Prevalence of genetic diversity of Listeria monocytogenes in the tonsils of pigs

Autio, T.
International Association for Food Protection
2004


http://hdl.handle.net/1975/772

Downloaded from Helda, University of Helsinki institutional repository.
This is an electronic reprint of the original article.
This reprint may differ from the original in pagination and typographic detail.
Please cite the original version.
Research Note

Prevalence and Genetic Diversity of Listeria monocytogenes in the Tonsils of Pigs

TIINA AUTIO,† ANNUKKA MARKKULA,∗ SANNA HELLSTRÖM, TAINA NISKANEN, JANNE LUNDÉN, AND HANNU KORKEALA

Department of Food and Environmental Hygiene, Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, P.O. Box 57, FIN-00014 Helsinki University, Finland

MS 03-281: Received 30 June 2003/Accepted 6 November 2003

ABSTRACT

This study was set up to establish the prevalence of Listeria monocytogenes in the tonsils of sows and fattening pigs from five Finnish slaughterhouses and to evaluate the genetic similarity of L. monocytogenes strains isolated from the tonsils. A total of 271 pig tonsils (132 tonsils from fattening pigs and 139 from sows) from five different slaughterhouses in various parts of Finland were studied from June 1999 to March 2000. Overall, 14 and 4% of pig tonsils harbored L. monocytogenes and Listeria innocua, respectively. The prevalence of L. monocytogenes in tonsils of fattening pigs (22%) was significantly higher than in sows (6%). The isolates (n = 38) recovered from tonsils showed a wide genetic diversity by means of 24 different pulsed-field gel electrophoresis (PFGE) types presented by the strains. Moreover, in numerical analyses of restriction patterns, no association was found between the clustering of strains and the slaughterhouses, and strains showing a similar PFGE type were recovered from pigs of different slaughterhouses. The high prevalence of L. monocytogenes showing various PFGE types in the tonsils of pigs could indicate a potential source of contamination of pluck sets, carcasses, and the slaughterhouse environment and of subsequent processing steps.

Listeria monocytogenes is a foodborne pathogen that causes the disease listeriosis in a well-defined risk population. Various food products have been associated with both epidemics and sporadic cases of listeriosis. Three outbreaks—in 1992, 1993, and 2000—have been linked to consumption of the pork products rillettes and jellied tongue (8, 11, 12). Therefore, prevention of pork product contamination with L. monocytogenes is of major importance.

L. monocytogenes has been recovered from slaughterhouse environments, carcasses, tonsils, and feces of pigs (7, 10, 14, 17, 18). It has been suggested that Listeria detected in carcasses might have a nonfaecal origin and that equipment could be a possible contamination source (15). Moreover, in low-capacity slaughterhouses, where the maximum amount of slaughtering is 100 pigs per week and 5,000 pigs per year, with each pig weighing over 100 kg (9), it has been suggested that L. monocytogenes originating from pork tonsil, even though rejected after inspection, and tongue might contaminate the slaughtering equipment. Equipment could in turn spread the pathogen to carcasses (4), and in this way, carcasses can introduce the tonsil-originating pathogen into pork product processing plants. Noting this, there is high value in the study of the role and genetic diversity of L. monocytogenes in the tonsils of pigs.

In this study, the prevalence of L. monocytogenes in the tonsils of the sows and fattening pigs from five Finnish slaughterhouses was established. The genetic similarity levels of L. monocytogenes strains isolated from tonsils was determined by the characterization of the strains with pulsed-field gel electrophoresis (PFGE) typing.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Samples. A total of 271 pig tonsils, including 132 tonsils from fattening pigs and 139 from sows, from five different slaughterhouses in various parts of Finland were studied from June 1999 to March 2000. In 2002, the average size of pig herds was about 140 fattening pigs, each weighing over 50 kg. The average age of slaughtered fattening pigs was 6 months, and weight is 100 to 125 kg. In slaughterhouses involved in this study, line speeds varied from 80 to 180 fattening pigs per hour and from 400 to 800 per working day. A maximum of 300 sows were slaughtered in every slaughterhouse every month. The number of different herds slaughtered each day varied from 5 to 50. The tonsils were cut out, frozen immediately after evisceration, and examined within 2 months after removal. A 10-g sample of tonsil tissue without surface sterilization was homogenized in 90 ml of half-Fraser broth (Oxoid, Basingstoke, UK) for 1 min in a stomacher blender.

Isolation of L. monocytogenes. The isolation of L. monocytogenes was carried out according to the ISO method (1) with the use of PALCAM (Oxoid, Oxford, Oxoid), and LMBA (trypticase soy agar base [Difco, Sparks, Md.], 10 g/liter lithium chloride, 10 mg/liter polymyxine B sulfate [Sigma Chemicals, St. Louis, Mo.], 20 mg/liter ceftazidime [Abtek Biologicals Ltd., Liverpool, UK], 5% sterile defibrinated sheep blood) selective plates.

∗ Author for correspondence. Tel: 358-9-19149754; Fax: 358-9-19149718; E-mail: annukka.markkula@helsinki.fi.
† Present address: National Veterinary and Food Research Institute (EELA), Kuopio department, P.O. Box 92, FIN-70701 Kuopio, Finland.
TABLE 1. The prevalence of L. monocytogenes and L. innocua in tonsils of fattening pigs and sows in five slaughterhouses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Slaughterhouse</th>
<th>Fattening pigs</th>
<th>Sows</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>L. monocytogenes</td>
<td>L. innocua</td>
<td>L. monocytogenes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>7/29 (24)</td>
<td>0/29 (0)</td>
<td>0/36 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>11/29 (38)</td>
<td>1/29 (3)</td>
<td>4/31 (13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>2/30 (7)</td>
<td>3/30 (10)</td>
<td>0/30 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>1/14 (7)</td>
<td>0/14 (0)</td>
<td>3/11 (27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>8/30 (27)</td>
<td>1/30 (3)</td>
<td>2/31 (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>29/132 (22)</td>
<td>5/132 (4)</td>
<td>9/139 (6)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In situ DNA isolation and PFGE. In situ DNA isolation and PFGE was performed as described by Autio et al. (2, 3) with the use of Pronase (Roche Diagnostics GmbH, Mannheim, Germany) instead of proteinase K.

PFGE pattern analysis. Asc I macrorestriction patterns were analyzed by BioNumerics software (Applied Maths, Sint-Martens-Platen, Kortrijk, Belgium). The similarities among restriction patterns on the basis of band position was expressed as a Dice coefficient correlation. The position tolerance was optimal when set at 1.1% for the total length of the pattern with no increase. The clustering and construction of the dendrogram was performed by the unweighted pair group method with the use of arithmetic averages (UPGMA).

Statistical analysis. For the statistical analysis, the chi-square test was used.

RESULTS

The Listeria species recovered from pig tonsils were L. monocytogenes and L. innocua. Overall, 14 and 4% of pig tonsils harbored L. monocytogenes and L. innocua, respectively (Table 1). The prevalence of L. monocytogenes in the tonsils of fattening pigs (22%) was significantly higher than in sows (6%) ($P < 0.001$). The overall prevalences of L. monocytogenes among pigs from different slaughterhouses varied from 3 to 25%.

The characterization of 38 L. monocytogenes isolates yielded 24 PFGE types (Table 2 and Fig. 1). The different PFGE types in slaughterhouses number two to eight. Strains showing PFGE types 6, 8, and 13 were found in pigs of different slaughterhouses. In slaughterhouse B, strains possessing PFGE types 6 and 9 were found both from fattening pigs and from sows. The numerical analysis of macrorestriction patterns is shown in Figure 1.

In the isolation of L. monocytogenes, three selective agar plates were used (Table 3). Of the 38 positive samples, 37 were detected both by LMBA and PALCAM, but only 31 positive samples were recovered with Oxford. All L. monocytogenes-positive samples were detected after both the primary and secondary enrichment steps was reduced when both LMBA and PALCAM agars were used.

DISCUSSION

Both fattening pigs and sows in Finland harbor L. monocytogenes in their tonsils after slaughter. A total of 14% of the pigs were found to be tonsillar carriers, which is in agreement with our earlier study showing a 12% carrier rate in pigs at low-capacity slaughterhouses (4). An even higher proportion (45%) of tonsillar carriers was reported by Bunčić (7) in pigs in Yugoslavia, whereas Kanuganti et al. (13) showed a 7% carrier rate in pigs in the United States.

In our study, fattening pigs (22%) were shown to have a significantly higher carrier rate than sows (6%). To our knowledge, this is the first time that differences in L. monocytogenes tonsillar carrier rates in different age groups of pigs have been reported. It is possible that sows are naturally more resistant to the bacteria than young animals. Differences were also found in the carrier rate among different slaughterhouses, which would be a result of geographical differences in the prevalence of infected herds. Additionally, differences in the carrier rate, both in different age groups and among different slaughterhouses, might be affected by the husbandry and feeding practices associated with pigs (7, 20). Skovgaard and Norrung (20) demonstrated that the prevalence of feces containing L. monocytogenes in specific pathogen-free herds might be low compared with

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Slaughterhouse</th>
<th>No. of PFGE types</th>
<th>No. of isolates</th>
<th>PFGE types</th>
<th>Sows</th>
<th>No. of isolates</th>
<th>PFGE types</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 24</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6, 9 (2, 10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 24</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6, 9 (2, 10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6 (6), 9, 11, 12, 13, 14</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5 (2, 8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13, 15</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>18, 19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6, 17 (2), 20 (2), 21, 22, 27</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18, 19</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>29</td>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*When more than one isolate belonged to one PFGE type, the number of isolates is presented in parentheses.*
others. It has also been shown that the type of feed significantly affects the contamination rates in piglets by *L. monocytogenes* (5). Belzeil et al. (5) noticed that both wet feed pens and wet feed harbored *L. monocytogenes*, whereas dry feed pens and dry feed were free of the bacteria. Further research is needed to establish the factors effecting the healthy hosting of *L. monocytogenes* in pigs.

In the isolation of *L. monocytogenes*, the use of PALCAM or LMBA plates resulted in the detection of 37 positive samples out of 38, whereas only 31 positive samples were recovered with Oxford. All *L. monocytogenes*-positive samples were detected after both the primary and secondary enrichment steps when both LMBA and PALCAM agar were used. Our finding is in agreement with the results of those who recommend the use of multiple plating media (19, 21).

A total of 24 PFGE types were presented by 38 *L. monocytogenes* strains. The number of PFGE types is great when compared, for example, with the number of PFGE

---

**TABLE 3.** *Listeria monocytogenes*-positive samples recovered from different selective plates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>PALCAM</th>
<th>Oxford</th>
<th>LMBA</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary enrichment</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary enrichment</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>37</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
types presented by strains of *Yersinia pseudotuberculosis*, another foodborne pathogen isolated from the tonsils of pigs (16). These data suggest that the *L. monocytogenes* strains recovered from the tonsils of pigs show wide diversity by the number of different macrorestriction patterns obtained. In the numerical analysis of the restriction patterns, the strains divided into two known genomic groups (6). Moreover, no association was found between the clustering of strains and the slaughterhouses, and strains showing a similar PFGE type were recovered from pigs of different slaughterhouses. These results indicate that diverse *L. monocytogenes* strains are entering the slaughterhouse along with the pigs. Also, findings suggest that the diversity of *L. monocytogenes* strains in the housing environments of pigs is wide. These facts must be considered when contamination studies are performed.

A high prevalence of *L. monocytogenes* showing various PFGE types in the tonsils of pigs is a potential source of *Listeria* contamination in the slaughterhouse. In particular, when pig tonsils are removed together with the pluck set, the pathogen can spread from the tonsils to the pluck set and carcass. Moreover, *L. monocytogenes* originating from the tonsils can either directly or indirectly contaminate slaughterhouse equipment in abattoirs and consequently cause carcass contamination. Further research is needed to compare the strains isolated from the tonsils of pigs with the strains recovered from meat products in order to evaluate the role of tonsils as an initial source of pork product contamination.

**REFERENCES**


