



PRODUCTION OF LOVASTATIN BY *ASPERGILLUS FLAVIPES* NCIM 1209 USING RICE HUSK UNDER SOLID STATE FERMENTATION

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Abstract: *Production of lovastatin was carried out by Aspergillus fischeri NCIM-509 using agro-industrial residue rice husk, as substrate under solid state fermentation. Lovastatin is a potent hypercholesterolemic drug used for lowering blood cholesterol. In recent years, lovastatin has also been reported as a potential therapeutic agent for the treatment of various types of tumors and also play a tremendous role in the regulation of the inflammatory and immune response, coagulation process, bone marrow, neovascularization, vascular tone, and arterial pressure. Process parameters like Incubation time (5-days), Temperature (28°C), Moisture content (60%), Inoculum age (4 days), Inoculum volume (30% v/w), pH of the medium(6.0), carbon source (1.5% Lactose) and nitrogen source(1.5% Ammonium Sulphate) were optimized and gave an overall yield of 11.2 mg/gds of lovastatin after optimization.*

Keywords: *Lovastatin, Aspergillus flavipes, rice husk, Solid state fermentation, Process parameters, Optimization*

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INTRODUCTION

Lovastatin is a member of the drug class of statins, used for lowering cholesterol (hypolipidemic agent) in those with hypercholesterolemia and so preventing cardiovascular disease. It is a potent hypercholesterolemic drug used for lowering blood cholesterol. Lovastatin was the first statin approved by the US FDA ^{1,2}.

Lovastatin, also known as Monacolin K, is a kind of fungal metabolite, serving as a competitive inhibitor of 3-hydroxyl-3-methylglutaryl coenzyme A reductase (HMG-CoA), the rate-limiting enzyme in cholesterol biosynthesis³. Lovastatin not only inhibits cholesterol biosynthesis but also reduces blood cholesterol level in both humans and animals. In addition to this, lovastatin has a clear evidence to benefit on stroke and it also shows in vivo tumor suppression by inhibiting the synthesis of non-sterol isoprenoid compounds ^{4,5}.

In addition, lovastatin has been used in the biomedical applications such as in treating coronary heart diseases, renal diseases, Alzheimer's disease and bone fractions⁶ Several fungal genera including *Aspergillus*, *Penicillium*, *Monascus*, *Paecilomyces*, *Trichoderma*, *Scopulariopsis*, *Doratomyces*, *Phoma*, *Phythium*, *Gymnoascus*, *Hypomyces* and *Pleurotus* have been reported to be able to produce lovastatin ⁷.

Currently, lovastatin is mainly produced by submerged fermentation (SmF), a very few works are carried on solid state fermentation (SSF). In recent years, researchers have shown an increasing interest in SSF as a potential alternative of submerged fermentation because it uses economical substrates (agricultural residues), requires fewer processing and downstreaming stages, utilizes lesser power and generates lesser effluent It provides an opportunity to exploit agro-industrial residues for the production of value added products 8. Moreover, SSF has higher product yield and offers better product stability ⁹.

In the present investigation, we evaluate the feasibility of solid state fermentation process for the production of lovastatin by the fungal strain *Aspergillus flavipes* using rice husk as the substrate and also to optimize the process parameters (both physico-chemical and nutritional) that maximize the lovastatin yield in a step-wise manner.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Microorganism: The fungal strain *Aspergillus flavipes* NCIM-1209 used in this study was procured from the culture collection centre of National Collection of Industrial Microorganisms (NCIM), Pune, India. The microbial strain was maintained on Potato



Dextrose Agar (PDA) medium. Inoculated slants were grown in an incubator at 28°C for five days. After that the slants were preserved at 4°C and sub-cultured once every four weeks (monthly).

Inoculum's preparation: Inoculum was prepared by adding 10.00 mL of sterilized 0.1% Tween 80 solution to a well-sporulated *Aspergillus flavipes* slant. The spore surface was scrapped with an inoculating loop to suspend the spores in an above solution and the obtained spore suspension was used as the inoculum for the fermentation process.

Solid state fermentation (SSF): Rice husk procured from the local market of Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh was used as the substrate in the present investigation. Ten grams of rice husk was taken in a 250 mL Erlenmeyer flask and moistened with distilled water (moistening media) and autoclaved at 121°C (15lb) for 15-20 min, cooled to room temperature and inoculated with 1.00 mL of the 5 day spore suspension (spore concentration of about 10^7 - 10^8 per mL) of *A.flavipes* under aseptic conditions. The contents of the inoculated flasks were mixed thoroughly and incubated at desired temperature in an incubator for desired length of fermentation time.

Optimization of Process Parameters: Various process parameters that influence the lovastatin production during SSF were optimized over a wide range. The strategy adopted for standardization of fermentation parameters is to evaluate the effect of an individual parameter and incorporate it at the standard level before standardizing the next parameter. The process parameters optimized in the present study include fermentation time (1-7days), incubation temperature (26-34°C), initial moisture content (40-90% v/w), inoculum age (2-7days), inoculum volume (10-60 %v/w), initial pH (3-9), carbon sources (1% w/w) and nitrogen sources (1% w/w). All the experiments were done in triplicate and the mean values of the lovastatin yield was reported.

Extraction of lovastatin: After the incubation period, lovastatin from the fermented substrate was extracted using organic solvent acetonitrile. 50.00 mL of acetonitrile was added to fermented substrate. The flasks were kept in an orbital shaking incubator at 180 rpm for 2 hrs. The residue was filtered with filter paper. The solids were removed by centrifuging the homogenate at 3000 X at 4°C for 8 min and the resultant clear supernatant was used for analytical studies.



Quantitative analysis of lovastatin¹⁰: To 1.00 mL of Supernatant, 1.00 mL of 1% trifluoroacetic acid was added and incubated for 10 min (lactonization of hydroxyl acid form of lovastatin). From the above solution 1.00 mL was taken and diluted to 10 times and further from that solution 1.00 mL was taken and diluted to 10 times with acetonitrile. The absorbance was read at 238 nm by using UV-Visible Spectrophotometer.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Selection of solid substrates in SSF for lovastatin production: The solid substrates used in solid state fermentation are generally insoluble in water and play a dual role of supply of nutrients to the microbial culture growing and anchorage for the growing cells. In SSF, the selection of a suitable substrate for a fermentation process is a critical factor and thus involves the screening of a number of agro-residual wastes for microbial growth and product formation. In the present study, four different substrates, viz. barley bran, wheat husk, rice bran and rice husk were screened for production of lovastatin. The maximum yield of 2.7 mg/gds of lovastatin (**Fig.1**) was achieved in a medium containing rice husk as the substrate.

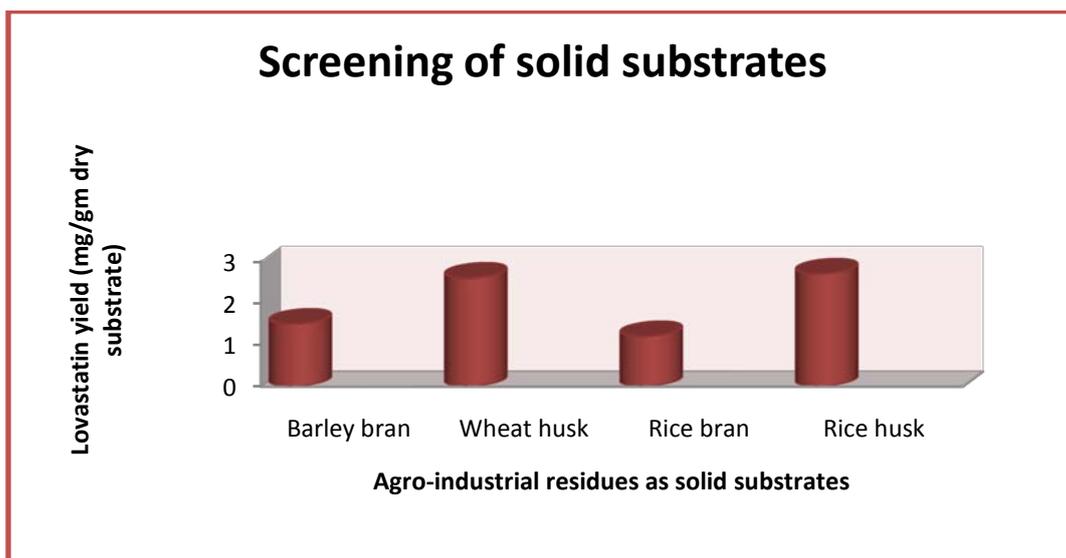


Fig. 1: Screening of solid substrates

Effect of Fermentation time: The effect of fermentation time on lovastatin production was studied by incubating the fermentation flasks from 3-7 days. The maximum lovastatin yield of 3.7 mg/gds was achieved at 5 days of fermentation time (**Fig.2**). Lovastatin is an intracellular product, its accumulation in mycelia is growth related and simultaneously increased as cell grows¹¹. Decrease of yield after five days maybe due to onset of death



phase of organism and due to nutrient depletion. ¹⁰Pei-Lian *et al.*, reported highest yield of lovastatin at 11 days with *Aspergillus terreus* using rice powder as substrate under SSF. ⁹Valera *et al.*, reported maximum yield of lovastatin at 6th day by *Aspergillus flavipes* using wheat bran under SSF.

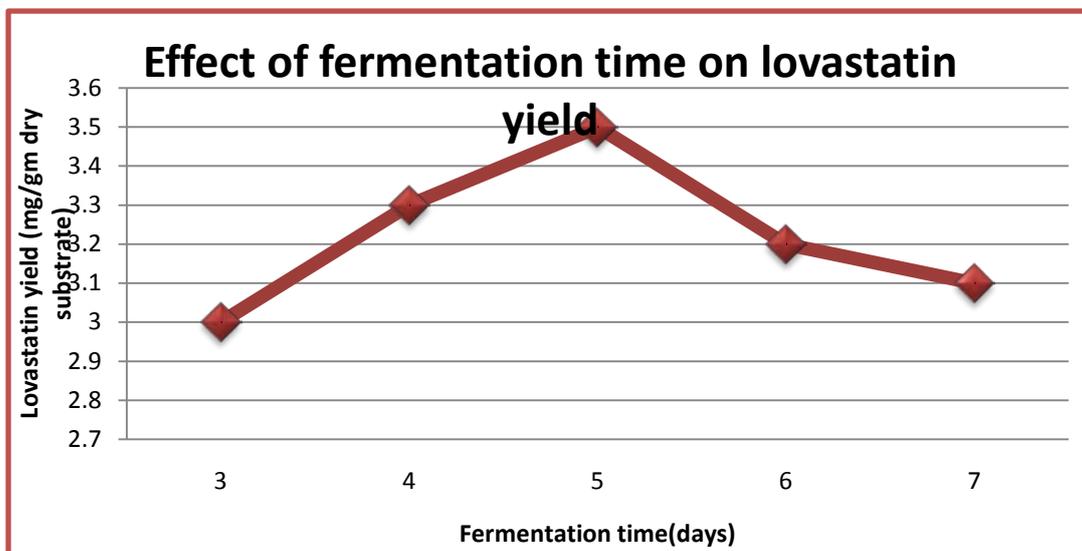


Fig. 2: Effect of fermentation time on lovastatin production

Effect of temperature on lovastatin production: Fermentation was carried out at various temperatures such as 26, 28, 30, 32, 34°C to study their effect on lovastatin production. Maximum yield of 4.0 mg/gds was observed at 28°C temperature(**Fig. 3**) and yield decreased with further increase in temperature.

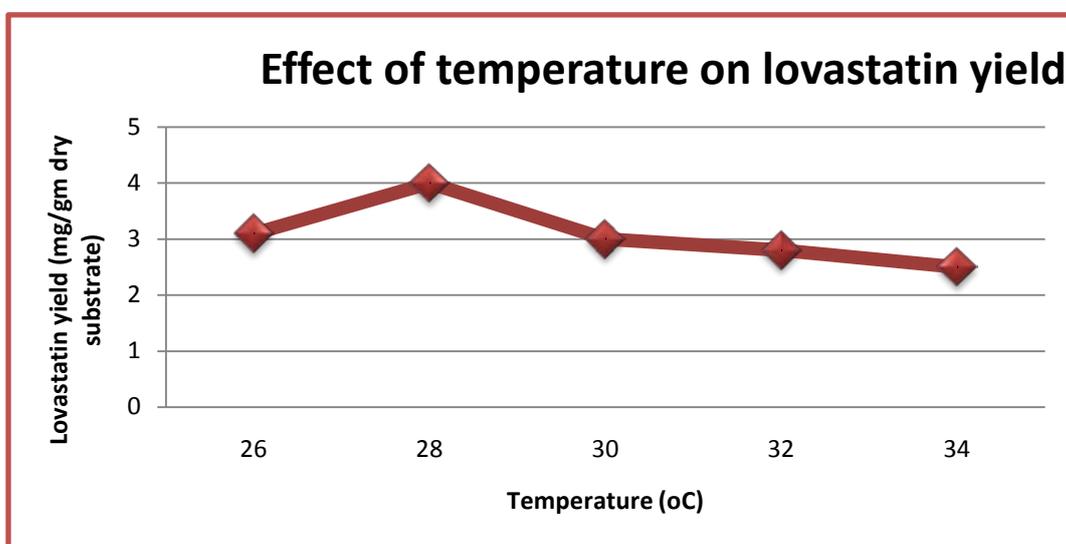


Fig. 3: Effect of temperature on lovastatin production



This decrease in yield may be due to the heat that accumulates in the medium during mesophilic aerobic SSF and poor heat dissipation which could lead to a further drop in the oxygen level and thereby reducing the growth of test organism as lovastatin is growth related product.

Similar observation was also reported by ¹¹Pei-Lian *et al.*, for lovastatin yield with *Aspergillus terreus* whereas ¹²Panda *et al.*, reported highest yield of lovastatin at 30°C using co-culture of *Monascus purpureus* and *Monascus ruber* under SSF.

Effect of initial moisture content on lovastatin production: To investigate the influence of initial moisture content of the substrate, fermentation was carried out with various initial moisture levels (40, 50, 60, 70, 80, 90 (% v/w)) of rice husk, adjusted with moistening media. Maximum lovastatin yield (4.7mg/gds) was achieved at 60% (v/w) initial moisture content (Fig. 4).

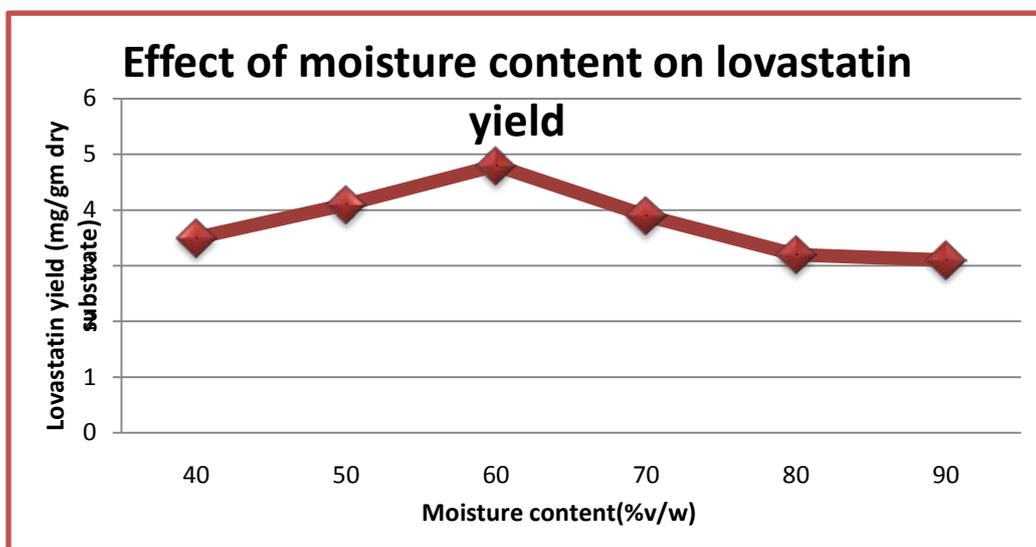


Fig. 4: Effect of moisture content on lovastatin production

As the moisture content increase the air present in the void volume decreases, resulting in poor oxygen availability in the processes without forced aeration. With low moisture content, the available oxygen is sufficient, but the watercontent is not enough to support good metabolic activity and dissipation of heat generated. This may account for lower lovastatin production and biomass¹³.

⁹Valera *et al.*, reported highest lovastatin production with *Aspergillus flavipes* at 60% moisture content under SSF and ¹¹Pei-Lian *et al.*, also reported maximum yield of lovastatin with *Aspergillus terreus* at 60% moisture content under SSF.



Effect of inoculum age on lovastatin production: Experiments were carried out to determine the optimum age of inoculum for the production of lovastatin by varying the age of inoculum from 2nd day to 7th day. The maximum yield of lovastatin of 5.2 mg/gds was obtained with 4th day old culture (**Fig. 5**).

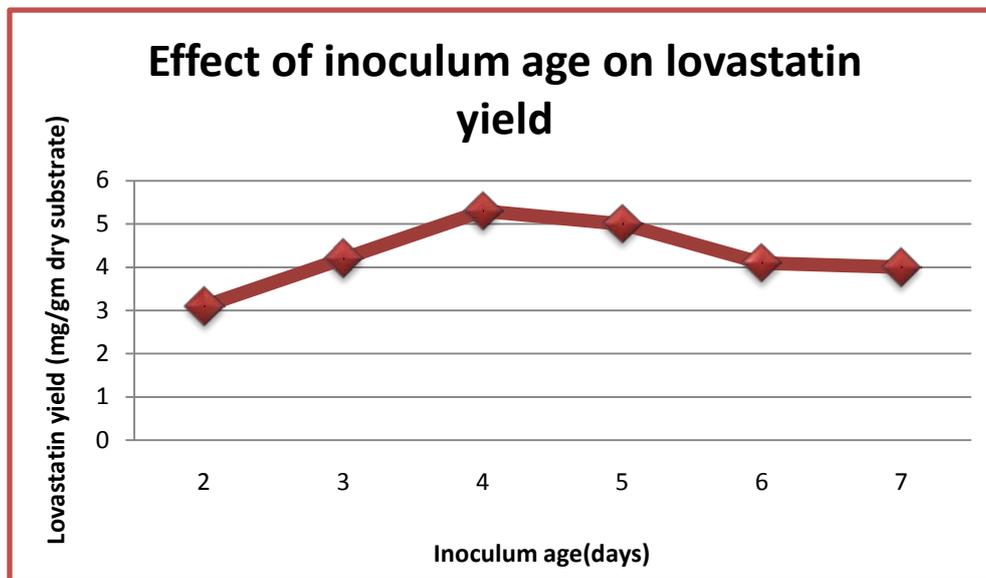


Fig. 5: Effect of inoculums age on lovastatin production

The production of biomass and lovastatin by spore initiated solid or submerged fermentation of fungi was shown to depend on the age of the spores used for inoculation. Control of spore age at inoculation of fermentation is required for obtaining optimal production of lovastatin¹⁴.

¹⁴Porcel *et al.*, reported highest yield of lovastatin by *Aspergillus terreus* with spore age of 16 days.

Effect of inoculum volume on lovastatin production: Fermentation was carried out with different inoculums volume(10–60 %v/w) of five day old *A.flavipes* culture for a period of 5 days to study its effect on lovastatin production. Maximum yield of 6.2 mg/gds was obtained with 30 % v/w inoculum concentration (**Fig. 6**). With further increase in inoculum volume/concentration , the yield decreased due to depletion of nutrients in the production medium. The free excess liquid present in an unabsorbed form will give rise to a diffusional barrier imposed by the solid nature of the substrate leading to the poor mycelia growth and product formation. With low inoculum volume, the yield is also low due to insufficient microbes to form mycelia and accumulate lovastatin (Pansuriya and Singhal. 2010).



¹³Pansuriya and Singhal., reported 20%v/w to be optimum for lovastatin production.

¹²Panda *et al.*, reported highest yield of lovastatin with inoculum volume 5.10 mL using co-culture of *Monascus purpureus* and *Monascus ruber* under SSF.

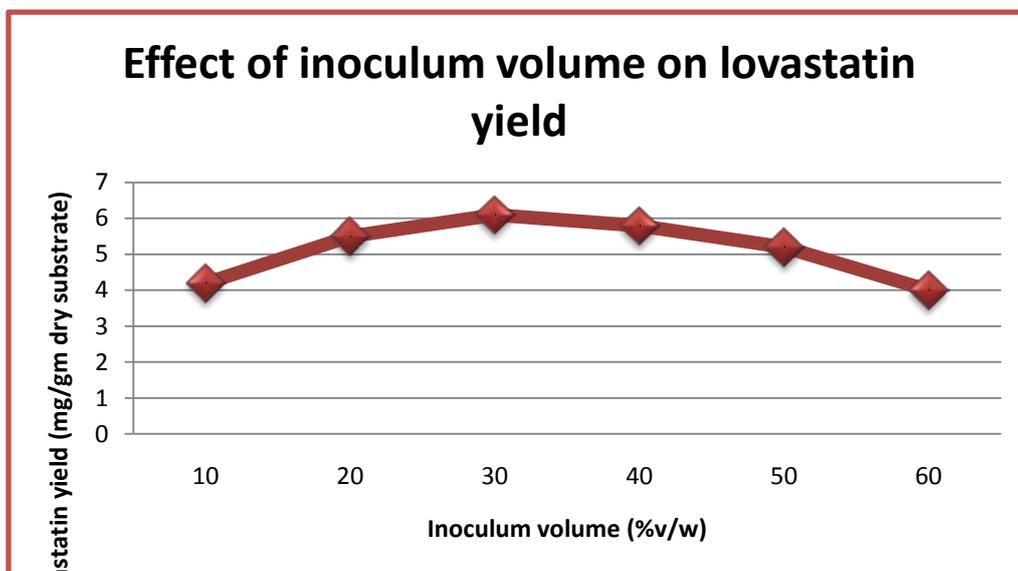


Fig. 6: Effect of inoculum concentration on lovastatin production

Effect of initial pH on lovastatin production: In order to maintain the favorable conditions for increased lovastatin production pH was optimized. This was established by carrying out the fermentation by varying the pH from 3-9 (adjusted with 1N HCl or 1N NaOH). The maximum yield of 7.2 mg/gds was obtained at pH 6.0 (**Fig.7**). Most of the fungi grow actively at acidic pH which is necessary for transport of various components across the cell membrane thus strongly influencing the cell growth and secondary metabolites production.

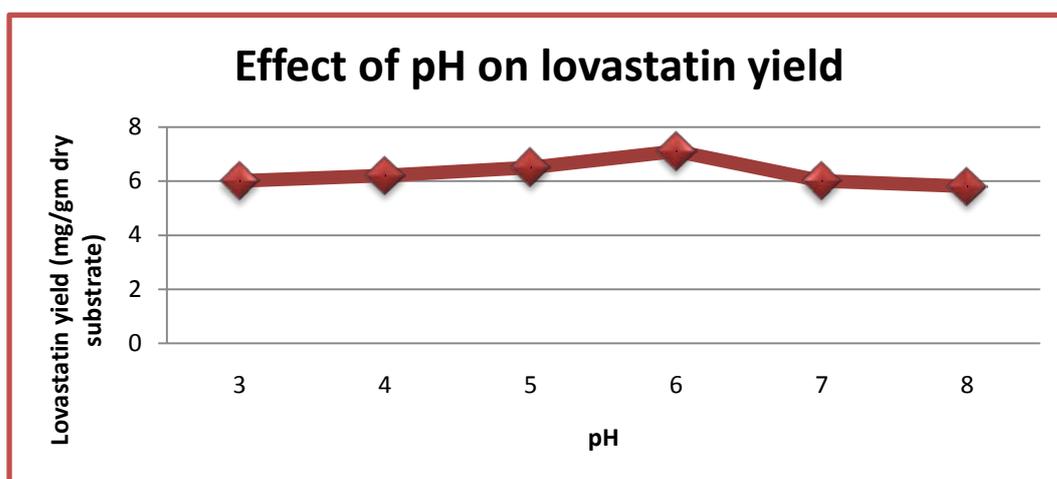


Fig. 7: Effect of pH on lovastatin production



These findings were similar with those reported by ¹²Panda *et al.*, for maximum lovastatin production at pH-6.0 using co-culture of *Monascus purpureus* and *Monascus ruber* under SSF where as ⁹Valera *et al.*, reported highest yield of lovastatin production with *Aspergillus flavipes* at pH 5.0 under SSF.

Effect of carbon supplementation on lovastatin production: To determine the effect of carbon sources on lovastatin yield, different carbon sources such as starch, sucrose, lactose, fructose, maltose, glucose, at a concentration of 1 %w/w was supplemented to the basal solid state fermentative medium. Among different carbon sources tested, lactose enhanced lovastatin yield to 8.2 mg/gds when compared to other carbon sources (**Fig. 8**).

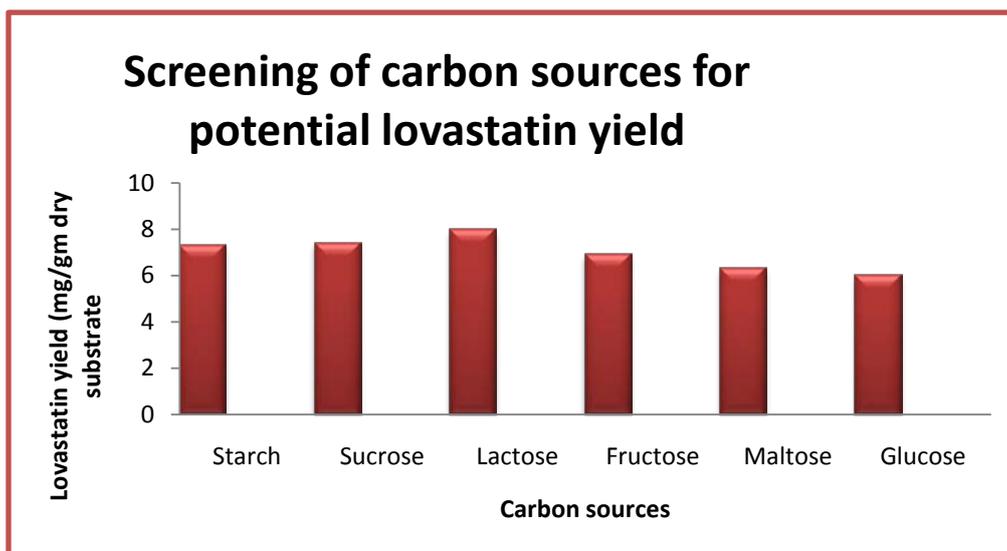


Fig. 8: Effect of carbon supplementation on lovastatin production

Similar observations were reported by ¹⁵ Szakacset *al.*, as lactose was a favorable carbon source for the production of lovastatin with *Aspergillus terreus* under SmF. ¹⁶Xu *et al.*, reported significant increase in lovastatin production using sucrose and glycerol as carbon supplement and glucose as repressor for lovastatin production with *Monascus ruber* using steamed rice under SSF.

Effect of lactose concentration: In order to investigate the effect of lactose concentration on the fermentation medium, SSF was carried out with different lactose concentrations varying from 0.5-3.0% (w/w). Maximum yield of lovastatin yield of 8.4 mg/gds was obtained at a concentration of 1.5 %w/w (**Fig. 9**).

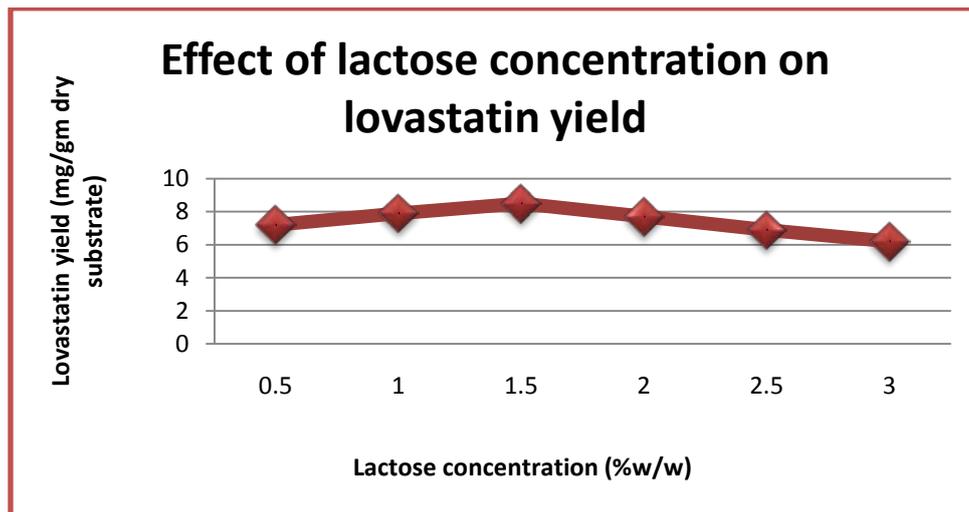


Fig 9: Effect of lactose concentration size on lovastatin production

Effect of nitrogen supplementation on lovastatin production: To determine the effect of nitrogen sources on lovastatin production, different organic nitrogen sources such as peptone, beef extract, yeast extract, peptone, malt extract and the inorganic nitrogen sources such as urea, ammonium sulphate, ammonium nitrate, sodium nitrate were supplemented at a concentration of 1 %w/w to the basal solid state fermentative medium. Among different nitrogen sources, with ammonium sulphate high lovastatin yield of 7.7mg/gds was obtained when compared to other nitrogen sources (Fig. 10).

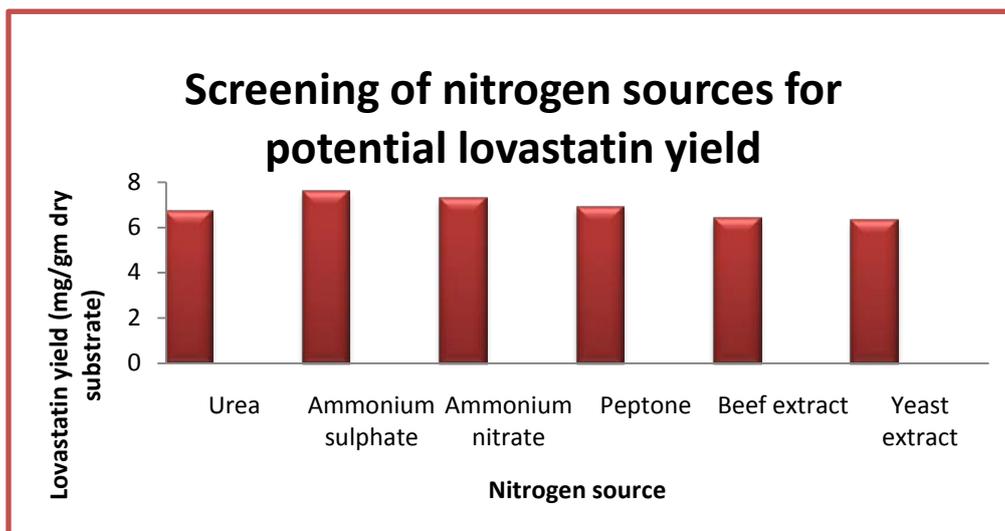


Fig. 10: Effect of nitrogen supplementation on lovastatin production

¹⁷Atalla *et al.*, reported that ammonium sulphate was used to enhance the lovastatin yield.

¹⁶Xu *et al.*, reported significant increase in lovastatin production using yeast extract as organic nitrogen source and sodium nitrate as inorganic nitrogen source with *Monascus ruber* using steamed rice under SSF.



Effect of ammonium sulphate concentration: In order to evaluate the effect of ammonium sulphate concentration on the fermentation medium, SSF was carried out with different concentrations of ammonium sulphate varying from 0.5-3.0% (w/w). Maximum yield of lovastatin yield of 8.3 mg/gds was obtained at a concentration of 1.5 %w/w (**Fig. 11**).

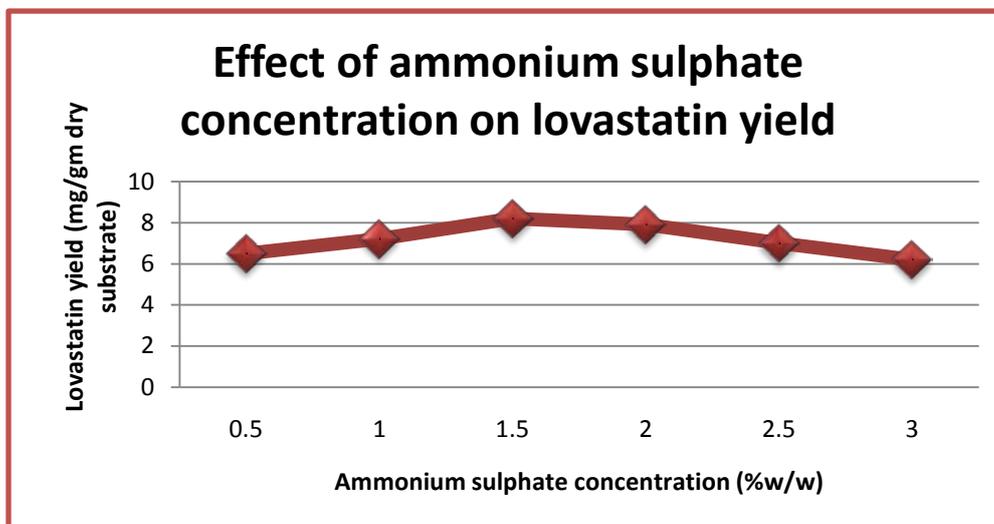


Fig. 11: Effect of ammonium sulphate concentration on lovastatin production

Finally with all the optimized parameters, of incubation time 5 days, incubation temperature 28°C, initial moisture content 60 % (v/w), inoculum age 4 days, inoculum volume 30 %v/w, pH 6.0, carbon source and its concentration 1.5% (w/w) lactose, nitrogen source and its concentration 1.5% w/w ammonium sulphate maximum lovastatin yield of 11.2 mg/gds was obtained.

CONCLUSION

The present study shows that *Aspergillus flavipes* NCIM-1209 can produce an important secondary metabolite - lovastatin with relatively good yield from rice husk which is an agro-industrial residue, easily available and economical. The significant improvement in lovastatin yield was recorded when the basal medium was supplemented with different carbon sources. This study indicates that rice husk from agro-industrial residues can be exploited from their commercial use in various industries.

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