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Intolerance of Chlorhexidine as a Skin Antiseptic in Patients Undergoing Hemodialysis

Author(s): Alexander J. Kallen, Priti R. Patel, Sally Hess

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Reporting Program. CDC will continue to provide tools for these patient safety efforts, and NHSN will evolve to help reduce the burden of data collection and inconsistencies between data collectors.

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**Teresa C. Horan, MPH,<sup>1</sup> Kathryn E. Arnold, MD,<sup>1</sup>  
Catherine A. Rebmann, MPH,<sup>1</sup> Scott K. Fridkin, MD<sup>1</sup>**

Affiliations: 1. Division of Healthcare Quality Promotion, National Center for Emerging and Zoonotic Infectious Diseases, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, Georgia.

Address correspondence to Teresa C. Horan, MPH, Division of Healthcare Quality Promotion, National Center for Emerging and Zoonotic Infectious Diseases, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Mailstop A-24, 1600 Clifton Road NE, Atlanta, GA 30333 (thoran@cdc.gov).

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## Intolerance of Chlorhexidine as a Skin Antiseptic in Patients Undergoing Hemodialysis

*To the Editor*—Bloodstream infections (BSIs) are an important problem among patients undergoing hemodialysis. Current estimates suggest that there were about 37,000 access-related BSIs among hemodialysis patients with central lines in 2008.<sup>1</sup> This number is similar to the estimated 41,000 central line-associated BSIs that occurred in all US hospital patients in 2009. In addition, rates of hospitalization for bacteremia/septicemia have increased 47% among hemodialysis patients from 1993 to 2008.<sup>2</sup> A number of interventions have been recommended to prevent access-related BSIs, particularly among patients who have central lines. One important recommendation is the use of chlorhexidine gluconate (10.5%) with alcohol as the first-line skin antiseptic for routine care of central line insertion sites, on the basis of evidence that it is superior to alternative antiseptics.<sup>3</sup> Further, 2% chlorhexidine with 70% alcohol is also recommended by the National Kidney Foundation's Kidney Disease Outcomes Quality Initiative as 1 of 3 options for skin antiseptics for subcutaneous arteriovenous (AV) access.<sup>4</sup>

Chlorhexidine appears to be generally well tolerated. There

table 1. Median Percentage of Chlorhexidine-Intolerant Patients per Facility by Access Type and Percentage of Facilities with Chlorhexidine Intolerance in More Than 10% and 25% of Patients

Access type	No. of facilities reporting data	Median (range) patients per facility	Chlorhexidine-intolerant patients per facility		No. (%) of facilities with	
			Median (%)	Range (%)	>10% chlorhexidine-intolerant patients	>25% chlorhexidine-intolerant patients
Central line	18	16 (6–31)	0.5 (2)	0–8 (0–53)	7 (39)	4 (22)
AV fistula	10	14 (0–59)	3.5 (18)	0–21 (0–62)	7 (70)	2 (20)
AV graft	8	2 (0–10)	0.5 (15)	0–3 (0–50)	4 (50)	4 (50)

note. AV, arteriovenous.

are rare reports of serious hypersensitivity reactions related to topical chlorhexidine use or following exposure to chlorhexidine-impregnated devices.<sup>5,6</sup> Skin inflammation was reported in 15% and 27% of patients, respectively, who participated in 2 studies of chlorhexidine; however, neither study identified any local or systemic hypersensitivity reactions.<sup>7,8</sup> Outside of research studies, it is unclear how the use of chlorhexidine is limited by reactions to this agent and how perceived intolerance to chlorhexidine varies between facilities. In order to better understand the prevalence of perceived chlorhexidine intolerance, we queried groups participating in the CDC Dialysis BSI Prevention Collaborative about their experience with this antiseptic.

We provided questionnaires to 5 groups in the collaboration who agreed to participate in this evaluation. The instrument consisted of 24 questions from the following domains: facility demographics, facility chlorhexidine use practices, and prevalence of chlorhexidine-intolerant patients. Intolerance to chlorhexidine was simply defined as a patient who was eligible to receive chlorhexidine for skin antisepsis but who was unable to use this antiseptic because of a perceived adverse reaction. The questionnaire was primarily designed to determine how many of a facility's active patients were unable to receive chlorhexidine for skin antisepsis on the basis of the facility's own criteria. We did not evaluate those criteria or impose uniform criteria on respondents. Analyses were stratified by vascular access type (ie, central line, AV graft, or AV fistula).

Five individuals were queried and responded from March 25, 2011 to April 26, 2011. They reported information from 18 facilities that cared for 586 patients. Overall, all 18 facilities used chlorhexidine for skin antisepsis for patients who had central lines (290 patients), 10 used chlorhexidine for patients who had AV fistulae (256 patients), and 10 used chlorhexidine for patients who had AV grafts; however, 2 facilities had no patients with AV grafts who were currently receiving chlorhexidine, and this reduced the evaluable number of facilities in that category to 8 (40 patients). For patients who had central lines, 1 facility used 2% aqueous chlorhexidine, 14 used 2% chlorhexidine with 70% alcohol, and 3 used 4% chlorhexidine with 4% alcohol. For patients who had AV fistulae, 7 facilities used 2% chlorhexidine with 70% alcohol and 3 used 3.15% chlorhexidine with 70% alcohol. For pa-

tients who had AV grafts, 6 facilities used 2% chlorhexidine with 70% alcohol and 2 used 3.15% chlorhexidine with 70% alcohol.

Overall, 97 of 586 patients (17%) were unable to use chlorhexidine because of perceived intolerance. This included 35 (12%) of 290 patients with central lines, 53 (21%) of 256 patients with AV fistulae, and 9 (23%) of 40 patients with AV grafts ( $P$  for difference between 3 groups = .02). When stratified by access type, there was a high level of variability in the proportion of patients per facility who were unable to use chlorhexidine because of a perceived intolerance (Table 1). In addition, more than 25% of patients were intolerant to chlorhexidine in a sizable proportion of facilities (Table 1).

These data suggest that in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Dialysis BSI Prevention Collaborative, perceived chlorhexidine intolerance is not uncommon and is found more commonly among patients with AV grafts and AV fistulae than among patients with central lines. In addition, the proportion of patients in each facility who had perceived chlorhexidine intolerance varied from 0 to about one-half of eligible patients. This level of heterogeneity suggests that variations in practices among facilities might explain some of the intolerance and implies that more standardized practices might improve chlorhexidine use. However, as we did not assess each facility's threshold for discontinuing chlorhexidine use, differences in those criteria might also explain some of the variability in chlorhexidine intolerance we observed.

As chlorhexidine is an important agent for skin antisepsis, further work is needed to clarify practices that will increase the number of patients who are able use this agent. This includes better defining what constitutes a significant adverse reaction. In this evaluation, we were unable to assess differences in adverse reactions between chlorhexidine products and we do not know whether the level of chlorhexidine intolerance was different than that observed for other skin antiseptics. Preliminary work in facilities in the CDC collaborative that followed this evaluation suggests that ensuring that the chlorhexidine had time to dry prior to covering it with an occlusive dressing and less vigorous scrubbing of the skin during chlorhexidine application were associated with a decrease in adverse reactions. A better understanding of the

issues surrounding perceived intolerance has the potential to lead to increased use of chlorhexidine and decreases in BSIs among patients receiving hemodialysis.

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**Alexander J. Kallen, MD, MPH;<sup>1</sup>  
Priti R. Patel, MD, MPH;<sup>1</sup> Sally Hess, CIC, MPH<sup>2</sup>**

Affiliations: 1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, Georgia; 2. Fletcher Allen Healthcare, Burlington, Vermont.

Address correspondence to Alexander J. Kallen, MD, MPH, 1600 Clifton Road, MS-A35, Atlanta, GA 30333 (akallen@cdc.gov).

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