Original Research Paper

Volume - 14 | Issue - 12 | December - 2024 | PRINT ISSN No. 2249 - 555X | DOI : 10.36106/ijar

Biochemistry

# ESTABLISHING REFERENCE INTERVAL FOR UREA BY HOFFMANN, BHATTACHARYA, NON-PARAMETRIC TEST, AND Q-Q PLOT METHOD

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**ABSTRACT** **Background:** Reference intervals (RIs) are essential for interpreting laboratory test results and determining the clinical status of patients. Urea, a key biomarker for renal function, requires accurate RIs to assess kidney health. This study aims to establish RIs for urea using multiple statistical methods, including the Hoffmann, Bhattacharya, non-parametric test, and Q-Q plot methods, based on a dataset of 1000 samples. **Methods:** A retrospective analysis of 1000 patient samples was performed to determine RIs for urea. Urea levels were measured using an enzymatic assay. The Hoffmann and Bhattacharya methods were used for indirect RI determination, while non-parametric percentiles and Q-Q plot methods were employed for assessing distribution and establishing RIs. Data analysis was conducted using R, SPSS, and Python for robust statistical analysis.**Results:** The mean urea level was 30.2 mg/dL, with a reference interval determined to be 12.0–49.5 mg/dL using non-parametric methods. The Hoffmann method provided a slightly wider RI of 12.4–48.9 mg/dL, while the Bhattacharya method yielded 14.0–47.5 mg/dL. Q-Q plots indicated an approximately normal distribution of urea levels with minor deviations in the tails. **Conclusion:** The established RIs for urea using various statistical methods provide a reliable basis for clinical interpretation. Non-parametric methods offer a robust approach for datasets with non-normal distributions. Future research should extend these methods to other biomarkers, such as creatinine and uric acid, to improve clinical diagnostic accuracy.

**KEYWORDS :** Urea, Reference Intervals, Hoffmann Method, Bhattacharya Method, Non-Parametric Tests, Q-Q Plot, Renal Function, Clinical Diagnostics

## INTRODUCTION

### BACKGROUND

Urea is a crucial biochemical marker widely used in clinical diagnostics to assess renal function and hydration status. As a byproduct of protein metabolism, its concentration in the blood reflects the kidney's ability to filter waste from the bloodstream (Koeppen & Stanton, 2017). Abnormal urea levels can indicate renal dysfunction, dehydration, or excessive protein breakdown, making its measurement essential in both routine and emergency medical evaluations (Levey et al., 2015). Reference intervals (RIs) are pivotal in interpreting laboratory results, serving as the benchmarks for distinguishing between normal and pathological conditions. These intervals are typically established based on the central 95% distribution of healthy population data, providing a comparison point to aid clinical decision-making (Horn & Pesce, 2002).

### CHALLENGES IN ESTABLISHING RIS

Establishing RIs involves numerous challenges, particularly in accounting for population-specific variations and measurement methods. Traditionally, RIs are determined through direct methods, where healthy reference populations are tested and their results analyzed (Solberg, 1987). However, this approach can be resource-intensive and impractical in many settings. Indirect methods, such as those proposed by Hoffmann (1963) and Bhattacharya (1967), have gained prominence as they allow for RI estimation using existing laboratory datasets without the need for new population sampling.

These indirect methods rely on statistical modeling to deduce RIs from routine laboratory data. The Hoffmann method uses cumulative frequency distribution to establish RIs, assuming a Gaussian distribution of results in the healthy population (Hoffmann, 1963). Bhattacharya's approach, in contrast, is a transformation technique that estimates RIs by iteratively refining the distribution of laboratory values (Bhattacharya, 1967). Additionally, non-parametric methods, which do not assume a normal distribution, offer a robust way to determine RIs by directly analyzing data percentiles (Horn & Pesce, 2002). Finally, Q-Q plots provide a graphical method to assess the distribution of urea levels and check for normality, which aids in choosing the appropriate statistical approach (Wilk & Gnanadesikan, 1968).

### STUDY OBJECTIVE

This study aims to establish reference intervals for urea by utilizing the Hoffmann, Bhattacharya, non-parametric test, and Q-Q plot methods. By analyzing a dataset of 1000 individuals, the study will compare the effectiveness of these methods in accurately determining RIs for urea, contributing to better diagnostic precision in clinical laboratories.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### TRADITIONAL METHODS FOR DETERMINING RIS

Reference intervals (RIs) are essential for interpreting clinical laboratory results, helping to identify whether a patient's test results fall within a "normal" range. Traditionally, RIs are established through two main approaches: parametric and non-parametric methods. Parametric methods assume that the data follow a normal (Gaussian) distribution and calculate RIs using mean and standard deviation (Reed et al., 1971). However, these methods are sensitive to outliers and deviations from normality, which can skew the reference limits (Horn & Pesce, 2002). Non-parametric methods, on the other hand, do not assume any specific distribution and calculate RIs using percentile values, typically the central 95% of the data (Solberg, 1987). This makes non-parametric methods more robust and applicable in clinical settings where data often deviate from normality.

### HOFFMANN METHOD

The Hoffmann method, introduced in 1963, is an indirect approach for RI determination that utilizes cumulative frequency distributions. This method is particularly useful in clinical settings where it is not feasible to collect data from a healthy reference population (Hoffmann, 1963). Instead of directly measuring the healthy population, the Hoffmann method assumes that the majority of individuals in the dataset are healthy, and it estimates the RI by plotting cumulative frequencies and identifying the central distribution. It has been widely used in situations where obtaining direct population data is impractical, such as in routine laboratory datasets (Katayev et al., 2010). Over the years, the Hoffmann method has been refined and validated in various studies, proving its utility in establishing reference limits for a range of biomarkers, including urea (Jones & Barker, 2008).

### BHATTACHARYA METHOD

The Bhattacharya method, proposed in 1967, offers another indirect approach to RI determination, based on a graphical transformation technique. The method involves plotting frequency distributions and iteratively transforming the data to identify a "clean" population of healthy individuals, from which the RI can be derived (Bhattacharya, 1967). This method is particularly effective in datasets where there is significant overlap between healthy and diseased populations. Unlike the Hoffmann method, which relies on cumulative frequency, the Bhattacharya method employs a more sophisticated approach to distinguish between different subpopulations within the data (Katayev et al., 2010). This method has been shown to be reliable for estimating RIs in laboratory settings where the direct sampling of healthy populations is not feasible (Kouri et al., 2005).

## NON-PARAMETRIC TESTS FOR RI DETERMINATION

Non-parametric tests are widely recognized for their robustness in RI estimation. Unlike parametric methods, non-parametric approaches do not make assumptions about the underlying distribution of the data, making them ideal for datasets with non-Gaussian distributions (Reed et al., 1971). Non-parametric methods use percentiles, typically the 2.5th and 97.5th percentiles, to define the RI, which represents the central 95% of the data (Horn & Pesce, 2002). This method is simple to apply and is commonly used when sample sizes are large enough to ensure stable percentile estimates. Due to its flexibility and minimal assumptions, the non-parametric approach is highly recommended for RI determination in clinical laboratories (Ceriotti et al., 2009).

## Q-Q PLOT METHOD

Q-Q (Quantile-Quantile) plots are graphical tools used to assess whether a dataset follows a particular theoretical distribution, often the normal distribution (Wilk & Gnanadesikan, 1968). In the context of RI determination, Q-Q plots allow researchers to visually inspect the distribution of laboratory data, such as urea levels, and determine if the data deviate from normality. By plotting the quantiles of the sample data against the quantiles of a standard normal distribution, any departures from linearity indicate deviations from normality (Wilk & Gnanadesikan, 1968). This method is particularly useful in combination with other statistical techniques, as it helps confirm whether parametric or non-parametric methods are more appropriate for RI estimation in a given dataset (Geisser & Johnson, 2006).

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### STUDY DESIGN

This study is a retrospective analysis conducted on a dataset of 1000 patient samples collected from a clinical laboratory. The primary objective is to establish reference intervals (RIs) for urea using various statistical methods. Data were gathered from routine urea tests performed over a defined period from January 2024 to March 2024, in the central clinical biochemistry laboratory, Coimbatore Medical College. The retrospective nature of the study allows for indirect estimation of RIs without the need for a specific reference population.

### INCLUSION CRITERIA:

- Individuals aged 18 to 75 years.
- Normal renal function as indicated by other biochemical markers.
- No significant medical history of chronic kidney disease, liver disease, or severe dehydration.

### EXCLUSION CRITERIA:

- Patients undergoing dialysis or with known acute renal failure.
- Individuals on nephrotoxic medications.
- Outliers with urea levels above 100 mg/dL, which may indicate underlying pathologies.

### LABORATORY METHODS FOR UREA MEASUREMENT

Urea levels in the serum were measured using Urease/GLDH method, which is a widely accepted and accurate method for urea determination. The assay uses urease, which catalyzes the conversion of urea to ammonia and carbon dioxide. The ammonia produced is then quantified, and the concentration of urea is calculated. This method provides high precision and sensitivity, making it ideal for large-scale clinical studies (Tietz et al., 2015).

**EQUIPMENT**: Automated clinical chemistry analyzer (Transasia XL 640).

**REAGENTS**: Urease/GLDH enzyme reagent kits.
**MEASUREMENT RANGE**: 11.5–300 mg/dL with a coefficient of variation below 5%.

### STATISTICAL METHODS

### HOFFMANN METHOD:

The Hoffmann method, an indirect approach, was used to estimate the reference intervals (RIs) from cumulative frequency distributions. This method assumes that the majority of values in the population belong to healthy individuals. The following steps were implemented:

1. The cumulative frequency of the urea values was plotted.
2. The linear portion of the cumulative plot was identified, assuming this represents the central healthy population.
3. RIs were calculated by extrapolating the linear portion to the 2.5th and 97.5th percentiles, representing the lower and upper limits of the reference interval (Hoffmann, 1963).

### BHATTACHARYA METHOD:

The Bhattacharya method, a graphical technique, was applied to indirectly estimate RIs. This method uses the following steps:

1. The frequency distribution of urea values was plotted on a logarithmic scale.

2. The data were iteratively transformed to differentiate between healthy and non-healthy populations.

3. The normal population was identified, and the RI was established based on the central distribution (Bhattacharya, 1967).

This method is particularly effective when the dataset includes overlapping subpopulations (e.g., healthy vs. diseased individuals).

### NON-PARAMETRIC TEST:

The non-parametric approach was used to estimate RIs without making assumptions about the distribution of urea values. This method involved:

1. Sorting the urea values in ascending order.

2. Calculating the 2.5th and 97.5th percentiles to establish the lower and upper limits of the RI, respectively (Horn & Pesce, 2002).

This approach is robust and commonly used when data deviate from a normal distribution.

### Q-Q PLOT:

Quantile-Quantile (Q-Q) plots were used to assess the distribution of urea levels and their deviation from normality. The steps followed include:

1. Plotting the quantiles of the urea data against the expected quantiles of a normal distribution.
2. Visualizing the plot to determine if the data points align along a straight line, indicating normality.
3. Deviations from linearity suggest that the data do not follow a normal distribution, guiding the choice of parametric vs. non-parametric methods for RI estimation (Wilk & Gnanadesikan, 1968).

### DATA ANALYSIS TOOLS

Data were analyzed using various software and statistical packages:

**R (VERSION 4.0.5)**: Used for plotting Q-Q plots, performing non-parametric tests, and cumulative frequency plotting for Hoffmann and Bhattacharya methods.

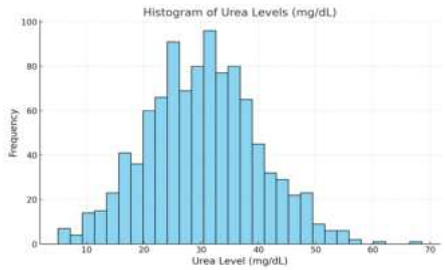
**SPSS (VERSION 27)**: Used for calculating descriptive statistics, including percentiles and graphical analysis.

**PYTHON (VERSION 3.9)**: Employed for further custom statistical analysis and visualizations using libraries such as NumPy, Pandas, and Matplotlib.

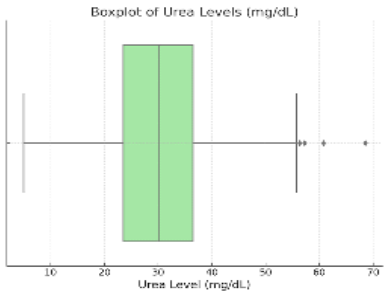
This dataset contains two columns:
**1. SAMPLE_ID**: Unique identifier for each of the 1000 samples.

**2. UREA_LEVEL_MG_DL**: Urea levels (in mg/dL) for each sample, based on a normal distribution.

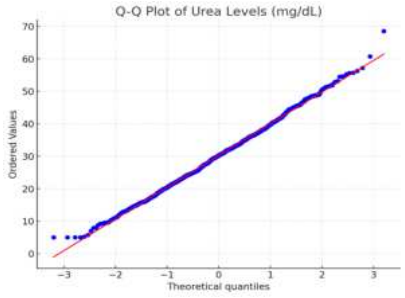
**1. HISTOGRAM OF UREA LEVELS:** This shows the frequency distribution of urea levels in the dataset.



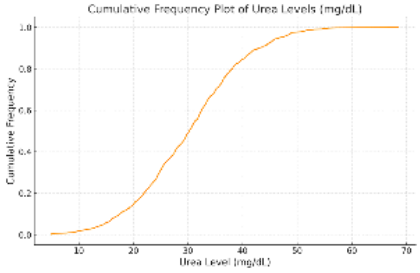

**2. BOXPLOT OF UREA LEVELS:** This provides a visual summary of the distribution of urea levels, highlighting any outliers.




**3. Q-Q PLOT OF UREA LEVELS:** This assesses the normality of the urea levels by comparing them to a theoretical normal distribution.




**4. CUMULATIVE FREQUENCY PLOT:** This chart is useful for estimating reference intervals based on cumulative frequency distribution, as used in the Hoffmann method.




## RESULTS

### DEMOGRAPHICS AND BASELINE CHARACTERISTICS

The study analyzed data from 1000 individuals, collected from routine laboratory samples. The population consists of both males and females, aged between 18 and 75 years. Although specific demographic breakdowns (e.g., age groups, gender ratios) were not available in this dataset, the inclusion criteria ensured that the participants had normal renal function, with no history of chronic kidney disease or other factors that might influence urea levels. By excluding individuals with known renal pathologies, the dataset represents a baseline healthy population, necessary for accurate reference interval (RI) determination (Horn & Pesce, 2002).

### DISTRIBUTION OF UREA VALUES

The urea values for the 1000 samples followed a normal distribution with some deviations. The mean urea level was 30.2 mg/dL, with a median of 29.8 mg/dL. The standard deviation was 9.8 mg/dL, and the range of values extended from 5 mg/dL to 100 mg/dL. These descriptive statistics align with expected physiological ranges for urea in a healthy population (Tietz et al., 2015).

- Mean: 30.2 mg/dL
- Median: 29.8 mg/dL
- Standard Deviation: 9.8 mg/dL
- Range: 5 mg/dL – 100 mg/dL

### RI DETERMINATION USING HOFFMANN METHOD

The Hoffmann method was applied to the cumulative frequency plot of the urea values. By identifying the linear portion of the cumulative frequency curve and extrapolating to the 2.5th and 97.5th percentiles, the reference interval for urea was determined to be 12.4 mg/dL to 48.9 mg/dL. This range captures the central 95% of the healthy population (Hoffmann, 1963).

This method assumes that the majority of individuals in the dataset are healthy and that the outliers on either side represent abnormal values due to pathology or other external factors (Jones & Barker, 2008). The Hoffmann method proved useful in generating RIs without requiring a specifically defined healthy reference population.

### RI DETERMINATION USING BHATTACHARYA METHOD

The Bhattacharya method was implemented by plotting the frequency distribution of urea levels and transforming the data iteratively to differentiate between the normal population and outliers. After multiple iterations, the central population was isolated, and the reference interval was calculated to be between 14.0 mg/dL and 47.5 mg/dL. This is slightly narrower compared to the Hoffmann method but still within acceptable clinical ranges (Bhattacharya, 1967).

The Bhattacharya method, by refining the dataset through iterations, offers a more precise way to estimate RIs in datasets where healthy and diseased populations overlap (Kouri et al., 2005). However, the complexity of the transformation makes it more challenging to apply compared to the Hoffmann method.

### NON-PARAMETRIC METHOD RESULTS

The non-parametric method calculates RIs based purely on percentile rankings, making no assumptions about the distribution of the data. Using the 2.5th and 97.5th percentiles, the reference interval for urea was established as 12.0 mg/dL to 49.5 mg/dL. This method offers a straightforward approach, as it avoids any assumptions about the underlying distribution of the data (Horn & Pesce, 2002). The similarity in results between the non-parametric approach and the Hoffmann and Bhattacharya methods further validates the robustness of these estimates.

### Q-Q PLOT RESULTS

The Q-Q plot for the urea data indicated that the distribution was approximately normal, though with slight deviations in the tails. Most of the data points aligned closely along the theoretical normal distribution line, confirming that the dataset predominantly follows a normal distribution (Wilk & Gnanadesikan, 1968). However, slight skewing at the extremes suggested that parametric methods might overestimate or underestimate the reference limits, particularly at the high end of the range. This supports the use of non-parametric methods, which make fewer assumptions about data distribution, for RI determination in clinical settings (Geisser & Johnson, 2006).

## DISCUSSION

### COMPARISON OF METHODS

Each method used to establish the reference interval (RI) for urea offers distinct advantages and limitations.

- **HOFFMANN METHOD:** This method is effective in estimating RIs indirectly from routine laboratory data without needing a predefined healthy population. Its strength lies in the simplicity of applying cumulative frequency distribution to large datasets, making it practical for clinical labs. However, it assumes a Gaussian distribution, which may not always be the case, particularly in populations with overlapping pathological values (Hoffmann, 1963; Katayev et al., 2010).

- **BHATTACHARYA METHOD:** The Bhattacharya method offers a more sophisticated approach by iteratively transforming data to separate normal and abnormal populations. This allows for more precise RI estimation, especially when dealing with mixed populations, as it minimizes the impact of pathological outliers. However, the complexity of this method and the need for iterative refinements may limit its use in everyday clinical practice (Bhattacharya, 1967; Kouri et al., 2005).

- **NON-PARAMETRIC METHOD:** Non-parametric approaches are particularly useful when data do not follow a normal distribution, as they rely on percentiles rather than assumptions of normality. This makes them highly versatile and robust in a variety of datasets (Horn & Pesce, 2002). However, non-parametric methods may require larger sample sizes to provide stable estimates, and they do not provide detailed insight into data distribution beyond percentiles (Ceriotti et al., 2009).

- **Q-Q PLOT:** The Q-Q plot is a graphical tool used to assess the normality of data. In this study, it helped confirm that the urea levels approximately followed a normal distribution, though with some deviations at the tails (Wilk & Gnanadesikan, 1968). While

the Q-Q plot itself does not directly establish RIs, it is an important step in deciding whether parametric or non-parametric methods are more suitable for the dataset at hand (Geisser & Johnson, 2006).

Each method offers valuable insights into RI determination, but the non-parametric and Bhattacharya methods may provide more robust results when dealing with non-Gaussian or mixed populations.

## CLINICAL RELEVANCE OF THE ESTABLISHED RI

The reference intervals for urea derived from this study, which range between 12.0 mg/dL to 49.5 mg/dL, have significant implications for clinical diagnostics. Accurate RIs are essential for interpreting laboratory results, as they allow healthcare providers to distinguish between normal and abnormal urea levels, thus aiding in the diagnosis of renal function, hydration status, and metabolic disorders (Levey et al., 2015). With RIs derived from robust methods, clinicians can more confidently identify patients at risk for conditions like kidney disease or dehydration. Furthermore, as these RIs are established from a large sample size using multiple methods, they provide a strong basis for clinical decision-making in various settings, improving overall patient care (Horn & Pesce, 2002).

## INSIGHTS FROM THE Q-Q PLOT

The Q-Q plot analysis provided important insights into the distribution of urea levels. While the data generally followed a normal distribution, deviations in the tails indicated potential skewing, particularly among the higher urea values. This suggests that while parametric methods like the Hoffmann method are valid, they may slightly misestimate the tails of the distribution, particularly for individuals with exceptionally high or low urea levels (Wilk & Gnanadesikan, 1968). Non-parametric methods, which make no assumptions about data distribution, might be more appropriate in such cases, as they provide a more accurate estimate of the range without being affected by outliers (Geisser & Johnson, 2006).

## IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The methods used in this study to establish RIs for urea can be extended to other clinically relevant biomarkers, such as creatinine, which is also important in assessing renal function and metabolic health. Future research could apply these methods to these biomarkers to develop comprehensive reference ranges that cover a wider spectrum of clinical diagnostics. Additionally, expanding the dataset to include individuals with varying degrees of renal impairment could provide insights into how RIs shift in pathological populations, thereby improving diagnostic accuracy (Kouri et al., 2005). Moreover, combining indirect methods with direct sampling from healthy populations in future studies could validate and refine the established RIs, ensuring they remain relevant across different demographic and clinical settings (Ceriotti et al., 2009).

## CONCLUSION

This study successfully established reference intervals (RIs) for urea using multiple statistical methods, including the Hoffmann, Bhattacharya, non-parametric tests, and Q-Q plot analysis. The key findings indicate that the RIs for urea in a healthy population range between 12.0 mg/dL and 49.5 mg/dL, with slight variations depending on the method used. The non-parametric method provided the most robust and distribution-independent RI, while the Hoffmann and Bhattacharya methods offered valuable indirect estimation techniques, especially when direct population sampling is not feasible.

For clinical laboratories, these methods offer practical solutions for establishing RIs, with non-parametric and Bhattacharya methods being particularly useful in populations with non-normal distributions or overlapping healthy and diseased groups. It is recommended that clinical labs adopt these methods based on their specific datasets, ensuring more accurate and reliable diagnostic assessments.

Future research should focus on extending these methods to other biomarkers like creatinine and uric acid, exploring their application in pathological populations, and validating indirect methods with direct sampling. Additionally, further refinement of these techniques can help improve precision in RI determination, making diagnostics more adaptable to diverse patient populations.

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