Enumeration of Microorganisms

Prepared by : Dr O.H. AJIGBEWU

Department of Microbiology

Introduction

- Imagine you’re working in a hospital lab, and you need to check if a patient’s urine contains bacteria that could cause an infection. Or perhaps you’re testing bottled water to ensure it’s free from harmful germs.
- This is known as the enumeration of microorganisms
- Some techniques are used to count microorganisms
  - sometimes directly, or indirectly
- These counts help doctors, food producers, and environmental scientists keep people safe.

Enumeration of Microorganisms

- It means determining how many microbes are present in a sample—be it water, food, soil, or a clinical specimen.
- This is crucial for several reasons:
  - **Quality Control:** Ensuring products like milk, bottled water, and medicines are safe for consumption.
  - **Disease Diagnosis:** Measuring bacteria in patient samples to diagnose infections.
  - **Environmental Monitoring:** Checking rivers, lakes, and soil for contamination.
  - **Research:** Studying microbial growth, death, and response to treatments.
- Microbial counts can be **total counts** (all cells, living or dead) or **viable counts** (only living cells that can grow and form colonies). The method chosen depends on the goal—sometimes we care about all cells (e.g., vaccine production), sometimes only the living ones (e.g., infection risk).

Enumeration Methods

- Microbiologists use two main approaches to count microbes:

1) **Direct Enumeration**
   - involves physically counting cells or colonies.
   - Viewing under a microscope or counting colonies on an agar plate.
   - This provides a hands-on, visual count,
   - but can be time-consuming and sometimes misses cells that are alive but not growing.
- **Indirect Enumeration**
   - Estimates cell numbers by measuring something related to their presence
     - like how cloudy a liquid is (turbidity),
     - how much ATP (energy molecule) is present,
     - or how much light is absorbed.
   - These methods are faster and can handle large numbers,
   - but may not distinguish between living and dead cells.

Direct Enumeration

- Direct methods involve observing and counting microorganisms or their colonies directly.
- They provide more accurate results but may be more labour-intensive.
- Classified as
  - Direct Microscopic Counts
  - Plate Count Method (Viable Cells)
  - Most Probable Number Count

Direct Microscopic Count: Principle

- The **direct microscopic count** is one of the oldest and simplest ways to count microbes.
- It uses a special slide called a **counting chamber** (like the Petroff-Hausser or hemocytometer) with a grid etched into it.
- By placing a known volume of sample on the grid and counting the cells under a microscope, you can calculate the concentration of cells in the original sample.
- **Key Points**

1) It counts both living and dead cells.
2) Fast and requires minimal equipment.
3) Best for samples with high cell density (>10^6 cells/ml).

Advantages and Limitations

. **Advantages:**

Rapid, simple, and allows observation of cell shape and arrangement.

- **Limitations:**

Cannot distinguish live from dead cells (unless using viability stains),
not suitable for low-density samples, small cells may be missed

Direct Microscopic Count: Procedure

1. Clean the counting chamber and coverslip.
2. Place the coverslip on the chamber.
3. Pipette a small volume (e.g., 10 µl) of well-mixed sample onto the edge of the coverslip; capillary action draws it under the coverslip.
4. Allow cells to settle for 1–2 minutes.
5. Focus on the grid under the microscope (usually 400x magnification).
6. Count the number of cells in several squares (e.g., 10–15).
7. Calculate the average number of cells per square.
8. Use the formula to determine cells/ml:
9. **Cells/ml = Average count per square × dilution factor × chamber conversion factor**

Viable Plate Count (Standard Plate Count)

The viable plate count (also called standard plate count or colony count) estimates the number of living bacteria in a sample by counting colonies that grow on an agar plate.

Each colony is assumed to arise from a single viable cell (or a clump), and the result is expressed as colony-forming units per milliliter (CFU/ml).

Key Points:

- Only living cells that can grow under the conditions are counted.
- Requires serial dilution to obtain countable plates (30–300 colonies).
- Used in food, water, clinical, and research labs.

Advantages:

Counts only living cells, allows for identification, sensitive (can detect low numbers).

Limitations:

Time-consuming (24–48 hours incubation),

clumps/chains may lead to underestimation; only cells that grow under the conditions are counted.

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Most Probable Number (MPN

- The Most Probable Number (MPN) method is a statistical approach to estimate the number of viable microorganisms in a sample.
- especially when counts are expected to be low (e.g., <100/ml).
- It involves inoculating multiple tubes of broth with different volumes of sample, incubating, and recording which tubes show growth (usually indicated by color change or gas production).

Key Points:

- Used for water, food, and soil samples.
- Relies on probability tables to estimate counts.
- Useful when plate counts are impractical.

- **Advantages:**

Works for turbid or particulate samples, easy to interpret, and effective for low counts.

- **Limitations:**

Less precise than plate counts, takes longer (up to 48 hours), requires more glassware and media.

Most Probable Number: Procedure

Prepare sets of tubes with selective broth (e.g., lactose broth for coliforms).

2. Inoculate tubes with different volumes (e.g., 10 ml, 1 ml, 0.1 ml).

3. Incubate at appropriate temperature (e.g., 37°C for coliforms).

4. Observe for growth: color change (acid production), gas bubbles (Durham tube).

5. Record the number of positive tubes at each dilution.

6. Use MPN tables to estimate the most probable number of organisms per 100 ml.

Indirect Enumeration Methods

- Indirect methods do not count cells directly;
- They measure a parameter that correlates with microbial growth e.g.
    - like how cloudy a liquid is (turbidity),
    - how much ATP (energy molecule) is present,
    - or how much light is absorbed.
- Examples include
    - Turbidity Measurement (optical density)
    - Metabolic Activity Measurements

Turbidity Measurement (optical density)

- It estimates cell density by measuring how cloudy (turbid) a liquid culture becomes as microbes grow.
- A spectrophotometer shines light through the sample and measures how much is absorbed or scattered.
- The result is called optical density (OD), usually measured at 600 nm (OD600) for bacteria.

Key Points:

- Fast and easy for monitoring growth
- Works best for high-density cultures.
- Requires calibration to relate OD to cell number.

Advantages:

- Rapid,
- non-destructive,
- ideal for monitoring growth curves.

Limitations:

- Cannot distinguish live from dead cells,
- affected by cell size/shape,
- needs calibration.

Turbidity Measurement (optical density)

1. Prepare a blank (sterile medium) and the samples in cuvettes.

2. Place the blank in the spectrophotometer to set zero.

3. Measure OD of the sample at 600nm wavelength

4. Use a calibration curve (OD vs. CFU/ml) to estimate cell concentration.

Calibration:

- Prepare serial dilutions, measure OD, and plate counts for each.
- Plot OD vs. CFU/ml to create a standard curve.

Metabolic Activity Measurements

- Oxygen consumption
- CO_2 production
- Acid/alkali production
- ATP assays
- Useful for hard-to-culture organisms

Advantages:

- Rapid,
- non-destructive,
- ideal for monitoring growth curves.

• Limitations:

- Cannot distinguish live from dead cells,
- affected by cell size/shape,
- needs calibration.

Comparison of Direct and Indirect Methods

Feature	Direct Methods	Indirect Methods
Measures	Actual cells or colonies	Growth effects or metabolic activity
Accuracy	High	Moderate
Speed	Slower (except microscopic)	Fast
Distinguish live/dead	Only viable counts do	Generally no
Applications	Food, water, clinical, research	Industrial fermentation, growth monitoring