

Hepatotoxic Effect of Combined Exposure of Arsenic and Microplastics on *Labeo Rohita*: An *In-Vivo* Experimental Study

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

ABSTRACT

Received on: April 20, 2025.

Accepted on: May 14, 2025.

Published on: May 15, 2025.

Keywords: Arsenic;
Hematology;
Inflammation;
Microplastics;
Oxidative stress.

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Background: Arsenic (As) is one of major environmental toxicants that adversely affect living organisms. Microplastics (MPs) are small plastic particles that are hazardous because they may be toxic or conjugate with some toxic elements.

Objective: The present research was conducted to assess whether the treatment of As with polystyrene microplastics (PS-MPs) enhance their toxic effects on the hepatic tissues of *Labeo rohita*.

Methods: The experiment was conducted at Government College University, Faisalabad, using 85 healthy *Labeo rohita* (average 8.91 cm, 7.3 g). Fish were acclimatized and randomly divided into four groups i.e., control group, As treatment group (4.05mgL^{-1}), PS-MPs treatment group (1mgL^{-1}), and As (4.05mgL^{-1}) plus PSMPs (1mgL^{-1}) combined treatment group for 21 days. Blood and liver samples were collected post-treatment for hematological, antioxidant, hepatic, and inflammatory analyses. Enzymatic activities and biomarkers were measured using standard biochemical methods.

Results: Exposure to As and PS-MPs, especially their combination, significantly reduced RBCs and hemoglobin, increased WBCs, and suppressed antioxidant enzyme activities (SOD, CAT, GST). Reactive oxygen species (ROS) and Thiobarbituric acid reactive substances (TBARS) levels were elevated, indicating oxidative stress. Liver enzymes (ALT, AST) and inflammatory cytokines (IL-1 β , IL-6) were significantly higher in the As+PS-MPs group compared to individual treatments or control.

Conclusion: Co-exposure to As and PS-MPs caused severe hematological, oxidative, hepatic, and inflammatory disturbances in *L. rohita*. Their combined toxicity was greater than individual exposures, indicating a synergistic effect that may lead to pronounced liver damage and physiological dysfunction.

Citation: Yasin S, Mustafa A, Tariq A, Hashim M, Sania, Shahzadi H, et al. Hepatotoxic effect of combined exposure of arsenic and microplastics on *Labeo rohita*: an *in-vivo* experimental study. Chron Biomed Sci. 2025;2(2):52. Available from: <https://cbsciences.us/index.php/cbs/article/view/52>.

Introduction

Environmental pollution, especially of water, is one of the key global problems. Not only is water pollution seriously impacting on the survival, development and reproduction of aquatic organisms but it also has an influence on the lives of human beings due to its ability of bioaccumulation [1].

Fish is one of the staple foods that is cost-effective, with high nutritional animal protein content [2]. Fish development, especially early development, is quite susceptible to water contamination. Aquatic environment contamination by heavy metals (e.g., lead (Pb), cadmium

(Cd), arsenic (As), mercury (Hg) etc.) significantly affect the development and physiology of fish, including the development of organs, spawning, and reproduction, leading to the reduced offspring quantity and quality [3]. Waterborne heavy metals intake by a fish lead to functional and structural disruptions in numerous tissues as well as organs [4].

Arsenic (As) is one of the key toxicants in the aquatic ecosystem that contaminates water [5]. As is a metalloid toxicant that is found extensively throughout the world in lakes, canals, rivers, ponds, and groundwater, as well as seawater due to the unregulated flow of industrial waste products and pesticides into the aquatic ecosystem [6]. The World Health Organization (WHO) has placed As among the leading chemicals posing risk to public health [7]. As concentrations have been recorded up to 800-2500ppm in numerous countries, i.e., Bangladesh and Chile [8].

High level of As exposure has been directly related to numerous diseases like lung and skin cancers along with cardiovascular diseases and liver disorders [9]. The adverse effects of As on fish growth, development, RNA/DNA ratio, histopathology, gene expression and mortality have been established through earlier studies [10]. This toxicant is capable of inducing biochemical as well as physiological alterations in the fish that produce harmful effects in the development as well as growth of fish [11]. Elevated concentrations of As alters the fish physiology and result in immune and reproductive disorder and even death [12].

Microplastics (MPs) are categorized into primary and secondary MPs depending on where they originate from and the manufacturing process [13]. The primary MPs are small pieces of plastic that are generally used in textiles, care products, and drugs. These particles enter aquatic environments primarily via runoff from the surface waters and discharge from treatment plants (WWTPs) [14]. The larger pieces of plastic degrade into secondary MPs. Some of the major sources of these large pieces are fishing nets, resin materials, domestic products, and disposable products [8][15]. The process of breakdown raises the overall environmental concentration of MPs, which is becoming a global concern.

MPs affect the health of humans because they have the ability to accumulate in seafood [16]. Aquatic organisms ingest MPs that bioaccumulate in certain organs, leading to oxidative stress, thus decreasing the growth and development of sea animals [13]. MPs have adverse effects on the health of living organisms and damages various organs, such as gut, liver, and kidney, testes [17][18][19][20]. When MPs are consumed by fishes, they are deposited in the organs and tissues of fishes, leading to different kinds of negative health effects [21]. MPs ingestion causes severe damage to the liver, including

enhanced accumulation of fats, inflammation, fibrosis, structural injury, and apoptosis [22].

Oxidative stress is an occurrence where the body's reactive oxygen species (ROS) are unbalanced compared to antioxidants scavenging them [23]. ROS are naturally occurring or induced molecules produced within the body through metabolic activities, but they can be elevated by external stimuli like exposure to pollutants or toxicants. Excess ROS can bring about harm to cells and tissues, resulting in inflammation as well as other negative health outcomes. Reducing the nutrition level of the fish as well as the fish population has an important influence on the diet of humans but also on tradition and economy globally [24].

As and MPs are among the most prevalent environmental pollutants. Research suggests that MPs may increase the bioaccumulation of other toxicants as they can attach with MPs. After attaching with MPs, these chemicals not only accumulate in the body, but their adverse effects are also increased significantly [25]. Therefore, the current research was conducted to assess the combined effect of MPs and As on the hepatic tissues of *Labeo rohita*. We hypothesized that MPs may enhance the toxicity of As and induce toxicity in the liver of *L. rohita*.

Methods

Experimental Animals

This *in-vivo* experimental study was executed in Government College University, Faisalabad, Pakistan. 85 healthy and uniform sized *L. rohita* were purchased from local hatchery and transported to the research site. The fish were 90 days old, and their average length and weight were 8.91 ± 1.32 cm and 7.3 ± 1.57 g, respectively. The fish was kept in glass aquariums and acclimatized in the laboratory environment for 90 days at $25 \pm 1^\circ\text{C}$ temperature, 6.0-7.5 mg L^{-1} dissolved oxygen (DO) and 7.5-8.5 pH. The fish were treated with 5g/L sodium chloride to lower the risk of parasites and infection. Fish were given commercial feed and the ethical guidelines of EU (2010/63/EU) were followed during the experiment.

Chemicals

Polystyrene microplastics (PS-MPs) and arsenic (As) were purchased from Macklin Biochemical Technology (Shanghai, China). All other chemicals used in the experiment were of analytical grade.

Group allocation

Fish were kept randomly assorted into 4 equal groups and each group contained 20 fish. The groups included, Control, As treated (4.05mgL^{-1}), PS-MPs treated (1mgL^{-1}) and As (4.05mgL^{-1})+PSMPs (1mgL^{-1}) co-treated group.

The experiment was conducted for 21 days and then the fish were anaesthetized and killed. Their blood was taken in blood vials and stored at -20°C for subsequent analysis. Moreover, their liver was taken out and placed in ice box and kept at -20°C for biochemical analysis.

Biochemical tests

Biochemical tests were conducted to measure the concentrations of blood parameters, antioxidant enzymes, inflammatory indices and liver function markers. DxH 900 Hematology Analyzer (Beckman Coulter, California, USA) was used to determine hematology parameters including red blood cells (RBCs) count, white blood cells (WBCs) count, and Hemoglobin concentrations. Hepatic tissues were homogenized and supernatant was collected and stored at -80°C for further analysis. The activities of antioxidant enzymes i.e., SOD, GST and CAT were estimated via the methodology of Winterbourn et al. [26], Habig et al. [27] and Aebi et al. [28], respectively. Moreover, the levels of Thiobarbituric acid reactive substances (TBARS) and ROS were estimated as per the techniques of Iqbal et al. [29] and Hayashi et al., [30], respectively. The activity of ALT, AST and ALP was estimated by using the kits provided by Bioactive Diagnostic (Bad Homburg, Germany). Moreover, the levels of inflammatory cytokines (IL-1β, and IL-6) were measured using ELISA kits (Cusabio, US).

Statistical analysis

The data were expressed as Mean±SEM. SPSS (v26) was used for the statistical analysis and GraphPad Prism 9 was used to generate graphs. One-way ANOVA followed by Tukey’s test was employed for the comparison of groups. P value less than 0.05 was considered significant.

Results

Effects of exposure of As and PS-MPs on hematological markers

The results in Table 1 showed that As and PS-MPs exposure significantly affected the concentration of hematological markers. RBCs and hemoglobin were significantly (p<0.05) reduced and WBCs were increased after the exposure to As, PS-MPs and As + PS-MPs co-exposure, as compared to control. Moreover, RBCs and hemoglobin exhibited non-significant differences among As and PS-MPs group. However, As + PS-MPs co-treated group was affected the most and showed lowest concentrations of RBCs and hemoglobin and high concentrations of WBCs, as compared to the other groups.

Table 1. The effect of As and PS-MPs on hematological markers.

	Control	As	PS-MPs	As + PS-MPs
RBC	3.31±0.07 ^a	2.79±0.06 ^b	2.68±0.09 ^b	1.94±0.10 ^c
WBC	12.31±0.19 ^c	18.93±0.38 ^b	17.56±0.48 ^b	24.62±0.87 ^a
Hb	9.13±0.22 ^a	7.83±0.21 ^b	8.01±0.31 ^b	5.28±0.14 ^c

RBC (10⁶/mm³), WBC (10³/mm³), Hemoglobin (g/dL). Values showing different superscripts are significantly (p<0.05) different from each other.

Effects of exposure of As and PS-MPs on antioxidant enzymes and oxidative stress markers

Figure 1 and 2 shows the effect of As and PS-MPs on antioxidant enzymes and oxidative stress markers. The graphs show that As, PS-MPs and As + PS-MPs exposure significantly (p<0.05) reduced the activities of SOD, CAT and GST while increasing the level of TBARS and ROS, as compared to the control group. However, the levels of these markers were approximately similar in the As and PS-MPs treated groups. Nevertheless, the group co-treated with As + PS-MPs showed the lowest activities of antioxidants and the highest levels of TBARS and ROS.

Effects of exposure of As and PS-MPs on hepatic serum and inflammatory markers

Figure 3 and 4 demonstrate that As and PS-MPs exhibited marked impact on the levels of hepatic serum and inflammatory markers. The levels of ALT, AST, IL-1β and IL-6 were significantly (p<0.05) increased following As, PS-MPs and As + PS-MPs treatment, as matched with the control. However, the differences in the levels of these indices were insignificant in the As and PS-MPs treated groups. However, As + PS-MPs co-exposed group exhibited the highest levels of these markers that were significantly (p<0.05) different from the other groups. This suggests that As + PS-MPs co-treated group was most the affected one.

Discussion

The level of As content of natural water bodies is largely dependent on geological composition, as well as the level of pollution [31]. The results of current experiment revealed that As and PS-MPs exposure reduced RBCs count and hemoglobin concentration along with increasing WBCs count. Pedlar et al., [32] reported that As exposure produced anemic conditions in the fish. It has been documented that, heavy metal exposure decreased the number of RBCs in fish [33].

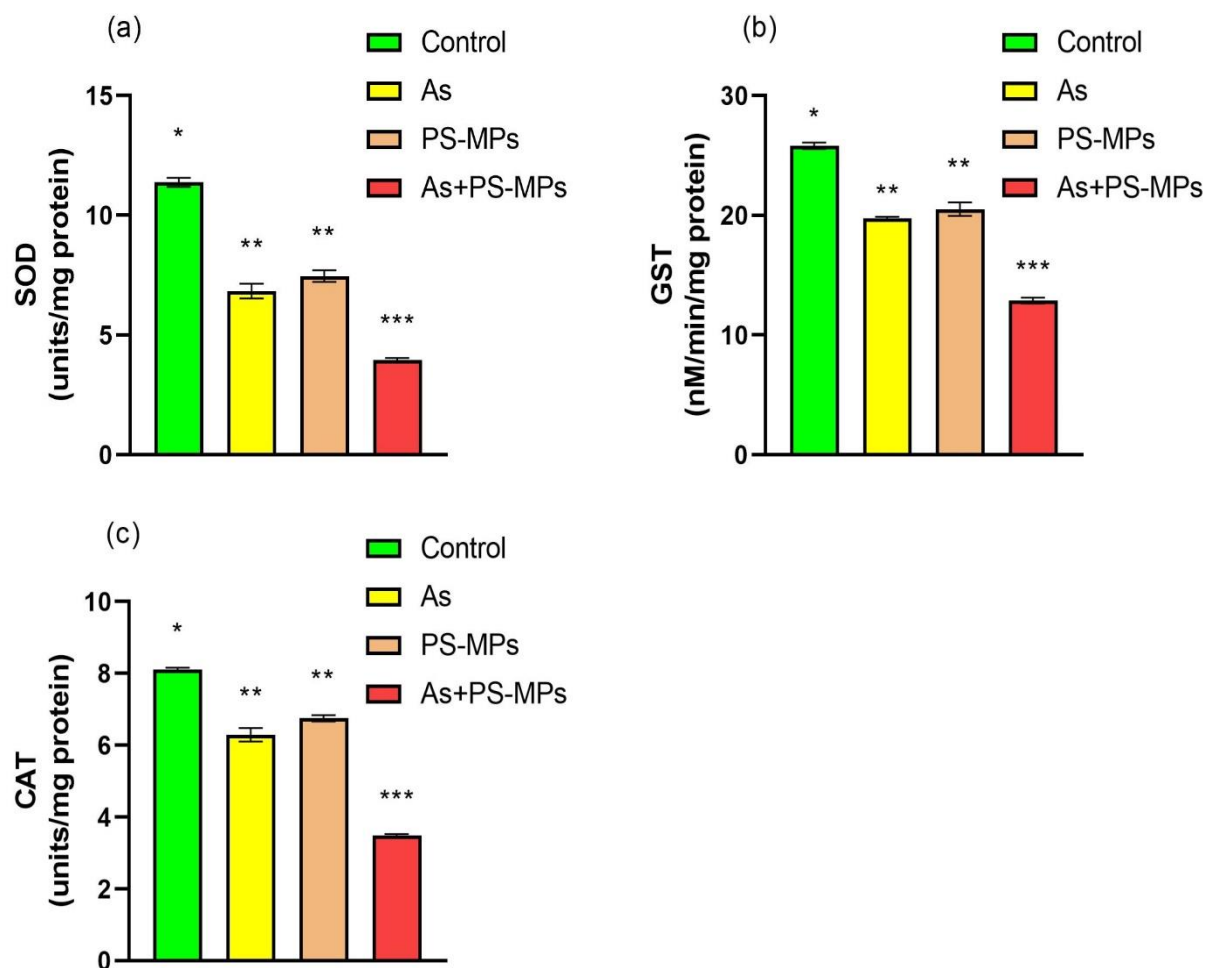


Figure 1: Effect of As and PS-MPs are shown on (a) SOD, (b) GST and (c) CAT. Different superscripts above the bar show that significant differences are present.

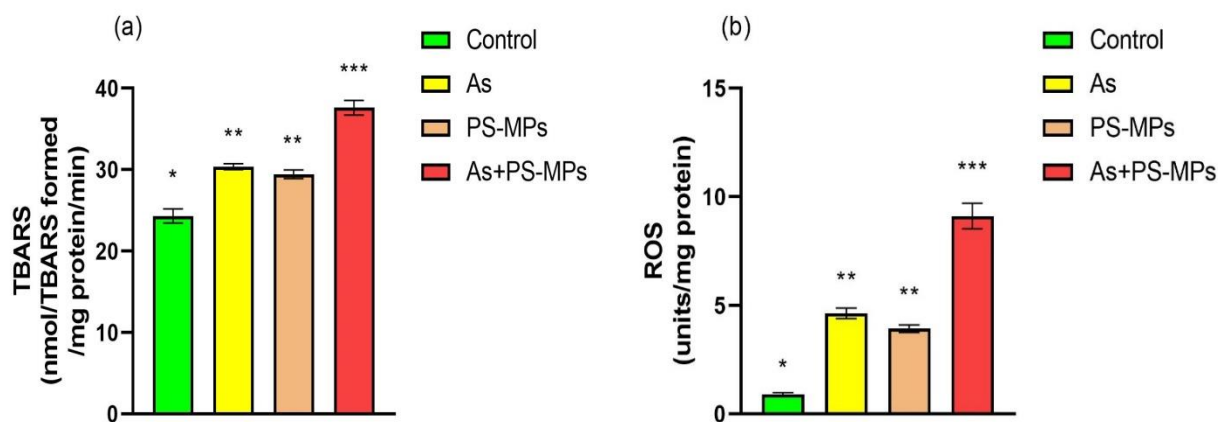


Figure 2: Effect of As and PS-MPs are shown on (a) TBARS, and (b) ROS. Different superscripts above the bar show that significant differences are present.

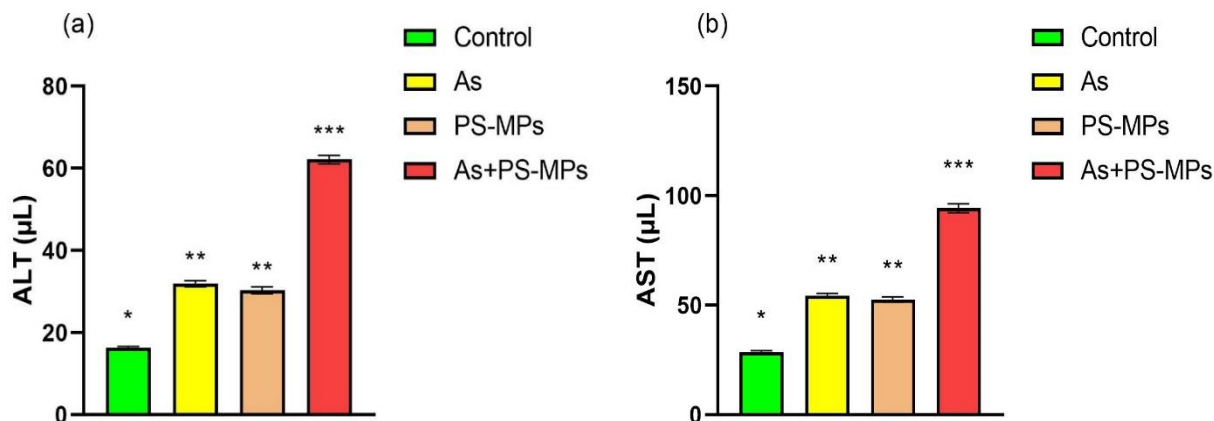


Figure 3: Effect of As and PS-MPs are shown on (a) ALT, and (b) ALP. Different superscripts above the bar show that significant differences are present.

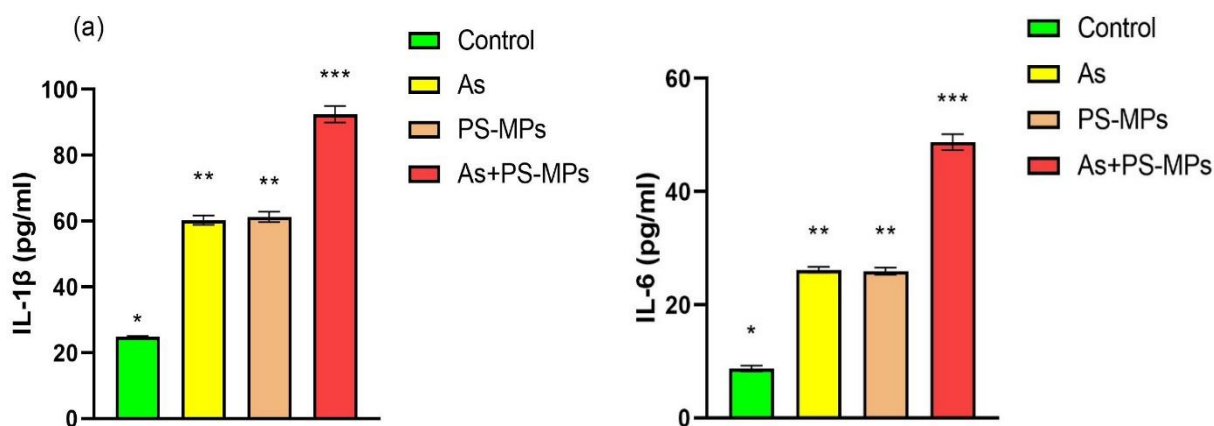


Figure 4: Effect of As and PS-MPs are shown on (a) IL-1β, and (b) IL-6. Different superscripts above the bar show that significant differences are present.

Moreover, As exposure also reduced the levels of hemoglobin and packed cell volume of *L. rohita* [34]. Leucocytes are engaged in the modulation of immunological function within most organisms and the WBC increase of stressed animals signifies a protective reaction towards stress [35]. The significantly decreased levels of RBCs, and hemoglobin and increased WBCs in As+PS-MPs co-treated group show that it deleteriously impacted the hematological parameters of fish.

Exposure to As and PS-MPs decreased the antioxidant activities and increased the levels of TBARS and ROS. SOD, and CAT are three key enzymes of first line defense mechanism that directly assists to degrade harmful ROS. Enzyme SOD acts through catalyzing the dismutation of toxic superoxide anion ($O_2^{\cdot-}$) to molecular oxygen (O_2) and less toxic hydrogen peroxide (H_2O_2). This H_2O_2 is removed subsequently by the combined action of CAT and glutathione peroxidase (GPx). These enzymes acts through catalyzing reduction of H_2O_2 to harmless products. GPx can also act against other peroxides [36]. GST is another

antioxidant enzyme which is involved in detoxification and neutralization of ROS [37]. Method of assessing the oxidative stress levels have been extensively used in studies on mechanisms of environmental toxicity as well as ecotoxicity towards living organisms under exposure of contaminants [38]. Oxidative stress could be quantified directly by the production of free radicals, indirectly by the defense against the reactive species by antioxidants and by determining the end-products of oxidative damage [39]. TBARS are the markers of lipid peroxidation and oxidative stress [40]. It was revealed that As and PS-MPs co-exposure produced enhanced toxic effects as evidenced by significantly compromised antioxidant levels and increased ROS and TBARS levels.

In the current research, exposure to As and PS-MPs increased the levels of hepatic function markers. Moreover, ALT, and AST enzymes are present in maximum number of fish organs including heart, skeletal muscle, kidney, pancreas, spleen, erythrocyte, brain, liver and gill [41]. Upon damage of these tissues or cells, particularly of liver through disease or injury, AST as well as ALT are released and subsequently invade into the blood stream [42]. The notably higher levels of liver markers in As + PS-MPs co-exposed group showed that they significantly impacted the hepatic function and damaged the liver.

Our results indicated that as a result of AS and PS-MPs exposure, there was a rise in pro-inflammatory cytokine levels (IL-1 β , and IL-6), which resulted in hepatic toxicity in *L. rohita*. Thus, upregulation of pro-inflammatory cytokines can be supplemented with a rise in anti-inflammatory cytokine levels to trigger the immune response as well as keep the microenvironment homeostatic [43]. IL-1 β is triggered in the condition of organ damage, pain and inflammation and it is a marker of inflammatory response [44]. Moreover, IL-6 is another marker of inflammation and its elevated levels are found in case of inflammation due to multiple reasons, including metabolic diseases or toxicity [45]. It was revealed that, PS-MPs and As co-exposure upsurged the levels of IL-1 β , and IL-6, showing marked inflammation in the hepatic tissues of *L. rohita*.

Conclusion: In conclusion, As and PS-MPs co-exposure significantly damaged the hepatic tissues of *L. rohita*. Their combined treatment enhanced the hazardous effects of As and lead to hematological impairments in the fish. Moreover, they also disturbed the activities of antioxidant enzymes and induced oxidative stress. Additionally, PS-MPs and As co-exposure increased the levels of hepatic function markers and inflammatory markers. Therefore, As and PS-MPs co-treatment may cause hepatic damage in *L.*

rohita due to their ability to cause oxidative stress and inflammation in the body of fish.

Authors’ contributions

ICMJE criteria	Details	Author(s)
1. Substantial contributions	Conception, OR	1,8
	Design of the work, OR	2,5,7
	Data acquisition, analysis, or interpretation	3,4,6
2. Drafting or reviewing	Draft the work, OR	1,2,5,6
	Review critically for important intellectual content	3,4,7,8
3. Final approval	Approve the version to be published	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8
4. Accountable	Agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8

Acknowledgement

None

Funding

This research study received no specific grant from any funding agency.

Availability of data and materials

The datasets used and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

The Ethics Review Committee of Government College University, Faisalabad approved the study.

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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