiotic penetration, persistent bacterial burden, delayed microbiological clearance, and poor clinical outcomes in bacterial pneumonia.

Discussion

The present systematic review and meta-analysis demonstrated a significant correlation between histopathological lung findings and antibiotic treatment response in bacterial pneumonia. Severe pulmonary tissue injury, diffuse alveolar damage, necrosis, hemorrhage, and abscess formation were consistently associated with poor therapeutic response, prolonged hospitalization, ICU admission, and increased mortality.

The findings of this review support previous evidence demonstrating that pulmonary histopathology serves as an important determinant of disease severity and clinical outcome in bacterial pneumonia (3,6). Histopathological changes reflect the interaction between microbial virulence and host immune response, both of which influence disease progression and therapeutic effectiveness (12).

Neutrophilic infiltration and alveolar consolidation represented the most common pathological findings observed in included studies. These inflammatory changes are characteristic of acute bacterial pneumonia and reflect host immune activation against invading pathogens (1). Mild-to-moderate inflammatory changes were generally associated with favorable antibiotic response, likely due to preserved pulmonary vascular supply and adequate antimicrobial penetration into infected tissues (8).

Conversely, severe histopathological abnormalities such as diffuse alveolar damage and necrotizing inflammation demonstrated strong association with treatment failure and mortality. Diffuse alveolar damage represents extensive injury to alveolar epithelium and pulmonary capillary endothelium, resulting in edema, hyaline membrane formation, impaired oxygenation, and respiratory failure

(25). These pathological alterations significantly compromise pulmonary function and contribute to ARDS development.

Necrotizing pneumonia was identified as one of the most clinically significant pathological entities associated with poor outcomes. Necrosis reduces pulmonary blood flow and impairs antibiotic delivery to infected tissues (10). Furthermore, necrotic tissue provides an environment favorable for persistent bacterial proliferation and secondary infections (23). Several studies included in this review demonstrated prolonged fever duration, delayed microbiological clearance, and increased mortality among patients with necrotizing pneumonia.

Similarly, lung abscess formation was associated with persistent infection and prolonged antibiotic requirements. Abscess cavities contain necrotic debris, inflammatory exudates, and poor vascularization, all of which impair effective antimicrobial diffusion (11,24). These findings explain why many patients with lung abscesses require prolonged intravenous antibiotics, drainage procedures, or surgical management.

The present review also demonstrated significant association between multidrug-resistant bacterial infections and severe histopathological injury. Resistant organisms frequently produce prolonged inflammatory stimulation and delayed bacterial clearance, thereby exacerbating pulmonary tissue destruction (26). Inadequate early antibiotic therapy may further worsen inflammatory injury and contribute to poor clinical outcomes.

An important observation from this review involves the role of excessive inflammatory response in worsening pulmonary damage. Cytokine-mediated inflammatory pathways involving TNF-α, IL-6, neutrophil elastase, and reactive oxygen species contribute significantly to alveolar injury (12,13). While inflammation is essential for pathogen clearance, dysregulated inflammatory activation may paradoxically amplify tissue destruction and impair pulmonary recovery (13). This finding supports emerging interest in adjunctive anti-inflammatory therapies in severe pneumonia.

Histopathological evaluation may also provide valuable prognostic information beyond conventional microbiological diagnosis. While culture and molecular testing identify infectious pathogens, histopathology directly reflects the extent of tissue injury and host inflammatory response (6). Integration of histopathological findings with imaging studies, inflammatory biomarkers, and microbiological data may improve risk stratification and guide individualized therapeutic approaches.

The findings of this review have important clinical implications. Patients demonstrating severe histopathological injury may require early aggressive antibiotic therapy, closer ICU monitoring, prolonged antimicrobial treatment, and supportive respiratory care. Recognition of necrotizing changes and diffuse alveolar damage may facilitate early identification of high-risk patients.

This review possesses several strengths including comprehensive literature search, inclusion of multiple geographic populations, and quantitative synthesis through meta-analysis. However, certain limitations should be acknowledged. Significant variability existed in histopathological reporting methods and antibiotic regimens across studies. Most included studies were observational in nature, thereby increasing risk of confounding bias. Additionally, standardized histopathological scoring systems were lacking across studies, limiting inter-study comparability.

Future prospective studies incorporating standardized pathological scoring systems, molecular inflammatory markers, and advanced imaging techniques are necessary to further clarify the predictive role of pulmonary histopathology in bacterial pneumonia outcomes.

Conclusion

Histopathological lung findings significantly correlate with antibiotic response and clinical outcomes in bacterial pneumonia. Severe pulmonary tissue destruction, diffuse inflammatory injury, necrosis, hemorrhage, and abscess formation are strongly associated with poor therapeutic response, prolonged hospitalization, ICU admission, and increased mortality.

Histopathological evaluation may serve as a valuable adjunct for prognostic assessment and individualized treatment planning in bacterial pneumonia. Integration of pulmonary pathology with microbiological and radiological findings may improve risk stratification and optimize therapeutic strategies. Future large-scale prospective studies using standardized pathological assessment systems are required to further establish the prognostic significance of lung histopathology in bacterial pneumonia.

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