Advancing clinical trials of herbal medicine for obesity: A scoping review of methodologies

Lau Mei Siu1, Chan Janice Sue Wen1, Mustapha Kamal Siti Khadijah1, Muhamad Rosli Siti Hajar1, Wan Seman Wan Nurul Nadia1, Ali Nurul Hidayah1, Tan Terence Yew Chin1, Lim Xin Yi1, Krishnan Puspawathy1, Ahmad Ida Farah1, Borhan Marisa Khatijah2, Syed Mohamad Ami Fazlin1

1Herbal Medicine Research Centre, Institute for Medical Research, National Institutes for Medical Research, Setia Alam, Selangor, 2Medical Department, Hospital Sungai Buloh, Selangor

ABSTRACT

Introduction: Global prevalence of obesity is high, estimated at 14% in 2019. Obesity clinical trials are often met with challenges in integrating lifestyle modifications and assessing long-term health outcomes. Conventional medicine-centric guidelines for clinical trials may overlook specific details essential for herbal interventions. This scoping review aimed to collate literature regarding anti-obesity clinical trials with herbal medicines (HM), map the methodology landscape and identify research gaps specifically for these trials.

Methods: Systematic searches with predetermined keywords were conducted on MEDLINE, CENTRAL, and Embase databases. Eligible randomized controlled trials (RCTs) targeting all age groups with obesity, using HM interventions were included.

Results: This review included 99 RCTs (participants aged 18-75). The most common HM interventions were single herbs (n=55) and herbal mixtures (n=40). These interventions were often combined with lifestyle modifications (n=58) and among those, few studies were conducted for more than 6 months (n=4) and included dietitian counselling as an integral component of the program. Three reported good treatment compliance rates of >85%, while about two-thirds had a dropout rate of <20%. Dropout rates were found to be not consistent across studies. Key outcomes assessed were a mix of biomedical and behavioural measurements. Short-term study designs were favoured, incorporating lifestyle advice without strict enforcement. Investigational product quality is an essential factor that must be considered for HM trials.

Conclusion: This review highlights the multidimensional nature of herbal RCTs for obesity, emphasizing the importance of a multidisciplinary approach that integrates treatment interventions, lifestyle modifications, and expert guidance for effective management. Keywords: Scoping review, obesity, overweight, methodology, herbal medicine.