



## Effect of Chlorhexidine Cleansing of Umbilical Cord for Prevention of Infection

Md. Khairuzzaman<sup>1</sup>, MA Mannan<sup>2</sup>, Abdul Matin<sup>3</sup>, Mst. Monjuman Ara Sarker<sup>4</sup>, Nihar Ranjan Sarker<sup>5</sup>, MA Rouf<sup>6</sup>, Mohmmad Shahidullah<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of Paediatrics, Shaheed Suhrawardy Medical College, Dhaka, Bangladesh; <sup>2</sup>Professor and Chairman, Department of Neonatology, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University, Dhaka, Bangladesh; <sup>3</sup>Associate Professor, Department of Paediatrics, Shaheed Suhrawardy Medical College, Dhaka, Bangladesh; <sup>4</sup>Junior Consultant (Gynaecology & Obstetrics), Upzilla Health Complex, Dhamrai, Dhaka, Bangladesh; <sup>5</sup>Associate Professor, Department of Paediatrics, Shaheed Suhrawardy Medical College, Dhaka, Bangladesh; <sup>6</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of Paediatrics, Shaheed Suhrawardy Medical College, Dhaka, Bangladesh; <sup>7</sup>Professor, Department of Neonatology, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University, Dhaka, Bangladesh;

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### Abstract

**Background:** Chlorhexidine cleansing of the cord can reduce neonatal mortality among newborns. **Objective:** The aim of study was to determine the effect of cord cleansing with chlorhexidine in reduction of umbilical infection among newborns in hospital settings. **Methodology:** This randomized controlled trial was carried out between April 2013 to July 2014 and 510 newborns were randomly assigned within a tertiary level hospital in Bangladesh to receive 1 of 3 cord care regimens single cord cleansing with 4% chlorhexidine (Group-1), multiple cord cleansing with 4% chlorhexidine (Group-2) and clean and dry cord care (Group-3 : control). **Results:** The risk of umbilical cord infection (omphalitis) was significantly reduced in both the single (Relative risk [RR] 0.15 [95% CI] 0.008-0.93) and multiple chlorhexidine cleansing group (RR 0.37 [95% CI] 0.04- 0.99) compared to the dry cord care group. The risk of omphalitis was not significantly different between multiple and single chlorhexidine cleansing group (RR 3.14 [0.13-76.54]). **Conclusion:** Chlorhexidine significantly reduce the risk of umbilical infection in both single and multiple cord cleansing neonates. [*Bangladesh Journal of Infectious Diseases* 2017;4(2):35-39]

**Keywords:** Chlorhexidine; Umbilical Cord; infection prevention; cleansing

**Correspondence:** Dr. Md. Khairuzzaman, Assistant Professor (Neonatology), Department of Pediatrics, Shaheed Suhrawardy Medical College, Dhaka, Bangladesh; Email: [lipton.zaman@gmail.com](mailto:lipton.zaman@gmail.com) ; Cell no.: +8801714537243

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## Introduction

Neonatal mortality rate in Bangladesh is still high (28/1000 live births) and 20% of which are due to sepsis<sup>1</sup>. The umbilicus is regarded as key entry point for invasive pathogens, consequence of which is a cord stump infection, a factor that can greatly increase neonatal morbidity and mortality due to systemic sepsis<sup>2-5</sup>. Pathogens can enter the bloodstream through the patent vessels of the newly cut cord even in the absence of overt signs of cord infection<sup>5</sup>. Infection risk is greatest in countries like Bangladesh where most deliveries (>70%) take place at home, often attended by unskilled traditional birth attendants (TBAs) with suboptimal conditions and delivery places<sup>6-7</sup>.

Application of potentially harmful substances to the umbilical stump are still common (52%) in Bangladesh and are associated with a high risk of umbilical infection<sup>8</sup>. Chlorhexidine use substantially reduces bacterial colonization on the cord stump and may be associated with reduced superficial skin infections<sup>2,9-11</sup>. Chlorhexidine has broad spectrum activity against gram-positive and gram-negative organisms, an extensive safety record, strong binding potential that results in residual effectiveness and low cost<sup>12</sup>. Three communities-based randomized controlled trials in Nepal, Bangladesh and Pakistan identified safety aspects of chlorhexidine use in newborn infants<sup>13-15</sup>. A meta-analysis from three recent trials revealed application of 7.1% chlorhexidine digluconate (delivering 4% chlorhexidine) on cord reduce newborn mortality risk by 23% and eliminates two-thirds to three-quarters of serious umbilical infections<sup>16</sup>. The objectives of the study were to determine the effect of cord cleansing with chlorhexidine in reduction of umbilical infection among newborns in hospital settings.

## Methodology

This was a randomized controlled trial carried out in the department of neonatology and department of obstetrics and Gynecology, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University (BSMMU), Dhaka, from April 2013 to July 2014. The study protocol was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB), BSMMU. All term and preterm healthy newborns delivered during the study period were included. Preterm or any sick babies who need NICU admission, newborns with congenital malformations and newborns with sepsis risk factors were excluded. A total of 510 both term and preterm healthy newborns were enrolled and

divided into three study groups using a simple randomization method. Each study group was assigned to one of three cord care regimens. Group 1 was assigned for single cord cleansing group and 7.1% chlorhexidine digluconate solution (delivering 4% chlorhexidine) was applied as soon as possible after birth or within 24 hours of birth. Group 2 was assigned for multiple cord cleansing group and same chlorhexidine solution was applied to the cord as soon as possible after birth or within 24 hours of birth and then repeat application once daily for up to 7 days. Group 3 was assigned for clean and dry cord care and promoted dry cord care messages recommended by WHO and did not apply chlorhexidine to the cord. After proper hand washing with soap and water, two sterile cotton balls were soaked with 7.1% chlorhexidine digluconate solution. One cotton ball was used to gently cleanse the umbilical cord stump and another cotton ball was used to gently cleanse the base of the stump and the skin immediately around the base from center to periphery<sup>13, 15</sup>. During the hospital stay, chlorhexidine was applied to the cord by the investigator in either OPD or department of Neonatology or in operation theater room of department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, BSMMU. After discharge from hospital, chlorhexidine was applied to the cord once daily by parents or family members at home to complete a total of 7 days. Parents and family members of the group 2 newborns were trained about the application of chlorhexidine to the cord during the time of hospital stay<sup>15</sup>. Sufficient sterile cotton balls and chlorhexidine solution in 25 ml opaque bottle were supplied to caregivers for application at home. Chlorhexidine solution (7.1% chlorhexidine digluconate delivering 4% chlorhexidine) used in the trial was prepared by diluting a 20% stock solution of aqueous chlorhexidine digluconate (ACI Limited, Dhaka, Bangladesh) with distilled water. The prepared chlorhexidine solution was packaged into 250 ml and 25 ml opaque bottles and were supplied to NICU, BSMMU with free of cost only for research purpose after ensuring 6 months stability test. Caregivers of all newborns in all groups were received educational messages about clean and dry cord care practice according to WHO and also advised to follow it after application of chlorhexidine during the total neonatal period. Newborns of all 3 groups were followed up to 7 times in assigned date (Day 1, 3, 5, 7, 14, 21 and 28) by the concern physician for signs of umbilical cord infection and features of sepsis during the total neonatal period. Mother was oriented about the signs of umbilical infection during the hospital stay with colored photograph of umbilical cord infection and report to concern physician if any. Researcher

was communicated with the parents or other family member over mobile phone in assigned date. If any signs of cord infection were observed by the parents or other family members, parents were requested for returned their baby to NICU, BSMMU for umbilical cord swab culture and treatment. In each follow up during hospital stay or after discharge at home, findings observed by researcher or information's reported by parents or other family members were recorded. Umbilical cord swab culture and septic screening were done in all babies who developed signs of umbilical infection. Treatment was given to all babies who developed umbilical infection according to NICU, BSMMU protocol. Omphalitis was defined as the presence of signs of inflammation such as redness and swelling, foul smelling from the cord or pus either in the cord stump or in the skin at the base of stump<sup>13</sup>. Omphalitis was graded into mild, moderate and severe<sup>13</sup>. Mild omphalitis was defined as redness and swelling, foul smelling from the cord or pus restricted to the cord stump. Moderate omphalitis was defined as redness and swelling, foul smelling from the cord or pus extending to the skin at the base of cord stump < 2 cm. Severe omphalitis was defined as inflammation extending > 2 cm from the cord stump, with or without pus. An informed written consent was obtained from parents or legal guardians of the babies. All demographic information and detailed history relevant to the

research work were collected from the parents or other family members and from obstetrics record by a structured questionnaire and data collection sheet. Collected data were compiled and analyzed with the help of SPSS (Statistical package for social sciences) Version 20.0. Quantitative data were expressed as mean and standard deviation and comparison were done by ANOVA test and independent unpaired student's t-test. Qualitative data were expressed as frequency and percentage and comparison were carried out by chi-square ( $X^2$ ) test. P value < 0.05 was considered statistically significant. Variable like umbilical infection was analyzed according to above plan.

## Results

A total of 510 newborn babies were included (170 in each group), 47 of them were dropped out from different groups due to incomplete follow up, needed NICU admission, application of local antibiotics/antiseptics or other harmful substances and parents having no interest to continue the research. Finally 463 newborns (single chlorhexidine cleansing 153, multiple chlorhexidine cleansing 146 and dry cord care 164) were completed the study. Demographic characteristics of mother, household and babies were comparable in newborns of all 3 groups.

**Table 1: Cord infections (omphalitis) in different groups (n=463)**

Group	No of live births	No of Omphalitis Case	Risk per 100 live birth	Relative Risk (95%CI)
Group 1	153	0	0	0.15 (0.008 -0.93)
Group 2	146	1	6.85	0.37 (0.04- 0.99)
Group3(control)	164	3	18.29	1.0
Group 2	146	1		3.14 (0.13 -76.54)
Group 1	153	0		1.0

RR reached from Chi-square test

The risk of umbilical cord infection (omphalitis) was significantly reduced in both the single (Relative risk [RR] 0.15 [95% CI] 0.008-0.93) and multiple chlorhexidine cleansing group (RR 0.37 [95% CI] 0.04- 0.99) compared to the dry cord care group. The risk of omphalitis was not significantly different between multiple and single chlorhexidine cleansing group (RR 3.14 [0.13-76.54]). The risk of mild omphalitis was significantly low in single (RR 0.34 [95% CI] 0.014- 8.70]) but not in multiple

chlorhexidine cleansing group (RR 1.12 [95% CI] 0.07-17.79) as compared to dry cord care group. The risk of moderate omphalitis was significantly low both in single (RR 0.21 [95% CI] 0.01 - 0.97) or multiple (RR 0.22 [95% CI] 0.01 - 0.98) chlorhexidine cleansing groups as compared to dry cord care group. No severe omphalitis was found in our study. Out of 4 omphalitis cases, 3 babies had growth on umbilical swab culture (1-Acinetobacter, 1-Staph. Aureus and 1-pseudomona)

**Table-2: Grading of omphalitis in different groups (n=463)**

Name of Groups	No of live births	No of omphalitis cases	Relative risk (95% CI)
<b>Mild omphalitis</b>			
Group 1	153	0	0.34 (0.014-8.70)
Group 2	146	1	1.12 (0.07-17.79)
Group 3(control)	164	1	1.0
<b>Moderate omphalitis</b>			
Group 1	153	0	0.21 (0.01 – 0.97)
Group 2	146	0	0.22 (0.01 – 0.98)
Group 3(control)	164	2	1.0

RR reached from Chi-square test

## Discussion

In this study, 7.1% chlorhexidine significantly reduce umbilical cord infection in the single (RR 0.15 [95% CI] 0.008-0.93) and multiple (RR 0.37 [95% CI] 0.04- 0.99) chlorhexidine cleansing group as compared to the dry cord care group but there was no significant difference in reduction of omphalitis between the single and multiple chlorhexidine cleansing group (RR 3.14 [0.13-76.54]). These findings were comparable with another 3 community based studies; in Nepal<sup>13</sup>, Bangladesh<sup>14</sup> and Pakistan<sup>15</sup>.

Chlorhexidine acts by binding to the bacterial cell wall and disrupting its membrane, leading to increased permeability and cell content leakage. It has broad spectrum activity against gram-positive and gram-negative organisms and strong binding potential that results in residual effectiveness. Chlorhexidine binds to the umbilical cord and continues to exert antimicrobial effect for several days<sup>12</sup>. Therefore its use reduces bacterial colonization and infection on the umbilical cord stump<sup>2</sup>. In this study, chlorhexidine significantly reduce mild omphalitis in single chlorhexidine group (RR 0.34[0.014-8.70]) and moderate omphalitis both in single (RR 0.21[0.01-0.97] and multiple (RR 0.22 [0.01-0.98]) chlorhexidine cleansing group as compared to dry cord care group.

This study finding was comparable with the findings of a meta-analysis from 3 randomized controlled trials in Nepal, Bangladesh and Pakistan<sup>16</sup>. Organisms isolated in umbilical swab culture were *Acinetobacter*, *Staphylococcus aureus* and *Pseudomonas* species which was similar to locally isolated organism from blood and other culture in our hospital wards and nurseries. The

organism pattern in our study is slightly differed from the previous hospital & community based studies<sup>17-18</sup>. The isolated organisms of these studies were *Staphylococcus aureus*, group A *Streptococcus*, group B *Streptococcus*, *Escherichia coli*, *Klebsiella* species and anaerobic bacteria. This difference in organism patterns was probably due to different local organism patterns in the hospital nurseries of the study areas.

## Conclusion

Application of 7.1% chlorhexidine digluconate delivering 4% chlorhexidine to the umbilical cord significantly decrease the risk of omphalitis (mild to moderate) and markedly decrease in single chlorhexidine cleansing group than the multiple chlorhexidine cleansing group.

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