



# Impact of Molecular Surveillance on Public Health Strategies and the Transformation of Malaria Diagnosis

Wangdi Tsheten\*

Department of Infectious Diseases, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

## DESCRIPTION

Malaria a vector-borne disease caused by *Plasmodium* parasites, continues to be a major global health challenge, particularly in endemic regions. The diagnosis of malaria has traditionally relied on microscopic examination of blood smears and Rapid Diagnostic Tests (RDTs). However, these methods have limitations, such as low sensitivity, especially in low-parasitemia cases. Molecular surveillance, using techniques like Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) and Loop-Mediated Isothermal Amplification (LAMP), offers a promising solution to overcome diagnostic heterogeneity. This article describes the role of molecular surveillance in enhancing malaria diagnosis, particularly in regions with diverse malaria transmission dynamics and its potential to improve disease monitoring, treatment outcomes and control strategies.

Malaria diagnosis in endemic areas often relies on blood smear microscopy, which is considered the gold standard. However, this method requires skilled personnel, is time-consuming and may fail to detect low-level parasitemia, which is particularly common in asymptomatic individuals or those with partial immunity. Rapid Diagnostic Tests (RDTs) have become an alternative, offering quicker results and ease of use, but they also have limitations. RDTs detect specific antigens produced by the parasite, but their sensitivity is lower than that of microscopy, especially in cases with low parasite density.

In addition to these technical challenges, malaria diagnosis is complicated by the presence of mixed infections, where different species of *Plasmodium* are present simultaneously. This can result in inaccurate results, particularly with RDTs, which are designed to detect a specific species of *Plasmodium*. Inaccurate diagnosis can lead to improper treatment, resulting in poor clinical outcomes and the continued spread of the disease. Furthermore, asymptomatic carriers, who harbor low levels of parasites but can still contribute to transmission, are often missed by traditional diagnostic methods. This diagnostic heterogeneity hampers

malaria control efforts and makes it difficult to accurately assess the burden of malaria in a population.

Molecular surveillance techniques, such as Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR), real-time PCR, and Loop-Mediated Isothermal Amplification (LAMP), have shown promise in overcoming the limitations of traditional diagnostic methods. These techniques offer high sensitivity and specificity, enabling the detection of low-level parasitemia and mixed infections, as well as asymptomatic cases. PCR-based methods, for example, can detect DNA from *Plasmodium* species with greater accuracy than microscopy or RDTs, even in cases with very low parasite density.

PCR is widely used for species identification and for detecting mixed infections, which are difficult to identify using conventional methods. By amplifying specific regions of the *Plasmodium* genome, PCR can provide precise information about the parasite species present in a sample. Real-time PCR further improves the sensitivity and quantification of parasitemia, making it particularly useful for monitoring treatment efficacy and tracking malaria transmission dynamics in populations. LAMP, a newer molecular technique, is gaining attention as a potential alternative to PCR. LAMP is an isothermal amplification method that requires no thermal cycling, making it simpler and more cost-effective for use in resource-limited settings. LAMP has shown comparable sensitivity to PCR in detecting malaria, particularly in asymptomatic cases and its simplicity makes it a promising tool for malaria surveillance in remote areas.

Molecular surveillance can play a critical role in malaria control by providing more accurate and detailed data on malaria transmission. Traditional diagnostic methods often underestimate the true burden of malaria, especially in asymptomatic individuals who may contribute significantly to transmission. By identifying these asymptomatic carriers, molecular surveillance can help target interventions more effectively, such as Mass Drug Administration (MDA) or Indoor Residual Spraying (IRS), to reduce transmission in high-risk populations. Additionally, molecular surveillance can assist in

**Correspondence to:** Wangdi Tsheten, Department of Infectious Diseases, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, E-mail: tsheten\_wangdi@email.com

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monitoring the effectiveness of antimalarial treatments. PCR-based methods can track changes in parasitemia levels over time, providing early indicators of treatment failure or the emergence of drug-resistant strains. This information is essential for guiding treatment policies and ensuring that the most effective drugs are used to combat the disease.

Molecular surveillance can also contribute to the development of more targeted malaria control strategies. For example, by identifying the prevalence of different *Plasmodium* species in a given area, public health authorities can tailor interventions to target specific species or transmission hotspots. Molecular tools can also aid in mapping the spread of drug-resistant strains, enabling more timely responses to emerging resistance patterns. Despite the potential benefits of molecular surveillance, several challenges remain. The high cost of molecular diagnostic techniques, such as PCR, can limit their widespread use in resource-limited settings. While LAMP offers a more cost-effective alternative, further research is needed to optimize its sensitivity and specificity in different malaria transmission settings. Additionally, the implementation of molecular surveillance requires trained personnel and infrastructure,

which may be lacking in some malaria-endemic regions. To fully realize the potential of molecular surveillance in malaria control, global health initiatives must invest in capacity-building efforts, including training healthcare workers and establishing diagnostic laboratories. Partnerships between governments, non-governmental organizations and research institutions will be essential to ensure that molecular surveillance techniques are accessible and scalable in endemic regions.

Molecular surveillance holds great promise for addressing the diagnostic heterogeneity of malaria and enhancing the accuracy of malaria diagnosis in endemic regions. By providing more sensitive and specific tools for detecting malaria, particularly in asymptomatic individuals and mixed infections, molecular surveillance can improve disease monitoring, guide treatment strategies and inform malaria control efforts. As the world works toward malaria elimination, molecular surveillance will be an essential component of more targeted and effective public health interventions. With continued investment in research and infrastructure, molecular surveillance has the potential to play a pivotal role in the fight against malaria.