Journal Home Page: https://sjes.univsul.edu.iq/

Research Article:

Effect of Different Curing Conditions on the Mechanical and Microstructural Properties of Normal Strength Concrete

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Article Information

Article History
Received : March 9th ,2026
Accepted : June 22, 2026
Available online : August ,2026

Keywords:

Curing conditions, Curing compounds, Mechanical properties, , Microstructural properties.

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DOI https://doi.org/10.17656/sjes.10218

Abstract

The performance of normal strength concrete (NSC) is strongly governed by curing quality, particularly during the early hydration period. This study investigates the effect of curing conditions and curing compounds on concrete grades of 25, 35, and 45 MPa. A total of 630 specimens were prepared and subjected to standard water curing, laboratory and outdoor exposure, and three commercially available curing compounds: Acrylic Resin (CC1), Water-Acrylic Polymer (CC2), and Paraffin Wax (CC3). To reflect realistic site practices, curing was applied immediately as well as after 1- and 2-day delays. Compressive strength was evaluated at 7, 28, and 90 days, while flexural strength was measured at 28 days. The results demonstrate that curing conditions exert a decisive and lasting influence on strength development. CC2 exhibited performance closest to standard water curing, achieving 90–98% of the benchmark compressive strength at 90 days. In contrast, CC1 and CC3 caused significant and irreversible strength reductions ranging from 30% to 50% across all grades. Delayed standard water curing resulted in only moderate losses, whereas delayed application of CC1 and CC3 substantially amplified strength deterioration. Flexural behavior revealed a different trend: applying CC2 after a 2-day delay enhanced tensile performance, producing up to 23% higher strength than the standard benchmark for the 45 MPa mix. These findings highlight the critical role of curing compound selection and application timing in ensuring long-term structural performance. This study evaluates the compressive and flexural strengths of concrete grades 25, 35, and 45 MPa under various curing conditions over 90 days. Using Standard Water Curing as the benchmark, three compounds were tested: Acrylic Resin (CC1), Water-Acrylic Polymer (CC2), and Paraffin Wax (CC3). Results show that CC2 (Water-Acrylic Polymer) is the superior chemical alternative, consistently reaching 90-98% of the standard benchmark's compressive strength. In contrast, CC1 and CC3 caused significant strength declines of 30-50%, which did not recover by 90 days.For flexural strength at 28 days, a unique trend emerged: while immediate curing is best for compression, a 2-day delay combined with CC2 resulted in a strength incline (increase) of up to 23% over the standard benchmark. The research concludes that CC2 is a highly reliable field substitute for traditional curing, whereas CC1 and CC3 are insufficient for structural applications.

1. Introduction

Concrete remains the most widely used construction material due to its availability, economy, and structural versatility. Normal Strength Concrete (NSC), typically ranging from 20 to 50 MPa compressive strength, is extensively used in residential buildings, pavements, and general infrastructure. Its mechanical performance is strongly influenced by the water-to-cement (w/c) ratio, aggregate characteristics, critically, curing conditions, low cost, and abundant raw materials. After 28 days of curing, making it excellent for residential constructions, pavements, and modest infrastructure projects. It is used to compare other advanced concrete kinds like High Strength Concrete HSC and Self Compact Concrete SCC. The water-to-cement ratio, aggregate quality, and curing conditions all affect its mechanical properties, which are crucial to its strength and longevity. [1-4] Normal Strength Concrete (NSC) works and finishes effectively at low cement levels due to its high water-to-cement (w/c) ratio. This simplifies placement and compaction but has drawbacks that impact material performance. High w/c ratio improves porosity and permeability, allowing sulfates, chlorides, and carbon dioxide to permeate NSC. The material is sensitive to chemical attacks that cause reinforcement corrosion and sulfate expansion. Rapid water evaporation during hardening generates plastic shrinkage, which can induce microcracking and structural cracking in mature concrete. Mix design and curing conditions are critical to resolving NSC's handling trade-off. Recent study shows that longer wet-curing enhances normal strength concrete performance. Extended curing hydrates cement particles, increasing compressive strength and reducing permeability, making concrete chloride-resistant. This enhancement is necessary because chloride penetration damages steel reinforcement and reinforced concrete structures. Proper and thorough curing increases NSC service life. [9-12] Extended curing significantly reduces conventional concrete's chloride diffusion coefficient. By preventing chloride ions from entering the concrete matrix, proper curing minimizes reinforcement corrosion, a significant cause of reinforced concrete loss. Proper hydration refines pore structure and creates a denser, less permeable microstructure, enhancing resistance. A workable and cost-effective solution to extend the service life of aggressively exposed concrete buildings is adequate curing [12-17]. However, Curing factors including temperature, relative humidity, and moisture retention must be carefully regulated to improve hardened characteristics and assure long-term serviceability under diverse exposure conditions. [18, 19] The concrete matrix maintains more moisture when temperature and humidity are regulated during curing, reducing cracking. The regulated atmosphere promotes cement hydration and a denser microstructure, increasing concrete strength. [20-23] Controlled humidity curing seals out carbon dioxide, sulfates, and chlorides by improving pore structure and reducing permeability. This decrease in transport characteristics makes concrete constructions more durable and prevents reinforcing corrosion. [24-26] Calcium–silicate–hydrate (C–S–H) gel forms quickly and calcium hydroxide (CH) crystals increase. Rapid hydration, which increases early strength but reduces microstructure density, may weaken concrete. [27-30] Optimizing curing conditions to provide a dense, stable microstructure for long-term performance and quick early-age strength growth is the major aim. For large-scale or hot-climate concreting, uncontrolled quick hydration may be useful at first but harmful to service life. [31-34] Understanding how curing settings impact long-term material performance and early-age strength improvement is necessary for optimization. [35-37] This study compares three Kurdistan-available curative agents to rectify this discrepancy. These compounds came from major Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, Duhok, and Halabja vendors. Each compound was be tested on cubic concrete specimens' compressive strength and curing ability during a defined curing duration. The findings should help area building firms choose curing ingredients. Cubic concrete specimen qualities will be studied to find the best compound for regional use. However, almost all existing research assumes that curing begins without delay. Very few studies have investigated what happens when concrete is left uncured for the first 24 or 48 hours, even though this situation is common on construction sites. The early-age period is the most sensitive to moisture loss, and delaying curing may cause irreversible reductions in hydration that later curing cannot fully recover. The literatures also do not clearly explain how different curing compound perform when their application is delayed. Therefore, while previous work provides valuable insight into curing methods, it does not address the practical and critical scenario studied in this thesis: the impact of one- and two-day delayed curing followed by the application of different curing compounds on the strength development of normal-strength concrete. This research fills that gap by examining delayed curing as a real-world problem and evaluating its effect on short- and long-term performance. This experimental study evaluates of concrete covered with three different curing compounds. To learn more about how curing compounds affect the mechanical qualities a scientific assessment of previous studies was carried out. In addition to discussing findings that may be relevant to current research, This experimental study focus on the methods and materials utilize ‹That hasn't been used before in previous research.

2. Experiment

A total of 630 specimens were prepared to evaluate the influence of curing compounds on the mechanical of locally produced normal strength concrete. All materials were sourced from the Iraqi construction market, and representative commercial brands commonly used in practice were selected. Material characterization included sieve analysis, specific gravity determination, and chemical composition testing for cement, aggregates, admixtures, and curing compounds. Concrete specimens were prepared under controlled conditions and subjected to different curing regimes to assess moisture retention efficiency, strength development. The collection has 630 samples. This experimental study evaluates the material properties, preparation methods, curing procedures, and testing methodology used to accurately assess the effect of curing compounds on locally produced normal strength concrete's mechanical . All for the study came from Iraq. Material brands and types were chosen from local construction industry-wide concrete mix and curing chemical components. Sieve analysis, specific gravity, and chemical composition tests for cement, admixtures, and curing agents were performed on each component. Below are detailed descriptions of the investigation's resources. This study examined how numerous curing agents affected concrete curing and performance. Several curing agents were tested for moisture retention, strength development. For each types w added to all chemical compounds in this study were uniformly applied to all specimens using a low-pressure spray technique. To guarantee a continuous, non-porous protective layer, every specimen received exactly two consecutive coats.

1- Acrylic resin Curing Compound. (CT1)
2-Water-acrylic polymer Curing Compound.(CT2)
3- Paraffin Wax Curing Compound. (CT3)

the concrete specimens were left uncovered, exposed directly to the controlled ambient laboratory air for exactly 24 hours before being fully submerged in the standard water curing tank also at the Laboratory Temperature Range: 15*C* to 26*C*

Relative Humidity (RH) Range: 45% to 60%

2.1 Curing Conditions

Various curing conditions were applied in this study to evaluate their impact on the properties of the concrete. A summary of these curing conditions, including the specific methods and durations for each conditions:

1-Standard curing
2-Standard (1 day delay)
3- Standard (2 day delay)
4- Ambient (lab condition)
5- Ambient (outdoor condition)
6- Curing compound-1
7-Curing compound-1 (after 1 day delay)
8-Curing compound-1 (after 2 day delay)
9- Curing compound-2
10- Curing compound-2 (after 1 day delay)
11- Curing compound-2 (after 2 day delay)
12- Curing compound-3
13- Curing compound-3 (after 1 day delay)
14- Curing compound-3 (after 3 day delay)

2.2 Mix Design

Normal strength concrete (20–50 MPa) with target compressive strengths of 25, 35, and 45 MPa was designed and prepared for this study. Mix proportions were determined using an empirical design approach, and the detailed compositions are presented in Table 1. Slump values were maintained between 60 and 180 mm to ensure adequate workability. Type I Portland cement was used, with maximum aggregate sizes limited to 4.75 mm for fine aggregate and 10 mm for coarse aggregate, as summarized in Table 1. Normal concrete strength is 20–50MPa. Grade 25, 35, and 45 normal concrete were prepared for this study. depends on experience approach was used to create concrete, and Table 1 shows mixture composition. There is kept the droop between 60mm and 180mm. It was made with Type I Portland cement. Fine and coarse aggregates could not exceed 4.75mm and 10mm.show is in Table 1.

2.3 Type of curing compounds

2.3.1 Acrylic resin-based Curing Compound

It is a liquid curing compound that is ready to use and is based on acrylic resin. Its purpose is to prevent water loss from freshly poured concrete. Its primary characteristic is its capacity to penetrate the concrete surface, thereby reducing the rapid evaporation of water during the curing process. By preventing the development of cracks, this ensures optimal conditions for cement hydration and assists in achieving the required concrete design strength. Additionally, it is simple to implement with either an automatic system or mechanical application tool on a concrete surface. It is identified by its colorless appearance with the density of 1.03 g/cm3 and it follows the ASTM C309-11, Type 2. These features contribute to its effectiveness as a curing compound, enabling it to perform well in preventing water loss from freshly poured concrete, In the close-up SEM image as shown in Fig. 9, the intricate surface features of the curing compound are depicted, showcasing the fine particulate structure, diameter 46.68 nm, and any embedded additives that may contribute to its performance. The detailed morphology is indicative of the compound ability to form a coherent layer on the concrete surface, which aids in moisture retention. The observed textures and features are crucial in understanding how the curing compound functions at a microscopic level.

2.3.2. Water-acrylic based polymer Curing Compound

Water-acrylic based polymer liquid curing agent designed for curing both freshly poured and existing cement-based surfaces. It complies with ASTM C309, Type 1 & 2, Class B requirements. The product is characterized as a white milky liquid with a specific gravity of approximately 1.01 ± 0.01 g/cm³ and a pH range between 7 and 8, making it neutral and safe for various surfaces. By providing effective moisture retention, it prevents evaporation in concrete, thereby enhancing the overall quality of cement-based surfaces. As demonstrated in Figure 1 and 2**.** Also in the close-up SEM image presented in Fig. 10, the detailed surface characteristics of the curing compound are clearly visible, highlighting its fine particulate structure with a diameter of 63.65 nm, along with any incorporated additives that may enhance its effectiveness. The intricate morphology reflects the compound capacity to create a uniform film over the concrete surface, playing a vital role in retaining moisture. These observed textures and structural features are essential for understanding the curing compound microscopic behavior and functional performance.

2.3.3. Paraffin Wax Curing Compound

The paraffin wax-based curing compound is a liquid agent specifically formulated to cure both freshly poured and existing cement-based surfaces. It meets the ASTM C309, Type 1 Class A standards. This product appears as a white liquid with a specific gravity of around 1 g/cm³ and a pH level ranging from 8 to 9. By effectively retaining moisture, it minimizes evaporation from the concrete, which helps improve the quality of cement-based surfaces. As can be seen in Fig. 3. Also Fig. 11 presents a close-up SEM image that reveals the intricate surface features of the curing compound, emphasizing its fine particulate structure with a diameter of 617.67 nm, as well as any embedded additives that could improve its functionality. The detailed morphology demonstrates the compound ability to form a consistent and cohesive layer on the concrete surface, which is crucial for effective moisture retention. These surface textures and structural details provide valuable insight into the curing compound's behavior and performance at the microscopic level.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1 Compressive strength

All testing ages showed that curing procedure considerably impacted compressive strength growth speed and extent. 1-day and 2-day delayed curing" means that after casting and stripping, the concrete specimens were deliberately left uncovered in open ambient laboratory air for exactly 24 or 48 hours, respectively, before the chemical curing compound was applied. This setup simulates highly common real-world construction field scenarios where curing compounds cannot be applied immediately due to logistical constraints, formwork stripping delays, or labor schedules. Understanding this delay is critical because it reveals which chemical compound base can successfully revive the hydration process after initial surface desiccation. Figure 4 illustrates a consistent performance trend across the three concrete grades, where an increase in the design grade directly correlates with higher compressive strength regardless of the curing method. The Standard water curing method serves as the primary benchmark, yielding the maximum potential strength for all mixes. A distinct hierarchy in curing effectiveness is observed: Standard curing provides the most favorable environment for hydration, followed by Outdoor exposure, while Lab conditions result in a noticeable reduction in strength development. Despite this reduction, laboratory-cured samples still outperform those treated with less effective chemical curing compounds such as CC1 and CC3. For the Grade 1 mix, the data suggests that outdoor exposure maintains a high level of efficiency, with strength development closely trailing the standard-cured samples. This indicates a degree of resilience in lower-grade mixes to environmental fluctuations when compared to laboratory settings. Among the chemical alternatives, CC2 stands out as a highly effective agent, achieving a performance level nearly equivalent to both lab-cured and standard samples. In contrast, CC1 and CC3 demonstrate poor sealing properties, leading to significantly lower strength gains. A critical finding in this analysis is the extreme sensitivity of concrete to curing delays. The results highlight that the timing of curing initiation is just as vital as the method itself. Even a brief delay in standard curing leads to a substantial loss in strength. This vulnerability is exacerbated when delays are combined with inferior curing materials; the combination of a curing delay and the use of CC3 represents the worst-case scenario for structural integrity. This synergy suggests that moisture loss in the early hours post-casting causes irreversible damage to the pore structure, which cannot be fully recovered even with subsequent curing. The Grade 2 mix followed the established performance hierarchy, with standard water curing providing the peak resistance. A comparative analysis of the curing environments reveals that outdoor exposure maintains better strength development than laboratory conditions, suggesting that ambient humidity or temperature in the outdoor setting may have been more conducive to hydration than the controlled lab environment. A significant finding for this grade is the high efficacy of Curing Compound 2 (CC2). Unlike its counterparts, CC2 functioned as a highly effective moisture barrier, yielding results that were nearly indistinguishable from those of outdoor-cured samples. In stark contrast, CC1 and CC3 exhibited a marked inability to prevent moisture loss, leading to substantial strength deficits. Furthermore, the data confirms the critical importance of curing timing; a brief two-day delay in the initiation of water curing resulted in a drastic reduction in strength. This suggests that for mid-range concrete grades, the first 48 hours are a "critical window" where lack of moisture leads to irreversible damage to the developing cementitious matrix. Grade 3 concrete, representing the highest design strength in this study, reached its maximum potential under standard curing. The performance gap between outdoor and lab-cured samples remained consistent, with the outdoor environment proving superior. Notably, CC2 demonstrated exceptional efficiency for this higher-strength mix, even slightly outperforming the outdoor exposure results. This suggests that CC2 is particularly well-suited for high-cement-content mixes, where rapid moisture retention is vital to support the intense hydration heat and chemical demand. Conversely, the combination of an inferior curing agent (CC3) and a two-day delay produced the lowest overall performance for this grade. This underscores a vital scientific conclusion: higher-performance concrete does not imply higher resilience to poor curing. In fact, the sensitivity of Grade 3 to moisture loss highlights that as the design strength increases, the necessity for immediate and effective moisture retention becomes even more paramount. Without prompt curing, the dense microstructure intended for high-strength concrete fails to form properly, resulting in a significantly compromised structural product. Paraffin Wax (CC3) fails to bond properly with the partially unhydrated, dusty pore rims due to its non-polar, hydrophobic nature, leading to micro-fissures. Acrylic Resin (CC1) forms a rigid skin strictly on the very top surface without matrix penetration, leaving the core vulnerable to moisture loss. Water-Acrylic Polymer CC2 contains active latex chains suspended in a water-based emulsion, its hydrophilic nature prevents premature flash-setting. Instead, it leverages the capillary suction of the partially dried concrete skin to infiltrate the outer pore network. As hydration progresses, it co-polymerizes within the alkaline pore fluid, creating a flexible, interlocking "pore-plugging" matrix that seals internal moisture far more effectively.The results indicate that the first 24 to 48 hours (1day and 2 days delay) are the most critical for hydration. Across all grades, a 1-day or 2-day delay in curing consistently led to a decline in compressive strength. Furthermore, there is a distinct difference in chemical performance: CC2 is the most reliable compound, providing results that compete with outdoor curing. CC1 and CC3, however, appear insufficient as standalone curing agents for these mixes, especially when application is delayed. For instance, in Grade 3, using CC2 at 30.29 MPa provided nearly 70% more strength than using CC3 with a 2-day delay (17.87 MPa). Figure 5 illustrates the compressive strength at the 28-day maturity mark, a critical point for verifying structural design targets. Under Standard curing conditions, all three concrete grades successfully approached or met their intended design strengths, confirming the adequacy of the mix designs. An interesting trend observed at this stage is that Outdoor exposure slightly outperformed the Standard water-curing benchmark across all grades. This can be attributed to favorable ambient conditions, where a combination of natural humidity and optimal temperatures likely facilitated a more synergistic hydration process, utilizing both internal and external moisture more effectively than constant immersion. In contrast, the Lab condition resulted in a drastic strength deficit, showing a significant percentage loss compared to the standard benchmark. This disparity highlights that controlled indoor environments without active moisture management can be detrimental to long-term strength gain. Among the chemical treatments, CC2 remained the only viable alternative, consistently matching the performance of standard water curing. Conversely, CC1 and CC3 failed significantly, leaving the concrete with a substantial strength void that makes them unsuitable for structural applications requiring full design strength. 3.5 Grade 1 Performance and Curing Sensitivity For the Grade 1 mix, the 28-day results emphasize the high stakes of choosing the correct curing method. While outdoor exposure and CC2 provided results comparable to the standard benchmark, the Lab condition failed to reach the 25 MPa design target. This indicates that without proper moisture retention, lower-grade mixes are at risk of falling below their structural requirements. The data further confirms a severe sensitivity to curing delays. Even a brief interruption in the initiation of standard curing led to a permanent reduction in strength that could not be recovered by 28 days. The most critical failure occurred when a curing delay was combined with the use of CC3; in this scenario, strength development effectively stagnated, resulting in a nearly 45% loss compared to the benchmark. This suggests that early-age moisture loss in lower-grade concrete leads to a permanent cessation of hydration in the outer layers, severely compromising the long-term integrity of the material.The 28-day results for the Grade 2 mix reinforce the trend where outdoor exposure provides the most favorable environment for strength gain, even surpassing standard water immersion. This suggests that the ambient conditions provided an optimal balance of temperature and humidity that accelerated the hydration process. A major point of concern is the performance of the lab-conditioned samples, which experienced a massive drop in strength and failed to meet the 35 MPa design target. This underscores the high risk of strength deficiency in environments where moisture is not actively managed. In terms of chemical alternatives, CC2 performed admirably, capturing nearly the full potential of the standard curing benchmark and proving itself as a reliable substitute. In contrast, CC1 and CC3 were largely ineffective, resulting in strengths that fell far short of the design requirements. Furthermore, the data indicates that this grade is highly sensitive to timing; even a brief delay in standard curing hindered development, while delaying the application of inferior compounds like CC1 and CC3 led to a critical failure in structural capacity. For the high-strength Grade 3 mix, the disparity between effective and ineffective curing ethods became even more pronounced. While outdoor exposure continued to exceed the standard benchmark, the lab condition was notably insufficient, failing to provide the moisture necessary for the dense cementitious matrix to mature. CC2 solidified its reputation as a high-performance curing agent for this grade, achieving results nearly equal to standard water immersion. This confirms that high-quality chemical membranes can be just as effective as traditional water curing for high-strength applications. However, the performance of CC1 and CC3 was catastrophic for this grade. The significant strength loss associated with these compounds suggests a total failure in moisture retention, preventing the concrete from reaching its high-performance potential. The results lead to a vital scientific conclusion: for high-grade concrete, the use of an ineffective curing compound is equivalent to a total curing failure. Without the immediate and high-efficiency seal provided by methods like CC2 or standard immersion, the technological benefits of a high-strength mix design are entirely lost. The 28-day data leads to a pivotal conclusion: the specific choice of curing agent is a more critical factor in determining structural integrity than the minor timing delays in application. The results indicate that while brief delays in initiating standard water curing lead to only a marginal decline in strength, the divergence caused by the choice of curing compound is substantial and potentially catastrophic. CC2 demonstrated exceptional consistency across all concrete grades and delay scenarios, maintaining a performance profile that closely mirrored the standard water-curing benchmark. This suggests that CC2 provides a robust moisture barrier capable of sustaining hydration even under varying application conditions. In stark contrast, CC1 and CC3 proved fundamentally incapable of facilitating the hydration process, leaving the concrete with a severe strength deficit. The significant performance gap between these compounds confirms that while standard water immersion remains the ideal benchmark, CC2 serves as a highly reliable and high-performing alternative. Conversely, CC1 and CC3 are fundamentally unsuitable for structural concrete in these environments, as their inability to retain moisture prevents the concrete from achieving its necessary structural potential. This highlights that for field applications where water curing is not feasible, the selection of a high-efficiency membrane like CC2 is mandatory to ensure the safety and durability of the concrete.

Compound 2 > Compound 1 > Compound 3

Figure 6 illustrates the compressive strength at 90 days, a stage where the concrete has reached a high level of maturity. Under Standard curing conditions, all concrete grades successfully surpassed their respective design targets, confirming that the hydration process reached its full potential. A key observation at this long-term stage is that Outdoor conditions remained highly competitive with the standard benchmark, although they generally trailed slightly behind. In contrast, the Lab condition continued to exhibit a massive strength deficit, failing to meet the design targets for the higher grades. This suggests that the lack of active moisture in a dry indoor environment leads to a permanent cessation of the hydration process. Among the chemical treatments, CC2 solidified its position as the only high-performing alternative, consistently tracking the standard results. Conversely, CC1 and CC3 showed no significant long-term strength recovery, proving that the damage caused by poor moisture retention in the early stages is permanent. For the Grade 1 mix, the 90-day data indicates that CC2 remains exceptionally effective, providing a performance level nearly identical to standard water immersion. However, samples subjected to the Lab condition or CC3 remained significantly below the design threshold, showing that even with extended time, these curing methods cannot facilitate the necessary chemical reactions to reach target strength. An interesting scientific finding for this grade is that the impact of a two-day delay in standard curing was minimal at this stage. This suggests that for lower-grade concrete, late-stage hydration can partially compensate for early-age moisture loss, provided that a high-quality curing environment is eventually established. This "recovery" behavior, however, was not observed in samples treated with inferior chemical compounds. In the Grade 2 (35 MPa) mix, the disparity between effective and ineffective curing became even more pronounced. While Outdoor exposure and CC2 showed strong resilience—both approaching the standard benchmark—the results for the Lab condition, CC1, and CC3 were significantly lower. The data indicates that for mid-range concrete, the absence of proper moisture retention leads to a permanent strength loss of approximately one-third of the design potential. The fact that these samples failed to reach their design targets even after 90 days proves that the structural damage caused by inadequate curing is irreversible. This reinforces the conclusion that neither time nor late-stage environment can substitute for the critical moisture retention required during the first days of casting. At the

90-day maturity mark, Grade 3 concrete reached its peak performance under standard water curing, as expected for a high-performance mix. While outdoor exposure remained a respectable alternative, laboratory-cured samples exhibited an extreme strength deficit, failing to achieve even two-thirds of the standard potential. A standout observation for this grade was the exceptional performance of CC2, which emerged as the most effective chemical treatment, even surpassing the results of outdoor exposure. This suggests that for high-cement-content mixes, the superior sealing capability of CC2 is highly effective at facilitating internal hydration. In contrast, CC1 and CC3 proved to be entirely insufficient for high-strength applications. The data for Grade 3 emphasizes a critical engineering principle: higher-strength concrete is the most sensitive to the quality of curing. The staggering disparity between the standard benchmark and the least effective curing methods proves that the technological advantages of a high-grade mix design are completely neutralized if moisture retention is not prioritized. For high-performance concrete, the penalty for poor curing is far more severe than for lower-grade mixes. The 90-day data confirms that the initial choice of curing method has a permanent and irreversible impact on the concrete's structural integrity. A key finding is the distinction between the impact of curing timing and curing quality. While minor delays in the initiation of standard water curing resulted in only a marginal decline in long-term strength, the performance gap between different curing compounds was vast. CC2 consistently demonstrated its reliability as a high-performing alternative, achieving results that remained within a narrow margin of the standard benchmark across all grades and scenarios. Conversely, CC1 and CC3 performed nearly as poorly as the lab-cured samples, indicating a fundamental failure to provide the necessary moisture seal required for long-term hydration. Ultimately, these long-term results lead to a clear scientific conclusion: while standard water curing remains the ideal benchmark, CC2 is a reliable and high-performing substitute for structural applications. However, the use of inferior compounds like CC1 and CC3 results in a permanent loss of structural capacity, making them unsuitable for engineering projects where meeting design strength and ensuring long-term durability are mandatory.

3.2 Flexural Strength:

Figure 7 flexural strength at age 28 days for grade 1,2 and 3

Figure 7 demonstrates the flexural strength at 28 days, "Standard water curing benchmark yielded flexural strengths of 3.51 MPa for Grade 1, 3.93 MPa for Grade 2, and 3.89 MPa for Grade 3. A highly unexpected and significant trend in this data is that delayed curing actually improved flexural strength in many instances compared to immediate curing. In several cases, samples with a 2-day delay in curing outperformed the standard benchmark. As seen in the compressive results, "Outdoor" and "Lab conditions" generally produced lower results than the standard, but the gap is smaller in flexure. Among chemical options, Curing Compound 2 (Water-acrylic polymer) with a delay produced the highest flexural values across the entire study. The Grade 1 mix achieved a standard benchmark of 3.51 MPa. While Outdoor (2.46 MPa) and Lab (2.30 MPa) conditions fell significantly below this, the "Standard-2Days delay" reached the highest value for this grade at 4.05 MPa, exceeding the benchmark by 15%. When using curing compounds immediately, strengths were very low (CC1 at 1.66 MPa and CC3 at 1.81 MPa). However, applying CC2 with a 2-day delay brought the strength back up to 3.14 MPa, showing that Grade 1 flexural capacity is extremely sensitive to the timing of the seal application. For Grade 2, the standard benchmark was 3.93 MPa. Similar to Grade 1, the immediate application of curing compounds resulted in a major strength deficit (e.g., CC1 at 2.30 MPa). However, the performance of CC2 with a 2-day delay was exceptional, reaching 4.39 MPa, which is approximately 11% higher than the standard water-cured benchmark. Even a 2-day delay in standard water curing (4.00 MPa) proved better than immediate immersion. This suggests that for this grade, a short period of initial ambient drying followed by a high-quality polymer seal (CC2) creates a superior environment for flexural development. Grade 3 achieved a standard benchmark of 3.89 MPa. The results for this high-strength mix further confirm the benefit of delayed curing in flexure; the CC2 with a 2-day delay reached a peak of 4.80 MPa, the highest recorded value in the table. This is nearly a 23% increase over the standard benchmark. Even the "Standard-2Day delay" (4.53 MPa) significantly outperformed the immediate standard curing. Conversely, the immediate use of CC1 (2.52 MPa) or CC3 (2.64 MPa) provided inadequate results, emphasizing that the chemical choice (CC2) and timing (2-day delay) are both vital for maximizing the flexural performance of high-grade concrete. The flexural strength data reveals a critical finding: immediate curing is not necessarily the best for flexural capacity**.** Across all grades, delaying the start of curing by 2 days—whether with water or chemical compounds—consistently resulted in higher flexural strengths than immediate application. Specifically, Curing Compound 2 (Water-acrylic polymer) applied after a 2-day delay consistently outperformed the Standard benchmark. In contrast, CC1 (Acrylic resin) and CC3 (Paraffin Wax) remained the least effective choices, even with delays. This indicates that CC2 allows for a more beneficial maturation process for the concrete's tensile properties, making it the most superior chemical option for flexural strength.

4. Conclusion

The results across all testing ages (7, 28, and 90 days) confirm that Curing Compound 2 (Water-acrylic polymer) is significantly more effective than its counterparts. The primary reason for its success lies in its chemical nature; the water-acrylic polymer forms a more cohesive, flexible, and continuous membrane over the concrete surface compared to pure resins or waxes. The data across all ages (7, 28, and 90 days) confirms that while Standard Water Curing remains the ultimate benchmark for hydration, the chemical composition of the curing compound determines whether the concrete reaches its design potential.

Curing Compound 2 (Water-Acrylic Polymer): This was the most effective chemical treatment. It consistently followed the growth curve of the standard benchmark, showing only a minor decline. By 90 days, it provided a near-perfect seal, allowing the concrete to reach over 90% of its potential strength.

Curing Compound 1 (Acrylic Resin): Showed a significant decline. While it performed better than no curing at all, it failed to maintain sufficient internal moisture, leading to a permanent strength deficit of nearly 30-40%.

Curing Compound 3 (Paraffin Wax): This was the least effective method. It showed the most drastic decline compared to the standard, proving that wax-based barriers are insufficient for structural concrete in these conditions.

Average Percentage Decline vs. Standard(Compressive)

Curing Compound	7 Days	28 Days	90 Days
CC2 (Water-Acrylic Polymer)	-8% to -11%	-1.5% to -4%	-2% to -7%-2% to -7%
CC1 (Acrylic Resin)	-35% to -45%	-35% to -45%	-30% to -45%
CC3 (Paraffin Wax)	-45% to -55%	-40% to -48%	-40% to -50%

2. Flexural Strength Analysis (28 Days)

The flexural results presented a unique trend where timing and chemical type created a surprising "incline" over the standard benchmark. While immediate application of any compound caused a decline, delayed application (2 days) led to superior results.

CC2 (Water-Acrylic Polymer) with 2-Day Delay: This was the standout performer, showing a significant incline (increase) in strength compared to the standard water-cured benchmark.

CC1 & CC3: Both showed a heavy decline when applied immediately, but improved slightly with a delay, though they still struggled to match the standard.

Percentage Incline/Decline vs. Standard (Flexural - 28 Days)

Curing Method	Grade 1 (25 MPa)	Grade 2 (35 MPa)	Grade 3 (45 MPa)
CC2 (Immediate)	-40% (Decline)	-27% (Decline)	-30% (Decline)
CC2 (2-Day Delay)	-10% (Decline)	+11.7% (Incline)	+23.4% (Incline)
CC1 (Immediate)	-52% (Decline)	-41% (Decline)	-35% (Decline)
CC3 (Immediate)	-48% (Decline)	-38% (Decline)	-32% (Decline)

This experiment evaluated the impact of various curing compounds on concrete properties, revealing that the water-acrylic polymer-based compound (CC2) was the most effective alternative by achieving 90% to 98% of the standard water-cured compressive strength within 90 days, while the acrylic resin (CC1) and paraffin wax (CC3) caused permanent strength reductions of 30% to 50%. Leaving concrete un-cured in a laboratory environment for 7 days led to a compressive strength loss of 10% to 18%. In terms of compressive strength deficits compared to water curing, CC2 dropped by 8% to 11% at 7 days, narrowed to 1.5% to 4% at 28 days, and stabilized between 2% and 7% at 90 days, whereas CC1 maintained a consistently high deficit between 30% and 45% across all intervals, and CC3 recorded the poorest performance with a sharp drop of 40% to 55%. For the 28-day flexural strength, immediate application of all chemical compounds led to a significant drop ranging from 32% to 52%, with CC2 decreasing by 27% to 40%. However, delaying the application of CC2 by 2 days completely inverted this negative trend into a distinct incline, yielding a net increase of +11.7% for Grade 35 MPa and +23.4% for Grade 45 MPa compared to standard water curing.The broader significance of this work carries several strategic and practical implications for the construction sector, particularly regarding environmental and water conservation. By validating CC2 as a highly viable alternative to water curing, this research offers a concrete solution to save millions of liters of potable water, which is vital for large-scale infrastructure projects such as highways, tunnels, and dams in Kurdistan cities like Sulaymaniyah, Erbil, and Duhok that frequently experience water scarcity. Furthermore, the experiment serves as an economic and quality control guide, warning the local market that selecting curing compounds based solely on cheap material costs, like paraffin wax, is highly detrimental because inadequate compounds compromise the concrete's structural integrity and drastically shorten its service life. The discovery of a flexural strength increase via a 2-day delayed curing application provides a novel field engineering insight, allowing engineers to strategically utilize this delayed timeline in pavement designs to maximize cracking resistance. Finally, through SEM/EDS analysis, this study provides a crucial microstructural advancement by proving that the ultra-fine particle size of CC2 (63.65 nm) penetrates deep into concrete pores to densify the C-S-H gel, explaining on a micro-level why this compound exhibits superior durability against aggressive chemical environments like sulfuric acid (H_2SO_4).

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تأثير ظروف المعالجة المختلفة على الخصائص الميكانيكية والهيكلية الدقيقة للخرسانة ذات المقاومة العادية

المستخلص

يعتمد أداء الخرسانة اعتيادية المقاومة (NSC) بشكل كبير على جودة الإنضاج(Curing) ، خاصة خلال فترة الإماهة المبكرة (Early Hydration).تبحث هذه الدراسة في تأثير ظروف الإنضاج ومركبات الإنضاج الكيميائية على رتب خرسانية مختلفة (٢٥، ٣٥، و٤٥ ميجاباسكال). تم تحضير إجمالي ٦٣٠ عينة واختبارها تحت ظروف الإنضاج القياسي بالماء، والتعرض المختبري والخارجي، بالإضافة إلى ثلاثة مركبات إنضاج تجارية وهي: راتنج الأكريليك(CC1) ، وبوليمر الأكريليك المائي(CC2) ، وشمع البارافين .(CC3) ولمحاكاة ممارسات الموقع الواقعية، تم تطبيق الإنضاج فوراً وكذلك بعد تأخير لمدة يوم ويومين. تم تقييم مقاومة الانضغاط عند عمر ٧ و٢٨ و٩٠ يوماً، بينما قيست مقاومة الانحناء عند عمر ٢٨ يوماً .أظهرت النتائج أن لظروف الإنضاج تأثيراً حاسماً ومستمراً على تطور المقاومة؛ حيث حقق مركب بوليمر الأكريليك المائي (CC2) الأداء الأقرب للإنضاج القياسي بالماء، بنسبة بلغت ٩٠–٩٨٪ من المقاومة المرجعية عند عمر ٩٠ يوماً. في المقابل، تسببت مركبات (CC1) و (CC3) في انخفاضات كبيرة وغير قابلة للاستعادة في المقاومة، تراوحت ما بين ٣٠٪ إلى ٥٠٪ لجميع الرتب. وفيما يتعلق بمقاومة الانحناء عند عمر ٢٨ يوماً، ظهر اتجاه مغاير؛ فبينما كان الإنضاج الفوري هو الأفضل للانضغاط، أدى تأخير الإنضاج لمدة يومين باستخدام مركب (CC2) إلى زيادة مقاومة الانحناء بنسبة تصل إلى ٢٣٪ مقارنة بالمرجع القياسي لخلطة ٤٥ ميجاباسكال. تخلص الدراسة إلى أن مركب (CC2) يعد بديلاً حقلياً موثوقاً للغاية للإنضاج التقليدي، بينما تعتبر مركبات (CC1)و (CC3) غير كافية لضمان الأداء الإنشائي المطلوب.

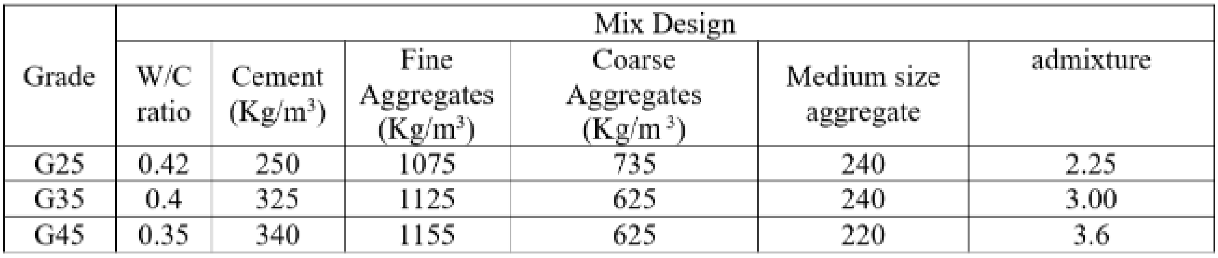
الكلمات المفتاحية

ظروف التصلب، مركبات التصلب، الخصائص الميكانيكية، الخصائص الميكروبنيوية.

Percentage Incline/Decline vs. Standard (Flexural - 28 Days)

Curing Method	Grade 1 (25 MPa)	Grade 2 (35 MPa)	Grade 3 (45 MPa)
CC2 (Immediate)	-40% (Decline)	-27% (Decline)	-30% (Decline)
CC2 (2-Day Delay)	-10% (Decline)	+11.7% (Incline)	+23.4% (Incline)
CC1 (Immediate)	-52% (Decline)	-41% (Decline)	-35% (Decline)
CC3 (Immediate)	-48% (Decline)	-38% (Decline)	-32% (Decline)

Table 1 mix proportions unique chemical interaction



Grade	Mix Design					
	W/C ratio	Cement (Kg/m^3)	Fine Aggregates (Kg/m^3)	Coarse Aggregates (Kg/m^3)	Medium size aggregate	admixture
G25	0.42	250	1075	735	240	2.25
G35	0.4	325	1125	625	240	3.00
G45	0.35	340	1155	625	220	3.6

Figure 1: Water-acrylic based polymer curing compound

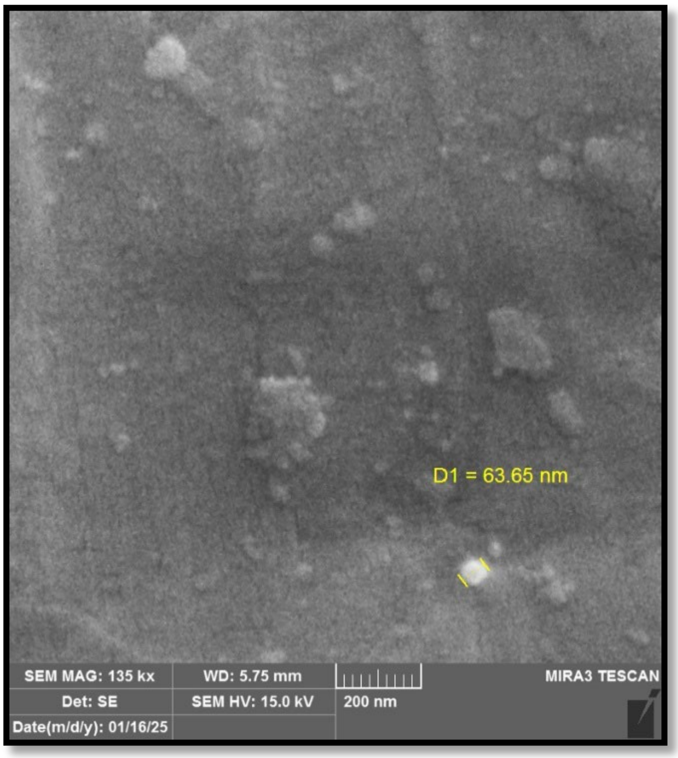


Figure 2: Water-acrylic based polymer curing compound SEM for surface morphology

Figure. 3 Paraffin wax curing compound

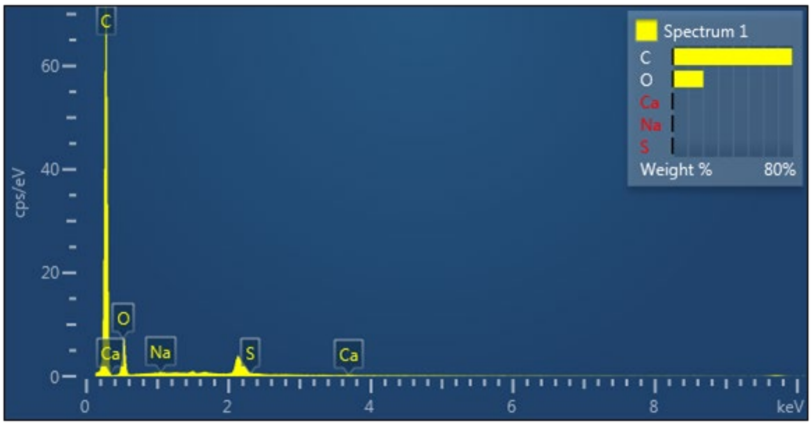


Figure 9: Acrylic resin-based curing compound SEM

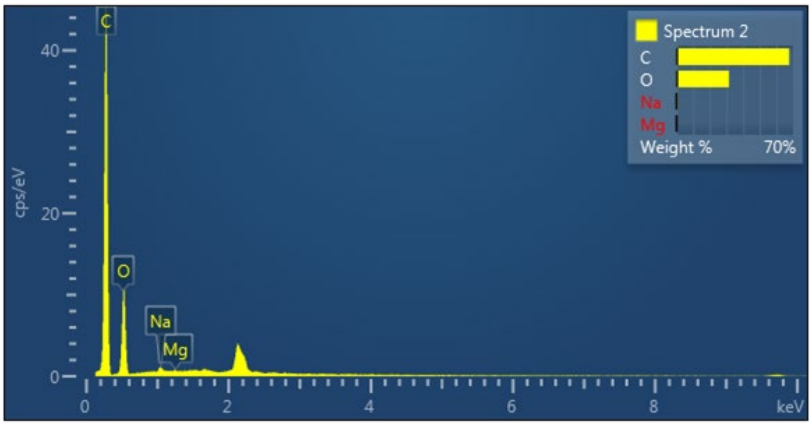


Figure 10 : Water-acrylic based polymer Curing Compound SEM

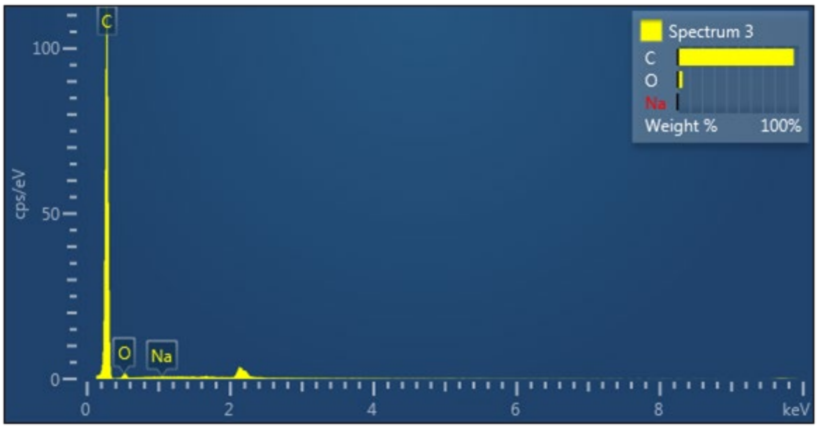
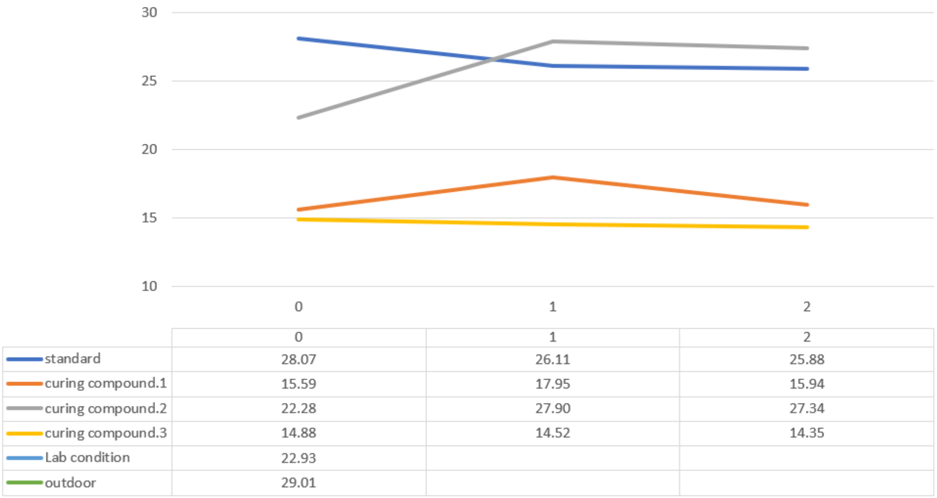


Figure 11: Paraffin wax Curing Compound SEM

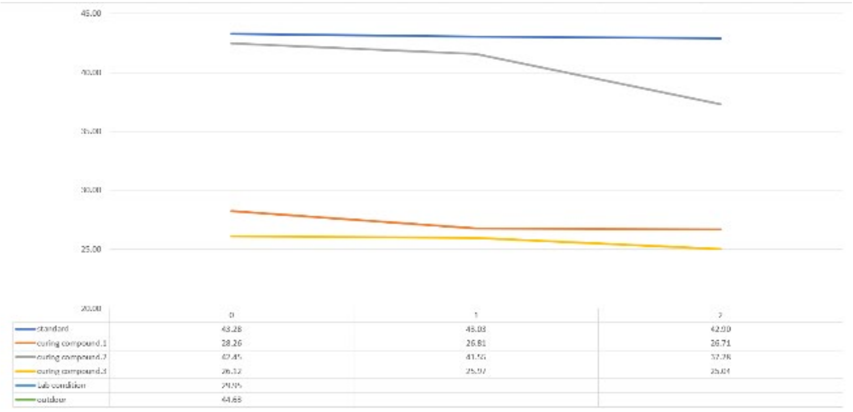


	0	1	2
standard	28.07	26.11	25.88
curing compound.1	15.59	17.95	15.94
curing compound.2	22.28	27.90	27.34
curing compound.3	14.88	14.52	14.35
Lab condition	22.93		
outdoor	29.01		

Figure 12: Line graphs to show the strength development curve for grade 1 at 28 days

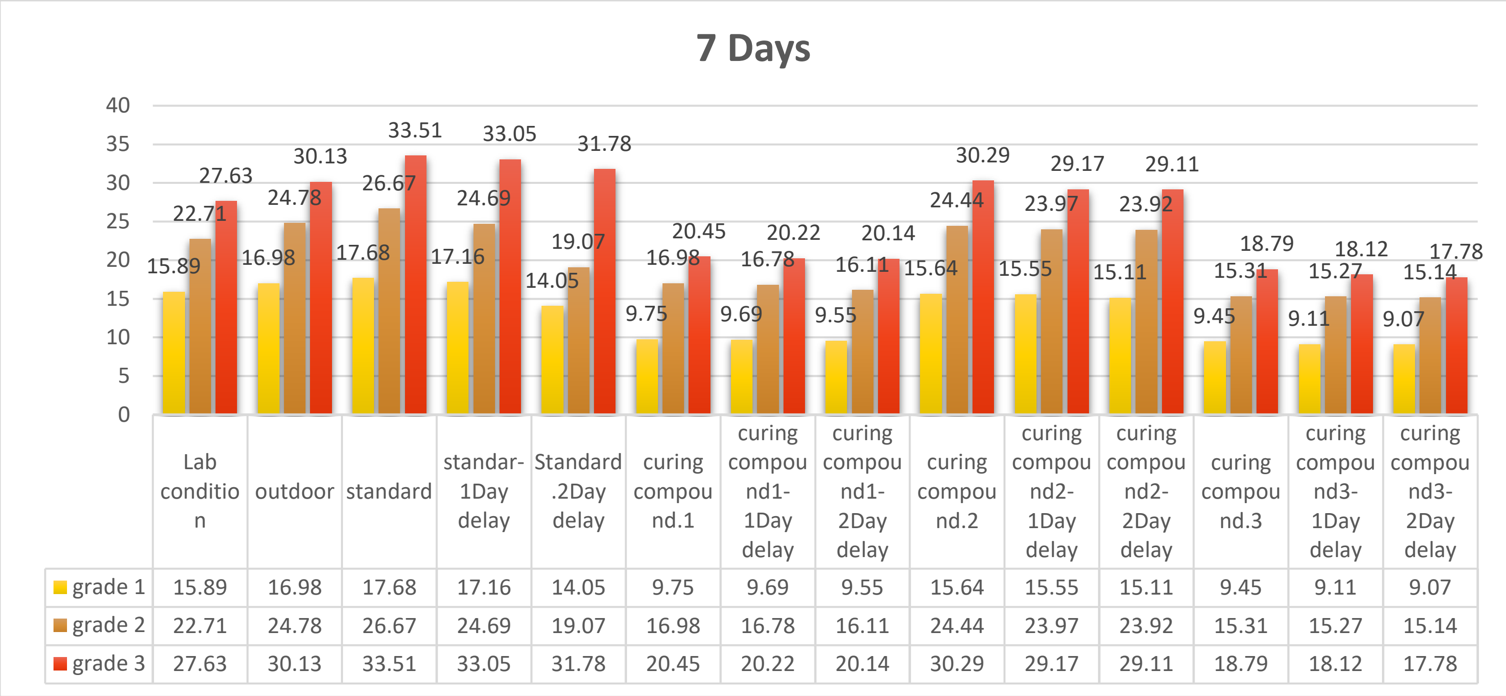
	0	1	2
standard	35.19	35.12	34.78
curing compound.1	23.75	21.41	21.31
curing compound.2	33.86	33.53	33.24
curing compound.3	22.59	21.89	21.75
Lab condition	24.46		
outdoor	37.10		

Figure 13: Line graphs to show the strength development curve for grade 2 at 28 days



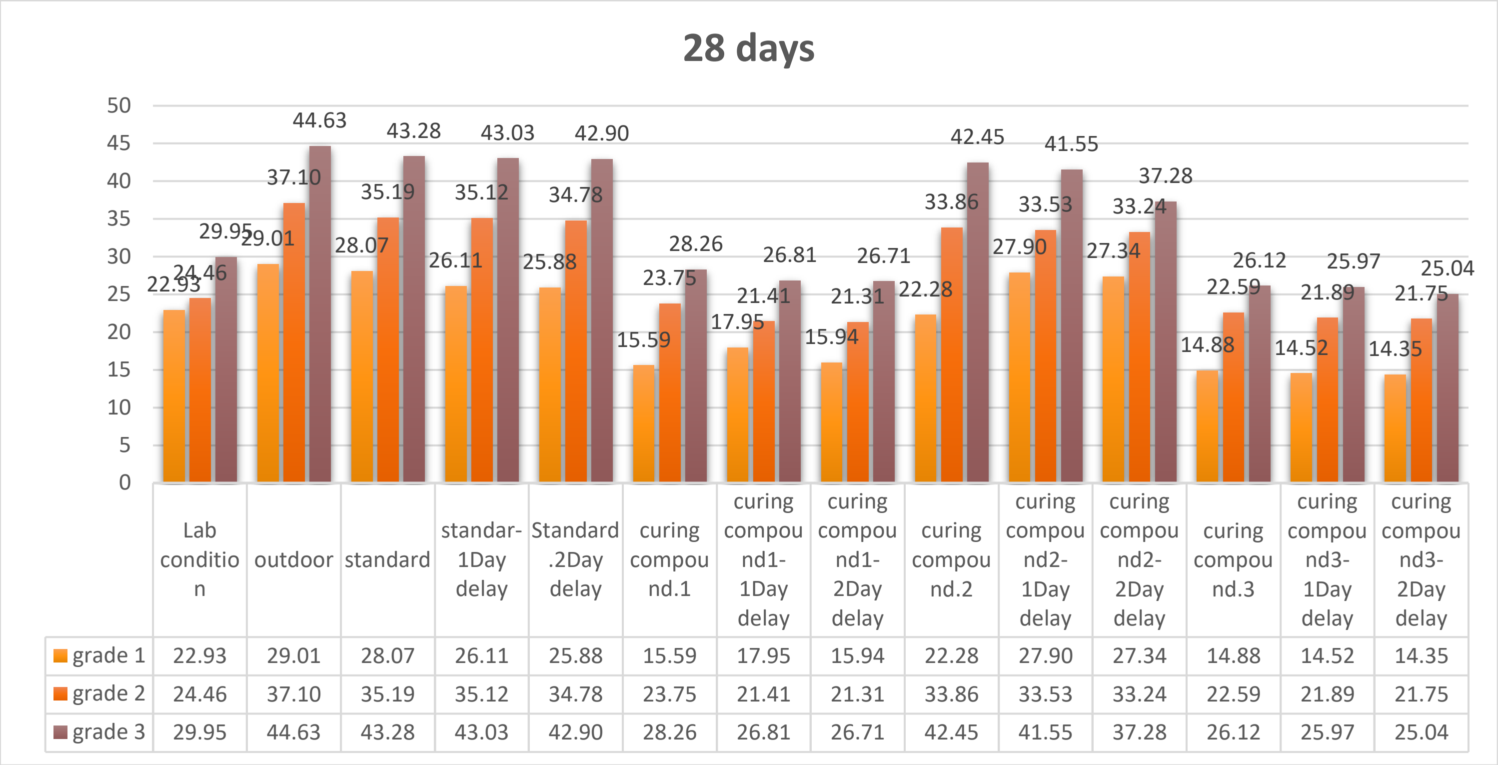
	0	1	2
standard	43.28	43.03	42.90
curing compound.1	28.26	26.81	26.71
curing compound.2	42.45	41.56	37.28
curing compound.3	26.12	25.97	25.04
Lab condition	29.95		
outdoor	44.68		

Figure 14: Line graphs to show the strength development curve for grade 3 at 28 days



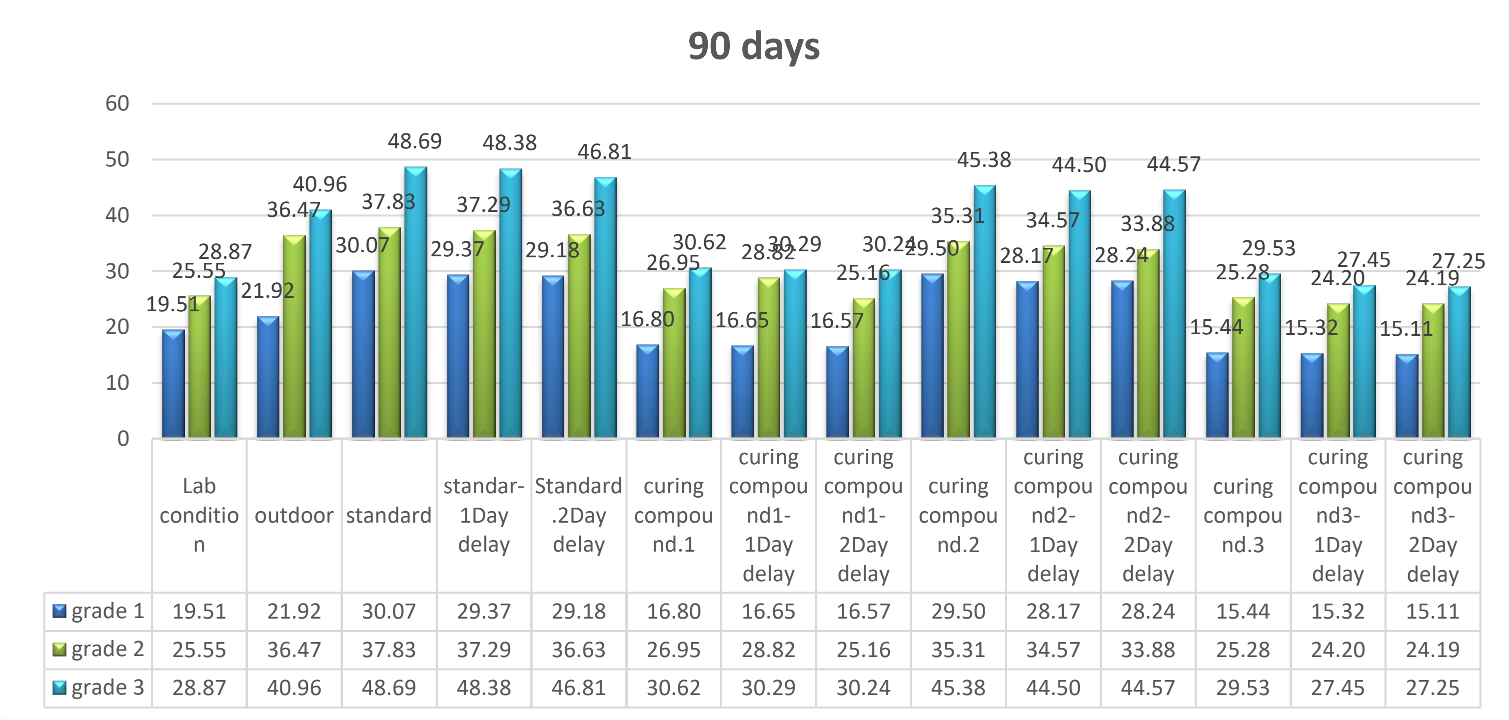
	Lab condition	outdoor	standard	standar-1Day delay	Standard.2Day delay	curing compound.1	curing compound1-1Day delay	curing compound1-2Day delay	curing compound.2	curing compound2-1Day delay	curing compound2-2Day delay	curing compound.3	curing compound3-1Day delay	curing compound3-2Day delay
grade 1	15.89	16.98	17.68	17.16	14.05	9.75	9.69	9.55	15.64	15.55	15.11	9.45	9.11	9.07
grade 2	22.71	24.78	26.67	24.69	19.07	16.98	16.78	16.11	24.44	23.97	23.92	15.31	15.27	15.14
grade 3	27.63	30.13	33.51	33.05	31.78	20.45	20.22	20.14	30.29	29.17	29.11	18.79	18.12	17.78

Figure 4 Compressive strength at age 7 days for grade 1,2 and 3



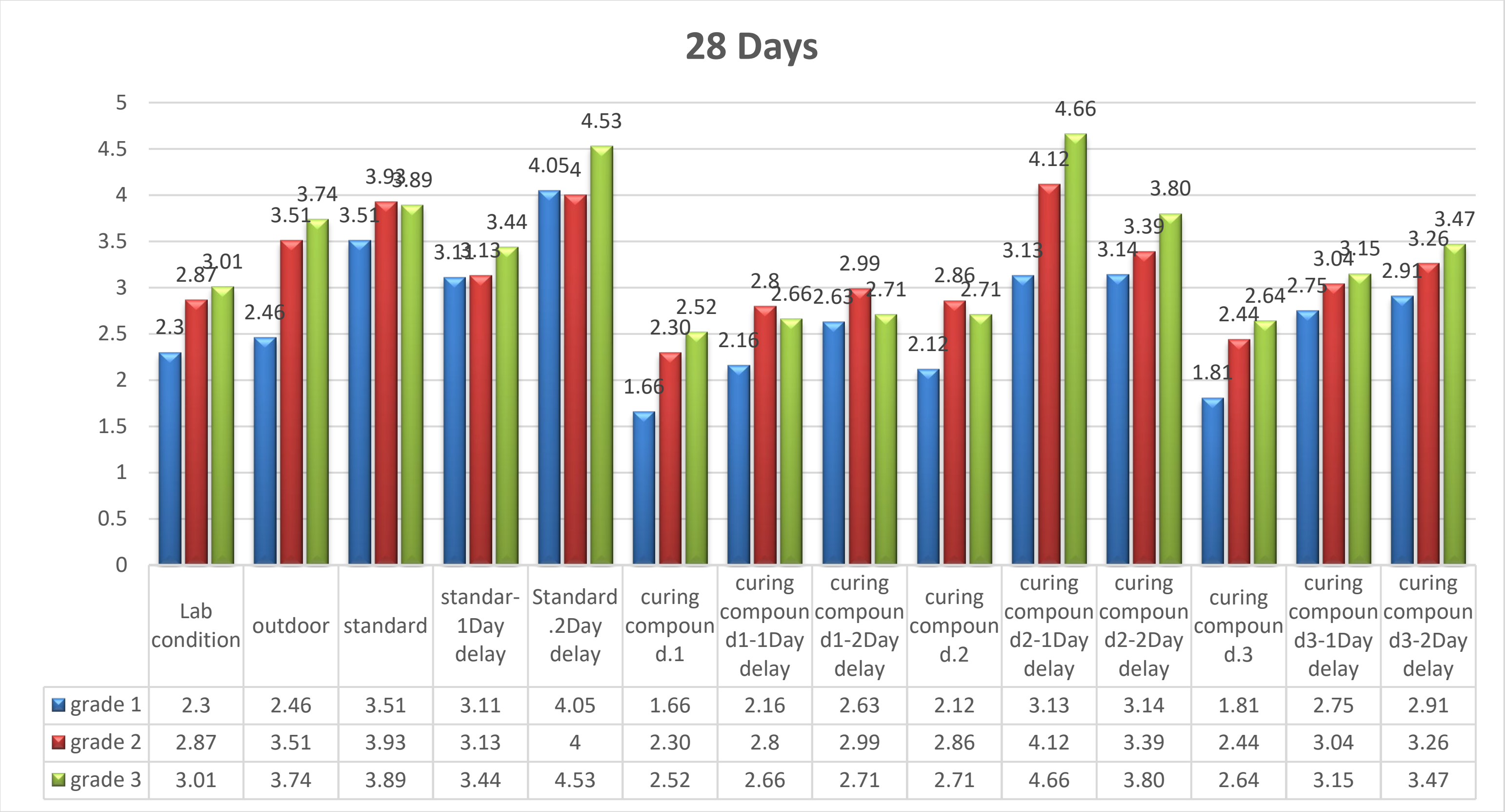
	Lab condition	outdoor	standard	standar-1Day delay	Standard.2Day delay	curing compound.1	curing compound1-1Day delay	curing compound1-2Day delay	curing compound.2	curing compound2-1Day delay	curing compound2-2Day delay	curing compound.3	curing compound3-1Day delay	curing compound3-2Day delay
grade 1	22.93	29.01	28.07	26.11	25.88	15.59	17.95	15.94	22.28	27.90	27.34	14.88	14.52	14.35
grade 2	24.46	37.10	35.19	35.12	34.78	23.75	21.41	21.31	33.86	33.53	33.24	22.59	21.89	21.75
grade 3	29.95	44.63	43.28	43.03	42.90	28.26	26.81	26.71	42.45	41.55	37.28	26.12	25.97	25.04

Figure 5 Compressive strength at age 28 days for grade 1,2 and 3



	Lab condition	outdoor	standard	standar-1Day delay	Standard .2Day delay	curing compound.1	curing compound1-1Day delay	curing compound1-2Day delay	curing compound.2	curing compound2-1Day delay	curing compound2-2Day delay	curing compound.3	curing compound3-1Day delay	curing compound3-2Day delay
grade 1	19.51	21.92	30.07	29.37	29.18	16.80	16.65	16.57	29.50	28.17	28.24	15.44	15.32	15.11
grade 2	25.55	36.47	37.83	37.29	36.63	26.95	28.82	25.16	35.31	34.57	33.88	25.28	24.20	24.19
grade 3	28.87	40.96	48.69	48.38	46.81	30.62	30.29	30.24	45.38	44.50	44.57	29.53	27.45	27.25

Figure 6 Compressive strength at age 90 days for grade 1,2 and 3



	Lab condition	outdoor	standard	standar-1Day delay	Standard .2Day delay	curing compound.1	curing compound1-1Day delay	curing compound1-2Day delay	curing compound.2	curing compound2-1Day delay	curing compound2-2Day delay	curing compound.3	curing compound3-1Day delay	curing compound3-2Day delay
grade 1	2.3	2.46	3.51	3.11	4.05	1.66	2.16	2.63	2.12	3.13	3.14	1.81	2.75	2.91
grade 2	2.87	3.51	3.93	3.13	4	2.30	2.8	2.99	2.86	4.12	3.39	2.44	3.04	3.26
grade 3	3.01	3.74	3.89	3.44	4.53	2.52	2.66	2.71	2.71	4.66	3.80	2.64	3.15	3.47

Figure 7 Flexural strength at age 28 days for grade 1,2 and 3

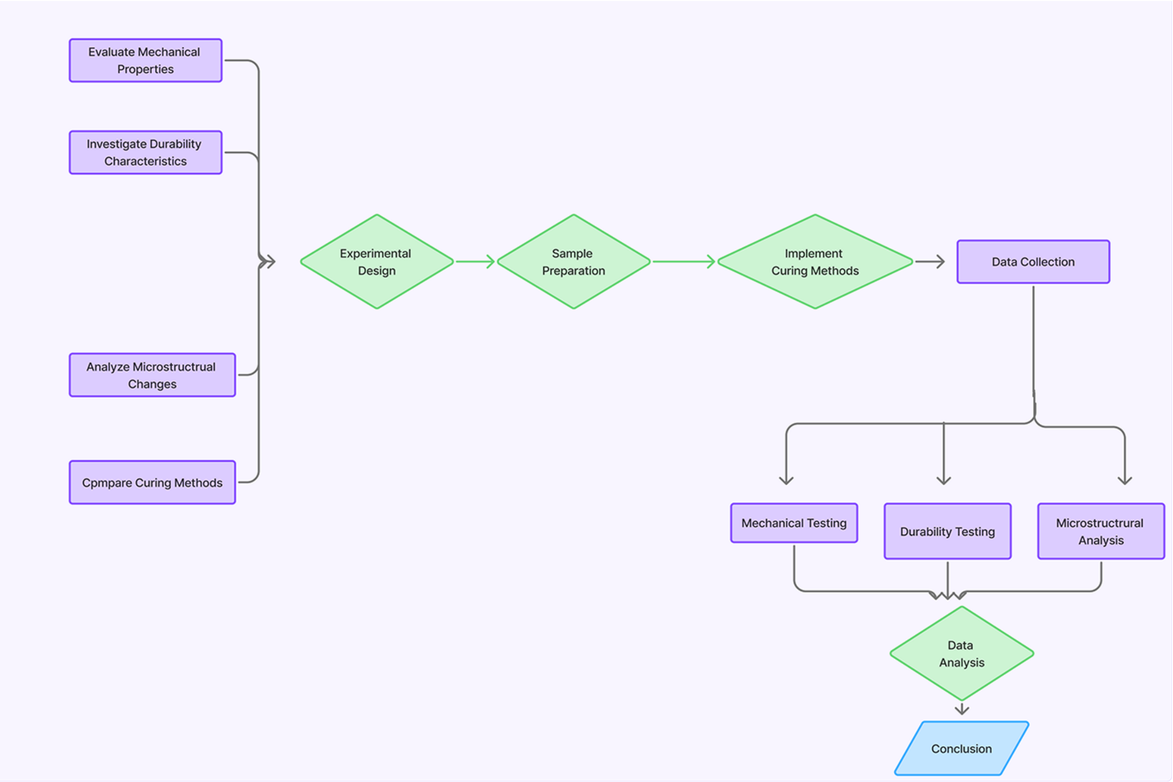


Figure 8: Flow chart of the practical work