



# The Emerging of Antifungal Resistance and Virulence in Non-Albicans *Candida* Derived from Bovine Mastitis

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## ABSTRACT

Mastitis represents a considerable economic burden on the dairy industry, adversely affecting milk yield and quality. In mycotic mastitis, *Candida* (*C.*) species are frequently responsible for opportunistic fungal infections in cows. The present study aimed to isolate *C. tropicalis* from aseptically collected milk samples from 60 dairy cows (average age 4.2 years) that tested positive for the California mastitis test (CMT). Mycotic etiology was confirmed through direct microscopy (KOH wet mount), culture on Sabouraud dextrose agar, and biochemical identification (API 20C AUX system). Antifungal sensitivity testing was conducted employing the broth microdilution method in accordance with CLSI M27-A3 guidelines. Additionally, molecular detection of antifungal resistance genes (*ERG3* and *CDR1*) and virulence genes (*SAPT3*, *ALS2*, and *LIP1*) was carried out using polymerase chain reaction (PCR). A total of five *C. tropicalis* isolates were obtained from 60 mastitis milk samples, yielding a prevalence of 8.3%. Antifungal susceptibility profiles demonstrated that all tested isolates were sensitive to itraconazole, nystatin, and ketoconazole. However, two of five isolates (40%) were resistant to fluconazole, all five isolates (100%) were resistant to terbinafine, and three of five isolates (60%) were resistant to voriconazole. Virulence genes (*SAPT3*, *ALS2*, and *LIP1*) were identified in 100%, 40%, and 60% of the five examined isolates, respectively. Meanwhile, antifungal resistance genes (*CDR1* and *ERG3*) were found in 100% and 80% of the isolates, respectively. The present study underscored the prevalence of multidrug-resistant *C. tropicalis* in bovine mycotic mastitis, emphasizing the need for routine antifungal susceptibility testing and molecular screening in dairy farms.

**Keywords:** Antifungal resistance, *Candida tropicalis*, Mastitis, Resistance gene, Virulence gene

## INTRODUCTION

Bovine mastitis represents the most significant economic challenge for the global dairy industry, resulting in substantial losses from decreased milk production, discarded milk, and the premature culling of high-value livestock (Devanathan et al., 2024). While bacterial pathogens have traditionally been the primary focus, mycotic mastitis is increasingly recognized as a significant concern within veterinary medicine. Among fungal agents, species of the genus *Candida* (*C.*), specifically *C. tropicalis*, act as opportunistic pathogens that exploit the mammary gland's environment, particularly in cows with compromised immune systems or those experiencing a disrupted microbial balance due to prolonged antibacterial therapy (Dawoud et al., 2024; Schikora-Tamarit and Gabaldón, 2024). The consequences of mycotic mastitis are often more severe than those of bacterial infections due to irreversible damage to the udder tissue. The pathogenicity of *C. tropicalis* is driven by a robust set of virulence factors, including secreted aspartyl proteinases (SAPs), phospholipases, and lipases. These enzymes facilitate the degradation of mammary epithelial tissue, leading to chronic inflammation, udder induration, and permanent loss of secretory function (Zuza-Alves et al., 2017). Additionally, *C. tropicalis* forms extensive three-dimensional biofilms, dense microbial communities covered by an extracellular matrix. This matrix shields the fungi from host immune responses and antifungal agents, making the infection highly resistant to treatment (Cangui-Panchi et al., 2023; Yogendraiah et al., 2025).

The zoonotic potential of *Candida* species in dairy environments highlighted the need for effective treatment. The potential transmission of resistant strains between animals and human handlers contributes to a cycle of antimicrobial resistance (AMR), posing a significant public health threat (Devanathan et al., 2024). Historically, *C. albicans* was considered the predominant pathogenic yeast; however, recent clinical and veterinary studies have indicated a significant increase in isolation rates of non-albicans *Candida* (NAC) species (Sadeghi et al., 2018). *Candida tropicalis* has become one of the most important NAC species in clinical settings, ranking second after *C. albicans* in causing invasive and persistent infections (Jiang et al., 2024).

Management of these infections is severely limited by the increasing prevalence of antifungal resistance. Azoles, particularly fluconazole, are the preferred treatment option due to their safety and low cost (Paul et al., 2022). *Candida tropicalis* has demonstrated a strong ability to quickly develop acquired resistance against antifungal medicines. Unlike

ORIGINAL ARTICLE  
 Received: March 11, 2026  
 Revised: April 10, 2026  
 Accepted: May 04, 2026  
 Published: June 30, 2026

other species, *C. tropicalis* frequently exhibits cross-resistance, whereby exposure to a single azole agent confers resistance to subsequent azole derivatives, such as voriconazole (Wang et al., 2021). Recent studies have documented concerning resistance rates not only to azoles but also to amphotericin B and echinocandins, thereby limiting the therapeutic options available to veterinarians (Díaz-García et al., 2023; Dawoud et al., 2024; Schikora-Tamarit and Gabaldón, 2024). The necessity of the present study stemmed from the urgent need to understand the molecular factors driving resistance in the dairy industry. Identifying specific virulence and resistance genes in local bovine isolates improves the ability to predict clinical outcomes and facilitates the implementation of more targeted strategies for infection management. Therefore, the present study aimed to isolate *C. tropicalis* from bovine mastitis cases, characterize its antifungal susceptibility profiles, and utilize polymerase chain reaction (PCR) to detect key resistance genes (*ERG3* and *CDR1*) and virulence-associated genes (*SAP3*, *ALS2*, and *LIP1*).

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Ethical approval

The current investigation was conducted in accordance with the guidelines of the Department of Microbiology and Immunology, National Research Centre, Egypt. All procedures for milk sampling and animal handling were performed in accordance with institutional protocol.

### Sampling and animals

A total of 60 milk samples were collected from 60 individual cows (one sample per animal) across three medium-scale dairy farms situated in Giza governorate, Egypt. The cows were primarily Holstein-Friesian crossbreeds, with an average age of  $4.5 \pm 1.2$  years, with a mean body weight of  $550 \pm 45$  kg. Clinical mastitis was diagnosed through physical examination of the udder, noting symptoms such as swelling, heat, and pain, along with observable abnormalities in milk, including clots or discoloration. Subclinical mastitis was identified using the California mastitis test (CMT). Prior to sample collection, the teats were meticulously cleaned and disinfected with 70% ethyl alcohol, and the first three milk streams were discarded. Approximately 10 mL of mid-stream milk was collected aseptically into sterile screw-capped tubes, transported to the laboratory in an ice box at 4°C, and processed within 24 hours.

### Fungal conventional isolation and identification

Each milk sample was streaked onto Sabouraud dextrose agar (SDA; Oxoid, UK) and incubated at 30°C for 48-72 hours. To differentiate *Candida* species, isolates were subcultured onto chromogenic *Candida* agar (CHROM agar; BD Diagnostics, USA). Pure colonies were identified based on morphology and conventional biochemical assays as described by Marinho et al. (2010).

### Antifungal sensitivity testing

Antifungal susceptibility was determined according to the CLSI (2009) guidelines using the Kirby-Bauer disc diffusion method. Six antifungal agents were tested, including nystatin (100 IU), terbinafine (1 µg), itraconazole (8 µg), fluconazole (25 µg), ketoconazole (15 µg), and voriconazole (1 µg).

### Molecular detection of antifungal resistance and virulence genes

#### Extracting DNA

Genomic DNA was extracted from five pure *C. tropicalis* isolates using the QIAamp DNA mini kit (Qiagen, Hilden, Germany). Briefly, 200 µL of the sample was incubated at 56°C for 10 minutes with 20 µL of Proteinase K and 200 µL of lysis buffer. After adding 200 µL of 100% ethanol, the lysate was washed and centrifuged. Nucleic acid was eluted in 100 µL of the provided elution buffer.

#### Primers

Primers from Bio Basic (Markham, ON, Canada) were used to detect resistance genes (*ERG3* and *CDR1*) and virulence genes (*SAP3*, *ALS2*, and *LIP1*). The primer sequences and detailed thermal cycling conditions, including denaturation, annealing, and extension, were adapted from Zhang et al. (2019), Paul et al. (2022), and Aboulela et al. (2023; Tables 1 and 2).

#### PCR amplification

Six µL of DNA template, one µL of each primer at 20 pmol, 4.5 µL of water, and 12.5 µL of EmeraldAmp Max PCR master mix (Takara, Japan) were combined to form a 25 µL reaction. The amplification reaction was performed using an Applied Biosystem 2720 thermal cycler.

### Visualization of the PCR products

The PCR products were separated via electrophoresis on a 1.5% agarose gel (AppliChem GmbH, Darmstadt, Germany) in 1x Tris-Borate-Ethylenediaminetetraacetic acid (TBE) buffer. A consistent gradient of 5 Volts/cm was applied. Fragment sizes were determined using a GeneRuler 100 bp DNA Ladder (Thermo Fisher Scientific, Germany). Gels were photographed using the Alpha Innotech Gel Documentation System and subsequently analyzed with specialized software.

**Table 1.** Primers and PCR conditions of *ERG3* and *CDR1* resistance genes in *Candida tropicalis* isolated from mastitis cow's milk

Genes	Primers	Amplified fragment (bp)	Primary denaturation	Amplification (35 cycles)			Final extension	Reference
				Secondary denaturation	Annealing	Extension		
<i>ERG3</i>	ATTCCATTCACCTATTGCCTGGTC	836 bp	94°C 5 min	94°C 30 sec	55°C 40 sec	72°C 50 sec	72°C 10 min	Paul et al. (2022)
	AGTGCCTTATAACCACCAGTAGA							
<i>CDR1</i>	TCGCCGTTTGCTGAAGAAGA	140 bp	94°C 5 min	94°C 30 sec	55°C 30 sec	72°C 30 sec	72°C 7 min	Aboulela et al. (2023)
	GCAATCCCAATTTTCGATGGT							

Min: Minute, Sec: Seconds

**Table 2.** Primers and PCR conditions of *SAPT3*, *ALS2*, and *LIP1* virulence genes in *Candida tropicalis* isolated from mastitis cow's milk

Genes	Primers	Amplified fragment (bp)	Primary denaturation	Amplification (35 cycles)			Final extension	Reference
				Secondary denaturation	Annealing	Extension		
<i>SAPT3</i>	AATTGGAATATAAATACGCT	1325 bp	94°C 5 min	94°C 1 min	53°C 1 min	72°C 1.5 min	72°C 12 min	
	GGGGGTGAAACTACAATTTA							
<i>ALS2</i>	GGTAAAAGAAGTCGGATACGCAT	1214 bp	94°C 5 min	94°C 1 min	55°C 1 min	72°C 1.5 min	72°C 12 min	Zhang et al. (2019)
	CTACATCCGTTGCCATTACTATT							
<i>LIP1</i>	CCAAGGAGTCTATGGCTCAGTTA	1945 bp	94°C 5 min	94°C 1 min	50°C 1 min	72°C 2 min	72°C 12 min	
	TAAGTGATAAAGTTGTCGGTGTTC							

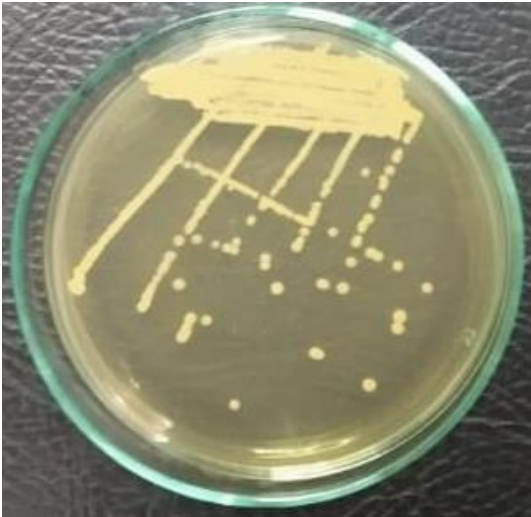
Min: Minute, Sec: Seconds

### Statistical analysis

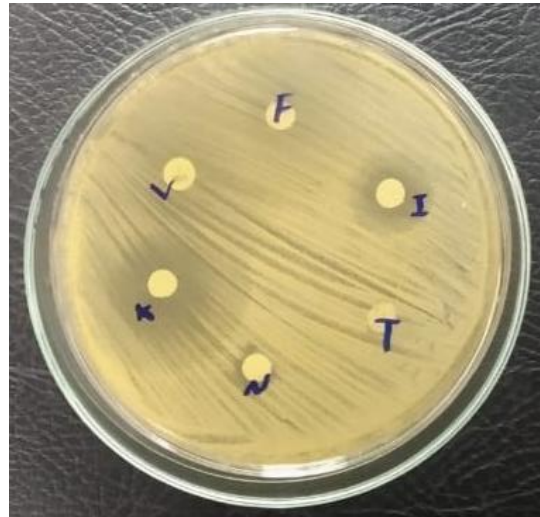
Data were analyzed using SPSS software (version 14.0). Descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, were calculated to summarize the prevalence of *C. tropicalis* isolates, antifungal resistance patterns, and the distribution of virulence and resistance genes.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the present study, *C. tropicalis* was identified in 8.3% (5/60) of mastitis milk samples. These isolates formed creamy, shiny white colonies on SDA (Figure 1) and were verified as *C. tropicalis* by their distinct blue color on CHROM agar (Figure 2). The isolation rate observed in the present study aligns with the 10.1% reported by Seker (2010) in Turkey, but it markedly exceeds the 2% documented by Dworecka-Kaszak et al. (2012) in Poland. Conversely, higher prevalence rates have been reported by Eldesouky et al. (2016) at 19.5% in Egypt and 26.1% in Turkey (Erbaş et al., 2017). These variations likely reflect differences in regional farming practices, humidity, and the hygiene protocols employed during milking. The emergence of *C. tropicalis* in dairy herds is often worsened by improper use of antibacterial agents. Although antibiotics effectively target bacteria, their indiscriminate use can disrupt the cow's natural mammary microbiota by eliminating beneficial bacterial communities. This microbial condition allows opportunistic, drug-resistant fungi such as *C. tropicalis* to proliferate and colonize the udder (Jiang et al., 2024). Furthermore, the present study suggested that prolonged antibiotic exposure may induce stress responses in fungal cells, potentially increasing their virulence and resilience against subsequent antifungal treatment (Devanathan et al., 2024). Antibiogram of *C. tropicalis* for six different antifungal agents (Figures 3-7; Table 3) demonstrated that *C. tropicalis* isolates were sensitive to itraconazole, nystatin, and ketoconazole. However, two of five isolates (40%) were resistant to fluconazole, all five isolates (100%) were resistant to terbinafine, and three of five isolates (60%) were resistant to voriconazole.



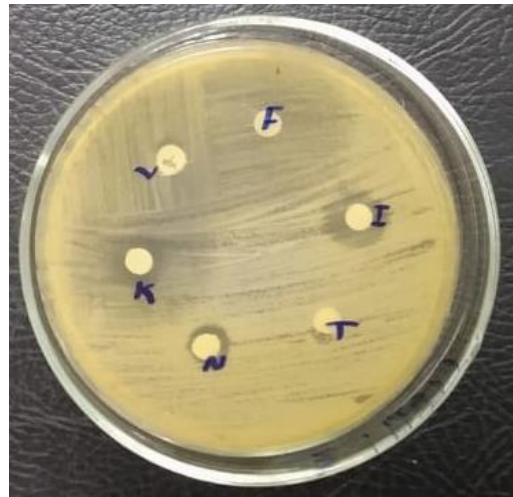
**Figure 1.** *Candida tropicalis* cultured on Sabouraud Dextrose Agar. The culture appears smooth, creamy-white, and convex colonies after incubation at 37°C for 48 hours.



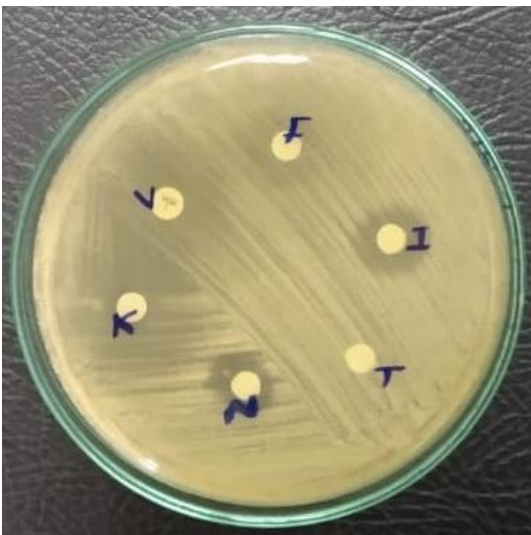
**Figure 4.** Antifungal susceptibility testing of *Candida tropicalis* using the disc diffusion method (Isolate 2). F: Fluconazole, I: Itraconazole, T: Terbinafine, N: Nystatin, K: Ketoconazole, and V: Voriconazole



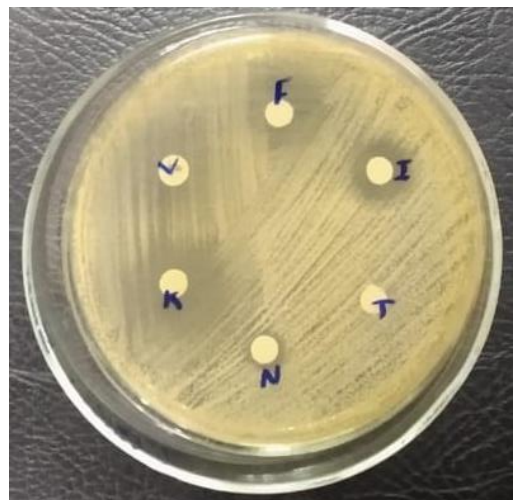
**Figure 2.** Differential identification of *Candida tropicalis* on chromogenic *Candida* agar (CHROM agar). *Candida* medium, and the colonies appeared blue



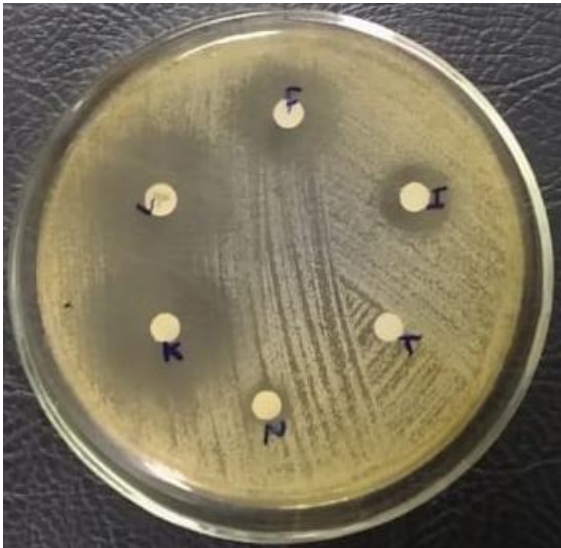
**Figure 5.** Antifungal susceptibility testing of *Candida tropicalis* using the disc diffusion method (Isolate 3). F: Fluconazole, I: Itraconazole, T: Terbinafine, N: Nystatin, K: Ketoconazole, and V: Voriconazole



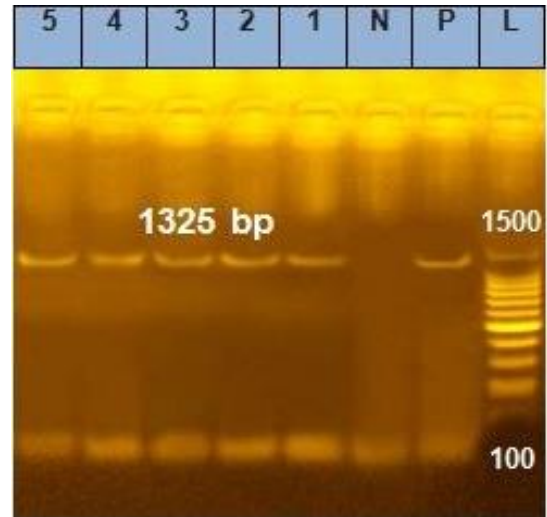
**Figure 3.** Antifungal susceptibility testing of *Candida tropicalis* using the disc diffusion method (Isolate 1). F: Fluconazole, I: Itraconazole, T: Terbinafine, N: Nystatin, K: Ketoconazole, and V: Voriconazole



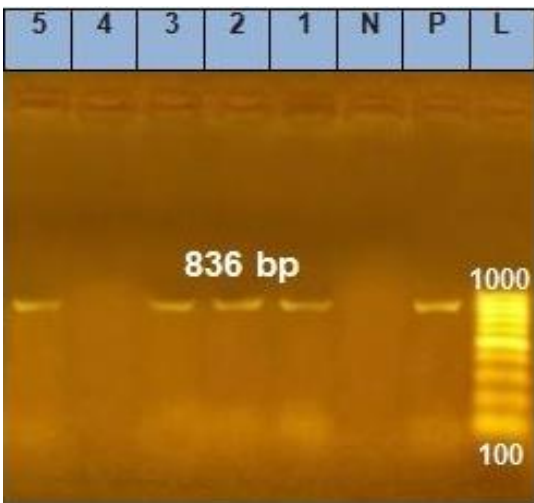
**Figure 6.** Antifungal susceptibility testing of *Candida tropicalis* using the disc diffusion method (Isolate 4). F: Fluconazole, I: Itraconazole, T: Terbinafine, N: Nystatin, K: Ketoconazole, and V: Voriconazole



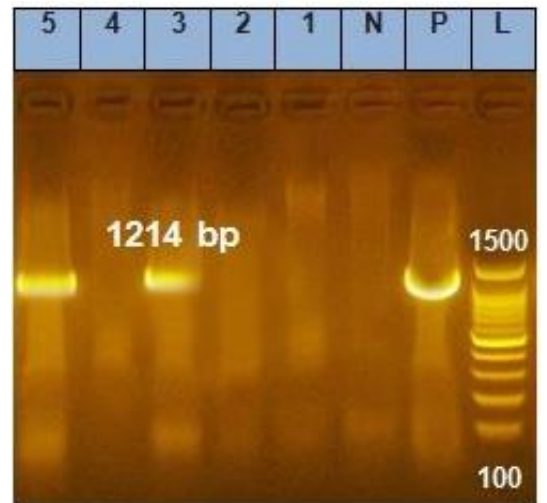
**Figure 7.** Antifungal susceptibility testing of *Candida tropicalis* using the disc diffusion method (Isolate 5). F: Fluconazole, I: Itraconazole, T: Terbinafine, N: Nystatin, K: Ketoconazole, and V: Voriconazole



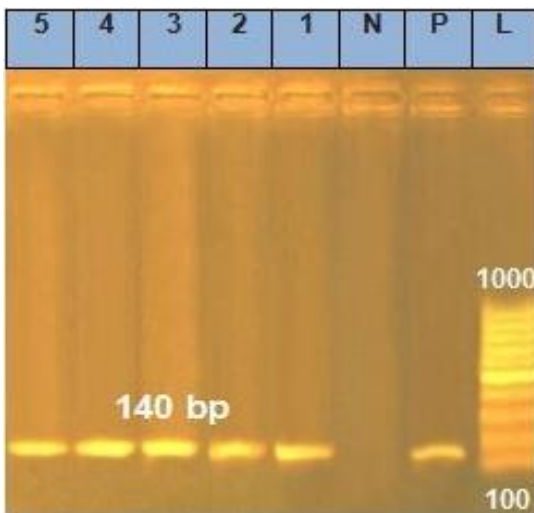
**Figure 10.** Agarose gel electrophoresis of the *SAP3* virulence gene (1325 bp) in *Candida tropicalis* isolates. Lane L: 100-1500 bp DNA ladder; Lane P: Positive control; Lane N: Negative control; Lanes 1, 2, 3, 4, 5: Positive isolates showing 100% prevalence of the *SAP3* gene.



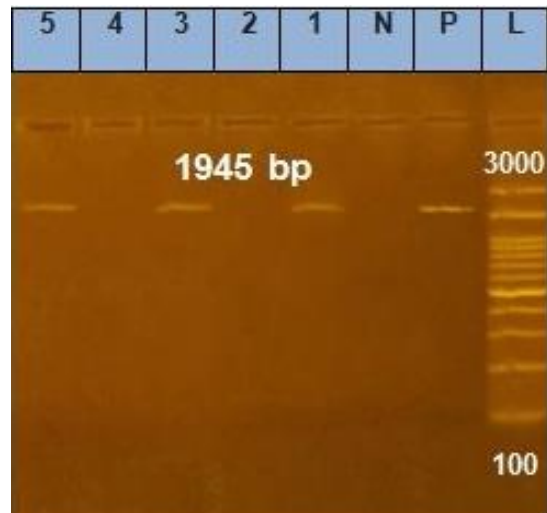
**Figure 8.** Agarose gel electrophoresis of the *ERG3* resistance gene (836 bp) in *Candida tropicalis* isolates. Lane L: 100-1000 bp DNA ladder, Lane P: Positive control, Lane N: Negative control, Lanes 1, 2, 3, 5: Positive isolates, Lane 4: Negative isolate.



**Figure 11.** Agarose gel electrophoresis of the *ALS2* virulence gene (1214 bp) in *Candida tropicalis* isolates. Lane L: 100-1500 bp DNA ladder, Lane P: Positive control, Lane N: Negative control, Lanes 3, 5: Positive isolates, Lanes 1, 2, 4: Negative isolates.



**Figure 9.** Agarose gel electrophoresis of the *CDR1* resistance gene (140 bp) in *Candida tropicalis* isolates. Lane L: 100-1000 bp DNA ladder; Lane P: Positive control, Lane N: Negative control, Lanes 1, 2, 3, 4, 5: All isolates positive for the *LIP1* gene.



**Figure 12.** Agarose gel electrophoresis of the *LIP1* virulence gene (1945 bp) in *Candida tropicalis* isolates. Lane L: 100-3000 bp DNA ladder, Lane P: Positive control, Lane N: Negative control, Lanes 1, 3, 5: Positive isolates, Lanes 2, 4: Negative isolates.

**Table 3.** Antifungal sensitivity testing of *Candida tropicalis* isolated from mastitis cow's milk

<i>C. tropicalis</i> isolates	Fluconazole	Itraconazole	Terbinafine	Nystatin	Ketoconazole	Voriconazole
Isolate (1)	12.3 ± 0.3	13.3 ± 0.3	R	9.3 ± 0.3	21.3 ± 0.3	16.3 ± 0.3
Isolate (2)	R	14.3 ± 0.3	R	7.7 ± 0.3	19 ± 0.6	R
Isolate (3)	R	14 ± 0.6	R	9.3 ± 0.3	12.3 ± 0.3	R
Isolate (4)	13.3 ± 0.3	15.3 ± 0.3	R	9.3 ± 0.3	19.3 ± 0.3	R
Isolate (5)	19.3 ± 0.3	15.3 ± 0.3	R	10 ± 0.0	26.3 ± 0.3	24 ± 0.6

The zones were measured in mm. R: Resistant, C: *Candida*

**Table 4.** Antifungal resistance genes and virulence genes of *Candida tropicalis* isolated from mastitis cow's milk

Sample	ERG3	CDR1	SAPT	ALS2	LIP1
1	+	+	+	-	+
2	+	+	+	-	-
3	+	+	+	+	+
4	-	+	+	-	-
5	+	+	+	+	+

+: Means the presence of this gene, -: Means the absence of this gene

The emergence of antifungal resistance in *C. tropicalis* results from multiple factors, including genetic changes and environmental influences (Paul et al., 2022). According to an investigation conducted in Turkey, Sonmez and Erbas (2017) reported that 25 *Candida* isolates demonstrated 100% resistance to miconazole, flucytosine, amphotericin B, and fluconazole. Additionally, Cândido et al. (2021) reported that *C. tropicalis* isolated from domestic and wild animals in Brazil demonstrated multidrug resistance, with 100% resistance to itraconazole but remaining susceptible to voriconazole. Antifungal resistance is mediated by point mutations in the *ERG11* gene and by increased expression of efflux pumps such as *CDR1* and *MDR1*, which help in avoiding common antifungal medicines. This resistance mainly stems from changes in the ergosterol biosynthesis pathway. Azole antifungal agents specifically target the enzyme lanosterol 14 $\alpha$ -demethylase, which is encoded by the *ERG11* gene (Lee et al., 2021). In *C. tropicalis*, at least 31 distinct mutations in the *ERG11* gene have been identified; these structural alterations prevent antifungal drugs from binding to the target enzyme, making treatment ineffective (Lima et al., 2022).

Over the past decade, the resistance of *C. tropicalis* to fluconazole has been consistently observed across several nations and regions, with notably high resistance rates documented in Austria at 37.7% (Arendrup et al., 2023), Vietnam (18.8%; Ngo et al., 2023), India (21.1%; Lima et al., 2022), Singapore and Thailand (20%; Tan et al., 2016), and China (12.8%; Fan et al., 2019). In addition to fluconazole resistance, *C. tropicalis* has exhibited reduced susceptibility to other triazoles, such as itraconazole and voriconazole, across diverse geographic regions, including Brazil, Spain, and North America (Fernández-Ruiz et al., 2015; Chapman et al., 2017; Xisto et al., 2017). Notably, these resistance rates often align with those of fluconazole, reflecting the high prevalence rate of cross-resistance. This incident occurs because different azole medicines target the same enzyme (lanosterol 14 $\alpha$ -demethylase enzyme); therefore, a single genetic mutation in the *ERG11* gene or the activation of multidrug efflux pumps (such as *CDR1*) can simultaneously make the fungus resistant to multiple medications within the same pharmacological class (Chong et al., 2012). In the current study, the molecular basis of this resistance was confirmed by the high prevalence of *CDR1* (100%) and *ERG3* (80%), as indicated in Figures 8 and 9 and Table 4. The *CDR1* gene encodes an Adenosine Triphosphate Binding Cassette (ABC) transporter that acts as an efflux pump, actively leading antifungal agents out of the fungal cell, lowering intracellular medicine levels to nonlethal levels (Prasad et al., 2019). Additionally, mutations or overexpression of *ERG3* (encoding sterol 5,6-desaturase) prevent the accumulation of toxic 14  $\alpha$ -methyl-3,6-diol, a byproduct of azole that typically results in fungal cell death. By altering this pathway, the fungus persists despite antifungal treatment (Paul et al., 2020).

Studies by Choi et al. (2016) and Rojas et al. (2023) have documented that *ERG11* and *ERG3* are the genes most frequently overexpressed in resistant isolates of *C. tropicalis*. This genetic adaptation typically occurs as a direct result of

prolonged and repeated exposure to azole antifungal agents, which apply selective pressure on the fungal population to overcome the drug's inhibitory effect on the ergosterol biosynthesis pathway. Although many studies have highlighted drug clearance, Jiang et al. (2013) found that efflux transporters may not be the main cause of azole resistance across all *C. tropicalis* populations. Jiang et al. (2013) suggested that alternative mechanisms play a more direct role in survival. These include modifications at the target site, such as mutations in the *ERG11* gene that decrease drug binding affinity, and the activation of bypass pathways in the sterol membrane, similar to those involving *ERG3* mutations. These mechanisms allow the fungus to preserve membrane integrity even when the main ergosterol pathway is inhibited.

In the present study, the virulence-associated genes *SAP3*, *ALS2*, and *LIP1* were detected in 100%, 40%, and 60% of the *C. tropicalis* isolates, respectively (Figures 10, 11, 12, and Table 4). These findings are consistent with the molecular pathogenesis models reported by Yu et al. (2016), who investigated the expression profiles of several virulence factors, including the secreted aspartyl proteinase family (*SAP1-4*), adhesins (*ALS1-2*), and lipases (*LIP1* and *LIP4*). Yu et al. (2016) demonstrated that the expression of the *ALS2* and *ALS3* genes, which encode critical cell-surface adhesins, was positively correlated with the extent of epithelial cell damage. This correlation highlighted an important stage in mycotic mastitis, indicating that *C. tropicalis* can adhere to the mammary epithelium, which is a crucial step in infection. Once adhered, the yeast can effectively utilize lytic enzymes, such as proteinases and lipases, to degrade host cell membranes. Thus, the high prevalence of *SAP3* (100%) and the presence of *ALS2* (40%) in the isolates during the present study indicated a strong genetic potential for both initial colonization and subsequent tissue destruction within the bovine udder.

## CONCLUSION

The present study identified *C. tropicalis* as a significant opportunistic pathogen causing bovine mastitis, with an isolation rate of 8.3% in the examined dairy herds. Although isolates were sensitive to nystatin and ketoconazole, resistance rates to terbinafine (100%), voriconazole (60%), and fluconazole (40%) were high. The molecular analysis confirmed that this resistance was driven by the widespread presence of the *CDR1* efflux pump gene (100% of isolates) and the high prevalence of the *ERG3* gene (80%). Furthermore, the 100% detection rate for the *SAP3* virulence gene indicated that these isolates have a considerable capacity to degrade host tissue. The current results demonstrated that *C. tropicalis* was not merely a transient contaminant but a persistent pathogen with a strong genetic tendency for drug resistance and invading mammary tissue. Consequently, the current study suggested that routine veterinary diagnostics should shift from general fungal detection toward species-level identification and molecular resistance profiling. Future studies should focus on the transcriptomic profiles of *C. tropicalis* virulence genes during active infections and investigate the possibility of cross-transmission of these resistant strains between dairy handlers and livestock to enhance understanding of the zoonotic risks associated with mycotic mastitis.

## DECLARATIONS

### Authors' contributions

Mona Mohamed Hassan Soliman designed the study, while Mona Mohamed Hassan Soliman and Mai Mohamed Kandil conducted data collection, practical work, analysis of results, and the preparation of the manuscript. All authors have read and approved the final edition of the manuscript before publication.

### Availability of data and materials

The data supporting the study's conclusions would be provided by the corresponding author upon request.

### Competing interests

No conflicts of interest have been disclosed by the authors.

### Ethical considerations

Each author has checked for ethical concerns, including plagiarism, consent to publish, misconduct, data fabrication and/or falsification, duplicate publication and/or submission, and redundancy. No AI tools were used to conduct or prepare the present study.

### Funding

The current study did not receive any funding or financial support.

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