EAS Journal of Parasitology and Infectious Diseases
Abbreviated Key Title: EAS J Parasitol Infect Dis
ISSN: 2663-0982 (Print) & ISSN: 2663-6727 (Online)
Published By East African Scholars Publisher, Kenya

OPEN ACCESS

Volume-7 | Issue-4 | Oct-Dec- 2025 | DOI: https://doi.org/10.36349/easjpid.2025.v07i04.005

Review Article

Decade of MALDI-TOF Mass Spectrometry in Clinical Mycology: A Review of Its Triumphs, Challenges, and Clinical Impact on the Identification of Yeasts and Filamentous Fungi

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Article History
Received: 21.10.2025
Accepted: 15.12.2025
Published: 19.12.2025

Journal homepage:
https://www.easpublisher.com

Quick Response Code

Abstract: ***Introduction*:** Over the past decade, Matrix-Assisted Laser Desorption/Ionization Time-of-Flight Mass Spectrometry (MALDI-TOF MS) has transitioned from a promising novelty to an indispensable tool in clinical microbiology. This review examines the successes, limitations, and profound clinical impact of MALDI-TOF MS in the identification of fungal pathogens since its widespread adoption. ***Methods*:** A comprehensive review of the literature was conducted to synthesize the progress of MALDI-TOF MS in mycology over the last ten years. The focus was placed on its application to filamentous fungi and rare yeasts, its current limitations, and its documented effects on patient management. ***Results*:** MALDI-TOF MS has achieved remarkable success in the rapid and accurate identification of common and rare yeast species, with identification times reduced from days to minutes. Its application to filamentous fungi (molds) has been more challenging but has matured significantly through improved sample preparation protocols and expanded spectral databases. The technology has proven to be a powerful tool for identifying clinically relevant molds like *Aspergillus*, *Fusarium*, and Mucorales. However, limitations persist, including incomplete databases for rare or newly described species, difficulties in distinguishing closely related (cryptic) species, and the lack of standardized protocols for mold extraction. ***Conclusion*:** MALDI-TOF MS has fundamentally transformed the workflow of the clinical mycology laboratory. It is a robust, rapid, and cost-effective identification method that has overcome many of the limitations of traditional techniques. While ongoing efforts are needed to expand spectral databases and standardize protocols, its role in improving the diagnosis and management of invasive fungal infections is firmly established.

Keywords: MALDI-TOF Mass Spectrometry, Clinical Mycology, Triumphs, Challenges, and Clinical Impact, Yeasts and Filamentous Fungi.

INTRODUCTION

Fungal infections, ranging from superficial to life-threatening invasive diseases, pose a significant global health challenge, particularly among immunocompromised populations. The cornerstone of effective management is the rapid and accurate identification of the causative fungal agent, as this directly influences the choice of antifungal therapy. For decades, clinical mycology laboratories relied on conventional methods such as microscopy, culture, and biochemical assays. While foundational, these techniques are often time-consuming, labor-intensive, and may fail to accurately identify rare or atypical species. The advent of molecular methods provided greater accuracy but often at a higher cost and with a longer turnaround time. Within this context, MALDI-TOF MS emerged as a revolutionary proteomic-based technology, promising to bridge the gap between speed and accuracy. Initially proven in bacteriology, its adoption in mycology over the last ten years has been a pivotal development.

Invasive fungal infections (IFIs) represent a significant and growing cause of morbidity and

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mortality, particularly among immunocompromised, critically ill, and hospitalized patients the successful management of these infections hinges on the rapid and accurate identification of the causative fungal agent, as different species exhibit diverse antifungal susceptibility profiles. For decades, clinical mycology laboratories relied on traditional methods based on culture, macroscopic and microscopic morphology, and biochemical tests. These techniques, while foundational, are notoriously slow, often taking days to weeks to yield a result, and frequently require specialized expertise, leading to critical delays in the administration of appropriate antifungal therapy.

The advent of molecular methods, such as DNA sequencing, provided a new gold standard for accuracy but remained costly and labor-intensive for routine use. The introduction of Matrix-Assisted Laser Desorption/Ionization Time-of-Flight Mass Spectrometry (MALDI-TOF MS) into the clinical microbiology laboratory marked a paradigm shift. Initially validated for bacterial identification, its application was quickly extended to the more complex domain of mycology.

This review synthesizes the experience of the last decade, charting the successes and hurdles of implementing MALDI-TOF MS for the identification of filamentous fungi and rare yeasts, and evaluating its transformative impact on clinical decision-making and patient care.

Successes and Advantages of MALDI-TOF MS in Mycology

The primary success of MALDI-TOF MS lies in its ability to dramatically reduce the time to identification. For common yeasts like *Candida* species, identification can be achieved in minutes from a single colony, compared to the 24-72 hours required for traditional biochemical tests. This speed is critical in cases of invasive candidiasis, where early, appropriate antifungal therapy is directly linked to improved patient survival. Numerous studies have demonstrated that MALDI-TOF MS provides high accuracy, often exceeding 95% for common yeasts, rivaling and sometimes surpassing the accuracy of reference molecular methods. Its utility extends to identifying cryptic species within complexes, such as the *Candida parapsilosis* and *Candida glabrata* complexes, which have different antifungal susceptibility profiles.

The application of MALDI-TOF MS for filamentous fungi (molds) has also been a significant advancement, though more complex. It has proven effective for identifying clinically relevant molds like *Aspergillus*, *Fusarium*, and Mucorales species. By providing a species-level identification much faster than morphological methods, which can take days or weeks of incubation, MALDI-TOF MS enables clinicians to quickly differentiate between species that have variable prognoses and treatment requirements. Furthermore, the low cost per sample after the initial capital investment makes it a highly cost-effective solution for high-throughput laboratories.

Revolutionizing Yeast Identification:

The most significant and immediate success of MALDI-TOF MS in mycology has been in the identification of yeasts. For common species like *Candida albicans*, *Candida glabrata*, and *Cryptococcus neoformans*, the technology provides a highly accurate and near-instantaneous identification directly from a single colony, with accuracy rates consistently reported above 95% this has dramatically reduced the turnaround time from 24-72 hours to mere minutes. Furthermore, its utility extends to rare and emerging yeast pathogens such as *Candida auris*, where rapid identification is critical for infection control, and other less common genera like *Trichosporon*, *Rhodotorula*, and *Saccharomyces*.

Taming the Molds: Progress in Filamentous Fungi Identification:

The identification of filamentous fungi (molds) has historically been a greater challenge for MALDI-TOF MS. This is due to their complex biology, the presence of resilient cell walls that hinder protein extraction, and the significant spectral variations that can occur depending on culture age and growth conditions.

Despite these difficulties, substantial progress has been made over the last decade. The development of more robust protein extraction protocols—involving mechanical disruption (bead beating) and chemical treatment (formic acid, acetonitrile)—has become standard practice and significantly improved spectral quality and reproducibility. Consequently, MALDI-TOF MS is now routinely used for the identification of many clinically important molds, including:

- ***Aspergillus* Species:** Accurately identifying members of the *A. fumigatus*, *A. flavus*, and *A. terreus* complexes.
- **Mucorales:** Providing rapid differentiation of genera such as *Rhizopus*, *Mucor*, and *Lichtheimia*, which is crucial given the aggressive nature of mucormycosis.
- **Dermatophytes:** Streamlining the identification of *Trichophyton*, *Microsporum*, and *Epidermophyton* species.

Limitations and Ongoing Challenges

Despite its successes, the implementation of MALDI-TOF MS in mycology is not without limitations. The most significant challenge is the completeness and standardization of the spectral databases. The accuracy

of identification is entirely dependent on the quality and comprehensiveness of the reference spectra in the database. While commercial databases are robust for common yeasts, they are often lacking for rare yeasts and less common filamentous fungi, leading to unreliable or "no identification" results. This necessitates the creation and validation of in-house, user-generated databases, which requires significant expertise and resources.

Sample preparation for filamentous fungi presents another major hurdle. Unlike yeasts, the rigid cell walls of molds require more rigorous protein extraction protocols to yield high-quality spectra. These multi-step procedures can be complex, are not standardized across laboratories, and can introduce variability that affects identification accuracy. Furthermore, culture remains a prerequisite, as direct identification from clinical specimens is still not routinely feasible, meaning the overall diagnostic timeline is still dependent on the fungus's growth rate.
Several limitations of MALDI-TOF MS in mycology persist.

Database Dependency and Gaps:

The accuracy of MALDI-TOF MS is entirely dependent on the quality and comprehensiveness of the reference spectral database. While commercial databases (e.g., Bruker Biotyper, VITEK MS) have expanded considerably, they may lack spectra for rare, geographically restricted, or newly described species. Furthermore, in-house, user-created databases are often necessary to supplement commercial ones but require careful validation and maintenance.

The "Cryptic Species" Problem:

MALDI-TOF MS struggles to reliably differentiate "cryptic species"—genetically distinct species that are morphologically identical. For example, it cannot consistently resolve members within the *Fusarium solani* species complex or the *Scedosporium apiospermum* complex. In these cases, DNA sequencing remains necessary for definitive identification when clinical implications demand it.

Lack of Standardization:

There is still a notable lack of standardization in protocols, particularly for filamentous fungi. Variations in culture media, incubation time, and protein extraction methods can all influence the resulting mass spectrum, potentially leading to identification discrepancies between laboratories.

Impact on Clinical Management and Patient Outcomes

The integration of MALDI-TOF MS into the clinical workflow has had a tangible impact on patient care. The rapid identification of bloodstream pathogens, particularly *Candida* species, allows for the swift de-escalation from broad-spectrum empirical antifungals to targeted, more effective therapy. This practice of "antifungal stewardship" not only improves patient outcomes by ensuring they receive the correct treatment sooner but also reduces the risk of antifungal resistance and minimizes drug-related toxicity and costs.

In cases of invasive mold infections, such as aspergillosis or mucormycosis, the species-level identification provided by MALDI-TOF MS is crucial. For example, distinguishing *Aspergillus fumigatus* from other *Aspergillus* species with intrinsic resistance to certain azoles, or identifying specific species within the Mucorales order, guides urgent and aggressive therapeutic and surgical decisions. This level of diagnostic precision, delivered in a clinically relevant timeframe, represents a paradigm shift from the presumptive diagnoses that were often made while awaiting conventional identification results.

The implementation of MALDI-TOF MS has had a profound and measurable impact on the clinical management of IFIs.

Reduced Turnaround Time and Targeted Therapy:

The most significant clinical benefit is the drastic reduction in identification turnaround time. This allows clinicians to de-escalate from broad-spectrum empirical antifungal therapy to a targeted, more appropriate agent much earlier. This not only improves patient outcomes by ensuring the pathogen is treated with an effective drug but also minimizes toxicity and reduces the selective pressure that drives antifungal resistance.

Enhanced Antimicrobial Stewardship:

By providing rapid and reliable species-level identification, MALDI-TOF MS is a cornerstone of modern antimicrobial stewardship programs. For instance, quickly distinguishing the intrinsically fluconazole-resistant *Candida krusei* or *C. glabrata* from the typically susceptible *C. albicans* has immediate therapeutic consequences.

Outbreak Investigation and Epidemiology:

The speed of MALDI-TOF MS facilitates the rapid detection of hospital-based outbreaks, such as those caused by *C. auris* or mold contamination in construction zones. It allows for swift implementation of infection control measures and provides valuable data for epidemiological surveillance.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Over the past decade, MALDI-TOF MS has firmly established itself as an indispensable tool in the modern clinical mycology laboratory. Its ability to provide rapid, accurate, and cost-effective identification of a wide range of fungal pathogens has revolutionized

diagnostic workflows and positively impacted patient management. However, to unlock its full potential, the field must address its current limitations. Future efforts should focus on expanding and standardizing commercial and open-source spectral databases, particularly for rare and geographically specific fungi. The development of simplified and standardized protein extraction protocols for filamentous fungi is equally critical. Looking ahead, the integration of MALDI-TOF MS with other technologies, such as its potential use in detecting antifungal resistance, promises to further enhance its clinical utility and solidify its role as a cornerstone of fungal diagnostics. As the technology continues to mature, its role in mitigating the threat of invasive fungal disease will only continue to grow.

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Cite This Article: A. Rhars, N. Ezzariga, Z. Lemkhente (2025). Decade of MALDI-TOF Mass Spectrometry in Clinical Mycology: A Review of Its Triumphs, Challenges, and Clinical Impact on the Identification of Yeasts and Filamentous Fungi. *EAS J Parasitol Infect Dis, 7*(4), 88-91.