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## ISOLATION OF BIOACTIVE MILK PROTEINS: A REVIEW

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### Abstract

Proteins are one of the major milk components that are diverse in constructions, structures and functional properties. Based on available evidence, individual milk proteins confer a wide range of potential health benefits, thus, attracting interests from both researchers and manufacturers to develop the most optimal methods for their isolation. The aim is to obtain an optimal yield of proteins with the highest purity in the shortest time. Due to the structural diversity and varying protein stability, a specific method for the isolation of each milk proteins may be needed. Over the past decades, many techniques have been assessed to isolate milk proteins such as filtration, precipitation and chromatographies. Most of the milk proteins require the incorporation of more than one technique to be successfully isolated. The advent of technology has also improved isolation processes. This review aims to present the current knowledge on the development of methods for isolating milk proteins. The progression of the isolation techniques is expected to obviate problems associated with the underutilisation of milk proteins.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Milk is a complex and complete food that contains essential nutrients such as proteins, oligosaccharides, lipids and minerals. Conventionally, it provides the nutritional need for the mammalian neonate during its early phases of life [1]. However, milk's role has expanded beyond the nutritional values as it constitutes a broad range of bioactive compounds with a significant role in human metabolism [2]. Bioactive compounds found in foods may exert physiological and biochemical activities which could be consumed by humans through the intake of conventional food, functional foods or dietary supplements [3]. The bioactive properties of milk compounds can be categorised into four main areas which include gastrointestinal development, activity and functions; immunological

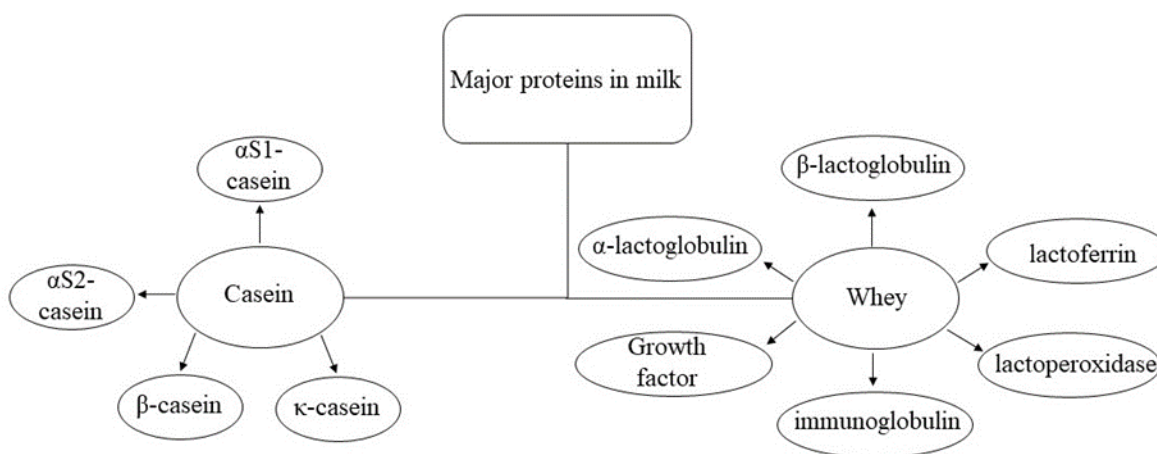
development and functions; infant development; and microbial activity, including antibiotic and probiotic activities [3]. Hence, each compound may exert multiple bioactive properties. It is also worth noting that some compounds are present naturally in their original forms and are ready for further application following isolation, while others may require pre-treatment (e.g., proteolytic digestion) to liberate the specific compounds (e.g., peptides).

Many studies conducted to date on the health benefit of food components led both food manufacturers and consumers to develop a better understanding of the relationship between food and human health. This relationship has steered the expansion of the global nutraceutical market which is projected to be worth US\$ 465,709.8 million by 2027 [4]. The growth of the market is primarily driven by the increase of consumer awareness on

the importance of maintaining health by consuming functional foods and by emphasising on preventive action rather than treatment of chronic diseases. This attitude has led to the emergence of milk fractionation sector in the nutraceutical industries. Many of the compounds from milk have been exploited in the formulation of dairy, non-dairy food and pharmaceuticals [5][6][7]. These compounds are presumed to promote human health by increasing the immune system, reducing elevated blood pressure, combating gastrointestinal infections, controlling body weight and preventing osteoporosis [5][6][7].

On the other hand, the isolation techniques of the milk components are dependent on the type of compounds. Milk compounds are conventionally separated using size-based separation method. For instance, sugars like lactose and oligosaccharides are small biomolecules, hence, their isolation processes are rather straightforward like dialysis, membrane filtration and liquid chromatography [8]. The

lipid fraction of milk can be separated via centrifugation. As for vitamins, another small molecule, are usually isolated by liquid-liquid extraction, high-performance liquid chromatography (HPLC) and magnetic solid-phase extraction (MSPE) [9]. Proteins which are the primary components of milk are relatively more challenging to be isolated compared to the previous three compounds. A majority of the milk proteins are made up of caseins and whey proteins. Caseins in milk are found in form of micelle which consists of two types of casein proteins, namely calcium-sensitive ( $\alpha$ 1-,  $\alpha$ 2- and  $\beta$ - caseins) and calcium-insensitive ( $\kappa$ -casein) [10]. In contrast, whey proteins are biochemically more diverse compared to caseins which include  $\alpha$ -lactalbumin,  $\beta$ -lactoglobulin, immunoglobulins, lactoferrin, lactoperoxidase and growth factors [11][12][13] (Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** Major bioactive protein from milk.

The recent developments in the isolation and characterization of milk proteins are reviewed in this paper. This review will focus on major milk proteins namely caseins,  $\alpha$ -lactalbumin,  $\beta$ -lactoglobulin, lactoferrin, lactoperoxidase, immunoglobulins and growth factors.

## 2. ISOLATION AND CHARACTERIZATION OF BIOACTIVE COMPOUNDS FROM MILK

### 2.1 Caseins

Approximately, 80 % of the total milk protein is made up of casein. It is commonly found in the market as sodium casein. Caseins have gained interest as bioactive proteins with functional properties in promoting health such as biodefence mechanism (antibacterial and antiviral properties) [14], opioid receptor ligands inducing naloxone to antagonize antinociception [15], regulating proliferation of lymphocytes

[16], production of antibodies and cytokines [17] and close to zero allergenicity to infants compared to human breast milk [18]. Caseins are traditionally extracted from the milk through fermentation which is also known as cheese. Apart from that, casein can also be isolated from whey protein as a liquid by-product of cheese production containing 12 to 20 % of casein glycomacropptide [19]. Moreover, caseins are purified using chromatography or membrane separation to produce infant formulae. The most developed methods separate caseins in milk using membrane separation such as ultrafiltration (UF) or microfiltration (MF) at low temperatures. It is due to the casein physiochemical properties where  $\alpha$ S1-casein,  $\alpha$ S2-casein and  $\kappa$ -casein coagulate under such conditions [20]. Meanwhile, the traditional method widely used by the milk and dairy industries produce sodium caseinate from the reaction of milk with acid and alkali by heating them together to 31 °C with rennet before the sedimentation process at 4 °C for 48

h [21]. Upon sedimenting, the lower fraction (insoluble fraction) will contain  $\alpha$ S1-casein,  $\alpha$ S2-casein and k-casein, while the supernatant will contain  $\beta$ -casein. Since the aforementioned steps did not produce highly purified caseins, more efficient separation technologies were developed. A study conducted by Huppertz et al. provided an improvisation to the previous method at an industrial scale [22]. The suggested method consisted of a series of incubation and centrifugation before being filtered from rennet-coagulated pasteurised skim milk. The final product which yielded the total extraction of casein (majorly  $\beta$ -casein) were of good purity based on the urea-PAGE assessment [22].

The current methods of casein purification involve membrane separation. The membranes used in casein isolation/purification can be categorised into microfiltration (MF) [23][24][25][26], ultrafiltration (UF) [27][28][29], reverse-osmosis [30] and nanofiltration (NF) [31][32][33] membranes which are usually made up of ceramic or polymers. Furthermore, studies have suggested to not rely on one separation membrane alone but to incorporate more than one type of membrane separation. Among the types of membranes listed above, the reverse-osmosis membrane is one of the unpopular choices of membrane separation as it only removes water to condense the milk protein concentration. Based on the available literature, most studies utilised MF membrane which is made of ceramic [34], polyvinylidene fluoride (PVDF) [23][25] Sephadex [36] and cellulose [36]. The extensive use of MF might be due to its easy availability and cost-effectiveness compared to UF and NF membranes. In 2014, a patent was published on the separation of  $\beta$ -casein from milk using spiral-wound PVDF membrane equipped with reversible thermal-induced aggregation system which demineralises the  $\beta$ -casein to produce  $\beta$ -casein purity of 90% [23]. However, among all the membrane used in isolating/ purifying caseins, the combination of UF and NF demonstrated a better percentage or concentrated caseins (coupled with dehydration) which improved its stability against degradation during storage [31]. As casein is one of the major bioactive proteins in milk and dairy products, MF was shown to be cost-effective in producing a high amount of pure caseins and is deemed as a good protocol for the industry.

On the other hand, chromatography is often used to assess the purity of the separated caseins. Glantz et al. constructed an assessment tool which can isolate, identify and purify caseins based on a library constructed from ultrafiltrated milk [37]. The study utilised asymmetrical flow field-flow fractionation connected to multiangle light scattering (AsF|FFF-MALS) and refractive index (RI) detection to isolate and purify casein micelles via flow cytometry which is then identified by detectors at 658 nm, 632.8 nm and 280 nm [37]. Usually, purity assessment of caseins methods is performed using polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis (PAGE) and reverse phase-high performance liquid chromatography (RP-HPLC). The sodium dodecyl

sulfate-PAGE (SDS-PAGE) and Urea-PAGE are the common types of denaturing PAGE analyses used [22][29][38]. The extracted caseins were compared to purified commercial caseins in the polyacrylamide gel to compare its molecular weight (protein ladder) as well as its production. Additionally, another chromatography method known as RP-HPLC provides a more precise quantitative analysis of the extracted caseins. Most HPLC methods are conducted by injecting samples through different types of columns like C18 or C4 columns which utilise polar solvent mobile phase [25][26][35][36][39] and shodex size exclusion column which utilised phosphate buffer as its mobile phase [40]. Similar to PAGE analysis, chromatography analysis identifies caseins at different peaks (based on the detection at a specific wavelength) compared to the standard purified caseins. Furthermore, the integrity of the molecular structure of caseins can be further characterised by the area of the peaks obtained.

## 2.2 Whey proteins

### 2.2.1 $\alpha$ -Lactalbumin and $\beta$ -Lactoglobulin

Karasu et al. identified that most commercial skim milk from the local supermarket contained 1.9 g/L of  $\alpha$ -lactalbumin ( $\alpha$ -LA) and  $\beta$ -lactoglobulin ( $\beta$ -LG) [24]. Other studies indicated a higher accumulation of  $\alpha$ -LA and  $\beta$ -LG in whole milk (no-fat was removed) which can reach approximately 2 to 3 g/L depending on the cattle breed, diet and stage of lactation [41][42].  $\alpha$ -LA plays a major role in lactose synthase and galactosyltransferase (enzyme functions) with a single strong  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  binding site [43]. Meanwhile,  $\beta$ -LG possesses ligand-binding functions that bind to a wide range of ligands [44]. Despite the properties, the separation of  $\alpha$ -LA and  $\beta$ -LG gained interest because  $\beta$ -LG is considered as an allergen in infant formulas, hence, only purified  $\alpha$ -LA was formulated in infant foods [45]. Extensive studies have been carried out since 1957 to separate or fractionate  $\alpha$ -LA and  $\beta$ -LG from milk and dairy products with the utilisation of salt concentration [46]. Since then, many methods have been tested including the manipulation of pH with heating [47], precipitation via acid or isoelectric [48][49], membrane separation [50][51][52] and chromatographies [53]. However, most of these techniques were found only proficient at the laboratory scale.

Having said that, many patents have also been published in regards to  $\alpha$ -LA and  $\beta$ -LG extraction and purification using the manipulation of heat and pH [54][55], silica-based anion exchanger [56], UF [57] and calcium-binding ionic exchange resin [58]. Years later, a modified manipulation method of pH and heat by Alomirah & Alli with a series of incubation and centrifugation demonstrated promising results for commercial applications [59]. The authors also separated and purified  $\alpha$ -LA and  $\beta$ -LG using pH adjustment and dialysis/ lyophilisation. This method yielded 47-69 % of  $\beta$ -LG fractions with 83 % to 90 % purity, while 44-89

% of  $\alpha$ -LA fractions with 86 % to 90 % purity from 60g/L dairy product (whey protein).

The chromatography methods for the separation and purification of  $\alpha$ -LA and  $\beta$ -LG are only ideal for preparative scale and not on a commercial scale [50][51]. The types of chromatographies include affinity chromatography [60], cation-exchange chromatography [61], anion-exchange chromatography [62][63], size exclusion chromatography [64], high-performance liquid chromatography [56][65], hydrophobic chromatography [66] and ultra-high pressure chromatography [67]. Based on these chromatography studies, most of their yields and purities were not up to par with the modified manipulation method of pH and heat by Alomirah & Alli except for anion-exchange chromatography [59]. Hence, it was postulated that pressure treatment (principle of chromatography) caused denaturation of  $\beta$ -LG [53]. However, the anion-exchange chromatography by De Jongh et al. yielded efficiency up to more than 80 % with more than 98 % of  $\beta$ -LG purity. In the study, affinity chromatography was also utilised prior to the purification of  $\beta$ -LG from fresh bovine milk using anion-exchange chromatography (Superdex 75 BPG)[62].

On the other hand, membrane separation is also one of the most frequently used methods in separating and purifying  $\alpha$ -LA and  $\beta$ -LG from milk and dairy products. It treats the milk with heat (thermal aggregation) followed by membrane filtration [68]. Meanwhile, the conventional practices of  $\alpha$ -LA and  $\beta$ -LG separation from milk involve the removal of caseins followed by isoelectric precipitation (precipitating  $\alpha$ -LA, while  $\beta$ -LG remained soluble) and fractionation via membrane separation or centrifugation. Fractionation could produce purified  $\alpha$ -LA and  $\beta$ -LG in the range of 50-80% and 60-99%, respectively [69]. Furthermore, the development of membrane separation methods has also been established to yield a greater outcome. A study indicated that compared to chromatography, utilisation of membrane separation at micro-size pore (MF) can also yield more than 99% and 90% recovery of  $\alpha$ -LA and  $\beta$ -LG, respectively [70]. This observation revealed that membrane separation causes lower denaturation or loss of  $\alpha$ -LA and  $\beta$ -LG indicating great potential in commercial applications. Novel positively charged membrane UltracelTM PLC regenerated cellulose UF membrane treated with 3-bromopropyl trimethylammonium bromide exhibited promising improvement of  $\alpha$ -LA and  $\beta$ -LG at 87 % and 83 % purity, respectively [50][51]. However, this recovery yield was much lower compared to the previously described MF membrane. Hence, it was suggested that the utilisation of a negative polyethersulfone (PES) UF membrane might improve the recovery process [71]. Attempts to utilise membrane separation at a commercial or large-scale operation was achieved by Toro-Sierra et al. [68]. The study utilised a combination of 1) manipulation of heat and pH (to precipitate/ separate between  $\alpha$ -LA and  $\beta$ -LG using citric acid), 2) MF and 3) UF. The pilot-scale study analysed 100 L of whey protein to achieve high overall yields of  $\alpha$ -LA

(60.7 % to 80.4 %) and  $\beta$ -LG (80.2 % to 97.3 %) with 91.3 % and 97.2 % purity respectively.

## 2.2.2 Lactoferrin and Lactoperoxidase

Apart from caseins, lactoferrin (LF) and lactoperoxidase (LPO) are the other bioactive proteins present in milk (often in whey), which are known for their antimicrobial properties [72]. LF or formerly known as lactotransferrin is an iron-binding glycoprotein protein which is structured in 2 globular lobes with iron-binding sites in each lobe [73][74]. LPO, on the other hand, is a haemoprotein consisting of a single polypeptide chain [75][76]. It was estimated that the contents of LF and LPO in whey are approximately 0.003% and 0.002% [77], and may vary depending on the cattle breeds [78]. Previous studies revealed a slight weight gain, lower counts of *Escherichia coli* in faeces, colon and jejunum, together with lower incidence of diarrhoea and higher blood immunoglobulin level in calves fed with milk containing 0.1 % LF and 0.2 % LPO than that of the calves fed with commercial cow milk replacer (LF and LPO content was approximately 0%) [79][80]. Besides that, LF and LPO in milk were also extensively studied in humans and model organisms whereby antimicrobial, antiviral activities, as well as immunomodulatory effects, were identified [76][81]. Apart from their nutraceutical and pharmaceutical potentials, the demand LF and LPO extraction and purification were also high due to their usage in food preservatives. The traditional thermal treatment of foods to kill pathogens and spoilage microorganism can alter the taste or nutritional value due to denaturation of vitamins and volatile compounds [41]. Several studies have assessed the application of LPO in food preservation including dairy products, beverages, desserts and salad dressings [75][82]. Recently, several studies highlighted the potential of LF and LPO as food preservatives with the combination of high-pressure treatments [83][84][85].

The most effective methods to extract and purify LF and LPO are chromatography with some modifications [86]. Many studies employed affinity chromatography [87][88][89], ion-exchange chromatography [77][90][91][92][93], size exclusion chromatography [94][95][96] and HPLC [97][98][99]. Of these, ion exchange and HPLC are widely used method at the moment. Numerous patents have been filed on the isolation and purification of LF and LPO from milk and other dairy products but most of them expired before 2014. Affinity chromatography was one of the earliest methods in LF and LPO separation, whereby a company called Snow Brand Milk Products Co Ltd patented a method using a monoclonal antibody to trap LF and LPO from raw milk [100]. In 1987, the same company filed a different patent for separating LF and LPO from raw milk using membrane separation comprises polysaccharide cross-linked with sulfuric ester, that yields up to more than 95 to 98 % purity [101]. Since then, most studies or patents shifted to ion-exchange

chromatography where greater yield and purity was obtained. Patents published varied based on the types of polymer used, pore diameter, and diameter and length of the column [102][103][104][105]. Although isolation and purification methods of LF and LPO have been well established [86], current studies involved the utilisation of new types of polymers in chromatography [77][87][94]. However, most of the findings were not significantly different from that of the previous studies which could enhance the commercial production of LF and LPO cost-effectively.

## 2.2.3 Immunoglobulins

According to Dubuisson et al. (2002), cow's milk was identified as one of the top six listed food allergens [106]. Apart from caseins and  $\beta$ -LG which contribute to allergic reactions, milk also contains immunoglobulins. There are five types of immunoglobulins found in mammals include IgA, IgD, IgE, IgG and IgM. It was identified that immunoglobulins in milk contain approximately 1 to 2 % of total milk protein [53], whereby, IgG is one of the major immunoglobulins found in milk [107]. While IgA and IgM are present at low levels [108]. IgG which comprises of two subclasses namely IgG1 and IgG2 constitutes 0.72 mg/ml in milk and 32 to 212 mg/ml in colostrum [108]. Having said that, bovine colostrum and milk have been traditionally used to prevent infection and has been a major research interest for decades [53]. Currently, with the advancement of separation and purification technologies, large-scale production or isolation of IgG have caused a remarkable growth of the dairy industries for nutraceutical food market [109].

Unlike the other bioactive proteins, immunoglobulins from dairy products are sensitive towards processing treatments [110]. A study by Elfstrand et al. revealed a 25 % reduction in immunoglobulins content in whey proteins that were treated with heat and freeze-drying [110]. During the treatment process, IgM was identified to be the most sensitive immunoglobulin since it did not survive (0%) the pasteurisation and freeze-drying treatment. Therefore, separation and purification of immunoglobulins were achieved using high-performance liquid chromatography [99][111], size exclusion chromatography [112] [113], affinity chromatography [107][112][114], ion-exchange chromatography [115][116][117], membrane filtration [110][118], electrophoresis [119][120][121] and immuno-based technique [122][123][124][125][126][127]. Similar to the other aforementioned bioactive proteins in milk, chromatography seems to be the most common method of choice as it has been demonstrated to be practical and accurate for high specific protein purification. However, there is no single method that has been demonstrated to accurately quantify all bioactive proteins in milk simultaneously. Specific chromatography such as size exclusion chromatography, ion-exchange chromatography

and affinity chromatography can increase the yield and purity of the immunoglobulins by approximately 94% and more than 95% respectively [53][116].

Additionally, membrane separation is also an effective method in isolating and purifying immunoglobulins. Some methods combined membrane separation with chromatography for a better outcome [53]. For instance, optimisation of immunoglobulins extraction and purification from transgenic goat's milk using MF yielded more than 95% with 15 to 20 % purity [128]. However, further attempts in separating and purifying immunoglobulins from transgenic goat's milk using UF reduced the yield to 80% but increased the purity up to 80% [129]. Nevertheless, a study which utilised both MF and UF successfully extracted immunoglobulins from bovine colostrum at different time scales of milking (80 hours per post after the previous milking) during three different milkings. The IgG1 concentration was estimated at 48 to 120 mg/ml on the first day of milking, 26 to 42 mg/ml (second milking) and 11 to 40 mg/ml (third milking) [110].

On the other hand, electrophoresis is one other common method used to analyse protein structure, expression (quantification) and integrity. Studies have utilised electrophoresis to isolate and purify immunoglobulins at a laboratory scale. One such electrophoresis method is the SDS-PAGE, where IgG,  $\beta$ -Ig and  $\alpha$ -la were successfully isolated and identified from whey protein through ion-exchange chromatography [99]. Although chromatography has been the method of choice in separating and purifying immunoglobulins, it was not suitable for large scale production [119][130]. Therefore, a novel extraction method which involves electrophoresis was employed using reverse micelles extraction [119]. This method involved the pooling of the immunoglobulins and other soluble proteins into small droplets using electrostatic interaction by creating micelles using surfactant ranging nanometers in diameter [131]. Moreover, Su & Chiang successfully extracted IgG1, IgG2,  $\beta$ -LA and  $\alpha$ -LG using anionic surfactant bis(2-ethylhexyl) sodium sulfosuccinate (AOT) as a surfactant and purified them using SDS-PAGE [119].

Lastly, the immuno-based technique is also a preferable analytical technique to assess the purity of immunoglobulins. Immuno-based techniques include radial immunodiffusion (RID), nephelometry, enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA), lateral flow immunoassay and surface plasmon resonance (SPR). Due to the diversity of these techniques, a collaborative study was conducted to analyse immunoglobulins. The AOAC published an immunoassay method to determine IgG in bovine colostrum powders, bovine milk powders and dietary supplements containing bovine colostrum products at concentrations of 0.4 to 15% in powder, excluding skim milk powder and milk protein isolate using SPR [122].

### 2.2.4 Growth Factors

The presence of hormones and growth factors in milk and dairy products are also recognised as important or high-value bioactive proteins. Among the growth factors are the insulin-like growth factor - 1 (IGF-I), IGF-II, platelet-derived growth factor, acidic and basic fibroblast growth factors (FGF) and transforming growth factor- $\beta$  (TGF- $\beta$ ) [132][133]. Hence, it was suggested that dairy industries could replace the traditional source growth factors in mammalian cell cultures [134]. Moreover, Belford et al. identified that whey-derived extracts (containing the growth factors) may support the growth of distinct cells such as human epithelial cells and myoblasts cells, while the addition of bovine milk may provide other mitogenic factors [132]. On the other hand, growth factor has also been used to treat gastrointestinal disorder, wounds and skin diseases [135]. This review will discuss the isolation and purification of hormones which are considered as one of the high-value products from milk and other dairy products.

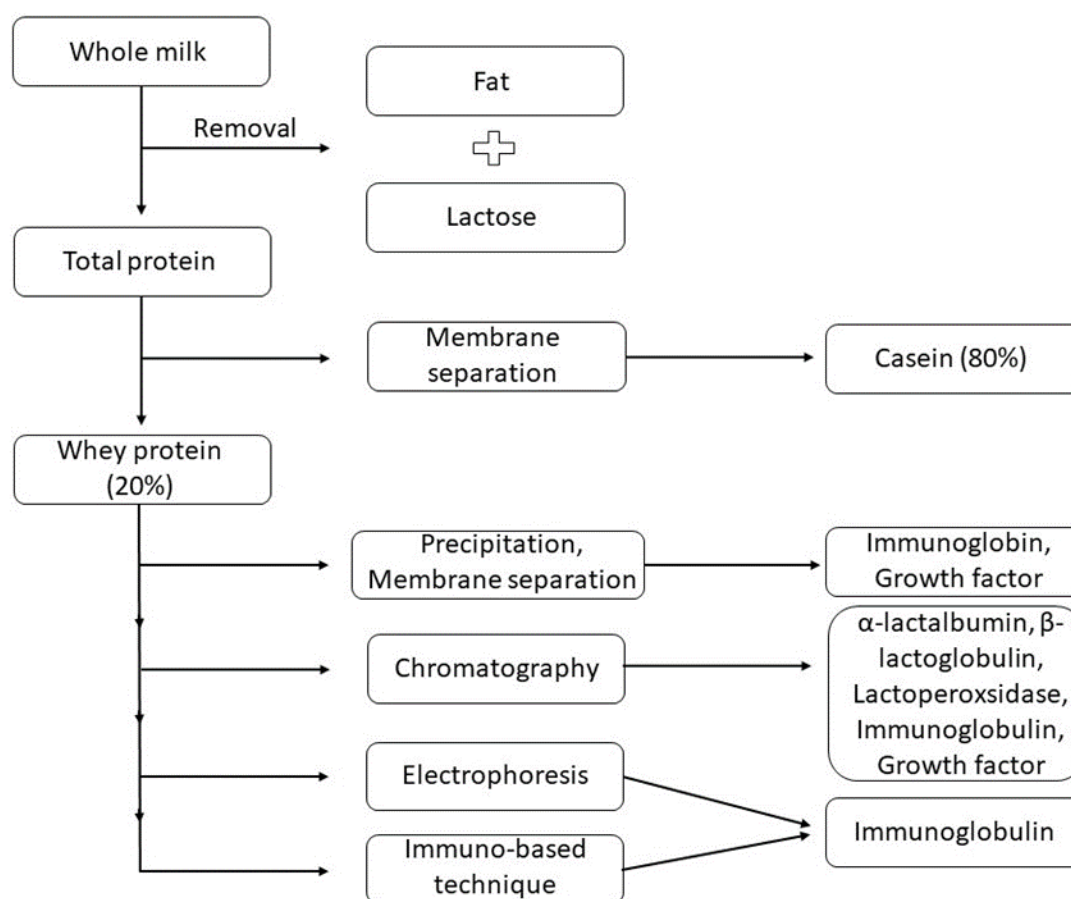
Hormones from milk and dairy products can be successfully extracted and purified using chromatography and membrane filtration ([53][110][135][136]. Gauthier et al. indicated that MF poorly separates the growth factor hormones compared to UF [135]. However, Elfstrand et al. utilised both MF and UF to successfully obtain  $289 \pm 10$  ng/ml of TGF- $\beta$ 2 and 590-870 ng/ml of IGF-1 hormone [110]. Furthermore, an attempt for large scale isolation of IGF-1 and IGF-II was found to be promising via alkaline diafiltration with double UF [137]. The diafiltration process utilises a recycling mode that recycles the alkaline buffer as well as the permeate that is collected from the first filter.

Apart from the abovementioned chromatography methods, other types can also be used to separate and purify hormones from milk and dairy products. Most studies hydrolysed raw milk with  $\beta$ -glucuronidase before the clean-up preparation using UF membrane to be injected into the chromatography [138][139][140]. Further optimisation and modification of chromatography to identify more hormones from milk was achieved by utilising the high-pressure liquid

chromatography-electrospray ionisation tandem mass spectrometry (LC-ESI-MS) [140]. The study prefiltered enzyme-treated milk using UF before injecting the samples into a C18 ultra-performance liquid chromatography (UPLC) column. The system successfully identified up to 50 different types of anabolic hormones from the milk with repetitive analysis yielding a marginal error of 7.9 to 23.2 % relative standard deviation (RSD). Furthermore, an in-depth study was conducted by Altomare et al. successfully identified 634 proteins (not only hormones) using nano-chromatography system (C18 column) followed by mass spectrometry. Among total protein identified using functional proteomic analyses by STRING software (a database of known and predicted protein-protein interactions), 93 proteins were found to have similar growth factors characteristics in wound healing process [141]. The study possesses tremendous application and permits wider approaches in identifying new potential growth factors hormone or novel hormones for study.

### 3. CONCLUSION

The isolation of new milk proteins can unravel their health potentials as each protein can fortify and enhance the functional properties of food products. Hence, it has attracted researchers and manufacturers worldwide to develop the best isolation techniques to archive optimal productivity. Most of the isolation procedures involve more than a single technique (Figure 2). Precipitation and filtration are usually employed as a preliminary method to separate and recover a bulk of proteins. The advancement in membrane technology has also yielded better separation of proteins, which can reduce the number of processes to obtain their purest forms. In terms of chromatographic methods, which are the most established methods for high-resolution purification, some innovations have also been reported to reduce the overall cost and improve productivity. These continuous efforts in developing effective isolation techniques for milk proteins can be incorporated into human health.



**Figure 2:** Summary of isolation techniques for bioactive proteins from milk.

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