

Protocol: Estimating bacterial loads from plating samples at different dilutions

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Overview

This protocol provides details on how you can estimate the bacterial load in samples based on data from plating those samples at different dilutions. The question being answered through this protocol of data analysis is: How much viable (i.e., replicating) bacteria are in each of your samples?

You can find out by **plating** the sample at different **dilutions** and counting the **colony-forming units (CFUs)** that are cultured on each plate. You put a sample on a plate with a medium they can grow on and then give them time to grow. The idea is that individual bacteria from the original sample end up randomly around the surface of the plate, and any that are viable (able to reproduce) will form a new colony that, after a while, you'll be able to see.

To count the number of colonies, you need a **“just right” dilution** (likely won't know what this is until after plating) to have a **countable plate**. If you have **too high** of a dilution (i.e., one with very few viable bacteria), randomness will play a big role in the CFU count, and you'll estimate the original with more variability. If you have **too low** of a dilution (i.e., one with lots of viable bacteria), it will be difficult to identify separate colonies, and they may compete for resources. (The pattern you see when the dilution is too low (i.e., too concentrated with bacteria) is called a *lawn*—colonies merge together). To translate from diluted concentration to original concentration, you can then do a back-calculation, incorporating both the number of colonies counted at that dilution and how dilute the sample was.

Laboratory description

These data result from plating each sample at several different dilutions and counting the colony-forming units (CFUs) that are cultured on each plate. Each sample was on a plate with a medium they can grow on and then given [time] to grow. On each plate, the individual bacteria from the original sample should have ended up spread randomly around the surface of the plate, and any that are viable (able to reproduce) formed a colony that, by the end of the procedure, can be counted.

[Image of plating]

Each sample was taken from a single mouse from the experiment. These mice came from different experimental groups, with several replicates (mice) per experimental group. The experimental groups in this case were:

[table of experimental groups]

Data description

Data are collected for this process into a spreadsheet that is set up in a “tidy” format. Here are the first few rows of the data:

```
## # A tibble: 6 x 4
##   group replicate dilution  CFUs
##   <dbl> <chr>      <dbl> <dbl>
## 1     2 2-A         0     26
## 2     2 2-C         0      0
## 3     3 3-A         0      0
```

```
## 4      3 3-C      0      0
## 5      4 4-A      0      0
## 6      4 4-B      0      0
```

Reading data into R

The data are stored in a comma-separated plain text file called “cfu_data.csv”. They can be read into R using the following code:

```
library(tidyverse)
cfu_data <- read_csv("cfu_data.csv")
head(cfu_data)
```

```
## # A tibble: 6 x 4
##   group replicate dilution  CFUs
##   <dbl> <chr>      <dbl> <dbl>
## 1     2 2-A         0     26
## 2     2 2-C         0      0
## 3     3 3-A         0      0
## 4     3 3-C         0      0
## 5     4 4-A         0      0
## 6     4 4-B         0      0
```

You will need to be sure that the data file (“cfu_data.csv” in this case) is in the working directory of your R session. You can check the current working directory in R with the call `getwd()`, and you can list all files in the current working directory with the call `list.files()`. These function calls can be useful to check to make sure that this file is in your working directory and, if not, to identify which directory on your computer file system you should move it to.

Once you run this command, the data will be available in your R session in the object `cfu_data`. You can see the first few rows by running:

```
head(cfu_data)
```

```
## # A tibble: 6 x 4
##   group replicate dilution  CFUs
##   <dbl> <chr>      <dbl> <dbl>
## 1     2 2-A         0     26
## 2     2 2-C         0      0
## 3     3 3-A         0      0
## 4     3 3-C         0      0
## 5     4 4-A         0      0
## 6     4 4-B         0      0
```

You can get a summary of the data by running:

```
summary(cfu_data)
```

```
##      group      replicate      dilution      CFUs
## Min.   : 2.000   Length:89   Min.   :0.000   Min.   : 0.000
## 1st Qu.: 4.000   Class :character 1st Qu.:1.000   1st Qu.: 0.000
## Median : 5.000   Mode  :character Median :2.000   Median : 0.000
## Mean   : 5.933                Mean  :1.539   Mean   : 1.944
## 3rd Qu.: 8.000                3rd Qu.:3.000   3rd Qu.: 0.000
## Max.   :10.000                Max.   :3.000   Max.   :52.000
```

Exploring the data and quality checks

It is helpful to explore the data once you read it in, to check for quality control issues and other characteristics of the data from a particular experiment. This section provides code examples for this quality control.

Identifying a good dilution for each sample

Estimating bacterial load for each sample

Outputting final estimates