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Activity of Three Disinfectants and Acidified Nitrite Against Clostridium difficile Spores

Marlene Wullt, MD; Inga Odenholt, MD, PhD; Mats Walder, MD, PhD

ABSTRACT

OBJECTIVE: To identify environmentally safe, rapidly acting agents for killing spores of Clostridium difficile in the hospital environment.

DESIGN: Three classic disinfectants (2% glutaraldehyde, 1.6% peracetyl ions, and 70% isopropanol) and acidified nitrite were compared for activity against C. difficile spores. Four strains of C. difficile belonging to different serogroups were tested using a dilution-neutralization method according to preliminary European Standard prEN 14347. For peracetyl ions and acidified nitrite, the subjective cleaning effect and the sporcidal activity was also tested in the presence of organic load.

RESULTS: Peracetyl ions were highly sporcidal and yielded a minimum 4 log₁₀ reduction of germinating spores already at short exposure times, independent of organic load conditions. Isopropanol 70% showed low or no inactivation at all exposure times, whereas glutaraldehyde and acidified nitrite each resulted in an increasing inactivation factor (IF) over time, from an IF greater than 1.4 at 5 minutes of exposure time to greater than 4.1 at 30 minutes. Soiling conditions did not influence the effect of acidified nitrite. There was no difference in the IF among the 4 strains tested for any of the investigated agents. Acidified nitrite demonstrated a good subjective cleaning effect and peracetyl ions demonstrated a satisfactory effect.

CONCLUSIONS: Cidal activity was shown against C. difficile spores by glutaraldehyde, peracetyl ions, and acidified nitrite. As acidified nitrite and peracetyl ions are considered to be environmentally safe chemicals, these agents seem well suited for the disinfection of C. difficile spores in the hospital environment (Infect Control Hosp Epidemiol 2003;24:765-768).

Hospital environments are considered to be one of the most important reservoirs for and areas of transmission of Clostridium difficile spores.1,4 Symptomatic patients are known to excrete a large number of organisms in feces, and bacterial spores are found in abundance in the environment of patients with C. difficile-associated diarrhea (CDAD).3 C. difficile, either as vegetative organisms or as spores, can also be isolated from the stools of asymptomatic patients. Thus, under the ecologic pressure of antibiotics, the hospital ward can be a potential focus where introduced and disseminated C. difficile spores may be ingested, germinate, and induce symptoms in susceptible hosts.5 In one study of patients colonized with C. difficile, it was demonstrated that most patients acquired the organism during hospitalization.6 Patient-to-patient transmission via contaminated environmental surfaces and the hands of healthcare workers has been suggested as an important mechanism of C. difficile acquisition during outbreaks of CDAD.3,8,9 However, in another study, patient-to-patient transmission was not convincingly shown.10

Vegetative forms of C. difficile are killed when exposed to air, but their spores are resistant to oxygen, desiccation, and most commonly used disinfectants2,8,9 and may persist in the hospital environment for long periods of time (months and probably years). Thorough cleaning of surfaces using detergents in combination with separate, clean equipment for each patient are accepted measures for reducing the number, density, and transmission of spores in the hospital environment. However, the efficacy of different cleaning and disinfection strategies for the environmental control of C. difficile contamination is not well documented.10 Thus, evidence is lacking to support routine environmental decontamination by the use of either disinfectants or detergent-based formulas.11,12 Furthermore, there is a need for studies of the efficacy of disinfectants against C. difficile spores, particularly on surfaces.

The aim of our study was to identify environmentally safe, rapidly acting chemicals against C. difficile spores and to examine their effectiveness in the presence of organic load. To our knowledge, this is the first evaluation of the activity of acidified nitrite as a disinfecting agent against C. difficile spores.
**METHODS**

**Bacterial Strains**

We tested one reference strain of *C. difficile* (CCUG 37779) from serogroup A, obtained from the Culture Collection at the University of Gothenburg, and three clinical strains originally isolated from patients at our hospital. The strain CI-382 had a polymerase chain reaction (PCR) ribotype pattern identical to that of the reference strain CCUG 9018, and strain CI-385 had the same PCR ribotype pattern as the serotype C and reference strain CCUG 37766. The PCR ribotype of strain CI-388 did not correspond to that of any reference strain in the library of the Swedish Institute for Infectious Disease Control, but is currently one of the most common types of *C. difficile* in Swedish hospitals.

**Growth of Bacteria and Preparation of Spores**

The strains were streaked on blood agar and grown anaerobically for 48 hours. Several colonies of each strain of *C. difficile* were then added to 5 mL of brain–heart infusion broth and incubated anaerobically for 48 hours. Thereafter, the culture was vortexed, mixed with 5 mL of 95% ethanol, vortexed again, and left at room temperature for 30 minutes. After centrifugation at 3,000 × g for 20 minutes, the supernatant was discarded and the pellet containing spores plus killed bacteria was suspended in 0.3 mL of water. Viable spore counts were performed by serial dilutions on blood agar. The spore counts in the resulting suspensions were 3 × 10⁵ to 2 × 10⁶ per milliliter and Gram staining verified that 85% to 90% of the bacterial structures were spores.

**Disinfectants and Acidified Nitrite**

The disinfectants tested were 70% isopropanol (vol/vol), WVicide-200 (2% glutaraldehyde, Promagent AB, Malmö, Sweden), and Perasafe (1.6% peracetyl ions included as a negative control showed little or no measurable sporidical activity after 30 minutes. Peracetyl ions showed a high IF after brief exposure times (1 and 5 minutes), independent of the amount of organic load (Table 2). The effect of acidified nitrite was not influenced by a low level or high level of dirt. However, the efficacy of acidified nitrite was decreased twofold (data not shown) when not prepared 24 hours before testing. No difference in the IF among the strains of *C. difficile* was observed. Validation of the test conditions showed a stable spore count suspension, no toxicity of the water, and no sporidical activity of the neutralizers (data not shown).

**Surface Cleaning Test**

The cleaning effect of peracetyl ions and acidified nitrite on surfaces was determined using a carrier test. Five milliliters of fresh human blood without any additives was placed on the 4 central steel plates of 16 in a square and dried. Twenty milliliters of the liquid disinfectant was poured onto the plates. After an initial contact time of 5 minutes, the surface of the test plates was subjected to cleaning for 2 minutes using a cloth attached to a mop. The mop was worked by hand 10 times to and fro with constant pressure. The cleaning effect is described as the subjective cleaning factor, which was the number of cleaning movements (to and fro) with the mop necessary before the spot was no longer seen by the naked eye.

**DISCUSSION**

Nosocomial outbreaks of CDAD have been linked to the spread of *C. difficile* spores via floors and other sur-
faces in the rooms of symptomatic and asymptomatic patients.1,2,3,6 Thus, the choice of disinfectant may be important for the persistence of *C. difficile* spores in the hospital environment.

The impact of surface disinfection for reducing nosocomial CDAD is debatable.15 Most studies dealing with disinfectants have examined their impact on *C. difficile* spores for instrument disinfection,8,16,17 whereas few studies have examined their effect for surface disinfection.3,15 Mayfield et al. reported that the incidence of CDAD was reduced after the environmental disinfectant was changed from a quaternary ammonium agent to a 10% hypochlorite solution in the rooms of patients with CDAD in a bone marrow transplantation unit.15 In another study, during an outbreak of CDAD, surface contamination of *C. difficile* was decreased to 21% of the initial levels with the use of 2% glutaraldehyde and the outbreak subsequently ended. The use of phosphate-buffered hypochlorite in that study was shown to be even more effective, as its use resulted in a 98% reduction in surface contamination.3

The bactericidal activity of acidified nitrite has been described.18,19 In our study, acidified nitrite, generated by the acidification of sodium nitrite (NaNO₂) with citric acid, was tested for the first time as a disinfecting agent and demonstrated good sporicidal activity, which was not influenced by low-level or high-level soiling conditions. However, a freshly prepared solution was important for the efficacy of acidified nitrite. Nitric oxide–related agents have previously been shown to have antimicrobial activity against a variety of pathogenic microorganisms including *C. perfringens.20,21* It is believed that reactive nitrogen oxides (nitric oxide donors), rather than the nitrite itself, are responsible for the sporicidal activity of acidified nitrite.22 Acidified nitrite is considered harmless to staff and to almost all surfaces because it is known to be synthesized by mammalian cells (N. Benjamin, PhD, written communication, February 10, 2003).20

Peracetyl ions have been described to have excellent sporicidal activity (Antec Int. Ltd, unpublished data, 1998). In this study, sporicidal activity within 5 minutes with a maximum IF of more than 4 log₁₀ was seen in both low-level and high-level soiling conditions. These results are in accordance with other studies of peracetyl ions in suspension tests. Thus, Holton et al. (written communication, January 21, 1999) showed no growth of *C. difficile* after 5 minutes of exposure to peracetyl ions from an initial inoculum of 1.5 × 10⁸ spores, even in the presence of organic load. Perasafe is harmless, according to its manufacturer (V. Croud, Technical Director, written communication, February 12, 2003) and peracetic acid has been reported as an environmentally safe agent by Rutala and Weber.23

In concordance with other studies, 2% glutaraldehyde is a sporicidal disinfectant used in most hospitals for the disinfection of endoscopes.17,24-27 In our study, a greater than 4.1 log₁₀ reduction was noted within 30 minutes. However, exposure to glutaraldehyde is considered to be hazardous and has been known to cause asthma and dermatitis in healthcare workers.28

The activity of alcohols is probably due to their ability to denature proteins. Although they are rapidly bactericidal, they have low activity against bacterial spores.27 As expected, 70% isopropanol showed no measurable sporicidal activity after 30 minutes in our study.

In this study, a dilution–neutralization method was used according to prEN 14347, which demands at least a reduction of 4 log₁₀ in viable counts within 120 minutes or less to be classified as a sporicidal disinfectant. In our test, an initial inoculum of 10⁶ CFU/mL was used, and we could demonstrate a maximal reduction of 4 log₁₀ CFU, which was the limit of detection in our assay. Our test showed good precision, and because glutaraldehyde, acidified nitrite, and peracetyl ions comply with prEN 14347, they can be considered as sporicidal agents.

Wilcox and Fawley12 showed that an epidemic strain of *C. difficile* produced significantly more spores than did the nonprevalent strains, and that sporulation was further enhanced when the strain was cultured in feces exposed to subinhibitory concentrations of cleaning agents with-

### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exposure Time (min)</th>
<th>Peracetyl Ions</th>
<th>Glutaraldehyde</th>
<th>Acidified Nitrite</th>
<th>Isopropanol</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>&gt; 4.1 (NG)</td>
<td>&gt; 4.1 (NG)</td>
<td>1.5 (0.5)</td>
<td>3.9 (0.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>&gt; 4.1 (NG)</td>
<td>2.5 (0.5)</td>
<td>3.1 (0.4)</td>
<td>3.8 (0.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>&gt; 4.1 (NG)</td>
<td>&gt; 4.1 (NG)</td>
<td>&gt; 4.3 (NG)</td>
<td>3.8 (0.6)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SD = standard deviation; NG = no growth.

*Mean values of 4 strains tested in triplicate.

### Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exposure Time (min)</th>
<th>BSA 0.3%</th>
<th>BSA 3%</th>
<th>Acidified Nitrite</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.9 (0.6)</td>
<td>3.8 (0.6)</td>
<td>3.8 (0.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>&gt; 4.1 (NG)</td>
<td>&gt; 4.3 (NG)</td>
<td>&gt; 4.3 (NG)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>&gt; 4.1 (NG)</td>
<td>&gt; 4.3 (NG)</td>
<td>&gt; 4.3 (NG)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>&gt; 4.1 (NG)</td>
<td>&gt; 4.3 (NG)</td>
<td>&gt; 4.3 (NG)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SD = standard deviation; NG = no growth; BSA = bovine serum albumin.

*Mean values of 4 strains tested in triplicate.
out chlorine as a base. In our study, we examined clinical toxigenic strains of \textit{C. difficile} from different serotypes, of which one has been described to cause nosocomial outbreaks.\textsuperscript{29,31} No difference was found regarding susceptibility to the different chemicals among the spores of the tested strains.

To evaluate the subjective cleaning effect of acidified nitrite and peracetyl ions on organic matter, a modified surface cleaning test was used.\textsuperscript{14} In this test, a low subjective cleaning effect generally means that the substance has a satisfactory or good cleaning effect for blood on a metal surface. Water has a good subjective cleaning factor of 2, 45% isopropanol a satisfactory subjective cleaning factor of 6, and 70% ethanol a bad subjective cleaning factor of 10 or greater. In our study, a good subjective cleaning effect for acidified nitrite equal to water was found and the subjective cleaning factor for peracetyl ions was satisfactory.

Glutaraldehyde, peracetyl ions, and acidified nitrite showed cidal activity against \textit{C. difficile} spores. Because acidified nitrite and peracetyl ions are considered to be environmentally safe chemicals and show a good or satisfactory cleaning effect, they seem well suited for the disinfection of \textit{C. difficile} spores in the hospital environment.

\textbf{REFERENCES}