



## Inhibition and Disruption Properties of Chlorhexidine Gluconate on Single and Multispecies Oral Biofilms

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Chlorhexidine gluconate (CHX) is the most common antimicrobial agent used against oral pathogens, however information on its ability to inhibit and disrupt anaerobic single and multispecies biofilms is relatively unknown.

**Objectives:** The purpose of this study was to test the efficacy of CHX for its biofilm inhibition and disruption properties using crystal violet assay.

**Materials and Methods:** Biofilm assays were carried out on single and multispecies of four oral pathogens: *Streptococcus mutans*, *Fusobacterium nucleatum*, *Aggregatibacter actinomycetemcomitans* and *Porphyromonas gingivalis*.

**Results:** *Streptococcus mutans*, *Fusobacterium nucleatum* and multi-species biofilm formation were inhibited in more than 90% of cases at concentrations of 3-12 mg/L. CHX exhibited strong disruptive activity (> 65%) on one-day old biofilms of *A. actinomycetemcomitans* and *P. gingivalis*.

**Conclusions:** In conclusion, CHX was a high effective biofilm inhibitor on *S. mutans*, *F. nucleatum* and multispecies biofilms but had a minimal effect on *P. gingivalis* and *A. actinomycetemcomitans*. Conversely, CHX showed disruptive properties on late colonizers in single species biofilms but not on early colonizers and multispecies biofilms.

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### ► Implication for health policy/practice/research/medical education:

This study provides practical information for both patients and dental practitioners on the efficacy of widely used antimicrobial mouthwash CHX, against oral biofilms.

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## 1. Background

Bacteria in the oral cavity colonize in the form of communities known as dental biofilms or plaques. Dental plaque is defined as "a biofilm community that accumulates through sequential and ordered colonization of multiple oral bacteria" (1). This bacterial community is composed of bacterial micro-colonies, an extracellular slime matrix, fluid channels, and complex communication systems (2). The behavior of biofilm associated bacteria towards host and en-

vironmental conditions is different than their planktonic counterparts (3). Therefore, host factors as well as biofilm growth determines the state of oral health. Shifts in composition of the predominant species in the biofilm disturbs the balance with host and may initiate oral disease (3).

To date, it is known that almost all oral diseases including dental caries and periodontal disease are caused by dental biofilms. In 1998, Socransky and co-workers grouped bacterial species in dental plaque into six colour coded bacterial complexes which determine the situation of biofilm

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(healthy versus diseased) (4). The presence of orange (*Fusobacterium nucleatum*, *P. intermedia*, *Prevotella nigrescens*) and red complex (*Porphyromonas gingivalis*, *Tannerella forsythensis* and *Treponemes denticola*) bacteria and a green complex bacteria, *Aggregatibacter actinomycetemcomitans*, in subgingival plaque have been associated with periodontitis (5). Since the presence of high number of pathogenic oral bacteria in dental biofilms is the main etiological factor for developing oral diseases (6), there is an increasing interest in the use of antimicrobial agents which can control the biofilm, by either inhibition or disruption.

Chlorhexidine Gluconate (CHX), a cationic bisbiguanide compound with high antibacterial activity, is one of the most commonly used chemotherapeutic agents against oral diseases. This is because of its wide spectrum of activity against yeasts, Gram positive, and Gram negative bacteria including many anaerobic pathogens (7). The mechanism of action is due to its cationic nature which binds to anionic compounds on the bacterial surface such as phosphate groups of teichoic acid in Gram positive and lipopolysaccharide in Gram negative bacteria and disrupts bacterial integrity (8). This leads to leakage of the cell constituents and ultimately cell death (9).

The significant effects of chlorhexidine on plaque and gingivitis have been well documented (10-12) and the effects were attributed to the reduction of pellicle formation and attachment of bacteria on the tooth surface (13). However, prolonged use of chlorhexidine carries with it several side effects including teeth staining, disturbances in taste sensation and increased calculus accumulation (14, 15). Several studies have previously tested the effects of chlorhexidine gluconate on oral biofilms developed on different substrata including the tooth (16), hydroxyapatite discs (17), and cellulose nitrate membrane (18). These models required the use of expensive microscopic devices for quantification of biofilms.

## 2. Objectives

The purpose of this study was to evaluate effectiveness of chlorhexidine gluconate against single and multi-species oral biofilm formation and disruption capability against early developed oral biofilms using a simple and inexpensive crystal violet assay.

## 3. Materials and Methods

### 3.1. Bacterial Strains and Growth Conditions

Bacterial strains studied were *P. gingivalis* (ATCC 33277), *F. nucleatum* (ATCC 25586), *A. actinomycetemcomitans* (FDC Y4), and *S. mutans*. All ATCC and FDC strains were kindly donated by Dr. Philip Bird, the University of Queensland, Australia. *S. mutans* was obtained from Yeditepe University Culture Collection. Brain Heart Broth (BHB; Merck, Germany) was used for the growth and maintenance of microorganisms while BHB supplemented by 1% sucrose was used for the growth of bacterial biofilms. All bacteria

were cultured and incubated anaerobically at 37 °C (N<sub>2</sub> 80%:H<sub>2</sub> 10%:CO<sub>2</sub> 10% v/v) in an anaerobic work station (Don Whitley, UK) for 24 hours. Bacterial suspensions used for antibacterial assays and quantitative biofilm assays were prepared by harvesting overnight cultures, centrifugation at 2400 x g for five minutes, re-suspending in 10 mM phosphate buffered saline (PBS, pH 7.2), and adjusting the turbidity to 1.0 Mc Farland standard. The multi-species suspension was prepared from equal volumes from a single stock suspension of *S. mutans*, *F. nucleatum*, *A. actinomycetemcomitans* and *P. gingivalis* giving a final concentration of approximately 3 x 10<sup>8</sup> cfu/mL bacteria cell density, similar to the single stock densities.

### 3.2. Preparation of Antimicrobial Agent

Aqueous chlorhexidine gluconate (CHX) a commercially available mouthwash (Drogsan, Turkey) was diluted with BHB to obtain a stock solution equal to 24 mg/L in order to be used in assays performed by microdilution method.

### 3.3. Antimicrobial Assay Using the Disc Diffusion Method

The disc diffusion assay was carried out according to Clinical and Laboratory Standards Institute (CLSI) (19). Briefly, prepared bacterial stock suspensions were cultured onto 5% Sheep Blood Agar (Salubris, USA). Filter paper discs (6 mm) were impregnated with 15 µL CHX and placed onto the agar. Following anaerobic incubation at 37 °C for 24 hours, the diameters of inhibition zones were measured in millimeters. The assay was repeated three times and the antibacterial activity was expressed as mean ± standard deviations of inhibition diameters.

### 3.4. MIC and MBC Determination of Chlorhexidine Gluconate

The Minimum Inhibitory Concentration (MIC) and Minimum Bactericidal Concentration (MBC) assays were performed using the broth microdilution method as described by Wei *et al.* (20), with some modifications. The MIC was defined as the lowest concentration of shiitake oil at which no visible growth (O.D. 595 nm < 0.05) was detected. The lowest concentration at which the original growth was reduced by ≥ 99.9% was defined as MBC.

Two fold serial dilutions of CHX with BHB medium were aliquoted into wells. Final concentrations of chlorhexidine ranged from 0.09-12 mg/L. Each well was then inoculated with 100 µL of bacterial cell suspension, at a final concentration of 1.5 x 10<sup>5</sup> cfu/mL for all species. Negative control (medium and inoculum) and blank (medium and CHX) wells were included. After incubation, the absorbance was measured at 595 nm by a microplate reader (ThermoLab Systems, Germany) to quantify cell growth. To measure MBC, 5 µL of inoculum was incubated anaerobically on 5% sheep blood agar for 24-36 hours and the

growth on agar surface was examined.

### 3.5. Inhibition Properties of Chlorhexidine Gluconate on Biofilm Formation

The effect of CHX on biofilm formation was determined by microdilution as well as crystal violet staining methods (19). As previously described, CHX dilutions were prepared and wells inoculated with 100  $\mu$ L of bacterial solution (1.5 x 10<sup>5</sup> cfu/mL). Growth was confirmed at 595 nm absorbance following incubation. Planktonic cells were removed and remaining cells were washed by PBS (pH 7.2). Biofilms were fixed with methanol for 15 minutes, air dried, and stained with crystal violet (Sigma, Germany), (150  $\mu$ L of 0.1% (w/v)) for 15 minutes. Wells were then thoroughly washed by sterile distilled water. Biofilm formation was quantified by adding 200  $\mu$ L of 95% ethanol into each well. Plates were rocked for 30 minutes at room temperature and absorbance values determined for each well at O.D. 595.

The percentage of biofilm formation in the presence of different concentrations of chlorhexidine gluconate was determined using the equation: (O.D. 595 of the test well / O.D. 595 of non-treated control well) x 100.

### 3.6. Disruption Properties of Chlorhexidine Gluconate on Early Developed Biofilms

To examine the effect of chlorhexidine gluconate on the one-day developed biofilms, plates were prepared as for inhibition assay by exclusion of the addition of CHX, and anaerobically incubated for 24 hours. As before, cells were washed and CHX dilutions (0.09-12 mg/L) were aliquoted into the wells. The microplate was then incubated for a further 24 hours and biofilms quantified as before.

### 3.7 Statistical Analysis

Data were analyzed for the mean and standard deviation of at least two independent tests with duplicates for each (SPSS version 10).

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Antimicrobial Assay

Results for three independent antimicrobial tests are shown in Table 1 as diameters of inhibition zones and

standard deviations. CHX exhibited significant antimicrobial activity on all test microorganisms showing inhibition diameters greater than 10 mm. Results of the disc diffusion assays indicated that CHX worked the best against *Fusobacterium* followed by *P. gingivalis*, *A. actinomycetemcomitans*, and *S. mutans*.

### 4.2. MIC and MBC

The concentration of CHX required to inhibit (MIC) and to kill (MBC) planktonic bacteria are shown in Table 1. Among the bacterial species tested, *S. mutans* was observed to be the most susceptible to CHX MIC (1.5 mg/L) followed by *A. actinomycetemcomitans*, *F. nucleatum*, and *P. gingivalis*, respectively. All MICs corresponded with their MBC values indicating bactericidal activity of the test agent, with the exception of *S. mutans* and *A. actinomycetemcomitans* where 2-fold higher MBC values were detected. Furthermore, CHX exhibited inhibitory and cidal effects at a concentration of 6 mg/L on the mixed culture.

### 4.3. Biofilm Inhibition

The inhibitory effects of CHX on biofilm formation were tested by microdilution broth method for single and mixed cultures. Generally, an agent is assumed to be a specific biofilm inhibitor if it is effective on biofilm formation at doses lower than its MIC, since at these doses biofilm formation might be inhibited by a different mode of action rather than killing the bacteria (21). CHX acted as specific biofilm inhibitor on *F. nucleatum*, since inhibition occurred at sub-inhibitory concentration (3 mg/L) (Figure 1). Furthermore, CHX at concentrations from 3 to 12 mg/L exhibited a strong inhibition activity (> 95%) on formation of *S. mutans* and *F. nucleatum* biofilms. While *P. gingivalis* biofilms were inhibited more than 40% (6-12 mg/L), *A. actinomycetemcomitans* was not significantly affected. Multi-species biofilm formation was also examined in the presence of CHX. More than 90% of the biofilm was inhibited even at its sub-MIC concentrations (1.5 and 3 mg/L).

### 4.4. Biofilm Disruption

It is known that once established, biofilms have greater resistance to external agents such as antibiotics, deter-

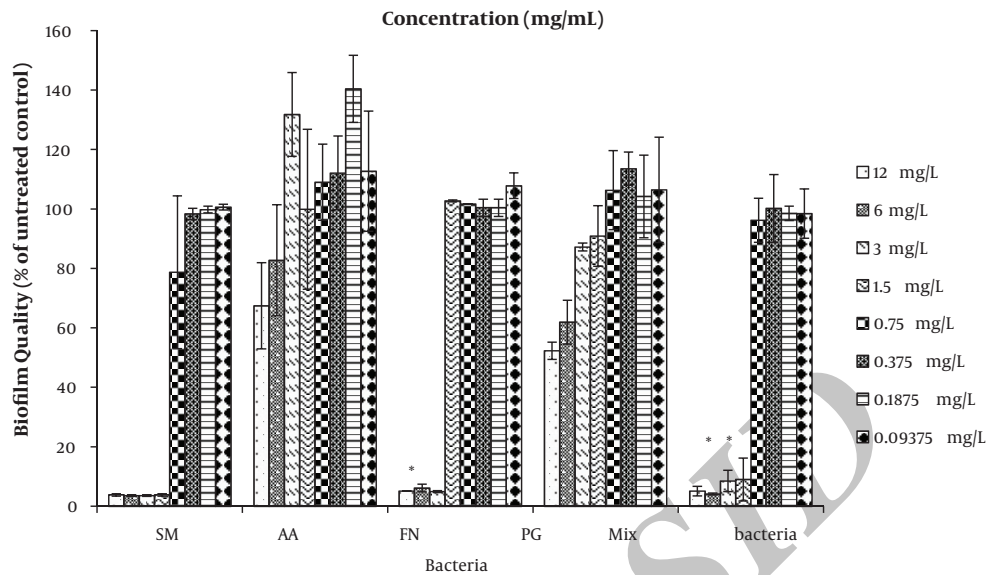
**Table 1.** Antibacterial Activity (Zone of Inhibition, MIC, and MBC) of Chlorhexidine Gluconate Against Selected Oral Bacteria

	Diameter of Inhibition Zone, mm <sup>a</sup>	MIC, mg/L	MBC,mg/L
<i>S. mutans</i>	15.8 ± 3.4	1.5	3 ↑ <sup>b</sup>
<i>A. actinomycetemcomitans</i>	19.2 ± 2.8	3	6 ↑ <sup>b</sup>
<i>F. nucleatum</i>	25.3 ± 0.1	6	6
<i>P. gingivalis</i>	21.2 ± 4	6	6
Mix bacteria	NA <sup>c</sup>	6	6

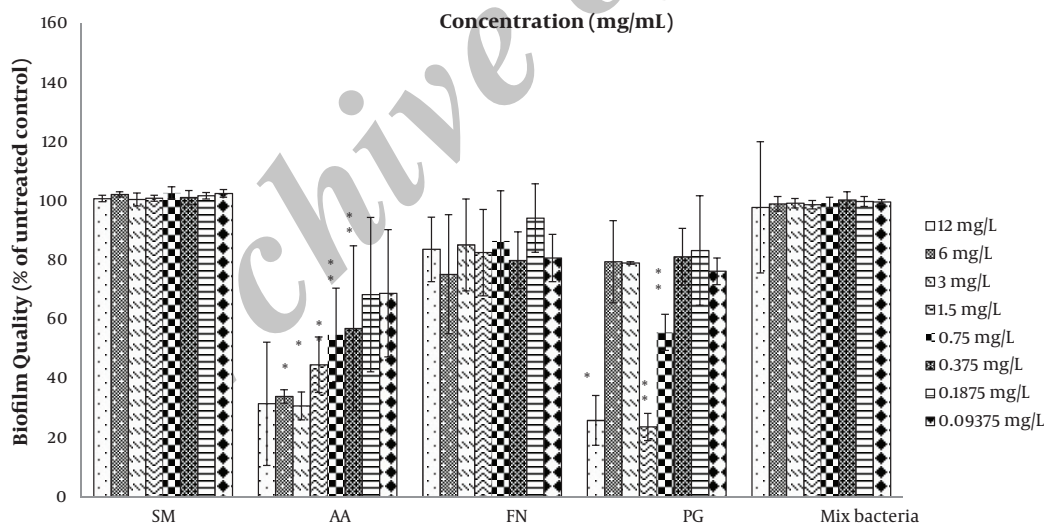
<sup>a</sup> Each value is mean ± standard deviation. Each experiment was carried out three times.

<sup>b</sup> ↑, indicates the essential oil having a MBC value higher than its MIC value.

<sup>c</sup> NA, indicates that this test was "non-applicable". This test was not applied for mix bacteria.

**Figure 1.** Effects of Chlorhexidine Gluconate at Different Concentrations Ranging From 12 to 0.09375 mg/L on Biofilm Formation by Oral Bacteria

Data represent the mean and standard deviation of at least two independent tests with duplicates for each. Asterisk shows the percentage of biofilm formation < 60% at sub-inhibitory concentrations (sub-MIC) of chlorhexidine gluconate. SM: *S. mutans*, AA: *A. actinomycetemcomitans*, FN: *F. nucleatum*, PG: *P. gingivalis*, and Mix: multi-species biofilms.

**Figure 2.** Effects of Chlorhexidine Gluconate at Different Concentrations Ranging From 12 to 0.09375 mg/L on One-Day Developed Biofilm Formed by Oral Bacteria

Data represent the mean and standard deviation of at least two independent tests with duplicates for each. Asterisk shows the percentage of biofilm quantity < 60% at 2X or 1X inhibitory concentrations (MIC) of chlorhexidine gluconate. Double asterisks show the percentage of biofilm quantity < 60% at sub-inhibitory concentrations (sub-MIC) of chlorhexidine gluconate. SM: *S. mutans*, AA: *A. actinomycetemcomitans*, FN: *F. nucleatum*, PG: *P. gingivalis* and Mix: multi-species biofilms.

gents, or biocides than their planktonic cells (22) and therefore disruption of pre-formed biofilms tend to have higher MIC values than killing of planktonic cells in suspension (23). By considering this fact, disruptive effects at MIC and 2X MIC values of CHX were also assumed to be efficient.

Results (Figure 2) showed that chlorhexidine gluconate

reduced one-day developed biofilms of *A. actinomycetemcomitans* and *P. gingivalis* more than 65% at their 2X and 4X MIC values when compared to the controls. This agent at its sub-MIC concentration was effective but to a lesser extent on preformed biofilms of *A. actinomycetemcomitans* and *P. gingivalis*. Early developed biofilms of *F. nucleatum* and *S. mutans* exhibited resistance to all test concentra-

tions of CHX. Moreover, multi-species biofilms were seen to be resistant to CHX as even at its supra-MIC values.

## 5. Discussion

The antimicrobial activity of CHX on planktonic species of oral pathogens was evaluated by disc diffusion, MIC, and MBC assays. Although CHX exhibited antibacterial activity against all test bacteria, MIC results revealed CHX inhibited growth at concentrations lower than undiluted agent. However, these MIC results did not correlate with that of disc diffusion test, i.e., the statement “when zone of growth inhibition decreases, MIC increases” (24) was not observed in all cases. The correlation between disc diffusion and MIC results has been previously discussed and some studies have shown that these tests do not always correlate (25, 26). Previous studies have shown similar results to our MIC findings (27). Furthermore, MIC findings observed in this study are in correlation with the general statement that Gram positive bacteria are more susceptible to chlorhexidine than Gram negative bacteria (28).

*S. mutans*, the only Gram positive bacteria tested, was affected the most by chlorhexidine gluconate. Several biofilm models using different kinds of substratum have been used in previous studies including tooth, hydroxyapatite discs, and cellulose nitrate membrane (17, 18, 29). However, these bear a disadvantage as they can be time-consuming, The use of crystal violet assay in this study reveals several advantages including allowing a large number of variables to be tested quickly and easily, and indirect quantification of biofilms formed on both the bottom and sides of the well by a very simple staining step (30). Moreover, in a study of Luppens and Ten Cate (31), it has been shown that *S. mutans* biofilm development on polystyrene surface was similar to that on hydroxyapatite in terms of viability and protein expression. Therefore, this was chosen as the biofilm model for this study.

Results of biofilm inhibition assay have shown that biofilm formation of *S. mutans*, *F. nucleatum*, and multiple bacteria were more susceptible to CHX, followed by that of *P. gingivalis* and *A. actinomycetemcomitans*. Moreover, there was a dose-dependent response effect of chlorhexidine (12-15 mg/L) toward the biofilm formation of *S. mutans*, *F. nucleatum*, and mix bacteria (Figure 1). These results are comparable with previous studies in which CHX at concentrations 5 mg/L and 0.01 µL/mL (~10 mg/L) were shown to inhibit biofilm formation of *S. mutans* (32) and *F. nucleatum* (33), respectively. Another study on *S. mutans*, *Streptococcus sanguis*, and *Actinomyces viscosus* (34) revealed the biofilms to only be inhibited using high concentrations of CHX (16-40 mg/L). This is most likely due to the different composition of multi-species biofilms. No disruptive capability of CHX on one-day biofilms of multi-species was observed even at its supra-MIC values.

This correlates with previous findings that have shown a disruptive effect on six-hours old biofilms but not on 24 and 48 hours-old mature multi-species biofilms (35). In another study (36), it was also shown that 0.12 percent chlorhexidine gluconate mouth-rinse exhibited little antiplaque and antigingivitis effects on mature biofilms.

In conclusion, the crystal violet assay is an easy, quick, and effective way for studying anti-biofilm agents. CHX was a highly effective biofilm inhibitor on *S. mutans*, *F. nucleatum*, and multispecies biofilms but exhibited a limited effect on *P. gingivalis* and *A. actinomycetemcomitans*. Conversely, CHX showed disruptive properties on late colonizers in single species biofilms but not on early colonizers and multispecies biofilms.

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## Authors' Contribution

None Declared.

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