DOI: https://doi.org/10.54393/pjhs.v6i9.2080

PAKISTAN JOURNAL OF HEALTH SCIENCES
(LAHORE)
https://thejas.com.pk/index.php/pjhs
ISSN (E): 2790-9352, (P): 2790-9344
Volume 6, Issue 09 (September 2025)

Original Article

OPEN ACCESS

Frequency of Carbapenem Resistance in the Pathogenic Gram-Negative Bacteria from Hyderabad, Sindh

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Antibiotic Resistance, Carbapenems, Gram-Negative Bacteria, Pathogens

How to Cite:
Ilyas, M. A., Bano, S., Tunio, S. A., Mangi, A. A., & Detho, H. (2025). Frequency of Carbapenem Resistance in the Pathogenic Gram-Negative Bacteria from Hyderabad, Sindh: Carbapenem Resistance in the Pathogenic Gram-Negative Bacteria. Pakistan Journal of Health Sciences, 6(9), 94-99. https://doi.org/10.54393/pjhs.v6i9.2080

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Received Date: 25th December, 2025
Revised Date: 5th September, 2025
Acceptance Date: 24th September, 2025
Published Date: 30th September, 2025

ABSTRACT

Carbapenems are β-lactam antibiotics and are often used as a last resort to treat infections caused by the β-lactamase-producing Gram-negative bacteria owing to their ability to withstand hydrolysis by many β-lactamase enzymes. However, the emergence of carbapenem resistance in these pathogens has already been reported. In order to avoid critical situations for public health, regular monitoring and reporting of carbapenem resistance is essential. **Objectives:** To determine the frequency of carbapenem-resistant Gram-negative pathogens circulating in Hyderabad, Sindh. **Methods:** This cross-sectional study was carried out for one year. The clinical samples were collected using a convenience sampling technique from patients suspected of bacterial infections. The bacterial isolates were subjected to identification based on their microscopic, cultural, and biochemical characteristics. Sensitivity of each type of Gram-negative pathogen to antibiotics was established in terms of Clinical Laboratory Standards Institute guidelines, with the use of the Kirby-Bauer disk diffusion technique. **Results:** 400 clinical samples were randomly selected and they were divided into urine (n=212), pus (n=85), blood (n=68), and other (n=35). Their microbiological processing resulted in the recovery of two hundred seventy-seven isolates of Gram-negative bacteria identified as *E. coli* (31.05%), *Enterobacter* spp. (24.19%), *Pseudomonas* spp. (16.25%), *Proteus* spp. (14.44%), *Klebsiella* spp. (10.11%), and others (3.96%). The frequency of carbapenem-resistant isolates varied among species, with the highest prevalence in *Pseudomonas* spp. demonstrating 20% being carbapenem-resistant isolates. **Conclusions:** Carbapenem resistance in pathogenic Gram-negative bacteria has emerged. The development of carbapenem resistance in these pathogens can be catastrophic for public health.

INTRODUCTION

Carbapenems, a subgroup of β-lactam antibiotics, act as cell wall inhibitors by restraining the biosynthesis of bacterial cell walls and are recognized as last-resort antibiotics for treating severe bacterial infections [1, 2]. Imipenem and meropenem are among the most broadly active carbapenem antibiotics available for systemic use in humans [3]. Carbapenems are typically resistant to hydrolysis by many beta-lactamase enzymes released by clinically significant bacterial pathogens. However, the emergence of carbapenem resistance (CR) in Gram-negative pathogenic bacteria such as *E. coli* and some species of *Acinetobacter*, *Klebsiella*, *Proteus*, and *Pseudomonas* genera has been reported in the last few years [4, 5], which has imposed a great public health concern worldwide by limiting treatment options for infections caused by CR-Gram-negative pathogenic bacteria. Consequently, infected patients face a high mortality rate. Additionally, the annual cost of combating these resistant bacterial infections has increased substantially worldwide [6, 7]. The carbapenem resistance in Gram-negative bacteria is mainly attributed to the conjugative plasmids, which can spread mobile genes that encode enzymes (carbapenemases) capable of hydrolyzing β-lactam agents, including carbapenems [8]. Among the

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clinically relevant carbapenemases, two types, namely K. *pneumoniae* carbapenemase (KPC) and Verona integron-encoded metallo-β-lactamase (VIM), are particularly prevalent. However, recently, oxacillinase-48 (OXA-48) and New Delhi metallo-β-lactamase-1 (NDM-1) have also become common [9]. Since the last decade, the isolation of CR-Gram-negative bacteria from clinical samples has been increasing, possibly due to the frequent usage of carbapenem antibiotics for treating bacterial infections. Consequently, CR-Gram-negative pathogenic bacteria have been listed in the critical priority pathogens group by the World Health Organization [10]. The epidemiological attributes of CR-Gram-negative pathogenic bacteria include multiple characteristics that show diversity and significantly vary by geographical region. Regular monitoring and surveillance of carbapenem resistance in Gram-negative pathogenic bacteria are suggested. The collected data have provided insights into the status of these clinically important antibiotics in terms of their effectiveness in treating infections associated with various Gram-negative bacteria.

This study aimed to evaluate the frequency of CR in Gram-negative pathogenic bacteria from Hyderabad, Sindh, Pakistan.

METHODS

This analytical cross-sectional study was carried out among undergraduate dental students at Watim Medical and Dental College, Rawalpindi, Pakistan, to investigate temporomandibular disorders (TMD). Data collection took place over six months, from May to October 2022. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Institutional Ethical Review Board of Watim Medical and Dental College (Ref. No. 06 ERB/April/2022). Written informed consent was secured from all participants in accordance with the Helsinki Declaration. The sample size was estimated using the WHO calculator, considering a student population of about 350, a 95% confidence interval, 5% margin of error, and an expected prevalence of 63% based on prior literature. An additional 10% was added to account for possible non-response, yielding a total of 186 participants. Students from all four professional years were included to ensure representation across different stages of the program. Sampling was performed using a non-probability purposive strategy. Temporomandibular disorders were assessed with the Fonseca Anamnestic Index (FAI), a validated and frequently used screening tool. The instrument evaluates symptoms such as restricted mouth opening, difficulty in jaw movement, fatigue or discomfort during mastication, headaches, neck or ear pain, joint sounds, bruxism, difficulty biting, and psychological stress. Each of the ten questions is scored as 10 points for "Yes," 5 points for "Sometimes," and 0 points for "No," producing a total score ranging from 0–100. Scores are interpreted as: 0–15 (no TMD), 20–40 (mild), 45–65 (moderate), and 70–100 (severe). To reduce confounding, students with systemic illnesses (e.g., autoimmune disease, rheumatoid arthritis, neurological disorders) or those receiving any TMD treatment (pharmacological, surgical, or physiotherapy) were excluded. Data were collected through the FAI, a brief sociodemographic questionnaire (age, gender), and relevant medical/dental history. The psychometric properties of the FAI are well established, with reported high reliability (Cronbach's alpha = 0.849; ICC = 0.837), good concurrent validity against DC/TMD, and acceptable sensitivity (≈78%) and specificity, with an AUC of 0.852. Statistical analyses were performed using IBM SPSS version 26.0. Normality of continuous data was examined with the Shapiro–Wilk test. Group differences in mean FAI scores across age categories were assessed using independent samples t-test, while associations between gender and TMD severity were evaluated with the chi-square test.

RESULTS

The present study included 400 different types of clinical samples. The frequency of growth-positive clinical samples is given. The observed higher frequency of positive growth patterns reflects the targeted collection from suspected patients, consistent with the aim of the current research. Although some samples revealed mixed growth, one isolate per sample was included in the present study for identification and detection of the CR phenotype. The data has further indicated that among the growth-positive samples (n=316), a higher percentage was of urine specimens, followed by pus and blood specimens. In contrast, other specimens (ear swabs and body fluids) were less frequent. Notably, urinary tract infections (UTIs) caused by Gram-negative bacteria were significantly more prevalent than other infections (p-value<0.05). Moreover, a higher frequency of the clinical isolates (87.65%) appeared as Gram-negative bacteria with rod-shaped morphology when microscopic observations were done, while the remaining (12.35%) were Gram-positive bacteria. It was further observed that the highest frequency of Gram-negative isolates was recovered from urine samples (p-value<0.05), followed by blood and pus samples (Table 1).

Table 1: Percentage Distribution of Clinical Specimens

Clinical Samples	Gram-positive, n (%)	Gram-negative, n (%)	Total Growth Positive, n (%)
Urine	11 (28.2%)	171 (61.7%)*	182 (57.59%)*
Pus	25 (64.10%)	44 (15.9%)	69 (21.84%)
Blood	02 (5.13%)	43 (15.5%)	45 (14.24%)
Other	01 (2.57%)	19 (6.9%)	20 (6.33%)
Total	39 (100%)	277 (100%)	316 (100%)

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*p-value<0.05

Further characterization of Gram-negative isolates showed that the rod-shaped bacilli were frequent among them, which included both lactose fermenters and lactose non-fermenters. The isolates identified as *E. coli*, *Enterobacter* spp., *Pseudomonas* spp., *Proteus* spp., Klebsiella spp., *Citrobacter* spp., *Salmonella* Typhi, and Xanthomonas maltophila were recovered with varying frequencies. The data indicated that the majority of isolates were responsible for causing UTIs in humans because these were obtained from urine samples. However, all *Salmonella* spp. isolated in this study were exclusively recovered from blood samples. This finding is consistent with the characterization of *S. Typhi*, which causes typhoid fever, an enteric fever primarily detected by the isolation of typhoidal *Salmonella* from human blood (Table 2).

Table 2: Percentage Distribution of the Gram-Negative Isolates

Type of Specimen	Lactose Fermenters, n=185 (66.79%)				Non-Lactose Fermenters, n=92 (33.21%)			
	E. coli	*Enterobacter* spp.	*Klebsiella* spp.	*Citrobacter* spp.	*Pro eus* spp.	*Pseudomonas* spp.	*Salmonella* Typhi	*Xanthomonas maltophilia*
Pus	6 (7.0%)	12 (17.9%)	4 (14.3%)	0 (0%)	15 (37.5%)	6 (13.3%)	0 (0%)	1 (100%)
Urine	64 (74.4%)	41 (61.2%)	24 (85.7%)	4 (100%)	21 (52.5%)	17 (37.8%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Blood	8 (9.3%)	9 (13.4%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	3 (7.5%)	17 (37.8%)	6 (100%)	0 (0%)
Other	8 (9.3%)	5 (7.5%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (2.5%)	5 (11.1%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Total	86 (100%)	67 (100%)	28 (100%)	4 (100%)	40 (100%)	45 (100%)	6 (100%)	1 (100%)
% of Total Isolates	31.05%	24.19%	10.11%	1.44%	14.44%	16.25%	2.17%	0.35%

The representative result of antibiotic susceptibility testing for Gram-negative bacteria (E. coli) using the disc diffusion assay. No zone of inhibition against the antibiotic disc (Resistant), Zone of inhibition (Sensitive). Antibiotics tested were Amikacin (AK), Cephalosporins, Cefoperazone (CEF), Cefuroxime (CXM), Ciprofloxacin (CIP), Fosfomycin (FOS), Imipenem (IMP), and Meropenem (MEM). The antibiotic resistance profile of all common clinical isolates was determined against a panel of seven antibiotics from different classes of antibiotics, including carbapenems (Imipenem and meropenem). Information indicated that the *E. coli* isolates have become resistant to antibiotics, which are mostly used. Interestingly, the majority of the *E. coli* isolates were vulnerable to carbapenem antibiotics but resistant to cephalosporins and fluoroquinolone antibiotics. A particularly high resistance rate was observed against ciprofloxacin (Figure 1).

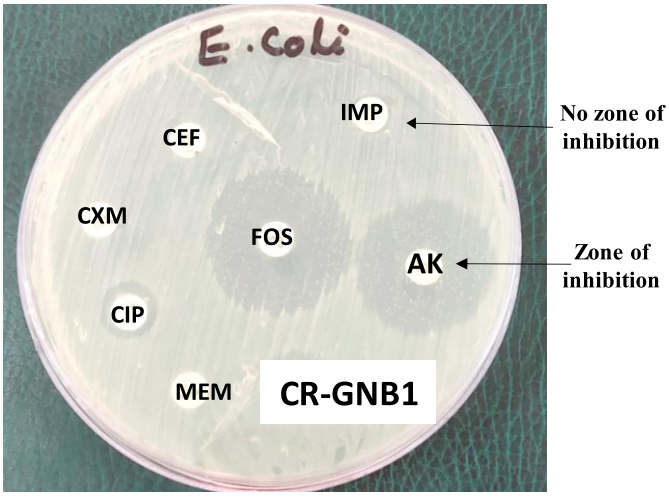

Figure 1: Antibiotic Susceptibility Testing for Gram-Negative Bacteria (E. Coli) Using Disc Diffusion Assay

Additionally, *E. coli* isolates also showed resistance to the cephalosporin antibiotics used in the study. The CR was observed in 6.98% (n=6) of *E. coli* isolates, which is considered an emerging concern for public health. Notably, a higher degree of CR was observed among *Pseudomonas* spp. along with a higher level of resistance against cephalosporins such as cefuroxime and cefoperazone observed in *Pseudomonas* spp. Similarly, *Klebsiella* spp. were resistant particularly against ciprofloxacin, with 64.29% isolates. In addition, more than 50% of isolates showed resistance against both cephalosporins tested in this study. Regarding the carbapenems, 4 (14.29%) isolates showed resistance to meropenem and imipenem antibiotics. Similarly, a higher level of resistance against cephalosporins such as cefuroxime and cefoperazone was observed in Pseudomonas spp. Antibiotic susceptibility testing of *Enterobacter* spp. revealed that 46 (68.66%) were susceptible to cefuroxime, while 21 (31.34%) were resistant. Furthermore, resistance to ciprofloxacin was observed in more than 50% of isolates. Specifically, 7 (10.45%) of *Enterobacter* spp. were resistant to meropenem, a carbapenem antibiotic, indicating the emergence of CR in the Gram-negative pathogenic bacteria. AST of *Proteus* spp. isolates revealed that 31 (77.5%) were sensitive to cefuroxime and cefoperazone, while 9 (22.5%) were resistant. Additionally, resistance to ciprofloxacin was observed in 18 (45.0%) of the isolates. Furthermore, 6 (15.0%) of the *Proteus* spp. exhibited resistance to carbapenems. Overall, data showed that 32 out of 266 Gram-negative isolates tested were CR isolates.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.54393/pjhs.v6i9.2080

Table 3: Antibiotic Susceptibility Profiles of Gram-Negative Bacteria Isolated from Various Clinical Samples

Clinical Isolates	*E. coli* n=86		*Enterobacter* spp. n=67		*Klebsiella* spp. n=28		*Proteus* spp. n=40		*Pseudomonas* spp. n=45	
Antibiotics	S, n (%)	R, n (%)	S, n (%)	R, n (%)	S, n (%)	R, n (%)	S, n (%)	R, n (%)	S, n (%)	R, n (%)
Amikacin	77 (89.53%)	9 (10.47%)	58 (86.57%)	9 (13.43%)	23 (82.14%)	5 (17.86%)	35 (87.5%)	5 (12.5%)	37 (82.22%)	8 (17.78%)
Cefoperazone	56 (65.11%)	30 (34.89%)	33 (49.25%)	34 (50.74%)	14 (50%)	14 (50%)	31 (77.5%)	9 (22.5%)	23 (51.11%)	22 (48.89%)
Cefuroxime	46 (53.49%)	40 (46.51%)	46 (68.66%)	21 (31.34%)	12 (42.86%)	16 (57.14%)	31 (77.5%)	9 (22.5%)	28 (62.22%)	17 (37.78%)
Ciprofloxacin	24 (27.90%)	62 (72.10%)	31 (46.26%)	36 (53.73%)	10 (35.71%)	18 (64.29%)	22 (55.0%)	18 (45.0%)	24 (53.33%)	21 (46.67%)
Fosfomycin	75 (87.20%)	11 (12.80%)	47 (70.15%)	20 (29.85%)	18 (64.29%)	10 (35.71%)	26 (65.0%)	14 (35.0%)	25 (55.56%)	20 (44.4%)
Imipenem	80 (93.02%)	6 (6.98%)	60 (89.55%)	7 (10.45%)	24 (85.71%)	4 (14.29%)	34 (85.0%)	6 (15.0%)	36 (80.0%)	9 (20.0%)
Meropenem	80 (93.02%)	6 (6.98%)	60 (89.55%)	7 (10.45%)	85.71 (24%)	4 (14.28%)	34 (85.0%)	6 (15.0%)	36 (80.0%)	9 (20.0%)

R=Resistant and S=Sensitive.

The percentage distribution of the CR-Gram-negative isolates is shown. In the current study, a chi-square test of independence was performed to determine whether the bacterial species and carbapenem resistance were significant; the results indicated the lack of a significant association (p-value>0.05) (Figure 2).

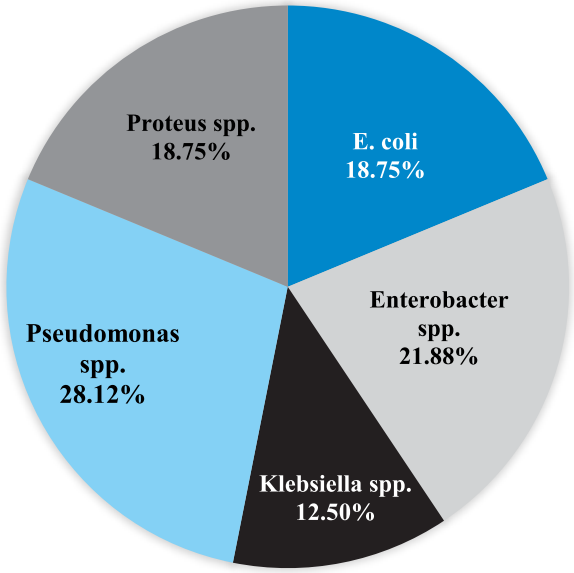

Figure 2: The Percentage Distribution of CR Gram-Negative Bacteria

DISCUSSION

Carbapenems are generally resistant to hydrolysis caused by clinically important β-lactamase enzymes, which are produced by Gram-negative bacteria. Therefore, the usage of carbapenems is commonly employed as a final resort antibiotic to treat infections that are brought about by the Gram-negative pathogens that produce β-lactamase. However, the acquisition of CR phenotype by the pathogens causes a challenging situation because of the lack of alternative treatment options for bacterial infections caused by CR Gram-negative pathogens. Consequently, CR has led to a dramatic increase in the death rate. The present study aimed to investigate carbapenem resistance developed by Gram-negative pathogens circulating in the study area. To realize the objective of the current study, firstly, Gram-negative pathogens were isolated among the patients who were suspected of bacterial infection. In our data, *E. coli* and the species of *Enterobacter, Klebsiella, Pseudomonas, Proteus,* and *Salmonella* were the most ubiquitous Gram-negative pathogens that cause different bacterial infections in humans in the study area. Our data has further highlighted that UTIs were more common than other bacterial infections. These findings are in agreement with the recent study, which has indicated an increased prevalence of UTIs across a wide range of bacterial infections worldwide [14]. Furthermore, *E. coli* remains the most prevalent causative agent of bacterial infections caused by Gram-negative bacteria [15]. Similarly, lactose-fermenting Gram-negative pathogens other than *E. coli* were also found to cause UTIs. Therefore, the development of antibiotic resistance in Gram-negative pathogens will contribute to the challenging public health concern. Furthermore, CR in *Proteus* spp. and *Pseudomonas* spp. presents a more concerning situation because the resistance mechanism causing the CR phenotype in these pathogens is comparatively less described. Moreover, AST results indicated that the majority of *E. coli* isolates have acquired resistance to ciprofloxacin and cephalosporin antibiotics, which are the common treatment options for *E. coli*-associated infections in humans. These findings are supported by a previous study that reported the higher frequency of ESBL producers among Gram-negative pathogenic bacteria [16]. Furthermore, the results suggested that *E. coli* isolates in this study exhibited high susceptibility to amikacin and carbapenem antibiotics, supported by the previous studies reporting minimal resistance against these antibiotics among clinical *E. coli* isolates [17]. However, the highest frequency of CR was observed in *Pseudomonas* spp. Overall, data show that CR is emerging in Gram-negative pathogens, which means that our last resort antibiotics are gradually failing to provide treatment for bacterial infections, thus limiting the antibiotic choices to treat infections associated with MDR-Gram-negative pathogens. Our data is consistent with recent reports from Pakistan showing an increasing trend

DOI: https://doi.org/10.54393/pjhs.v6i9.2080

of MDR in Gram-negative pathogens [18, 19]. Better monitoring and increased detectability of CR-Gram-negative pathogens underscore the fact that infections attributed to said pathogens are associated with serious morbidity and death [20]. In this regard, the current work explains the significance of researching the mechanisms of CR among Gram-negative pathogens found in the region of the current study. This could potentially facilitate the undetected spread of antibiotic-resistant pathogenic strains within our hospitals. Consequently, public health might experience a challenging situation sooner or later. Therefore, routine detection of these isolates should be prioritized. To achieve this, laboratories must possess the capacity to quickly identify these isolates, enabling the implementation of appropriate therapy to prevent antibiotic misuse or overuse. Furthermore, it is advisable to implement effective control measures to facilitate proper management and reduce the spread of these organisms.

CONCLUSIONS

It was concluded that resistance against last-resort antibiotics like carbapenems has emerged in Gram-negative pathogens. Consequently, it is crucial to exercise prudent use of carbapenems and administer them appropriately.

Authors Contribution

Conceptualization: MAI, SB, SAT
Methodology: MAI, SB, SAT, HD
Formal analysis: MAI, AAM, HD
Writing review and editing: MAI

All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript

Conflicts of Interest

All the authors declare no conflict of interest.

Source of Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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