1 Title

2 Evaluation of the inhibitory effect of N-acetyl-L-cysteine on *Babesia* and *Theileria* parasites

3 **Running title**

4 In vitro effect of N-acetyl-L-cysteine on Babesia parasites

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23 Competing interests

24 The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

25 ABSTRACT

N-acetyl-L-cysteine is known to has antibacterial, antiviral, antimalarial, and antioxidant 26 activities. Therefore, the in vitro inhibitory effect of this hit was evaluated in the present study on 27 28 the growth of Babesia and Theileria parasites. The in vitro growth of Babesia bovis, Babesia bigemina, Babesia divergens, Theileria equi, and Babesia caballi that were tested was 29 significantly inhibited (P < 0.05) by micromolar concentrations of N-acetyl-L-cysteine. The 30 inhibitory effect of N-acetyl-L-cysteine was synergistically potentiated when used in 31 combination with diminazene aceturate on B. bovis and B. caballi cultures. These results indicate 32 that N-acetyl-L-cysteine might be used as drug for the treatment of babesiosis, especially when 33 used in combination with diminazene aceturate. 34

35



37 1. Introduction

Babesiosis is a tick-transmitted disease, causes great economic losses in the bovine and 38 equine industries worldwide. B. bovis and B. bigemina are the main etiological agents of bovine 39 babesiosis, which has considerable impact on cattle health and productivity (Uilenberg et al., 40 2006). Moreover, the significance of *Babesia divergens* is almost certainly underestimated for 41 livestock industry in Europe, with the possibility of human infection (Zintl et al., 2003). Equine 42 piroplasmosis caused by T. equi and B. caballi, is considered one of the most important 43 protozoan diseases affecting horses, mules, and donkeys (El-Saved et al., 2015). Fever, 44 45 hemolytic anemia, and hemoglobinuria are the principal clinical manifestations of such infection (Homer et al., 2000; Uilenberg et al., 2006). To date, the newly developed antibabesial drugs, 46 such as epoxomicin, ciprofloxacin, thiostrepton, rifampicin (AbouLaila et al., 2010, 2012), 47 pyronaridine tetraphosphate, luteolin, nimbolide, gedunin, and enoxacin (Rizk et al., 2015, 2016) 48 aren't available for use in the veterinary market. Moreover, some currently available antibabesial 49 drugs in the veterinary field either have toxic side effects, as imidocarb dipropionate, or have 50 developed a resistance to *Babesia* parasites from prolonged use, as in the case of diminazene 51 aceturate (Mosqueda et al., 2012). Therefore, developing new antibabesial drugs with low toxic 52 effects on animal and with no resistance from the parasite is urgently needed. To address this 53 concern, the antimalarial effect of N-acetyl-L-cysteine (NAC) has been reported (Quadros 54 Gomes et al., 2015). Additionally, many studies have validated the usage of N-acetyl-L-cysteine 55 56 in the treatment of respiratory diseases (Grandjean et al., 2000; Stey et al., 2000; Poole and Black, 2001) and acute renal diseases (Tepel et al., 2000). Also, this drug has antioxidant (Quadros 57

Gomes et al., 2015), antiviral (Geiler et al., 2010), and antibacterial effects (Buijtels and Petit,
2005). However, its potential as an antibabesial drug has not been examined. Therefore, the
antibabesial effect of N-acetyl-L-cysteine was evaluated in the current study against the in vitro
growth of bovine *Babesia* and equine *Babesia* and *Theileria* parasites.
2. Materials and methods
2.1. Chemical reagents

SYBR Green I (SGI) nucleic acid stain (Lonza, USA; 10,000x) was stored at -20°C and
thawed before use. A lysis buffer consisting of Tris (130 mM; pH 7.5), EDTA (10 mM), saponin
(0.016%; W/V), and TritonX-100 (1.6%; V/V) was prepared in advance and stored at 4°C.
Diminazene aceturate (Novartis, Japan) was used as a positive control drug. N-acetyl-Lcysteine (from Sigma-Aldrich, Japan) were prepared as 100 mM stock solutions and stored at 30° until use.

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72 2.2. In vitro cultivation of Babesia parasites

A Texas strain of *B. bovis* (Hines et al., 1992), an Argentina strain of *B. bigemina* (Hotzel et al., 1997), a German bovine strain of *B. divergens* (Lengauer et al., 2006), a US Department of Agriculture (USDA) strain of *B. caballi* (Avarzed et al., 1997), and *T. equi* (Bork et al., 2004) were cultivated in purified bovine or equine red blood cells (RBCs) using a microaerophilic stationary-phase culture system (Igarashi et al., 1998). Briefly, Medium 199 was used for *B. bovis*, *B. bigemina*, and *T. equi*, whereas RPMI 1640 medium was used for *B. divergens* and *B.* *caballi* (both from Sigma-Aldrich, Japan). Media were supplemented with 40% normal bovine
serum (for bovine *Babesia* isolates) or 40% normal horse serum (for equine *Babesia* and *Theileria* isolates), 60 U/ml penicillin G, 60 µg/ml streptomycin, and 0.15 µg/ml amphotericin B
(all three drugs from Sigma-Aldrich). Additionally, 13.6 µg of hypoxanthine (ICN Biomedicals,
Inc., USA) per ml was added to *T. equi* culture as a vital supplement. Cultures of parasitized
RBCs (pRBCs) were incubated at 37°C in an atmosphere of 5% CO₂, 5% O₂, and 90% N₂.

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86 2.3. In vitro Babesia fluorescence assay

87 The in vitro Babesia fluorescence assay (BFA) was performed as previously mentioned by Rizk et al. (2015 and 2016). B. bovis, B. bigemina, B. divergens, T. equi, and B. caballi 88 pRBCs were diluted with non-parasitized bovine or equine RBCs to start the assay at 1% 89 90 parasitemia. M199 medium was used for the culture of B. bovis, B. bigemina, and T. equi parasites; RPMI 1640 medium was used for *B. divergens* and *B. caballi*. The specific medium for 91 each parasite was used alone or mixed with the indicated concentrations: 10, 5, 1, 0.5, and 0.25 92 μ M for diminazene aceturate or 400, 100, 50, 10, and 0.5 μ M for N-acetyl-L-cysteine were used 93 for the cultivation of pRBCs in double 96-well plates (Nunc, Denmark) at 2.5 % hematocrit 94 (HCT) for *B. bovis* and *B. bigemina* parasites or 5 % HCT for other *Babesia* and *Theileria* parasites 95 for four days without daily replacement of the medium in triplicate wells for each concentration of 96 the drug. Non-parasitized bovine or equine RBCs were loaded into each well in triplicate and 97 used as blank controls. First culture plate was used for evaluation the antibabesial effect of NAC. 98 On the fourth day of culture, 100 μ l lysis buffer containing 2× SG I was added to each well on the 99

first plate that contain either 97.5 µl or 95 µl of the specific medium in the assay with 2.5% or 5% HCTs, respectively. Next, plates were incubated for 6 hours in a dark place at room temperature, and fluorescence values were determined using a fluorescence plate reader (Fluoroskan Ascent, Thermo Electron Informatics, Philadelphia, PA, USA) at 485 nm and 518 nm excitation and emission wavelengths. Gain values were set to 100. Each experiment was repeated three times.

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107 *2.4. Viability test*

108 The viability of bovine *Babesia* and equine *Babesia* and *Theileria* parasites was assessed on the second plate after four days of treatments, as previously described by Rizk et al. (2016). 109 On the fourth day of culture treatment, 0.75 µl of the control or drug-treated infected RBCs from 110 111 the culture with 2.5% HCT was mixed with 1.75 µl of parasite-free RBCs. While, for Babesia and Theileria culture with 5% HCT, 1.5 µl of each of the control and drug- treated (at the various 112 indicated concentrations) infected RBCs was mixed with 3.5 µl of parasite-free RBCs. Next, 113 pRBCs were suspended in fresh growth specific medium without drug supplementation. Then, 114 the plates were incubated at 37°C for the next four days without daily replacement of the 115 medium. Afterward, 100µl lysis buffer containing 2× SGI was added to each well on the plate and 116 fluorescence values were determined as previously mentioned. The amount of parasite DNA was 117 measured using a fluorescence spectrophotometer and used as an indicator of parasite 118 119 recrudescence. Each experiment was repeated three times.

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121 2.5. In vitro drug combination test

To examine the possible synergistic effect between N-acetyl-L-cysteine and diminazene 122 aceturate, different concentrations of both drugs were tested in the in vitro cultures of B. bovis 123 and *B. caballi* as bovine and equine *Babesia* models, respectively. Combinations of both drugs 124 (M1, M2, M3, and M4) were based on the calculated IC50 values obtained from the in vitro BFA 125 (Table 1) and prepared as previously described (Salama et al., 2014) with some modifications. 126 Non-treated cultures and cultures containing only diminazene aceturate IC50 of *B. bovis* and *B.* 127 caballi parasites were used as controls. Each drug combination was applied in triplicate in three 128 separate trials over a period of four days using BFA. On the fourth day of culture, the 129 130 fluorescence values were calculated after adding lysis buffer containing 2× SG I to each well on the 96-well plate. 131

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133 2.6. Statistical analysis

A one-way ANOVA test (GraphPad Prism version 5.0 for Windows; GraphPad Software, Inc., San Diego, CA, USA) was used for calculating the significant differences between examined groups. A P value < 0.05 was considered to be statistically significant. For a viability test, the regrowth of the parasite was determined based on the statistically significant differences between the drug-treated and the positive-control group (Rizk et al., 2016).

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142 **3. Results**

143 *3.1. The in vitro inhibitory effect and viability test*

The in vitro growth of *B. divergens* and *B. caballi* was significantly inhibited (P < 0.05) 144 by 10-µM and 0.5-µM of N-acetyl-L-cysteine, respectively. Meanwhile, 100-µM treatments of 145 N-acetyl-L-cysteine were sufficient for the significant inhibition (P < 0.05) of the in vitro growth 146 of B. bigemina. On the contrary, the in vitro growth of B. bovis and T. equi was significantly 147 inhibited (P < 0.05) by 400-µM treatments of N-acetyl-L-cysteine (Fig. 1). B. divergens and B. 148 caballi were the Babesia parasites most susceptible to the in vitro inhibition effect of N-acetyl-L-149 cysteine (Table 2). Subsequently, to determine the ability of N-acetyl-L-cysteine to suppress the 150 regrowth of Babesia and Theileria parasites after four days of in vitro treatment, viability test 151 was performed. There was a statistically significant inhibition (P < 0.05) in the regrowth of B. 152 153 bovis, B. bigemina, and T. equi parasites treated with 400 µM N-Acetyl-L-cysteine in comparison with non-treated parasites. Meanwhile, such inhibition in B. caballi or B. divergens parasites was 154 observed at 10 µM N-Acetyl-L-cysteine (Table 3). On contrary, treatment with the lowest 155 156 concentration of diminazene aceturate (0.25 µM) was sufficient for statistically significant inhibition (P < 0.05) the regrowth of bovine *Babesia* and equine *Babesia* and *Theileria* parasites 157 in comparison with non-treated parasites (Table 4). 158

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160 *3.2. Drug combination testing*

161 Combination therapy from N-acetyl-L-cysteine and diminazene aceturate enhanced the 162 inhibitory effect in *B. bovis* and *B. caballi* in vitro cultures even with combination M4, which 163 consisted of 1/2 the IC_{50s} of both drugs (Table 5). Furthermore, treatment of *B. caballi* parasites 164 with combined therapy significantly enhanced the inhibition of parasite growth as compared with 165 those observed with the diminazene aceturate IC₅₀ even at M3, which represents 1/2 and 3/4 the 166 IC_{50s} of N-acetyl-L-cysteine and diminazene aceturate, respectively (Table 5).

167

168 **4. Discussion**

N-acetyl cysteine is a potent antioxidant agent and a precursor of the hepatic synthesis of 169 170 reduced glutathione (GSH) (Quadros Gomes et al., 2015). Recently, the role of reactive oxygen 171 and nitrogen species (ROS and RNS) in the pathogenesis of parasitic infections has been 172 demonstrated (Oliveira et al., 2002; Bildik et al., 2004). Indeed, parasitic infestations are 173 accompanied by various oxidant-generating enzymes, which subsequently activate the 174 production of a variety of inflammatory cells to kill intra-cellular and extra-cellular parasites 175 (Kocyigit et al., 2005). These ROS and RNS are generated mainly to attack invading microorganisms by nitration, oxidation, and chlorination reactions (Ince et al., 2010). However, 176 177 excess amounts of such reactions can injure host cells and damage tissue (Kocyigit et al., 2005; 178 Ince et al., 2010). For Babesia, infection increases the production of free radicals and oxidative 179 stress markers, including malondialdehyde (MDA), protein carbonyl content (PCO), and the 180 plasma concentration of nitric oxide metabolites (NOx), with decreased total antioxidant activity (AOA) and reduced glutathione (GSH) (Küçükkurt et al., 2014). Therefore, this study evaluated 181 the inhibitory effect of NAC against the in vitro growth of Babesia and Theileria parasites. B. 182 divergens and B. caballi were the most sensitive to N-acetyl-L-cysteine, followed by B. bovis, B. 183

184 bigemina, and T. equi. The IC₅₀ values of N-acetyl-L-cysteine for Babesia and Theileria 185 parasites were higher than those of previously developed antibabesial drugs listed in Table 6. On the other hand, the IC₅₀ values of N-acetyl-L-cysteine for Babesia and Theileria parasites were 186 lower than those of allicin against bovine Babesia and equine Babesia /Theileria parasites 187 (Salama et al., 2014), metronidazole against B. gibsoni (Matsuu et al., 2008) and of clodinafop-188 propargyl against B. bovis and B. bigemina (Bork et al., 2003) as shown in Table 6. The IC₅₀ 189 values of N-acetyl-L-cysteine for B. divergens and B. caballi parasites were nearly similar to 190 those of clindamycin phosphate on *B. gibsoni* (Matsuu et al., 2008). Therefore, a viability test 191 was applied, and the results showed N-acetyl-L-cysteine's ability to suppress the regrowth of 192 Babesia and Theileria parasites at lower concentrations as compared with those observed with 193 194 allicin (Salama et al., 2014). Next, combination therapy involving the candidate with diminazene aceturate was performed on the in vitro growth of *B. bovis* and *B. caballi*. The results confirmed 195 the potential antibabesial effect of N-acetyl-L-cysteine, especially when administrated 196 197 simultaneously with diminazene aceturate. In the same way, the administration of high and multiple doses of commonly used antibabesial drugs is required to produce their maximal 198 inhibitory effects. Subsequently, drug toxicity and parasite resistance emerge, which suggests the 199 200 use of N-acetyl-L-cysteine in combination with low dose of diminazene aceturate for babesiosis treatment. To date, although the in vitro growth of *Babesia* and *Theileria* parasites was 201 moderately inhibited in the presence of a high concentration of N-acetyl-L-cysteine, its 202 inhibitory effects were enhanced when used in combination with diminazene aceturate. Taken 203 together, the antibabesial effect of this hit with its potential role as mucolytic (Poole and Black, 204

205 2001), nephroprotective (Tepel et al., 2000), antioxidant (Quadros Gomes et al., 2015), and 206 antibacterial agents (Buijtels and Petit, 2005) encourage us to recommend using this candidate to 207 treat babesiosis under field condition.

In conclusion, N-acetyl-L-cysteine showed potential antibabesial activity, particularly against *B. divergens* and *B. caballi* parasites, and its inhibitory effect was enhanced when combined with diminazene aceturate. These results indicate that N-acetyl-L-cysteine might be useful as a drug for treating babesiosis, particularly when used in combination with diminazene aceturate. However, other studies are needed to evaluate the inhibitory effect of N-acetyl-Lcysteine/diminazene aceturate combination therapy in mice infected by *B. microti*.

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- 311 Figure Legend
- Fig. 1. Correlation between relative fluorescence units (RFUs) and the log concentrations of N-acetyl-L-cysteine (nM) on bovine *Babesia* parasites on the fourth day of treatment. Each value represents the mean of triplicate wells \pm standard deviation (SD) after the subtraction of background fluorescence for non-parasitized RBCs. Statistically significant differences are indicated by asterisks (**P* < 0.05) between the drug-treated cultures and the control cultures.
- 317

Fig. 2. Correlation between relative fluorescence units (RFUs) and the log concentrations of N-acetyl-L-cysteine (nM) on equine *Babesia* and *Theileria* parasites on the fourth day of treatment. Each value represents the mean of triplicate wells ± standard deviation (SD) after the subtraction of background fluorescence for non-parasitized RBCs. Statistically significant differences are indicated by asterisks (*P < 0.05) between the drug-treated cultures and the control cultures.





Table 1. Concentrations of N-Acetyl-L-cysteine combined with diminazene

	IC	50
	N-Acetyl-L-cysteine	Diminazene aceturate
M1	3⁄4	3/4
M2	3⁄4	1/2
M3	1/2	3/4
M4	1/2	1/2

aceturate applied to the cultures of *B. bovis* and *B. caballi* parasites.

^a Combinations were based on the calculated IC_{50} values obtained from the *in vitro* fluorescence- based assay

	Table	2.	IC 50	values	of	N-Acetyl-L-cysteine	and	diminazene	aceturate	drugs
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Drug	IC ₅₀ values	(µM) ^a
	N-Acetyl-L-cysteine	Diminazene aceturate
B. bovis	332.11 ± 33.11	0.48 ± 0.09
B. bigemina	229.16 ± 37.51	0.21 ± 0.06
B. divergens	117.23 ± 8.04	0.14 ± 0.03
T. equi	349.05 ± 16.21	0.72 ± 0.05
B. caballi	114.53 ± 28.58	0.005 ± 0.0002

evaluated for Babesia and Theileria parasites

^a IC₅₀ values for each drug were calculated on the fourth day of the in vitro culture using *Babesia* fluorescence assay (*B*FA) in three separate experiments. Each drug concentration was made in triplicate in each experiment, and the final obtained IC₅₀s were the mean \pm SD of values obtained from three separate experiments.

Drug	Drug concentrations (µM) ^a								
	РС	400	100	50	10	0.5			
B. bovis	232.72 ± 96.60	$22.07 \pm 8.42*$	160.92 ± 43.71	165.32 ± 40.81	176.77 ± 15.85	186.57 ± 31.94			
B. bigemina	218.19 ± 68.59	$58.92 \pm 15.37*$	114.99 ± 26.25	175.74 ± 39.07	184.17 ± 15.22	182.09 ± 14.54			
B. divergens	367.17 ± 51.73	$34.51 \pm 12.55*$	$70.37 \pm 15.02*$	$91.50 \pm 14.63*$	85.12 ± 17.28 *	291.47 ± 36.18			
T. equi	301.70 ± 83.29	$72.58 \pm 26.98*$	202.55 ± 48.71	200.72 ± 20.68	210.15 ± 62.72	241.12 ± 57.87			
B. caballi	200.91 ± 28.74	$95.88 \pm 4.70 *$	$105.21 \pm 26.65*$	$114.66 \pm 23.04*$	$119.01 \pm 24.95*$	158.73 ± 28.02			

Table 3. Viability test results of N-Acetyl-L-cysteine drug evaluated for Babesia and Theileria parasites

^a Each value was calculated using fluorescence- based assay in three separate experiments. Each concentration of the drug was made in triplicate in each experiment, and the final obtained fluorescence value represents the mean and standard deviation (SD) of three separate experiments after subtraction of the background fluorescence for non-parasitized RBCs and multiplied by 100. * P < 0.05 statistically significant differences between the N-Acetyl-L-cysteine -treated group and control groups.

Drug	Drug concentrations (µM) ^a									
	PC	10	5	1	0.5	0.25				
B. bovis	133.82 ± 87.43	$0.36\pm0.02*$	$2.57\pm0.06*$	$1.44 \pm 0.98*$	$9.29 \pm 4.30*$	$11.44 \pm 3.07*$				
B. bigemina	137.10 ± 56.87	$1.25 \pm 0.57*$	$10.78\pm6.45*$	$17.87 \pm 8.09*$	$20.62 \pm 4.85*$	$24.91 \pm 6.88*$				
B. divergens	394.61 ± 30.47	$14.30\pm0.76^*$	$25.99 \pm 2.95*$	$30.60 \pm 5.14*$	$41.34 \pm 12.70*$	$43.35 \pm 3.75*$				
T. equi	337.11 ± 90.17	$6.59 \pm 1.82*$	$10.60 \pm 3.21*$	$15.71 \pm 5.03*$	$53.23 \pm 13.82*$	$52.96 \pm 9.82*$				
B. caballi	151.03 ± 48.19	$0.59\pm0.08*$	$9.19 \pm 3.74*$	$12.18 \pm 2.15*$	$17.31 \pm 3.60*$	$23.93 \pm 8.87*$				

Table 4. Viability test results of diminazene aceturate drug evaluated for Babesia and Theileria parasites

^a Each value was calculated using fluorescence- based assay in three separate experiments. Each concentration of the drug was made in triplicate in each experiment, and the final obtained fluorescence value represents the mean and standard deviation (SD) of three separate experiments after subtraction of the background fluorescence for non-parasitized RBCs and multiplied by 100. * P < 0.05 statistically significant differences between the diminazene aceturate -treated group and control groups.

Table 5. Growth inhibition effect of diminazene aceturate and N-Acetyl-Lcysteine combinations on *B. bovis* and *B. caballi* parasites on the fourth day of treatment

Crown -	Fluorescence value (mean ± SD) ^a				
Group	B. bovis	B. caballi			
Control	234.55 ± 19.77	259.43 ± 21.89			
Diminazene aceturate IC 50	111.62 ± 7.45	143.88 ± 12.45			
M1	$111.87 \pm 30.10*$	$159.15 \pm 16.02*$			
M2	$152.52 \pm 36.55*$	$155.28 \pm 14.95*$			
M3	$91.27 \pm 28.77*$	$113.53 \pm 11.10 **$			
M4	$122.74 \pm 33.94*$	$125.68 \pm 11.55*$			

^a Each value was calculated using fluorescence- based assay in three separate experiments. Each concentration of the drug combination was made in triplicate in each experiment, and the final obtained fluorescence value represents the mean and standard deviation (SD) of three separate experiments after subtraction of the background fluorescence for non-parasitized RBCs and multiplied by 100. * P < 0.05 statistically significant differences between the combined-drug-treated group and control groups. ** P < 0.05 statistically significant differences between the combined-drug-treated group and control group and both the diminazene aceturate and control groups.

Antibabesial drug	IC 50 (μM)						References
	Parasite						-
	B. bovis B. bigemina T. equi B. caballi B. divergens B. gibsoni				-		
Pyronaridine tetraphosphate	4.31	0.70	2.14	0.44	4.25	ND	(Rizk et al., 2015, 2016)
Luteolin	5.20	0.30	2.40	0.96	2.50	ND	(Rizk et al., 2015, 2016)
Nimbolide	6.17	2.96	6.71	0.99	ND	ND	(Rizk et al., 2015)
Gedunin	17.86	19.95	12.40	11.18	ND	ND	(Rizk et al., 2015)
Enoxacin	38.04	18.00	24.70	12.63	ND	ND	(Rizk et al., 2015)
MMV396693	0.40	0.059	0.057	0.048	ND	ND	(Van Voorhis et al., 2016)
MMV666093	0.05	0.083	0.21	0.13	ND	ND	(Van Voorhis et al., 2016)
MMV006706	0.75	0.10	0.06	0.38	ND	ND	(Van Voorhis et al., 2016)
MMV073843	0.06	0.06	0.63	0.04	ND	ND	(Van Voorhis et al., 2016)
MMV665875	0.07	0.08	0.10	0.48	ND	ND	(Van Voorhis et al., 2016)
Clofazimine	4.50	3.00	0.29	4.30	ND	ND	(Tuvshintulga et al., 2016)
Fusidic acid	144.80	17.30	56.25	33.30	ND	ND	(Salama et al., 2013)
Epoxomicin	0.021	0.004	0.021	0.009	ND	ND	(AbouLaila et al., 2010)
Ciprofloxacin	8.30	15.80	2.50	2.70	ND	ND	(AbouLaila et al., 2012)
Thiostrepton	11.50	8.20	6.40	2.70	ND	ND	(AbouLaila et al., 2012)
Rifampicin	12.00	8.30	4.10	4.70	ND	ND	(AbouLaila et al., 2012)
Allicin	818	675	742	470	ND	ND	(Salama et al., 2014)
Metronidazole	ND	ND	ND	ND	ND	>1000	(Matsuu et al., 2008)
Clodinafop-propargyl	265	390	ND	ND	ND	ND	(Bork et al., 2003)
				(Matsuu et al., 2008;			
Clindamycin phosphate	126.6	206	27.2	4.7	ND	108.83	AbouLaila et al., 2012)

 Table 6. IC₅₀ values of previously developed antibabesial drugs

ND, not detected