



## Original article

## Self-medication with antibiotics in Saudi Arabia

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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** Despite of the global dilemma of antibiotics resistance, this issue is more worsen in developing countries or places where the antibiotics can be dispensed or purchased without prescription such as in Saudi Arabia. Most health awareness campaigns and published studies regarding the self-medication with antibiotics in Saudi Arabia are conducted within hospitals. The prevalence and reasons of self-medication with antibiotics were not well studied from community perspective in Saudi Arabia. This study was conducted to investigate the prevalence of self-medication with antibiotics in Saudi Arabia.

**Methodology:** A cross-sectional study using online survey and snowball technique was conducted during the period from January 2017 to May 2017 targeting people who are living in Saudi Arabia.

**Results:** A total of 1264 respondent completed the questionnaire and included in the study. About 34% of respondents have used antibiotic without a prescription, and 81.3% of them knew that it might be harmful to health. The most antibiotic used for self-medication was Amoxicillin/clavulanic acid (45.1%) followed by amoxicillin (39.9%). The most common illness and reasons for seeking antibiotic without prescription were tonsillitis (76.7%) and the previous experience of using a particular antibiotic (52.1%) respectively. The major source of self-medication with antibiotic was previous doctor's prescription (36.6%).

**Conclusion:** The relative high prevalence of self-medication with antibiotics necessitates taking serious steps by health authorities to implement the law of forbidding the sale of antibiotics without prescription.

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## 1. Introduction

Due to the accelerated growth of microbial resistance towards the most effective antimicrobial agents, WHO established a program named "WHO Global Strategy for Containment of Antimicrobial Resistance" to confront this challenge (World Health Organization, 2001). The aim of this strategy was to reduce the spread of antimicrobial resistance by implementing several action plans including the reduction of inappropriate use of antimicrobials. Despite of WHO efforts in halting the overuse of antimicrobials, antimicrobial purchase is considered one of the most

common buying medications globally (Col and O'Connor, 1987). The purchase of antimicrobial drugs without prescription is estimated to be 58% in Asia, 47% in southern Europe, 30% in eastern Europe, 25% in South America, 39% in Middle East (Morgan et al., 2011). The use of non-prescribed antimicrobial agents may lead to dangerous impact on the public health. The continuous emergence of antimicrobial resistance, the reported incidence of adverse effects, and the unavoidable costs of buying non-prescribed antimicrobials are consequences of acquisition antimicrobials without prescription.

Of the most common used antimicrobial agents are antibiotics. The major problem of utilizing antibiotics without prescription is the emergence of antibiotics resistance (General Background: Antibiotic Resistance, 2017). Kingdom of Saudi Arabia showed the highest prevalence of resistant pathogens in clinical isolates among all Gulf Corporation Council (GCC) countries (Aly and Balkhy, 2012). Also, using the antibiotics inappropriately can lead to unnecessary adverse effects or may cause diseases like Clostridium difficile colitis which happens due to disturbance in the normal bacterial flora in the colon because of using antibiotics (Morgan et al., 2011;

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**General Background: Antibiotic Resistance, 2017).** The incidence of toxigenic *Clostridium difficile* colitis in Saudi Arabia is reported to be 15% (Alasmari et al., 2014). The economic burden of antibiotic-resistance is an essential concern. No data estimated the economic burden of antibiotic resistance in Saudi Arabia; however, in the United States, approximately a range from \$18,588 to \$29,069 is the medical cost of a patient with antibiotic resistance infection (Golkar et al., 2014; Bartlett et al., 2013).

Despite of the global dilemma of antibiotics resistance, this issue is more worsen in countries or places where the antibiotics can be dispensed or purchased without prescription (Morgan et al., 2011). In Saudi Arabia, a study showed that 77.6% of the pharmacies are dispensing antibiotics without prescription, and almost 95% of which dispensed the antibiotics even without the patient request (Bin Abdulhak et al., 2011). On the other hand, antibiotics can be purchased without prescription in Saudi Arabia. According to a recent hospital-based cross sectional study conducted in Riyadh, It is estimated that around 79% of the participants purchased at least one antibiotic without a prescription (AlRasheed et al., 2016). Although of health awareness campaigns and published studies regarding the self-medication with antibiotics in Saudi Arabia, most of these campaigns and researches are conducted in hospitals. The prevalence and reasons of self-medication with antibiotics were not well studied from community perspective in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, this study was conducted to investigate the prevalence of self-medication with antibiotics in Saudi Arabia.

## 2. Methods

A cross-sectional study using online survey was conducted during the period from January 2017 to May 2017 targeting people who are living in Saudi Arabia.

The survey contained questions about: (1) demographic data such as age, gender, occupation, education level, and insurance status, (2) frequency and name of antibiotic used if any, (3) illness and reasons of self-medication with antibiotics, (4) knowledge of substitutional impact of using or recommending antibiotic without prescription, (5) the availability of antibiotics at home, and (6) source of information for selecting particular antibiotic. The common generic names of antibiotics in Saudi Arabia were taken from the latest edition of "Saudi National Formulary (SNF); 4th edition". Participants were recruited through social media websites and applications using snowball technique where any person recruited to do the survey provides multiple referrals. Any participant who lives outside Saudi Arabia will be exempt from the survey.

A well-structured questionnaire was developed from extensive literature review that conducted studies in this regard. Since most of those studies were published in English language, the questions used in those studies were first collected, organized, modified and then translated to Arabic language by an independent professional translator.

Eight experts in the field were asked to comment independently on appropriateness of the questions to assess the validity of the questionnaire. After the validation and comments consideration, a pilot face-to-face study of 10 randomly selected persons was conducted to ensure the linguistic and conceptual understanding of the questions. Reliability of the questionnaire was assessed with the Cronbach's alpha coefficient that scored 0.9.

The data were analyzed and processed by using SPSS version 15.

## 3. Results

In this surveyed study, a total of 1264 of respondents filled the questionnaire. Majority of respondents (72.7%) were female. The

most of respondents were aged from 34 to 51 years. Just over two-third of respondents had university education and further information on characteristics of respondents are given in Table 1.

In this study, more than one third (43.4%) of respondents reported that they sometimes using self-medication with antibiotics, while almost half of respondents (51.6%) claimed that they never used antibiotic without prescription. Only 5% of participants stated that they always use antibiotics without prescription.

The findings of this study reported that the most vital reasons for practicing self-medication with antibiotics were the previous experience of using particular antibiotic (52.10%), followed by the low severity or seriousness of diseases (36%), lack of time (22.30%), financial constraints (13.0%) and lack of a trustful medical doctor (10.10%) as shown in Fig. 1.

The antibiotics most usually used for self-medication were amoxicillin and potassium clavulanate (45.1%), followed by amoxicillin (39.9%), azithromycin (16.8%), cefuroxime (9.7%) and cephalixin (5.7%). Antibiotic included sulfamethoxazole and trimethoprim, levofloxacin and doxycycline were rarely used in self-medication. The percentage of use of each antibiotic is showed in Fig. 2.

Common reported illness in which self-medication with antibiotics were seeking include tonsillitis and pharyngitis (76.7%), fever (29.3%), toothache (26.5%), and respiratory symptoms (24.4%) such as cough and phlegm Table 2). The vast majority of respondents (84.1%) selected their antibiotics as self-medication based on its effectiveness. It was interesting that majority (81.3%) of the respondents knew that antibiotics cause adverse effects. More than two-third of the respondents had medications store at their home, and amoxicillin and amoxicillin/potassium clavulanate were the most frequent antibiotic are available (Table 2).

The major source of self-medication with antibiotic was previous doctor's prescription (36.6%), followed by advertisements from websites, social media, TV, or reading (26.5%), and pharmacist advice (19.7%). See Table 3.

**Table 1**  
Distribution of demographic information of respondents (N = 1264).

Variables	Frequency	Percentage	
Age (in years)	Less than 18	45	3.6%
	18–24	301	23.8%
	24–33	296	23.4%
	34–51	495	39.2%
	52–64	123	9.7%
	65 and older	4	0.3%
Gender	Male	345	27.3%
	Female	919	72.7%
Occupation	Employee	601	47.5%
	Non-Employee	343	27.1%
	Student	320	25.3%
Are you a health practitioner? (Doctor, pharmacist, nurse, etc.)	Yes	283	22.4%
	No	981	77.6%
Level of education	Illiterate	3	0.2%
	Primary school	47	3.7%
	Secondary school	235	18.6%
	University	852	67.4%
	Postgraduate	127	10.0%
Health insurance	None	525	41.5%
	General (governmental) insurance	456	36.1%
	Private insurance	283	22.4%

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