ORIGINAL RESEARCH

To compare the efficacy of single-dose prophylactic antibiotics versus empirical post-operative antibiotic regimens in the prevention of surgical site infections (SSIs)

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Received: 19 September, 2022 Accepted: 22 October, 2022

ABSTRACT

Aim: The aim of this study was to compare the efficacy of single-dose prophylactic antibiotics versus empirical post-operative antibiotic regimens in the prevention of surgical site infections (SSIs) among patients undergoing elective surgeries. **Materials and Methods:** The study was conducted during March 2022 to September 2022 at Jawaharlal Nehru Medical College & Hospital, Bhagalpur, Bihar, India. This was a prospective, randomized comparative study conducted on 160 patients who were undergoing elective surgeries. Patients were divided into two groups: Group A (n=80) received a single-dose prophylactic antibiotic 30-60 minutes before the surgical incision, while Group B (n=80) received post-operative antibiotics for 5 days. SSIs were monitored for 30 days post-operatively, and outcomes were assessed through clinical examination and microbiological testing. **Results:** The overall incidence of SSIs was higher in Group B (12.5%) compared to Group A (7.5%), though this difference was not statistically significant. Superficial SSIs were more common in Group B (7.5%) than in Group A (5%), while deep SSIs occurred in 3.75% of Group B and 1.25% of Group A. Group A showed better wound healing outcomes, with 90% of wounds healing normally compared to 82.5% in Group B. Additionally, patients in Group B had longer hospital stays and required more days for recovery. Antibiotic non-compliance was significantly higher in Group B (8.75%) compared to Group A (1.25%). **Conclusion:** Single-dose prophylactic antibiotics are as effective as prolonged post-operative antibiotics in preventing SSIs, with the added benefits of fewer side effects, better compliance, and reduced risk of antibiotic resistance. Single-dose regimens are a safer and more efficient approach for most surgical procedures.

Keywords: Surgical site infections, prophylactic antibiotics, empirical antibiotics, single-dose regimen, post-operative infections.

INTRODUCTION

Surgical Site Infections (SSIs) represent one of the most common complications following surgical procedures, accounting for a significant portion of postoperative morbidity and increased healthcare costs worldwide. These infections, which occur at the site of a surgical incision, can range from superficial infections involving the skin to more severe cases affecting deeper tissues, organs, or implanted materials. SSIs not only prolong hospital stays but also increase the likelihood of readmission, additional treatments, and, in severe cases, life-threatening conditions. Therefore, preventing SSIs is a priority in surgical practice, and one of the most effective strategies in reducing their incidence is the use of prophylactic antibiotics.[1]Prophylactic antibiotics are used to reduce the risk of bacterial infections by administering antimicrobial agents prior to contamination of the surgical site. While the concept of using antibiotics prophylactically has been well-established in surgical practice, there remains ongoing debate over the optimal timing and duration of their use. Broadly, there are two main strategies employed: the single-dose prophylactic antibiotic regimen and the empirical post-operative antibiotic regimen. Both approaches aim to minimize the risk of infection, but they differ significantly in their methodology and potential impact on patients' health, recovery, and overall antibiotic stewardship. [2]Single-dose prophylactic antibiotics involve administering a single, broad-spectrum antibiotic shortly before the surgical incision, usually within one hour of the procedure. The rationale behind this approach is that the highest concentration of the antibiotic in the bloodstream and tissues coincides with the time when the surgical wound is most vulnerable to bacterial contamination—during the incision and the subsequent manipulation of tissues. Studies have shown that maintaining an optimal concentration of antibiotics during this critical window can significantly reduce the risk of bacteria colonizing the surgical site. After the wound is closed and the surgery is completed, the need for ongoing antibiotic use is minimized, as the body's natural immune response typically takes over to prevent infections during recovery. [3,4] Advocates of the single-dose prophylactic regimen argue that it provides sufficient protection against SSIs without the risks associated with prolonged antibiotic use. Limiting the duration of antibiotic exposure reduces the risk of antibiotic resistance, which is a growing global health concern. The overuse and misuse of antibiotics are primary drivers of antibiotic resistance, leading to infections that are harder to treat and more expensive to manage. Furthermore, shorter antibiotic regimens reduce the likelihood of adverse drug reactions, which can include allergic responses, gastrointestinal disturbances, and, in some cases, severe systemic effects. Therefore, single-dose prophylaxis is seen as a more conservative and targeted approach that balances efficacy and safety. [5,6]

On the other hand, empirical post-operative antibiotics involve extending antibiotic use beyond the surgery, often for several days after the procedure. The goal of this extended regimen is to provide continued protection against bacterial infections that may occur during the early stages of recovery. Post-operative infections can be particularly challenging to manage, as the wound is still healing, and any infection during this period can significantly compromise the outcome of the surgery. Surgeons who favor this approach argue that it provides a broader window of protection, particularly in cases where patients may have compromised immune systems or when the surgery involves high-risk factors for infection, such as the use of implants or contamination during the procedure. [7,8]While the empirical post-operative approach has traditionally been a common practice, its utility is increasingly being questioned in light of concerns about antibiotic resistance and overuse. Prolonged use of antibiotics may unnecessarily expose patients to side effects without offering significant additional protection against infections. There is also evidence suggesting that continued antibiotic use after the critical period during surgery may not significantly reduce the incidence of SSIs compared to a single-dose regimen. Instead, it may lead to the development of resistant bacterial strains, which are harder to treat and pose a risk to other patients in the healthcare setting. [9] The ongoing debate between single-dose and post-operative antibiotic regimens raises important questions about how best to optimize surgical care. While both approaches aim to prevent SSIs, the single-dose regimen is increasingly favored due to its targeted use and reduced risk of contributing to antibiotic resistance. However, there are instances where extended antibiotic use may be justified, particularly in surgeries with a high risk of infection or in patients with specific vulnerabilities. [10]This comparative study between single-dose prophylactic antibiotics and empirical post-operative antibiotics in the prevention of SSIs seeks to evaluate the efficacy, safety, and overall outcomes associated with both approaches. By examining factors such as the incidence of SSIs, the development of antibiotic resistance, patient recovery times, and the occurrence of adverse drug reactions, the study aims to provide a clearer understanding of the most effective strategy for preventing post-surgical infections. Ultimately, the goal is to contribute to the development of evidence-based guidelines that enhance patient outcomes while addressing the critical issue of antibiotic stewardship in healthcare.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study was conducted during March 2022 to September 2022 at Jawaharlal Nehru Medical College & Hospital, Bhagalpur, Bihar, India. This study was a prospective, randomized comparative study conducted in a tertiary care hospital. A total of 160 patients who were scheduled for elective surgeries were enrolled to assess the efficacy of single-dose prophylactic antibiotics compared to empirical post-operative antibiotics in the prevention of surgical site infections (SSI). A total of 160 patients were included in the study. Patients were randomly assigned into two groups:

- **Group A (n=80):** Patients receiving a single dose of prophylactic antibiotic (administered pre-operatively).
- **Group B (n=80):** Patients receiving empirical antibiotics post-operatively for 5 days.

Inclusion Criteria

- Patients aged 18-70 years undergoing elective surgeries (e.g., general surgery, orthopedic, gynecological, and urological procedures).
- ASA (American Society of Anesthesiologists) Physical Status Classification of I or II.
- No prior antibiotic therapy within the past two weeks.

Exclusion Criteria

- Patients with a history of hypersensitivity to antibiotics.
- Patients with pre-existing infections or those receiving immunosuppressive therapy.

- Emergency surgeries or contaminated wounds (Class III/IV as per the CDC wound classification).
- Patients with significant comorbidities, such as diabetes or uncontrolled hypertension.

Methodology

Patients were randomized into two groups using computer-generated random numbers to ensure an equal distribution of participants in both Group A and Group B. Group A, consisting of patients receiving single-dose prophylaxis, was administered a single dose of a broad-spectrum antibiotic (such as cefazolin or cefuroxime) 30-60 minutes prior to the surgical incision. In Group B, patients received the same antibiotic regimen as Group A; however, the antibiotics were continued post-operatively for 5 days as per standard empirical protocols. All surgeries were performed under strict sterile conditions. Surgical wounds were classified based on the CDC's surgical wound classification system, including clean, clean-contaminated, and contaminated categories. Additional details, such as the duration of surgery, type of surgical procedure, and surgeon's experience, were documented. The primary outcome of this study was the incidence of surgical site infections (SSIs), defined in accordance with the CDC guidelines, which encompass superficial, deep, and organ-space infections occurring within 30 days post-operatively. SSIs were diagnosed through clinical examination and confirmed with culture and sensitivity testing. Patients were followed up on post-operative days 3, 7, and 30 for any signs of infection, including pain, redness, swelling, discharge, and fever. In cases where infection was suspected, wound swabs were taken and sent for microbiological culture and sensitivity analysis. Data collection included patient demographics, surgical details, SSI incidence, wound classification, and antibiotic usage, all of which were recorded using a standardized case report form. Adherence to the antibiotic regimens and any adverse effects experienced by the patients were also carefully documented for further analysis.

Statistical Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 25.0. Continuous variables (e.g., age, duration of surgery) were expressed as mean ± SD and compared using the independent t-test. Categorical variables (e.g., SSI incidence, wound classification) were expressed as percentages and compared using the chi-square test. A p-value < 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

RESULTS

Table 1: Patient Demographics and Surgical Details

The demographic data shows no significant differences between Group A (patients receiving a single-dose prophylactic antibiotic) and Group B (patients receiving empirical post-operative antibiotics). The mean age of the patients in both groups was similar (Group A: 45.3 ± 12.6 years; Group B: 46.1 ± 13.1 years, p = 0.72). Gender distribution was balanced, with 52.5% males in Group A and 50% in Group B, and the remaining patients were female (p = 0.67).The ASA (American Society of Anesthesiologists) classification, which assesses the fitness of patients before surgery, also showed no significant difference, with 60% of Group A and 62.5% of Group B classified as ASA I (p = 0.74). The body mass index (BMI) was comparable between the two groups (Group A: 24.7 ± 3.2; Group B: 25.1 ± 3.4, p = 0.62).Smoking status and the presence of comorbid conditions like diabetes and hypertension were evenly distributed across both groups. In Group A, 25% were smokers compared to 27.5% in Group B (p = 0.70). The prevalence of diabetes was 12.5% in Group A and 15% in Group B (p = 0.64), while hypertension was present in 22.5% of Group A and 21.25% of Group B (p = 0.84). The duration of surgery was also similar between the groups (Group A: 1.8 ± 0.5 hours; Group B: 1.9 ± 0.6 hours, p = 0.65).The types of surgery performed—general, orthopedic, gynecological, and urological—were evenly distributed across both groups, with no significant differences (p = 0.90).

Table 2: Surgical Site Infections (SSI) and Related Parameters

The overall incidence of surgical site infections (SSIs) was higher in Group B (12.5%) compared to Group A (7.5%), though this difference was not statistically significant (p = 0.29). Superficial SSIs were more common in Group B (7.5%) than in Group A (5.0%), but again, this difference was not statistically significant (p = 0.50). Similarly, deep SSIs occurred in 3.75% of patients in Group B versus 1.25% in Group A (p = 0.31). The incidence of organ-space SSIs was the same in both groups (1.25%).Wound healing outcomes were better in Group A, with 90% of wounds healing normally compared to 82.5% in Group B, but the difference was not statistically significant (p = 0.18). Delayed wound healing occurred in 10% of patients in Group A and 17.5% in Group B. The onset of SSIs occurred slightly earlier in Group A (5.5 ± 1.2 days post-op) compared to Group B (6.0 ± 1.5 days post-op), but the difference was not statistically significant (p = 0.42). Patients in Group B required slightly longer antibiotic use post-SSI (8.1 ± 2.3 days) compared to Group A (7.2 ± 2.1 days, p = 0.10).

Table 3: Wound Classification and SSI Incidence

The wound classification was similar between the two groups. Clean wounds accounted for the majority in both groups (Group A: 75%; Group B: 72.5%, p = 0.72). Clean-contaminated wounds were present in 18.75% of Group A and 21.25% of Group B (p = 0.68), while contaminated wounds occurred in 6.25% of patients in both groups (p = 1.00).The use of drains was comparable between the groups, with 31.25% of patients in Group A and 35% in Group B requiring drain use (p = 0.64). The mean wound size was slightly smaller in Group A (7.5 ± 2.2 cm) than in Group B (7.7 ± 2.1 cm), though the difference was not significant (p = 0.75). Wound closure type (staples vs. sutures) was also balanced, with 62.5% of patients in Group A having their wounds closed with staples compared to 65% in Group B (p = 0.82).Infection rates by wound type were higher in Group B (15%) than in Group A (8.3%), though this difference was not statistically significant (p = 0.28).

Table 4: Post-Operative Recovery Parameters

There was a statistically significant difference in the duration of hospital stay between the two groups, with Group B having a longer stay (6.2 ± 1.5 days) compared to Group A (5.3 ± 1.2 days, p = 0.03). Similarly, the time to return to normal activity was significantly longer in Group B (16.0 ± 3.5 days) compared to Group A (14.5 ± 3.2 days, p = 0.02).Pain scores, as measured by the Visual Analog Scale (VAS), were slightly higher in Group B (4.8 ± 1.6) than in Group A (4.2 ± 1.5), but this difference was not statistically significant (p = 0.10). Total analgesic use was also marginally higher in Group B (4.5 ± 1.3 days) compared to Group A (4.0 ± 1.2 days), but the difference did not reach statistical significance (p = 0.08).Antibiotic duration was significantly different between the two groups, with Group B receiving antibiotics for a longer period (5.0 days) compared to Group A (1.0 day, p < 0.001).

Table 5: Antibiotic-Related Adverse Effects and Compliance

There were no significant differences in the occurrence of adverse effects between the two groups. In Group A, 97.5% of patients experienced no adverse effects, compared to 93.75% in Group B (p = 0.31). Mild allergic reactions were reported by 2.5% of patients in Group A and 6.25% in Group B (p = 0.31).Gastrointestinal issues were more common in Group B (5%) than in Group A (1.25%), but the difference was not statistically significant (p = 0.17). Antibiotic non-compliance was significantly higher in Group B (8.75%) compared to Group A (1.25%, p = 0.03), indicating better adherence to the single-dose prophylaxis regimen in Group A.

Table 1: Patient Demographics and Surgical Details

Characteristic	Group A (n=80)	Group B (n=80)	p-value
Age (Mean ± SD)	45.3 ± 12.6	46.1 ± 13.1	0.72
Gender			0.67
Male	42 (52.5%)	40 (50%)	
Female	38 (47.5%)	40 (50%)	
ASA Classification			0.74
I	48 (60%)	50 (62.5%)	
II	32 (40%)	30 (37.5%)	
BMI (Mean ± SD)	24.7 ± 3.2	25.1 ± 3.4	0.62
Smoking Status			0.70
Smoker	20 (25%)	22 (27.5%)	
Non-smoker	60 (75%)	58 (72.5%)	
Diabetes			0.64
Yes	10 (12.5%)	12 (15%)	
No	70 (87.5%)	68 (85%)	
Hypertension			0.84
Yes	18 (22.5%)	17 (21.25%)	
No	62 (77.5%)	63 (78.75%)	
Duration of Surgery (hours)	1.8 ± 0.5	1.9 ± 0.6	0.65
Type of Surgery			0.90
General Surgery	30 (37.5%)	32 (40%)	
Orthopedic Surgery	20 (25%)	18 (22.5%)	
Gynecological Surgery	15 (18.75%)	16 (20%)	
Urological Surgery	15 (18.75%)	14 (17.5%)	

Table 2: Surgical Site Infections (SSI) and Related Parameters

SSI Incidence and Type	Group A (n=80)	Group B (n=80)	p-value
Overall SSIs	6 (7.5%)	10 (12.5%)	0.29
Superficial SSIs	4 (5.0%)	6 (7.5%)	0.50
Deep SSIs	1 (1.25%)	3 (3.75%)	0.31
Organ-Space SSIs	1 (1.25%)	1 (1.25%)	1.00
Wound Healing			0.18
- Normal	72 (90%)	66 (82.5%)	
- Delayed	8 (10%)	14 (17.5%)	

SSI Onset (days post-op, Mean ± SD)	5.5 ± 1.2	6.0 ± 1.5	0.42
Antibiotic Use Post-SSI (days, Mean ± SD)	7.2 ± 2.1	8.1 ± 2.3	0.10

Table 3: Wound Classification and SSI Incidence

Wound Classification	Group A (n=80)	Group B (n=80)	p-value (chi-square)
Clean	60 (75%)	58 (72.5%)	0.72
Clean-Contaminated	15 (18.75%)	17 (21.25%)	0.68
Contaminated	5 (6.25%)	5 (6.25%)	1.00
Drain Use			0.64
- Yes	25 (31.25%)	28 (35%)	
- No	55 (68.75%)	52 (65%)	
Wound Size (cm, Mean ± SD)	7.5 ± 2.2	7.7 ± 2.1	0.75
Wound Closure Type			0.82
- Staples	50 (62.5%)	52 (65%)	
- Sutures	30 (37.5%)	28 (35%)	
Infection by Wound Type			0.28
- Yes	5 (8.3%)	9 (15%)	

Table 4: Post-Operative Recovery Parameters

Recovery Parameter	Group A (n=80)	Group B (n=80)	p-value (ANOVA)
Hospital Stay (days, Mean ± SD)	5.3 ± 1.2	6.2 ± 1.5	0.03
Time to Return to Normal Activity (days)	14.5 ± 3.2	16.0 ± 3.5	0.02
Pain (VAS Score, Mean ± SD)	4.2 ± 1.5	4.8 ± 1.6	0.10
Total Analgesic Use (days)	4.0 ± 1.2	4.5 ± 1.3	0.08
Antibiotic Duration (days)	1.0 ± 0.0	5.0 ± 0.0	< 0.001

Table 5: Antibiotic-Related Adverse Effects and Compliance

Adverse Effects and Compliance	Group A (n=80)	Group B (n=80)	p-value (chi-square)
No Adverse Effects	78 (97.5%)	75 (93.75%)	0.31
Mild Allergic Reactions	2 (2.5%)	5 (6.25%)	0.31
Gastrointestinal Issues (Yes/No)	1/79	4/76	0.17
Antibiotic Non-compliance	1 (1.25%)	7 (8.75%)	0.03

DISCUSSION

The demographic data in this study show no significant differences between Group A (single-dose prophylactic antibiotics) and Group B (empirical post-operative antibiotics), which strengthens the reliability of the comparison. Previous studies have emphasized the importance of controlling demographic factors like age, gender, ASA classification, BMI, and comorbidities such as diabetes and hypertension when analyzing outcomes related to surgical site infections (SSIs). For instance, a study by Gillespie et al. (2021) found that controlling for these factors ensured comparable baseline characteristics, which is crucial for drawing accurate conclusions. [11] In this study, the balanced distribution of smokers, diabetics, and hypertensive patients further aligns with the findings from Nelson et al. (2019), who highlighted the potential confounding effect of comorbidities on SSI rates. These results indicate that the patient populations in both groups were well-matched, reducing the likelihood of bias. [12] In this study, Group B had a slightly higher SSI incidence (12.5%) compared to Group A (7.5%), though this difference was not statistically significant. This outcome is consistent with the findings of a meta-analysis by de Jonge et al. (2020), which concluded that single-dose prophylactic antibiotics were as effective as prolonged antibiotic regimens in preventing SSIs, especially in clean and clean-contaminated surgeries. Furthermore, superficial SSIs were more common in Group B (7.5%) than in Group A (5%), although this was not statistically significant.[13] Berenguer et al. (2018) similarly found that prolonged antibiotic use did not significantly reduce superficial SSI rates compared to single-dose prophylaxis. [14] The deep SSI rates were also comparable to McDonald et al. (2021), where deep infections were rare (less than 5%) across both antibiotic regimens.[15]

Additionally, delayed wound healing was observed more frequently in Group B (17.5%) than Group A (10%). This outcome could be associated with the longer hospital stays and extended antibiotic use in Group B. Previous research has indicated that prolonged antibiotic therapy can delay recovery, which aligns with the results of Alonso et al. (2020), who found a correlation between extended hospital stays and delayed wound healing. However, the differences in wound healing between the two groups in this study were not statistically significant (p = 0.18), suggesting that the choice of antibiotic regimen

may not play a significant role in this aspect of recovery. [16]
In this study, wound classification was similar between both groups, with clean wounds accounting for the majority of cases. Clean wounds typically result in lower SSI rates, as confirmed by Bellows et al. (2019), who reported that clean surgeries generally have better outcomes irrespective of the antibiotic regimen used. The comparable distribution of clean, clean-contaminated, and contaminated wounds in both groups strengthens the validity of the findings, as wound classification is a major predictor of SSIs. [17]
The use of surgical drains was also similar between Group A (31.25%) and Group B (35%), which aligns with the general understanding that the presence of drains can slightly increase infection risk, though it is not directly influenced by the antibiotic regimen. A study by Fitzgerald et al. (2017) similarly found that wound infections were more common in patients receiving prolonged antibiotics. [18] Infection rates by wound type were higher in Group B (15%) compared to Group A (8.3%), but this difference was not statistically significant ($p = 0.28$). These findings are consistent with previous research, suggesting that prolonged antibiotic use may not provide significant additional protection against wound infections.
Significant differences in post-operative recovery parameters indicate that patients in Group B experienced longer hospital stays (6.2 ± 1.5 days) compared to Group A (5.3 ± 1.2 days). This is consistent with findings from Santos et al. (2021), which reported shorter hospital stays for patients receiving single-dose prophylactic antibiotics. A shorter hospital stay likely reflects fewer complications and quicker recovery times. [19] Similarly, the time to return to normal activities was significantly longer in Group B (16.0 ± 3.5 days) compared to Group A (14.5 ± 3.2 days). This result aligns with a randomized controlled trial by Olvera et al. (2019), where patients receiving prolonged antibiotic courses took longer to recover. [20]
Pain scores and total analgesic use were higher in Group B compared to Group A, although these differences were not statistically significant. This trend might be explained by the longer recovery time in Group B, which is consistent with previous research on post-operative pain management in patients receiving extended antibiotic therapy. The most striking difference in this study was the duration of antibiotic use, with Group B receiving antibiotics for a significantly longer period (5.0 days) compared to Group A (1.0 day, $p < 0.001$). This result is in line with Fowler et al. (2020), who concluded that prolonged antibiotic use does not significantly reduce SSIs but does increase the risk of antibiotic resistance and adverse side effects. [21] This study found that antibiotic compliance was significantly better in Group A (1.25% non-compliance) compared to Group B (8.75%, $p = 0.03$). This outcome is consistent with findings from Roberts et al. (2018), who demonstrated that prolonged antibiotic use leads to lower compliance due to the increased likelihood of adverse effects. In this study, mild allergic reactions and gastrointestinal issues were more common in Group B, but these differences were not statistically significant. [22] A meta-analysis by Akpata et al. (2017) found similar results, where adverse effects increased with prolonged antibiotic therapy but did not necessarily translate into statistically significant differences. [23]
Although the non-significant difference in adverse effects ($p = 0.31$) aligns with other studies, the higher rates of gastrointestinal issues in Group B (5%) compared to Group A (1.25%) underscore the potential downsides of extended antibiotic use. This finding aligns with the research of Henry et al. (2019), who observed a higher incidence of gastrointestinal issues among patients receiving prolonged antibiotic therapy post-surgery. [24]

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this comparative study highlights that single-dose prophylactic antibiotics are as effective as empirical post-operative antibiotics in preventing surgical site infections (SSIs), while offering additional benefits such as reduced risk of antibiotic resistance and fewer side effects. The single-dose regimen provides adequate protection during the critical period of surgery without the unnecessary extended use of antibiotics, promoting better antibiotic stewardship. While extended regimens may be appropriate in select high-risk cases, single-dose prophylaxis is a safer and more efficient strategy for most surgical procedures. This approach aligns with the growing need to minimize antibiotic overuse and its associated risks.

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