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Bacterial Pathogenicity and Virulence in Plants: Molecular Strategies of Infection and the Emerging Role of EPS

*Aruna Dhakad[1] and Anjana Patel[2]
[1]Department of Plant Pathology, N.M. College of Agriculture, Navsari Agricultural University, Navsari, Gujarat, India
[2]Department of Entomology, N.M. College of Agriculture, Navsari Agricultural University, Navsari, Gujarat, India
*Corresponding Author's email: arunadhakad088@gmail.com

Plant-pathogenic bacteria cause disease through a coordinated sequence of recognition, attachment, entry, colonization, immune suppression, tissue damage and symptom development. Their success depends on a versatile arsenal of virulence factors, including adhesins, secretion systems, effector proteins, phytotoxins, cell-wall-degrading enzymes (CWDEs), exopolysaccharides (EPS), siderophores and regulatory systems. Type III secretion systems deliver effectors that manipulate plant signalling and immunity, whereas CWDEs weaken the structural barrier of the plant cell wall. EPS provides a protective extracellular matrix that supports attachment, biofilm formation, stress tolerance and colonization and may contribute to vascular blockage in some diseases. EPS production is regulated by quorum sensing, c-di-GMP signalling and two-component systems. Understanding these interconnected processes is central to explaining bacterial disease development and to identifying opportunities for sustainable disease management and useful EPS-based biotechnology

Keywords: plant pathogenic bacteria; virulence; pathogenesis; Type III secretion system; CWDEs; EPS; biofilm; c-di-GMP

From Pathogenicity to Virulence

Bacterial disease in plants is not the result of a single bacterial activity. It is the outcome of a dynamic interaction in which the pathogen recognizes a suitable host, reaches an appropriate entry site, survives plant defenses, multiplies in host tissues and produces factors that alter plant structure and physiology. In simple terms, pathogenicity describes the ability of a bacterium to cause disease, whereas virulence describes the degree or effectiveness with which disease and damage are produced. The distinction is important because two bacteria may both be pathogenic but differ in their capacity to colonize tissue, suppress immunity or produce severe symptoms. Virulence is therefore a multifactorial property. Adhesins, pili and fimbriae promote attachment; secretion systems deliver proteins and effectors; toxins alter cellular processes; CWDEs dismantle plant cell-wall components; and EPS helps build a protective matrix around bacterial populations.

The Infection Process: A Coordinated Chain of Events

Successful pathogenesis can be viewed as a sequence rather than a single event. The process generally begins with host recognition and surface survival, followed by attachment and movement toward entry sites. Bacteria may enter through natural openings such as stomata, hydathodes, lenticels and nectaries, through wounds caused by insects, hail, pruning or farm operations, or through roots. Once inside the plant, bacteria colonize suitable tissues and activate virulence functions according to local host and environmental signals.

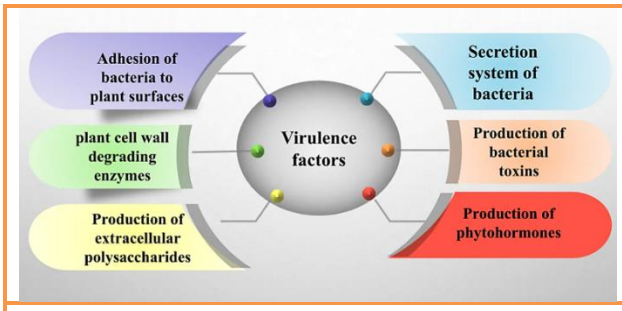

Figure 1. Major virulence factors highlighted in the presentation and their contribution to bacterial infection.

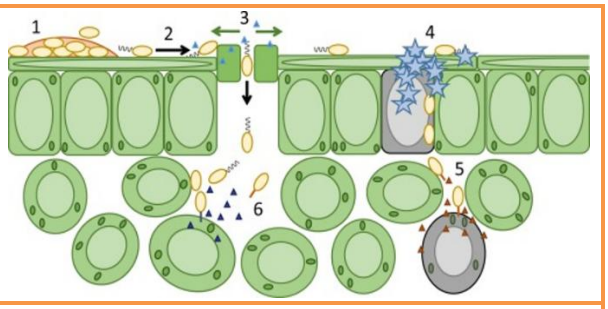

Figure 2. Schematic sequence of bacterial establishment and disease development in plant tissues, adapted from the supplied presentation.

At the molecular level, the sequence can be summarized as: host recognition → attachment → entry → colonization → virulence-factor production → suppression of plant immunity → tissue damage → disease symptoms. These stages are interconnected. Stable attachment supports colonization, EPS creates a protective community, secretion systems deliver effectors, and extracellular enzymes or toxins modify the host environment so that bacterial growth can continue.

Molecular Warfare: Effectors and Plant Immunity

Plants possess sophisticated surveillance systems that recognize invading microbes. Conserved microbial features can be detected by pattern-recognition receptors, activating pattern-triggered immunity (PTI). Pathogenic bacteria counter this basal defense using specialized secretion systems, particularly the Type III secretion system (T3SS), which functions as a molecular delivery apparatus for bacterial effector proteins.Once delivered into plant cells, effectors can interfere with mitogen-activated protein kinase (MAPK) signalling, hormone signalling, protein turnover, gene expression, reactive oxygen species (ROS) production and other immune processes. If a plant resistance receptor recognizes a particular effector or its activity, effector-triggered immunity (ETI) can be activated, producing a strong localized response that restricts pathogen spread. Disease outcome therefore reflects a continuous molecular contest between bacterial effectors and plant immune receptors.

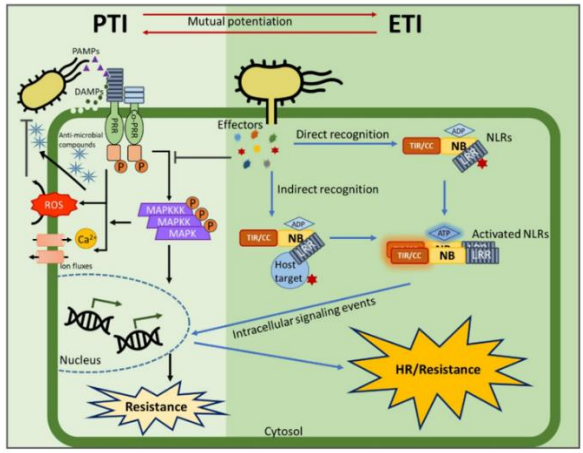

Figure 3. PTI–ETI framework showing the interaction between bacterial effectors and plant immune responses.

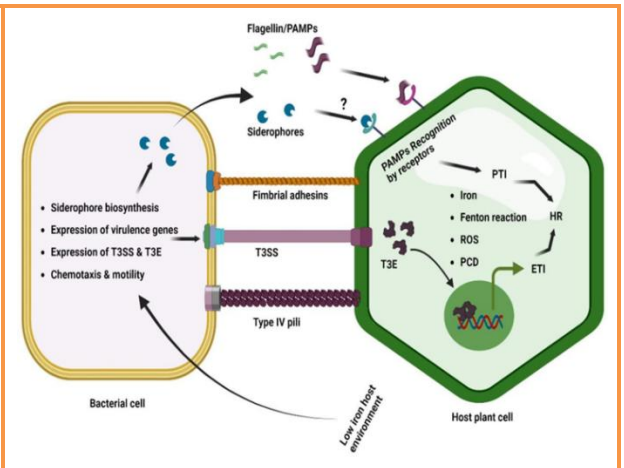

Figure 4. Type III secretion and effector-mediated manipulation of plant cellular processes, as represented in the presentation.

Type III Secretion: Delivering Virulence Where It Matters

Among bacterial secretion systems, T3SS is particularly important in several plant pathogens, including Pseudomonas, Xanthomonas and Ralstonia. The system forms a multi-protein channel through which effectors are delivered directly into host cells. Its importance lies in the precise targeting of bacterial molecules to host cellular machinery. By modifying signalling and defense pathways, effectors can create conditions that favor bacterial survival and multiplication.

Cell-Wall-Degrading Enzymes: Opening the Plant Barrier

The plant cell wall is a major physical barrier and is composed principally of cellulose, hemicellulose and pectin, with lignin contributing strongly to secondary walls. Plant-pathogenic bacteria produce extracellular cell-wall-degrading enzymes (CWDEs) that modify these polymers. Major groups include pectate lyases, polygalacturonases and pectin methylesterases; cellulases; xylanases and other hemicellulases; and β-glucosidases. Some pathogens also produce proteases and esterases.

Enzyme	Main substrate	Major effect during infection
Pectate lyase	Pectin/pectate	Middle-lamella degradation and tissue maceration
Polygalacturonase	Polygalacturonic acid	Hydrolysis of pectin backbone
Pectin methylesterase	Methyl-esterified pectin	De-esterification, facilitating further degradation
Cellulase	Cellulose	Weakens the cellulose framework
Xylanase	Xylan/hemicellulose	Breaks down hemicellulose

Collectively, CWDEs weaken the cell wall, facilitate bacterial movement and contribute to tissue maceration. In soft-rotting diseases, extensive degradation can transform firm plant tissue into a soft mass. At the same time, breakdown of complex plant polymers can contribute to the availability of simpler compounds that support bacterial growth.

EPS: The Protective Matrix Behind Colonization

Exopolysaccharides (EPS) are high-molecular-weight carbohydrate polymers released outside bacterial cells. In plant-associated bacteria, EPS is a major component of the extracellular matrix. It can help cells attach to plant surfaces, form biofilms, withstand environmental stress and maintain a favorable microenvironment. Examples highlighted in the presentation include xanthan produced by Xanthomonas, alginate associated with Pseudomonas and acidic EPS of Ralstonia solanacearum. EPS is also relevant to disease expression. A dense extracellular matrix can influence water movement and, in vascular pathogens, contribute to blockage of vascular tissues and wilting. Because EPS promotes stable surface-associated communities, it links early attachment with long-term colonization. EPS is therefore more than a simple slime layer: it is a functional component of bacterial survival and virulence.

How Bacteria Build and Control EPS

EPS biosynthesis begins with carbon substrates and the formation of activated sugar precursors such as UDP-glucose. Activated sugars are assembled into repeating units by glycosyltransferases, and the resulting polymer is exported to the bacterial surface through pathways that may involve Wzx/Wzy-dependent transport, ABC transporter-dependent systems or synthase-dependent mechanisms. Once outside the cell, the polymer becomes part of the extracellular matrix. Importantly, bacteria do not produce EPS at a constant rate. Production responds to environmental conditions, nutrient status and population density. Quorum sensing allows cells to coordinate gene expression when a sufficient population has accumulated. c-di-GMP acts as a central second messenger that commonly promotes the transition from a motile, free-living state toward surface attachment and biofilm formation. Two-component regulatory systems add another layer of control: a sensor kinase detects environmental changes and a response regulator alters gene expression, including genes involved in EPS synthesis, motility and stress responses.

Surviving the Plant's Chemical and Nutritional Defenses

Inside plant tissues, bacteria encounter oxidative stress generated during the plant oxidative burst. Reactive oxygen species such as hydrogen peroxide and superoxide can restrict invading microbes. Bacteria can respond with antioxidant defenses, including catalase, peroxidases and superoxide dismutase, helping them tolerate this hostile environment.

Iron availability is another challenge. Because free iron is limited in plant tissues, bacteria produce siderophores—high-affinity molecules that bind ferric iron and facilitate its uptake. Efficient iron acquisition supports bacterial growth and survival and can therefore contribute to disease development.

Quorum Sensing and c-di-GMP: Coordinating the Bacterial Community

A pathogenic bacterium does not always behave as an isolated cell. Through quorum sensing, bacterial populations release and detect chemical signals and adjust gene expression when signal concentrations reach a threshold. This collective regulation can influence EPS production, biofilm formation, motility, toxin production and extracellular enzyme secretion. Quorum quenching, in contrast, aims to disrupt bacterial communication. The importance of these regulatory systems is that they connect environmental information to virulence. A bacterium can sense when conditions favor attachment or when the population is sufficiently dense to invest in a communal extracellular matrix. Such regulation helps explain how bacteria switch between different lifestyles during infection.

Host × Pathogen × Environment: The Final Outcome

Disease development depends on the interaction of three major components: host, pathogen and environment. Host genotype, resistance genes, plant age, nutritional status and physiological condition influence susceptibility. Pathogen virulence genes, effectors, toxins, secretion systems, enzymes and population density determine the pathogen's capacity to exploit the host. Temperature, humidity, rainfall, soil moisture and nutrient availability can strongly modify the outcome. This framework is important for practical disease management. Interventions that disturb attachment, biofilm formation, secretion, CWDE activity or bacterial communication may reduce disease without relying only on direct killing of bacterial cells. A mechanistic understanding of virulence can therefore support more precise and sustainable disease-management strategies.

EPS Beyond Pathogenicity: A Biotechnological Opportunity

The same physicochemical properties that make EPS useful to bacterial pathogens can also make microbial EPS valuable in agriculture, food technology and biomedical applications. EPS can improve soil aggregation and stability, influence soil organic carbon and nutrient-related properties, and support beneficial plant–microbe interactions. Some EPS can also help protect plants against stress and may contribute to induced resistance.

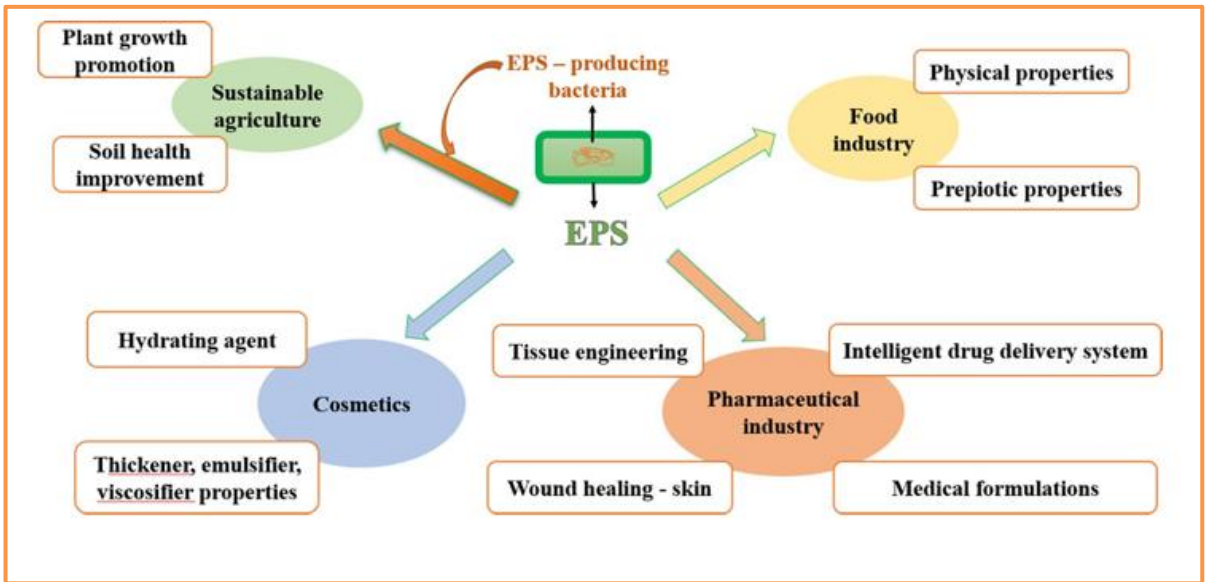

Figure 5. Selected agricultural, food, pharmaceutical and biomedical applications of bacterial EPS shown in the presentation.

Commercially relevant EPS such as xanthan, curdlan and alginate are valued for thickening, gelling, stabilization and emulsification. Other possibilities include drug delivery, wound

dressings, slow-release systems and tissue-related applications. Thus, EPS represents an interesting dual-purpose biological resource: it is a virulence-associated matrix in plant pathogens, yet it can also be a useful biomaterial when produced and characterized for beneficial applications.

Conclusion

Bacterial pathogenicity in plants is best understood as a coordinated molecular and cellular process. Recognition, attachment, entry, colonization and immune suppression are connected by a flexible network of virulence factors. T3SS effectors manipulate plant signalling; CWDEs weaken structural barriers; toxins alter plant physiology; siderophores help overcome iron limitation; and EPS supports adhesion, biofilm formation, stress tolerance and colonization. Regulatory systems such as quorum sensing, c-di-GMP and two-component systems ensure that these activities are deployed at appropriate times and places. The central message is that bacterial disease is a product of interaction rather than a single virulence factor. Future plant-health strategies can therefore benefit from targeting the coordination of bacterial behaviors—including communication, attachment, secretion and matrix formation—while also considering host resistance and environmental conditions. Such an integrated view can improve understanding of bacterial diseases and open new opportunities for sustainable disease management and EPS-based biotechnology.

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