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Mass Spectrometry in the Genomics Era: Expanding Newborn Screening through Metabolomic Innovation

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Abstract: ***Inborn Errors of Metabolism (IEMs) are a diverse group of inherited disorders caused by genetic mutations that disrupt enzyme activities or cofactor availability in metabolic pathways, leading to abnormal metabolite accumulation or deficiency. Early and precise diagnosis is crucial to improving long-term outcomes. Yet, current newborn screening programs rely mainly on targeted assays detecting limited sets of metabolites, resulting in possible false negatives or positives. Widening the scope of newborn screening via untargeted metabolomics offers a promising direction, as this approach can identify a diverse array of metabolites across numerous metabolic pathways in a single analysis. Liquid Chromatography–Mass Spectrometry (LC-MS) and Gas Chromatography–Mass Spectrometry (GC-MS) are important parts of both targeted and untargeted strategies. LC-MS is great for measuring acylcarnitines and amino acids, while GC-MS is great for giving detailed profiles of organic acids. Together, these technologies form the foundation of contemporary IEM diagnostics. This review examines their technological advancements, clinical applications, and future potential, particularly in the context of integrating untargeted metabolomics into newborn screening programs, to enhance diagnostic precision, broaden the range of detectable conditions, and drive progress in personalized medicine.***

Keywords: Inborn Errors of Metabolism (IEM); LC-MS; GC-MS; newborn screening; untargeted metabolomics; acylcarnitines; organic acids; tandem mass spectrometry

1. Introduction

Inborn errors of metabolism are a group of genetic disorders caused by defects in metabolic pathways, often resulting in the accumulation or deficiency of specific metabolites [1]. The disease specifically encompasses fatty-oxidation disorders, amino acid metabolism disorders, and organic acid metabolism disorders [2]. Early detection is critical, as timely intervention can prevent severe damage complications, irreversible damage, or death [3]. With the availability of new biochemical phenotype techniques, more and more IEMs can be identified [4]. Traditional diagnostic methods for IEM were time-consuming and lacked sensitivity, but the advent of advanced analytical technologies has revolutionized clinical screening [5]. IEMs can appear across all age groups, but most commonly at an early age in life. Clinical manifestations varied widely, ranging from milder symptoms to severe and life-threatening conditions [6]. Early clinical signs, including feeding difficulties, seizures, and lethargy, frequently presented atypically, complicating diagnosis in the initial phases and leading to disability, deformity, and even mortality [7]. The same disease often showed a lot of phenotypic variability because everyone is different, and different diseases also showed similar phenotypes, which made it hard to tell what was wrong. Given that pre-symptomatic diagnosis [8] is essential for prompt intervention, particularly for treatable inborn errors of metabolism (IEMs), early screening and diagnosis have emerged as critical strategies for decreasing mortality and morbidity rates in children with IEMs [9].

Liquid chromatography- mass spectrometry and gas chromatography- mass spectrometry are the most universal techniques for the detection of IEMs. These technologies are now integral to expanded newborn screening programs, enabling the simultaneous detection of multiple IEMs [10] from a single dried blood spot. Their precision, speed, and scalability have transformed clinical workflows and improved outcomes for affected individuals. This review examines the historical development, analytical principles, clinical applications, and future directions of LC-MS and GC-MS in the screening of IEM. Liquid Chromatography–Tandem Mass Spectrometry (LC-MS/MS) was first introduced into newborn screening in 1990. Today, it is widely used to detect organic acid, amino acid, and fatty acid metabolic disorders by measuring various amino acids and acylcarnitines in dried blood spots (DBS)[11]. Its popularity stems from its straightforward operation, high throughput, and rapid turnaround time. However, not all Inborn Errors of Metabolism (IEMs) present with clear biochemical markers in the blood, especially in the early stages, meaning LC-MS/MS alone cannot always provide a definitive diagnosis.

Gas Chromatography–Tandem Mass Spectrometry (GC-MS/MS), first applied in 1966 to diagnose isovaleric acidemia, serves as an important complementary technique. GC-MS/MS focuses on profiling dozens of organic acids in urine, offering critical diagnostic clues and helping to differentiate between various IEMs.

Over the years, MS/MS has become a cornerstone in IEM diagnostics for high-risk infants and children in the United States, most European nations, across Asia, and in several Arab countries. In China, both LC-MS/MS and GC-MS/MS were incorporated into newborn screening and metabolic disorder diagnosis in the early 2000s, reflecting the worldwide recognition of mass spectrometry technologies as indispensable tools in the fight against IEMs. These technologies are now integral to expanded newborn screening programs, enabling the simultaneous detection of multiple

IEMs from a single dried blood spot. Their precision, speed, and scalability have transformed clinical workflows and improved outcomes for affected individuals. This review examines the historical development, analytical principles, clinical applications, and future directions of LC-MS and GC-MS in the screening of IEM.

Historical Development and Significant Milestones of LC-MS and GC-MS

Liquid Chromatography-Mass Spectrometry (LC-MS) and **Gas Chromatography-Mass Spectrometry (GC-MS)** have evolved remarkably since their inception, with significant advancements that have expanded their applications and enhanced their capabilities.

During the 1960s and 1970s, Liquid Chromatography (LC) became an important technique for separating complex biological mixtures [12]. However, integrating it with Mass Spectrometry (MS) proved challenging due to the incompatibility [13] between liquid and gas phases.

By the 1980s, the development of Electrospray Ionization (ESI) and Atmospheric Pressure Chemical Ionization (APCI) transformed LC-MS technology. These innovations made it possible to efficiently ionize polar metabolites such as amino acids and acylcarnitines—crucial biomarkers used in the detection of Inborn Errors of Metabolism (IEMs) [14].

In the 1990s and 2000s, advancements in high-performance liquid chromatography (HPLC) and tandem mass spectrometry (MS/MS) revolutionized newborn screening [15]. These techniques allowed simultaneous analysis of multiple metabolites from dried blood spots (DBS), laying the foundation for today's expanded screening programs.

In recent years, hybrid systems such as Quadrupole Time-of-Flight (Q-TOF) and Q-Trap instruments have further improved resolution and sensitivity. These next-generation platforms now enable more accurate detection of rare metabolic disorders [16], marking a significant step forward in precision diagnostics.

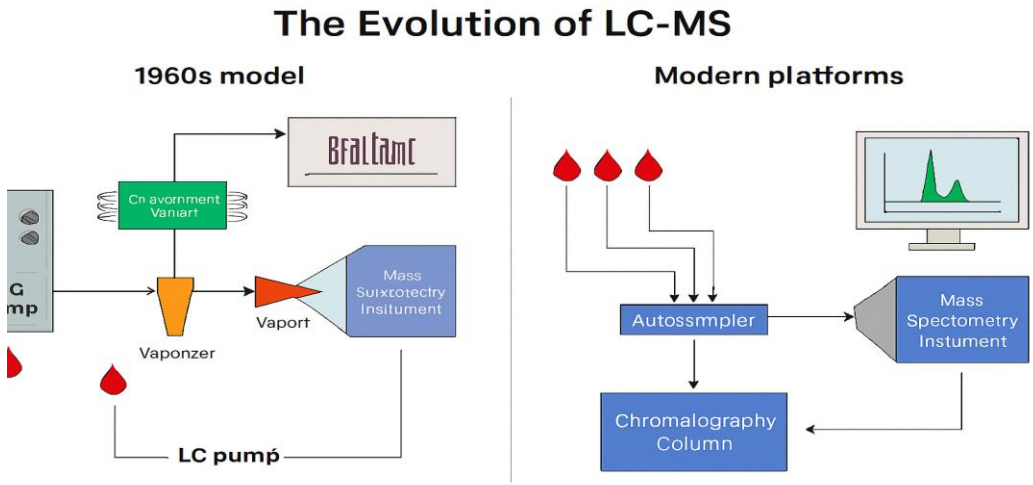

Figure 1: Evolution of LC-MS Over Time

Historical Development of GC-MS

In the 1950s and 1960s, Gas Chromatography (GC) emerged as a powerful method for separating volatile compounds. When scientists began coupling GC with Mass Spectrometry (MS) [17], it became possible to accurately identify organic acids—an essential step in diagnosing organic acidurias [18].

During the 1970s and 1980s, the development of Electron Ionization (EI) and Chemical Ionization (CI) techniques significantly enhanced the performance of GC-MS, making the detection of urinary metabolites more reliable and precise.

By the 1990s, the integration of GC-MS with computer systems brought automation to data acquisition and analysis, streamlining processes in clinical laboratories and improving diagnostic efficiency.

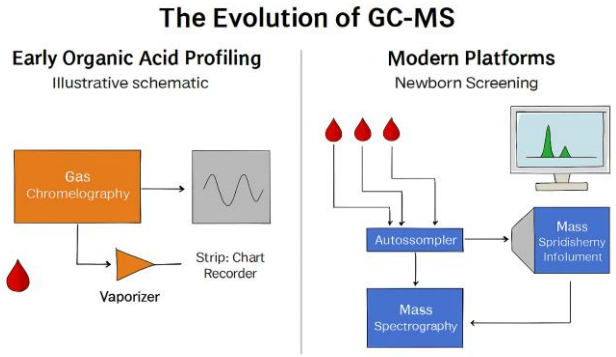

Figure 2: Evolution of GC-MS Over Time

From the 2000s to the present, GC-MS has remained the gold standard for profiling organic acids in urine. Its unmatched accuracy continues to play a vital role in diagnosing metabolic disorders such as methylmalonic acidemia and propionic acidemia.

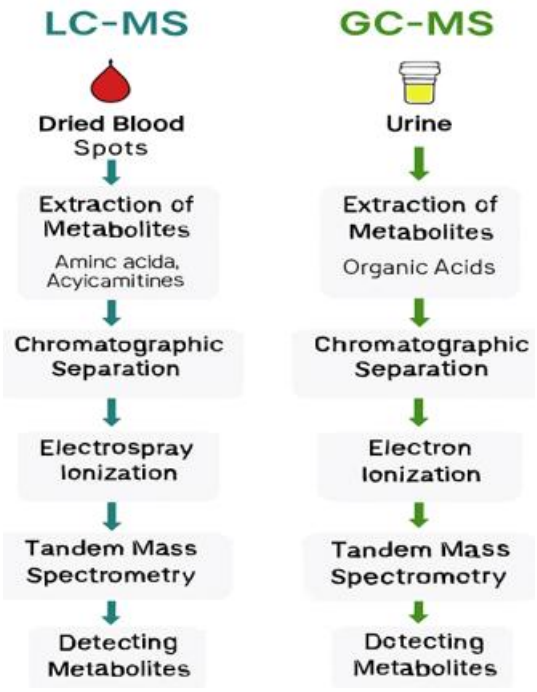

Figure 3: The analytical workflows for LC-MS and GC-MS in screening Inborn Errors of Metabolism (IEM) differ yet complement each other. LC-MS is primarily utilized to analyze amino acids and acylcarnitines from dried blood spots, whereas GC-MS is focused on profiling organic acids in urine samples [19]. Both methods follow a similar process that includes sample preparation, chromatographic separation, ionization, tandem mass spectrometry, and metabolite detection. Together, these workflows form the foundation of expanded newborn screening programs [20].

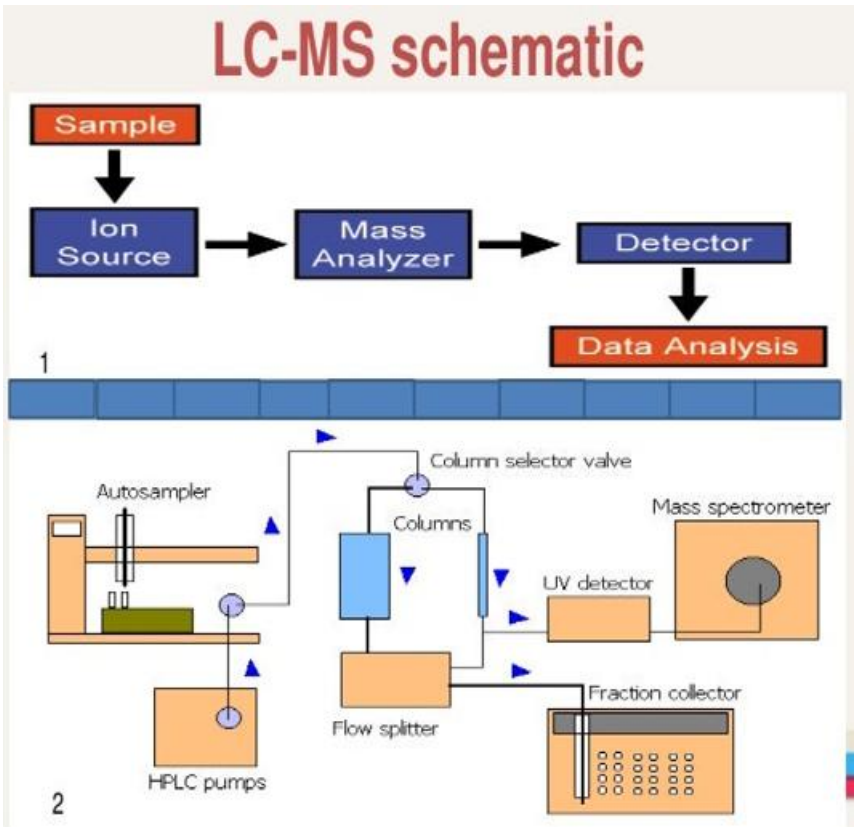

Figure 4: Schematic representation of LC-MS

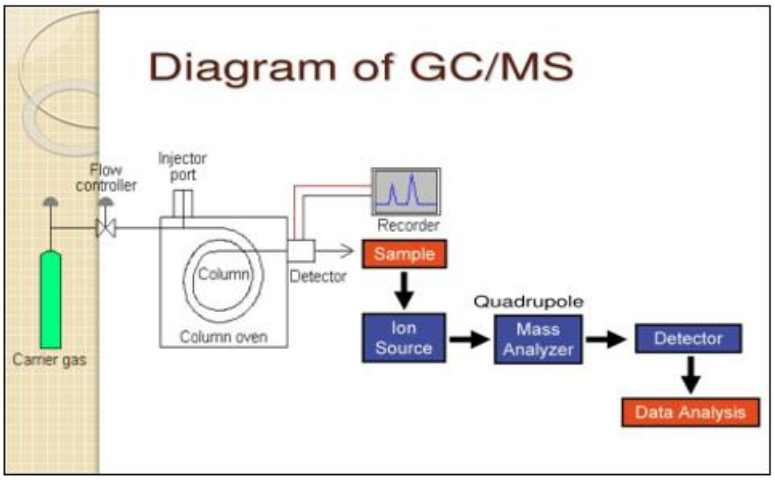

Figure 5: Schematic representation of GC-MS

New Developments in Sample Preparation Techniques

Recent advancements in sample preparation techniques aim to improve sensitivity and accuracy. Techniques such as solid-phase extraction (SPE), liquid-liquid extraction (LLE), and microextraction methods have enhanced the efficiency of isolating analytes from complex matrices [21]. These developments help achieve better detection limits and more reliable results.

Advances in untargeted metabolomics

Untargeted metabolomics takes a much broader approach than traditional targeted testing by attempting to measure all the metabolites detectable in a sample, even those that haven't been identified yet. This method is widely used today to better understand disease mechanisms and to discover new biomarkers across a variety of conditions [22]. Its roots can be traced back to the use of gas chromatography-mass spectrometry (GC-MS) in the 1970s for analyzing urinary organic acids, which has long been a key tool for diagnosing certain metabolic disorders like organic acidurias [23].

When preparing samples for untargeted metabolomics, the goal is to capture the widest range of metabolites possible without bias toward any specific group, while also removing proteins and other large molecules that could interfere. Techniques like liquid-liquid extraction or solid-phase extraction are commonly used, followed by separation through liquid or gas chromatography. Careful recording of retention times and detailed mass spectrometry data are essential for verifying metabolite identities [21].

High-resolution mass spectrometers like Quadrupole Time-of-Flight (QTOF) and Orbitrap systems offer the best sensitivity and accuracy for untargeted analysis [24], providing detailed snapshots of the metabolome. While triple quadrupole instruments excel in targeted screening by quantifying specific metabolites, they aren't as effective for discovering unknown or novel biomarkers because they lack full-scan and high-resolution capabilities.

Because untargeted metabolomics generates large, complex datasets with both known and unknown metabolites, careful statistical analysis is crucial to distinguish meaningful signals from background noise. Advanced data analysis techniques, including multivariate statistics, are used to link key metabolites to disease processes, diagnosis, and potential treatments. However, findings from these studies always need to be validated independently before being applied clinically [22].

Many studies have already shown the value of untargeted metabolomics in identifying metabolic differences associated with health and disease. In newborn screening, untargeted approaches have the potential to dramatically increase the number of detectable IEMs and reduce missed diagnoses [24]. For example, high-resolution mass spectrometry of dried blood spots has clearly distinguished multiple IEMs from control samples, setting the stage for broader validation. Another study uncovered new biomarkers and disrupted pathways in over 20 different IEMs [25] by analyzing plasma samples with both targeted and untargeted methods.

Untargeted metabolomics not only expands the range of metabolites linked to IEMs but also uncovers previously unknown compounds that may serve as valuable biomarkers. In phenylketonuria patients, for instance, it led to the discovery of two novel metabolites that varied significantly among individuals and did not correlate with the traditionally measured phenylalanine levels. This suggests new possible disease mechanisms that deserve further exploration. Similarly, in disorders like methylmalonic acidemia and propionic acidemia, untargeted analyses found known biomarkers alongside novel metabolites like γ-butyrobetaine, offering fresh insights into disease differences and potential diagnostic markers [25].

Overall, the advancements in untargeted metabolomics signal a promising future for expanding and improving IEM screening by capturing a more complete metabolic picture and discovering new markers that could lead to better diagnosis and treatment.

Current Challenges in IEM Screening

Current screening for Inborn Errors of Metabolism (IEM) faces several challenges. Many existing methods rely on targeted testing, which looks for a limited set of known metabolites. While effective for common conditions, this approach can miss rarer or less well-understood disorders, leading to false negatives [20]. Additionally, some IEMs don't have clear biochemical markers in easily accessible samples like blood, especially in the early stages of the disease, making early diagnosis difficult. False positives also pose a

problem, potentially causing unnecessary worry and follow-up tests for families [21]. These challenges highlight the need for broader, more sensitive screening methods that can catch a wider range of metabolic conditions earlier and with greater accuracy.

2. Clinical Impact and Future Directions

The clinical impact of advanced metabolomics in screening and diagnosing Inborn Errors of Metabolism (IEM) is already becoming evident. By moving beyond traditional targeted testing, untargeted metabolomics offers a more comprehensive view of a patient's metabolic profile. This not only improves the chances of accurately identifying rare or complex disorders early on but also provides deeper insights into disease mechanisms that can guide personalized treatment strategies [22]. Early and precise diagnosis is critical for timely intervention, which can dramatically improve outcomes for affected individuals.

Looking ahead, the future of IEM screening lies in integrating these cutting-edge metabolomics technologies into routine newborn screening programs worldwide. As tools like high-resolution LC-MS and GC-MS become more accessible and cost-effective, they have the potential to broaden the range of detectable metabolic conditions while reducing false positives and negatives. In addition, the growing ability to analyze large datasets with sophisticated bioinformatics will help uncover new biomarkers and therapeutic targets.

However, challenges remain, including the need for standardized protocols, large-scale validation studies, and improved data interpretation frameworks. Collaboration across clinical, research, and technology fields will be essential to overcome these hurdles and fully realize the potential of metabolomics in personalized medicine [25]. Ultimately, combining traditional methods with untargeted approaches promises a more accurate, inclusive, and effective screening landscape that can better serve patients and families affected by IEMs.

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Author Profile

Sailusha Katam completed her Master's in Human Genetics, gaining hands-on experience in molecular biology techniques, karyotyping, genetic counseling, and neonatal screening. With a strong interest in the genetic basis of inherited disorders, she aims to pursue a PhD abroad to access advanced research facilities and expand her expertise. Sailusha is motivated to contribute to translational genetics research, focusing on developing novel diagnostic and therapeutic approaches for metabolic and genetic diseases. She is eager to collaborate in interdisciplinary research environments and make meaningful contributions to human genetics through innovative and impactful research.