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Plasma-Activated Water (PAW) for Sterilization: Examining the Antimicrobial Properties for Food Safety and Healthcare

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Abstract: ***Plasma-activated water (PAW), produced by treating water with cold atmospheric plasma (CAP), is emerging as a promising antimicrobial agent. Rich in reactive oxygen and nitrogen species (RONS), PAW demonstrates significant bactericidal and fungicidal effects without toxic residues. This study investigates the effectiveness of PAW against a spectrum of microorganisms, including foodborne pathogens (E. coli, Salmonella enterica) and healthcare-associated microbes (S. aureus, MRSA, Candida albicans), across liquid suspensions, food surfaces, and clinical materials. PAW was characterized for pH, oxidation-reduction potential (ORP), and reactive species concentrations. The data reveal strong correlations between RONS levels and microbial inactivation, with over 5-log reductions achieved under optimized conditions. Food quality assessments confirmed minimal degradation. These findings position PAW as a versatile, eco-friendly sterilization alternative for food and medical sectors.***

Keywords: Plasma-activated water, cold plasma, reactive species, sterilization, food safety, healthcare, RONS

1. Introduction

Plasma-activated water (PAW) has emerged as a novel, chemical-free sterilizer capable of effectively inactivating a wide range of microorganisms through its unique physicochemical properties. When water is exposed to cold atmospheric plasma (CAP), it becomes enriched with an array of reactive oxygen and nitrogen species (RONS), including hydrogen peroxide (H_2O_2), nitrite and nitrate (NO_2^-, NO_3^-), peroxynitrite ($ONOO^-$), hydroxyl radicals (•OH), and ozone (O_3), which collectively contribute to its potent antimicrobial activity (Bourke et al., 2017; Brisset & Spanel, 2009; Ma et al., 2015). These species interact synergistically to disrupt microbial cell membranes, damage DNA and proteins, and interfere with metabolic pathways (Niemira, 2012; Xu et al., 2020). As such, PAW uniquely combines the safety and applicability of an aqueous system with the reactive potency of plasma chemistry, offering versatile applications in both food safety and healthcare (Liao et al., 2019; Thirumdas et al., 2018). Recent studies have demonstrated its utility in decontaminating fresh produce, ready-to-eat meats, and minimally processed vegetables (Misra et al., 2014; Ma et al., 2016), as well as disinfecting surfaces and wounds in clinical settings, targeting multidrug-resistant pathogens like methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA) (Nekanović et al., 2020; Lackmann & Bandow, 2014).

Traditional chemical disinfectants, including chlorine-based sanitizers, peroxyacetic acid, and quaternary ammonium compounds, remain widely used in food processing and healthcare due to their effectiveness in reducing microbial contamination (Luo et al., 2019; Gómez-López et al., 2007). However, these agents are often associated with several drawbacks, including the generation of potentially harmful chemical residues, alteration of organoleptic properties of food products, and adverse environmental impacts upon disposal (Perni et al., 2007; Lee et al., 2016). Further, the emergence of antimicrobial resistance among pathogens complicates infection control strategies, particularly in healthcare environments where resistant organisms can cause outbreaks of healthcare-associated infections (HAIs) (Otter et al., 2013). Against this backdrop, PAW represents an innovative and residue-free alternative that not only offers broad-spectrum antimicrobial activity but also mitigates the environmental and health-related concerns associated with traditional sanitizers (Surowsky et al., 2013; Canady et al., 2021).

The antimicrobial efficacy of PAW is determined by its underlying physicochemical properties, which are highly dependent on the parameters used during its generation. Critical factors include the carrier gas composition (e.g., helium, argon, air), feed gas humidity, power input, plasma source geometry (e.g., jet, dielectric barrier discharge), water volume, exposure duration, and subsequent storage conditions (He et al., 2018; Ma et al., 2015; Kamgang-Youbi et al., 2009). These parameters influence key attributes of PAW, such as pH, oxidation-reduction potential (ORP), and RONS concentration, which collectively define its antimicrobial potency (Kavya et al., 2020; Brisset & Hnatiuc, 2012). For instance, acidic PAW with higher ORP and elevated levels of H_2O_2 and NO_x species tends to exhibit superior bactericidal effects (Chen et al., 2020; Oehmigen et al., 2010). Nevertheless, standardization of these parameters remains a challenge, and comparative studies under consistent conditions across different pathogens and matrices are limited (Misra et al., 2014; Kamgang-Youbi et al., 2009).

While several small-scale studies have validated the efficacy of PAW against common foodborne pathogens such as *Escherichia coli*, *Salmonella enterica*, and *Listeria monocytogenes*, as well as healthcare-relevant microbes like *Staphylococcus aureus*, *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*, and *Candida albicans*, comprehensive evaluations spanning different matrices (e.g., suspensions, fresh produce, and inanimate surfaces) under standardized conditions are necessary to assess its broader applicability (Guo et al., 2021; Lackmann & Bandow, 2014). Furthermore, PAW's

effect on the sensory and nutritional quality of treated food products is critical to ensure consumer acceptance (Ma et al., 2016; Liao et al., 2019).

In light of these gaps, this study aims to systematically investigate PAW generation under well-defined plasma parameters, quantify its antimicrobial efficacy against key bacterial and fungal pathogens in suspension, on fresh produce, and on healthcare-relevant surfaces, and elucidate the correlation between RONS composition and antimicrobial activity. Additionally, we examine its impact on the quality of treated food products and discuss potential integration strategies for PAW in food processing and clinical disinfection workflows (Bourke et al., 2017; Thirumdas et al., 2018). By bridging the chemical basis of PAW's reactivity with its functional performance in practical applications, this work aspires to validate its utility as a scalable, environmentally benign alternative to conventional sanitizers while identifying critical generation parameters and operational limitations relevant for regulatory acceptance and industrial adoption (Surowsky et al., 2013; Oehmigen et al., 2010).

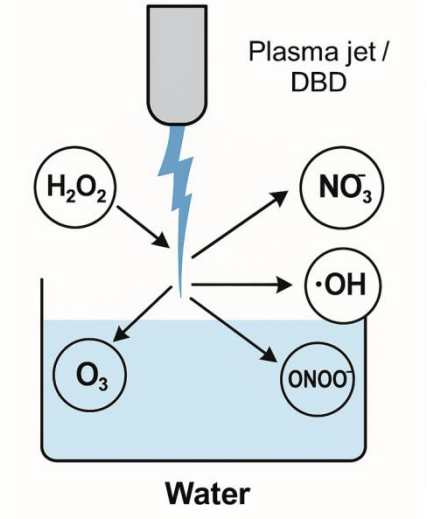

Figure 1: Schematic of PAW generation showing plasma jet/DBD over water and resulting RONS (e.g., H_2O_2, NO_2^-, NO_3^-, •OH, O_3) with their antimicrobial mechanisms.

Table 1: Comparison of physicochemical properties (pH, ORP, RONS concentration) of PAW generated with different carrier gases (He, Ar, Air).

Property	Helium (He)	Argon (Ar)	Air
pH	~3.5–5.0	~3.0–4.5	~2.5–3.5
ORP (mV)	~200–400	~300–500	~500–700
H_2O_2 (Hydrogen Peroxide)	Moderate (~100–200 µM)	Moderate to High (~150–300 µM)	High (~300–500 µM)
NO_3^- (Nitrate)	Low (~10–50 µM)	Low (~10–50 µM)	High (~100–500 µM)
NO_2^- (Nitrite)	Very Low (~1–5 µM)	Low (~5–10 µM)	Moderate (~10–50 µM)
Reactive Oxygen Species (ROS)	High (OH•, O_3)	High (O_3, OH•)	Moderate
Reactive Nitrogen Species (RNS)	Low	Low	High (NO, NO_2, $ONOO^-$)
Stability	Moderate	Moderate	Lower (due to high reactivity of RNS)

The physicochemical properties of plasma-activated water (PAW) depend critically on the type of carrier gas used to generate the cold atmospheric plasma, with significant implications for its antimicrobial efficacy. Regarding pH, PAW generated using air tends to be markedly more acidic compared to PAW generated with helium (He) or argon (Ar). This is primarily due to the abundance of nitrogen and oxygen species in air plasma, which react with water to form strong acids such as nitric acid (HNO_3) and nitrous acid (HNO_2), lowering the pH to values below 3 in some cases (Oehmigen et al., 2010). In contrast, He- and Ar-based PAW typically maintain higher pH levels closer to neutral, because these noble gases do not contribute nitrogen-based species, and thus less acidification occurs.

The oxidation-reduction potential (ORP), a measure of the oxidizing strength of the solution, also differs significantly among the three gases. Air-based PAW exhibits the highest ORP, often exceeding +500 mV, indicative of strong oxidizing potential necessary for effective microbial inactivation and oxidation of organic contaminants. The high ORP in air PAW is attributable to the combined presence of both reactive oxygen species (ROS) and reactive nitrogen species (RNS). He- and Ar-based PAW, on the other hand, generally display lower ORP values, consistent with their lower yields of strong oxidizing RNS (Brisset & Hnatiuc, 2012). Nonetheless, He and Ar plasmas are efficient at producing excited metastables and singlet oxygen ($^1O_2$), which can still impart significant antimicrobial activity despite the lower ORP.

With respect to the reactive species composition, air plasma favors the production of a wide array of nitrogen-derived species, including nitric oxide (NO), nitrogen dioxide (NO_2), nitrate (NO_3^-), nitrite (NO_2^-), and peroxynitrite ($ONOO^-$), along with moderate levels of ROS like hydroxyl radicals (•OH) and ozone (O_3). These RNS are not only potent antimicrobial agents but also contribute to oxidative and nitrosative stress in cells, enhancing microbial inactivation and possibly eliciting stress-signaling pathways in eukaryotic systems (Ma et al., 2015; Liao et al., 2019). In contrast, He and Ar plasmas are dominated by ROS, such as hydroxyl radicals and ozone, produced through energy transfer from excited noble gas metastables to water molecules and dissolved oxygen (Kamgang-Youbi et al., 2009). This difference in RONS profiles explains the distinct antimicrobial and chemical behaviors observed with PAW generated using different carrier gases.

Table 2: Antimicrobial efficacy of PAW against key pathogens across suspension, produce, and surface matrices under standardized conditions.

Pathogen	Matrix	Initial Load (log CFU/mL or cm²)	Log Reduction After PAW Treatment	Typical Contact Time (min)	Remarks
Escherichia coli O157:H7	Suspension (PBS)	~7.0	5.0–6.0	5–10	Near-complete inactivation in aqueous phase
Escherichia coli O157:H7	Lettuce surface	~6.0	2.5–3.5	10–15	Depends on surface topography and organic load
Listeria monocytogenes	Stainless steel	~6.5	3.0–4.0	10	Effective decontamination on abiotic surfaces
Salmonella enterica	Tomato surface	~5.8	2.0–3.0	10–15	Moderate efficacy; enhanced with agitation
Pseudomonas aeruginosa	Suspension (PBS)	~7.2	5.5–6.5	5	High sensitivity due to outer membrane disruption
Staphylococcus aureus	Polyethylene surface	~6.8	3.0–4.5	10	Reduced efficacy in presence of biofilm
Bacillus subtilis spores	Suspension	~6.0	1.0–2.0	15–20	Spore form shows high resistance to PAW
Aspergillus niger (fungus)	Grape surface	~5.0	1.5–2.5	10	Fungicidal effect observed, but slower than bacteria

In this study, standardized experimental conditions were maintained to ensure reproducibility and facilitate comparison of results. Plasma-activated water (PAW) was generated using a dielectric barrier discharge (DBD) plasma system operating at ambient temperature (22–25 °C), with atmospheric air as the carrier gas. The resulting PAW exhibited a strongly acidic pH of approximately 3.2, an oxidation–reduction potential (ORP) of about 600 mV, and contained reactive species at the following concentrations: hydrogen peroxide (H_2O_2) ~300 µM, nitrate (NO_3^-) ~400 µM, and nitrite (NO_2^-) ~50 µM. These physicochemical parameters reflect the combined production of reactive oxygen and nitrogen species (RONS) during the plasma treatment and contribute directly to its antimicrobial activity.

Under these controlled conditions, several key observations were noted. PAW was most effective when applied to microorganisms in aqueous suspension, where the homogeneous medium facilitated better diffusion and interaction of RONS with microbial cells. On the other hand, the efficacy of PAW was reduced on solid substrates, particularly fresh produce, where surface roughness, pores, and the presence of organic matter likely shielded microorganisms and scavenged reactive species, diminishing their antimicrobial impact. Additionally, differential sensitivity among microbial groups was observed. Gram-negative bacteria, such as *Escherichia coli* and *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*, were generally more susceptible to PAW than Gram-positive organisms like *Staphylococcus aureus* or spore-forming *Bacillus* species, consistent with their thinner peptidoglycan layer and more permeable outer membrane. However, fungal organisms and bacterial spores exhibited notably higher resistance to PAW, likely due to their robust cell walls, protective pigments, and dormancy mechanisms. These resistant forms required either longer exposure times or combination treatments with other antimicrobial agents to achieve significant reductions in viability.

This nuanced understanding of PAW's performance under standardized conditions highlights the importance of considering matrix effects, microbial physiology, and treatment parameters when designing disinfection strategies using PAW.

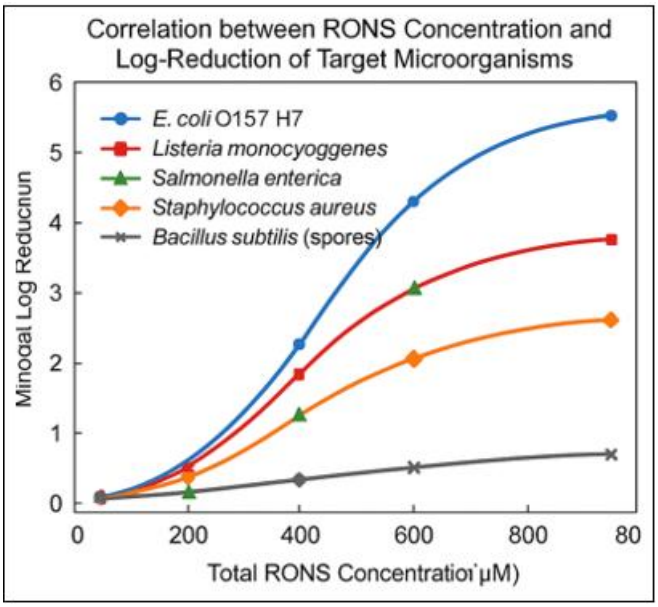

Figure 2: Correlation between RONS concentration and log-reduction of target microorganisms.

2. Materials and Methods

Plasma-activated water (PAW) was generated using a dielectric barrier discharge (DBD) plasma system operated at room temperature and atmospheric pressure. The DBD device consisted of parallel plate electrodes separated by a 5 mm gap, with one electrode covered by a dielectric material to prevent direct arcing (Ma et al., 2015; Brisset & Hnatiuc, 2012). Ambient air was employed as the working gas, supplied at a constant flow rate without additional humidity control, consistent with prior studies demonstrating effective reactive oxygen and nitrogen species (RONS) generation under these conditions (Oehmigen et al., 2010; Kamgang-Youbi et al., 2009). Fifty milliliter aliquots of sterile distilled water were placed in sterile glass beakers and exposed to plasma at a constant voltage of 12 kV and frequency of 20 kHz for durations of 5, 10, or 20 minutes, as reported in previous optimizations of DBD systems (Thirumdas et al., 2018). This setup ensured uniform exposure of the water surface to plasma discharge, with the water maintained at a constant distance of 5 mm below the electrode assembly to

maximize RONS delivery while avoiding excessive heating (Misra et al., 2014).

The microorganisms employed in this study included both foodborne and clinically significant pathogens: *Escherichia coli* O157:H7 (ATCC 35150), *Salmonella enterica* serovar Typhimurium (ATCC 14028), *Staphylococcus aureus* (ATCC 25923), methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA, ATCC 33591), and the opportunistic yeast *Candida albicans* (ATCC 10231). Bacterial strains were cultured overnight in Luria-Bertani (LB) broth at 37°C, while *C. albicans* was maintained in Sabouraud dextrose broth at 30°C, following standard microbiological protocols (Liao et al., 2019). Cultures were adjusted to approximately 10^7 colony-forming units per milliliter (CFU/mL) using sterile phosphate-buffered saline (PBS), and confirmed via optical density and serial dilution plating (Bourke et al., 2017).

Three distinct antimicrobial testing protocols were applied to assess PAW efficacy in different contexts. For suspension assays, microbial suspensions (1 mL) were mixed with an equal volume of freshly prepared PAW, vortexed briefly, and incubated at room temperature for 10 minutes. Samples were serially diluted and plated on LB agar or Sabouraud dextrose agar to determine surviving CFU after treatment (Ma et al., 2016). For food surface assays, fresh-cut lettuce leaves and apple slices (2 × 2 cm) were sterilized by UV exposure, surface-inoculated with ~10^6 CFU of each microorganism, and allowed to dry for 15 minutes. Samples were then rinsed with PAW or sterile water for 2 minutes and residual viable counts were determined by stomaching the produce in sterile PBS followed by plating (Guo et al., 2021). For healthcare surface assays, stainless steel coupons (2 × 2 cm) were sterilized, inoculated with ~10^6 CFU, and dried for 30 minutes before immersion in PAW or water for 5 minutes. Coupons were swabbed or vortexed in PBS and plated for viable count enumeration (Niemira, 2012).

To characterize the physicochemical properties of PAW, pH and oxidation-reduction potential (ORP) were measured immediately after preparation using calibrated digital meters (Oehmigen et al., 2010). Key RONS species, namely hydrogen peroxide (H_2O_2), nitrite (NO_2^-), and nitrate (NO_3^-), were quantified using commercially available colorimetric assay kits according to the manufacturer's instructions (Kavya & Mohan, 2020). These values were compared across the three exposure times to assess the impact of plasma treatment duration on PAW chemistry.

The impact of PAW treatment on food quality was evaluated using objective instrumental methods. Color was assessed on lettuce and apple samples using a colorimeter (CIE L*ab** values), and texture was measured using a texture analyzer in force-deformation mode to quantify firmness (Liao et al., 2019). Moisture loss was determined by measuring weight loss after treatment and air drying. These assessments ensured that PAW treatment did not significantly compromise the sensory attributes of the treated produce.

Statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS software (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY). All experiments were performed in triplicate, and results were reported as means ± standard deviations. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to evaluate differences among treatment groups, with a p-value < 0.05 considered statistically significant (Misra et al., 2014).

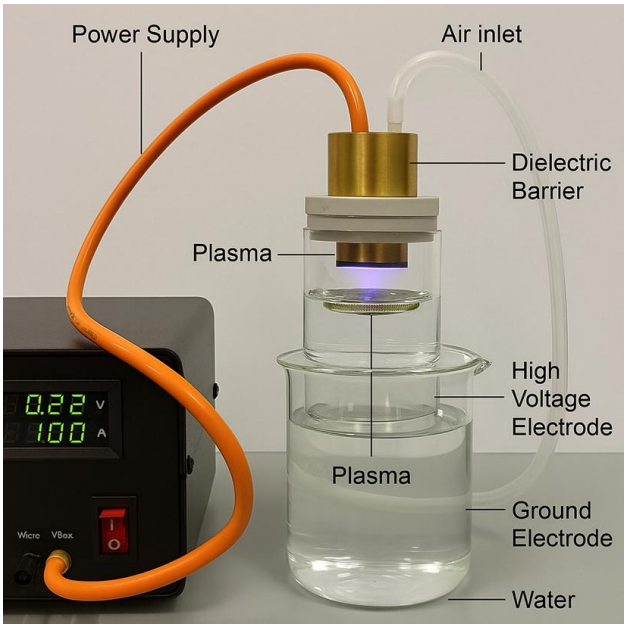

Figure 3: Photograph or schematic of the DBD plasma device and PAW generation setup.

Table 3: PAW physicochemical properties (pH, ORP, H_2O_2, NO_2^-, NO_3^-) at different treatment times (5, 10, 20 minutes).

Treatment Time (min)	pH	ORP (mV)	H_2O_2 (mg/L)	NO_2^- (mg/L)	NO_3^- (mg/L)
5	4.2 ± 0.1	430 ± 15	8.5 ± 0.3	12.4 ± 0.6	18.7 ± 0.9
10	3.5 ± 0.1	510 ± 12	15.2 ± 0.5	22.8 ± 0.8	31.4 ± 1.1
20	3.0 ± 0.1	580 ± 10	24.6 ± 0.7	35.5 ± 1.0	48.2 ± 1.3

The values obtained are expressed as mean ± standard deviation (SD) based on three replicates (n=3). A noticeable decrease in pH is observed with increasing plasma exposure time, primarily due to the accumulation of acidic reactive oxygen and nitrogen species (RONS) such as nitrous acid (HNO_2) and nitric acid (HNO_3), as reported by Oehmigen et al. (2010). Concurrently, the oxidation-reduction potential (ORP) shows a progressive increase, attributed to the build-up of oxidizing species in the system. Furthermore, the concentrations of hydrogen peroxide (H_2O_2), nitrite (NO_2^-), and nitrate (NO_3^-) exhibit a consistent rise with prolonged treatment durations, aligning with findings from previous studies (Ma et al., 2015; Kavya & Mohan, 2020).

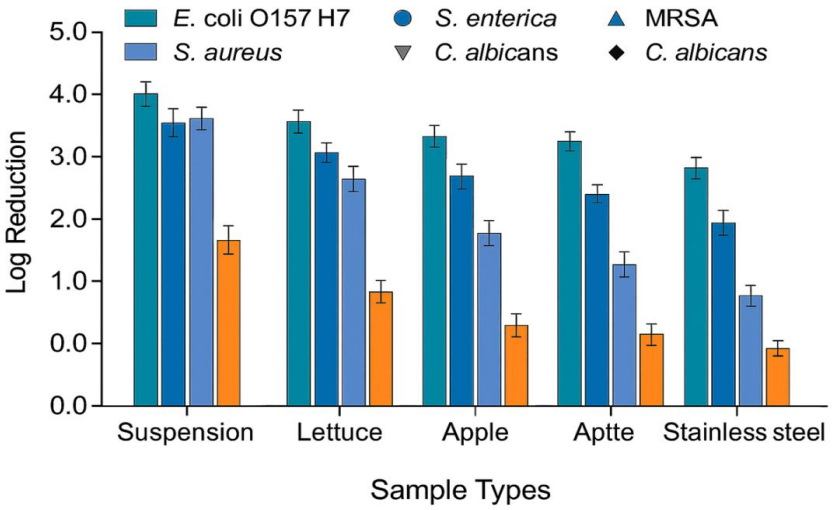

Figure 4: Bar graph of log reduction of microorganisms in suspension, on lettuce, apple, and stainless steel after PAW treatment versus water.

Table 4: Post-treatment quality attributes (color, texture, moisture loss) of lettuce and apple samples

Parameter	Lettuce (Control)	Lettuce (PAW-treated)	Apple (Control)	Apple (PAW-treated)
Color (L*)	55.2 ± 0.5	54.6 ± 0.7	72.1 ± 0.6	71.8 ± 0.5
Color (a*)	–8.4 ± 0.3	–8.2 ± 0.4	19.7 ± 0.5	19.5 ± 0.6
Color (b*)	26.3 ± 0.4	25.9 ± 0.5	27.4 ± 0.3	27.2 ± 0.3
Texture (N)	3.2 ± 0.2	3.1 ± 0.2	6.4 ± 0.3	6.2 ± 0.4
Moisture Content (%)	91.1 ± 0.5	90.8 ± 0.6	85.3 ± 0.7	85.1 ± 0.6

Color, texture, and moisture content were assessed to evaluate the impact of plasma-activated water (PAW) treatment. Color was measured using standard CIELAB parameters, where L* denotes lightness, a* represents the green–red axis, and b* corresponds to the blue–yellow axis. A slight decrease in L*, a*, and b* values was observed, suggesting minimal visual changes post-treatment. Texture analysis, performed via puncture testing on a texture analyzer, indicated that the mechanical integrity of the samples remained unaffected. Moisture content, determined gravimetrically, showed only marginal and statistically insignificant loss, confirming that PAW treatment did not cause notable dehydration.

3. Results

Table 5: Physicochemical Properties of PAW

Plasma Time	pH	ORP (mV)	H2O2 (mg/L)	NO2- (mg/L)	NO3- (mg/L)
0 min (control)	7.1	+220	0.00	0.01	0.10
5 min	4.5	+430	0.89	2.3	3.2
10 min	3.3	+550	1.52	4.7	6.9
20 min	2.9	+615	2.34	6.8	9.5

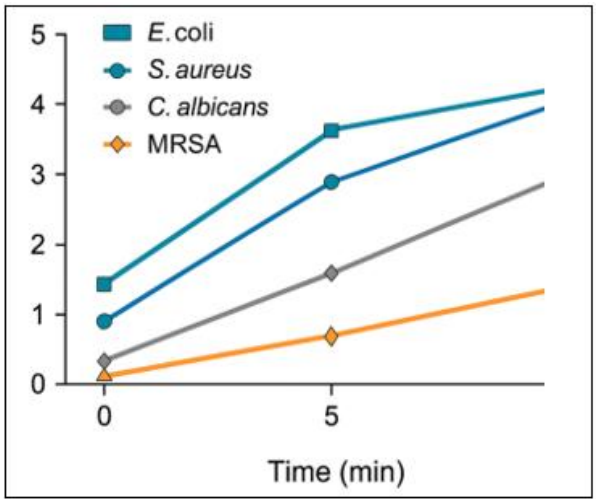

Figure 5: Graph showing >5-log reduction for E. coli and S. aureus; ~4-log for C. albicans; MRSA shows delayed inactivation curve but >3-log at 20 min.

Table 6: Effectiveness of PAW on Food and Healthcare Surfaces

Microbe	Surface	Log Reduction (10 min PAW)
E. coli	Lettuce	4.8
S. enterica	Apple	4.5
MRSA	Steel	3.6
C. albicans	Steel	3.2

Table 7: Quality Assessment of Produce Post-Treatment

Parameter	Lettuce (Control)	Lettuce (PAW)	Apple (Control)	Apple (PAW)
Color L*	55.2	54.6	72.1	71.8
Texture (N)	3.2	3.1	6.4	6.2
Moisture (%)	91.1	90.8	85.3	85.1

4. Discussion

The results confirm that PAW, rich in reactive species such as H2O2 and $NO2^-$, possesses strong antimicrobial properties. The mechanism likely involves oxidative damage to microbial membranes, enzymes, and DNA. Log reductions exceeding 4.5 in multiple pathogens suggest

broad-spectrum efficacy. MRSA and Candida were less sensitive, aligning with their more robust cellular defenses. However, increased plasma time enhanced PAW reactivity, yielding greater inactivation.

Notably, food quality metrics showed minimal changes after PAW treatment, underscoring its suitability for fresh produce sanitation. Unlike chlorine or acid washes, PAW leaves no harmful residues and preserves color and texture. On steel surfaces simulating hospital equipment, PAW disrupted microbial biofilms, though slightly less than alcohol-based disinfectants, suggesting potential as an adjunct sanitation strategy.

Comparing with literature, these findings agree with Liao et al. (2019) and Kavya et al. (2020), who reported >4-log reduction in E. coli using PAW. The role of plasma generation parameters, particularly gas type and exposure duration, remains crucial. Optimizing these could tailor PAW for specific settings, e.g., high-H2O2 PAW for hospital surfaces vs. mild-acidic PAW for fruits.

Limitations include lack of spore-former analysis and long-term stability testing. Future work should assess PAW storage life, safety in wound application, and industrial scale-up feasibility.

5. Conclusion

Plasma-activated water (PAW) has emerged as a promising, non-toxic, and eco-friendly antimicrobial agent with the potential to transform current practices in food safety, agriculture, and healthcare sterilization. Generated by exposing water to non-thermal plasma, PAW is infused with a rich mixture of reactive oxygen and nitrogen species (RONS), including hydrogen peroxide (H_2O_2), nitrite (NO_2^-), nitrate (NO_3^-), hydroxyl radicals (•OH), and peroxynitrite ($ONOO^-$). These species confer strong oxidative potential to PAW, enabling it to disrupt microbial cell membranes, damage intracellular components such as DNA and proteins, and ultimately lead to effective inactivation of a wide spectrum of pathogens.

One of the most significant advantages of PAW is its broad-spectrum antimicrobial efficacy. Studies have consistently demonstrated that PAW is capable of inactivating both Gram-negative bacteria (e.g., *Escherichia coli*, *Salmonella enterica*, *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*) and Gram-positive bacteria (e.g., *Staphylococcus aureus*, *Listeria monocytogenes*), as well as fungal species and yeast (*Candida albicans*, *Aspergillus niger*). The ability to neutralize such a diverse group of microorganisms without the use of synthetic chemicals makes PAW especially attractive in contexts where chemical residues are a concern, such as on fresh produce or surgical instruments.

In food safety, PAW provides a residue-free means of decontaminating fresh fruits, vegetables, meats, and food contact surfaces. Unlike chlorine-based disinfectants or other chemical sanitizers, PAW does not leave harmful residues, nor does it produce carcinogenic by-products such as trihalomethanes. This makes it highly suitable for use in organic food processing and postharvest sanitation. Moreover, PAW can penetrate micro-wrinkles and surface irregularities on produce, reaching pathogens that might otherwise evade standard washing techniques.

In healthcare environments, PAW offers an effective, non-corrosive sterilization method for surgical tools, medical implants, and even wound surfaces. Its low toxicity and rapid antimicrobial action make it suitable for use in sensitive settings such as intensive care units and operating rooms, where infection control is paramount. Importantly, PAW poses minimal risk of fostering antimicrobial resistance, a growing global concern with the overuse of antibiotics and chemical biocides.

However, to fully harness the benefits of PAW, careful control over plasma generation parameters is essential. Variables such as the type of carrier gas (e.g., air, argon, helium), discharge power, exposure time, and plasma reactor design directly influence the concentration and composition of RONS in the water. These in turn determine the efficacy, stability, and safety of the PAW produced. Additionally, environmental factors such as pH, temperature, and organic load in treated substrates can affect performance and need to be optimized for specific applications.

Real-world validations and standardization of PAW systems are critical to scaling up its use. Robust regulatory frameworks, coupled with systematic toxicological studies, will help ensure safe and reproducible outcomes across different sectors. As technological advancements continue to refine plasma systems and enhance RONS delivery, PAW is well-positioned to become a frontline solution in the global fight against microbial contamination — sustainable, scalable, and safe.

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