





Virulence - associated genes in Avian Pathogenic Escherichia coli of turkey

Elena Circella¹, Donato Pennelli², Silvia Tagliabue², Raffaella Ceruti³, Davide Giovanardi⁴, Antonio Camarda¹

¹Dipartimento di Sanità Pubblica e Zootecnia. Università di Bari, Italy

²Istituto Zooprofilattico Sperimentale della Lombardia e dell'Emilia Romagna. Brescia, Italy

³Gruppo Amadori. Cesena, Italy

⁴Laboratorio Tre Valli. San Martino Buon Albergo (VR), Italy

Corresponding author: Dr. Elena Circella. Dipartimento di Sanità Pubblica e Zootecnia. Facoltà di Medicina Veterinaria. Str. Prov.le per Casamassima km 3, 70010 Valenzano (Bari), Italy - Tel. +39 080 4679910 - Fax: +39 080 4679910 - Email:e.circella@veterinaria.uniba.it

ABSTRACT

50 Escherichia coli (APEC-Avian Pathogenic Escherichia coli) strains and 15 E. coli (AFEC-Avian Faecal Escherichia coli) from turkeys affected by colibacillosis and from healthy turkeys were tested for the presence of eight different virulence-associated genes. Besides, APEC were serotyped. O78 has been the most detected serotyped. The presence of the tested virulence genes was prevalently related to the APEC isolates. With reference to serogroup, all the tested O78 resulted iss and irp2 positive. Besides, tsh e cva/cvi were respectively present in 88.9 and 83.3% of O78. Nevertheless, the finding of a not typeable strains equipped with all the eight tested virulence genes among the APEC isolates suggest the importance of a careful and complete characterisation of the isolate to evaluate the real potential pathogenic attitude of the bacterium.

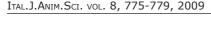
Key words: Escherichia coli, Turkeys, Serotyping, Virulence genes.

RIASSUNTO

GENI DI VIRULENZA IN AVIAN PATHOGENIC ESCHERICHIA COLI NEL TACCHINO

In questa ricerca, 50 stipiti di E. coli isolati da tacchini affetti da colibacillosi (APEC) e 15 E. coli provenienti dal contenuto intestinale di soggetti sani (AFEC) sono stati caratterizzati e sottoposti alla ricerca di 8 differenti geni di virulenza. Gli stipiti APEC sono inoltre stati sierotipizzati al fine di evidenziare i sierotipi più frequentemente associati alla malattia. Tra questi, O78 è risultato il sierotipo di gran lunga prevalente. I geni di patogenicità ricercati sono risultati fortemente associati agli stipiti patogeni rispetto a E. coli di origine fecale. Considerando il sierotipo di appartenenza, la totalità di O78 testati presentava i geni legati ai sistemi di acquisizione del ferro ed una elevata percentuale risultava tsh e cva/cvi positiva, confermando il potenziale ruolo di tali geni nella patogenicità di tali sierotipi. Il riscontro tuttavia di uno stipite non tipizzabile sierologicamente e munito di tutti gli 8 geni di virulenza ricercati pone l'attenzione sull'importanza di effettuare una completa e accurata caratterizzazione dell'isolato per poterne valutare l'effettivo potenziale patogeno.

Parole chiave: Escherichia coli, Tacchini, Sierotipizzazione, Geni di virulenza.







Introduction

Colibacillosis infections are cause of important economic losses in turkey industry. These infections are often characterised by respiratory lesions, in particular airsacculitis associated with pericarditis, perihepatitis and peritonitis. Environmental factors or viral infections may influence the outcome of colibacillosis. Nevertheless, avian pathogenic *Escherichia coli (APEC)* may play a role as single aetiological agent. Moreover, *E. coli* superinfection may increase the pathogenic attitude of mycoplasma or *Chlamydophila psittaci* in turkey (Van Loock *et al.*, 2006).

The presence of virulence-associated genes seems to be linked to the pathogenic attitude of the bacteria. Nevertheless, this association is still uncertain and their exact role is yet unclear.

In this study, the presence of eight different virulence-associated genes has been investigated in *E. coli* from turkeys affected by colibacillosis. To this aim, 50 *E. coli* (*APEC-Avian Pathogenic Escherichia coli*) were collected, serotyped and tested for the presence of the putative virulence genes. Besides, 15 *E. coli* (*AFEC-Avian Faecal Escherichia coli*) were collected from the gut of healthy turkeys to compare and better interpret the obtained results.

Material and methods

50 Escherichia coli (APEC-Avian Pathogenic Escherichia coli) strains and 15 E. coli (AFEC-Avian Faecal Escherichia coli) were respectively collected from turkeys affected by colibacillosis and from healthy turkeys coming from different intensive farms of Italy. Each strain was cultured on MacConkey agar (OXOID) and incubated at 37°C for 24h. Every compatible colony was isolated on Trypticase Soy Agar (TSA) (OXOID) and

incubated at 37°C for 24h. The biochemical identification was carried out using the API-20E method (Bio-MERIEUX). All *E. coli* strains were stored at -20°C in Brucella broth (OXOID) with glycerine (20%) before the execution of the characterisation test.

Serotyping

The *APEC isolates* were serotyped. Serotyping was carried out using monospecific antisera towards 40 different somatic O antigens (O1, O2, O4, O6, O8, O9, O10, O11, O15, O18, O20, O21, O22, O26, O45, O49, O64, O68, O73, O75, O78, O83, O85, O86, O88, O92, O101, O103, O109, O111, O115, O128, O132, O138, O139, O141, O147, O149, O153, O157) in U bottom polystyrene microtitre plates incubated for 24 hours at 37°C in a moist box (Blanco and Blanco, 1993).

Genotyping

The genetic characterisation was performed on *APEC* and *AFEC* isolates using a Multiplex-PCR (Polymerase Chain Reaction) according to Ewers *et al.* (2005). *E. coli* were tested for the presence of enteroaggregative toxin (*astA*), increased serum survival protein (*iss*), iron-repressible protein (*irp2*), aerobactin (*iucD*), P-fimbriae (papC), temperature-sensitive hemagglutinin (*tsh*), vacuolating autotransporter toxin (*vat*), colicin V plasmid operon genes (*cva/cvi*).

Results and discussion

A relevant number among the APEC isolates were typeable using somatic O antisera. 14 different serogroups were identified (Table 1). In order of frequency, the most detected serogroups associated to the disease have been O78 (36%), O8, O73 (6%), O2, O9, O20, O139, O141 (4%).

The detection of the virulence-associated genes was most related to the *APEC*





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Table 1. Serogroups distribution among *E. coli* from colibacillosis affected turkeys.

		- / -
Not typeable	10	(20)
Typeable	40a	(80) ^b
01	1	(2)
02	2	(4)
04	1	(2)
08	3	(6)
09	2	(4)
011	1	(2)
015	1	(2)
020	2	(4)
021	1	(2)
073	3	(6)
078	18	(36)
086	1	(2)
0139	2	(4)
0141	2	(4)

^aNumber of isolates, ^b% of detection.

isolates, in particular for *iss*, *iucD*, *cva/cvi* (Table 2). Moreover, *irp2*, *tsh* and *vat* have been exclusively found in the septicaemic strains.

The greater association observed of the putative virulence genes to the septicaemic isolates may increase the potential pathogenic attitude of the bacteria by different mechanisms. For example, irp2 and iucD

encode for two different systems of iron acquisition as yersiniabactin and aerobactin, respectively, and may increase the survival of the bacterium in the host in conditions of poor density of iron. tsh, which encodes for a temperature sensitive hemagglutinin, seems to be important in the early stages of the colonisation of the respiratory tract and for the invasion of the bloodstream (Ewers et al., 2003). vat encodes for a vacuolating autotransporter toxin while papC for the Pfimbriae which allows E. coli to adhere to the tissue and protect the bacterium from the inflammation cells activity .cva/cvi is indicative of the presence of col V-plasmid which may serve as vector of several putative virulence genes as tsh, iss, genes encoding for iron acquisition systems (Johnson et al., 2006) or antimicrobial resistance factors.

astA, encoding for an enteroaggregative stable toxin, is considered a virulence factor associated with diarrhoea in human and animals but was also expressed by several non-pathogenic *E. coli* in humans and animals. In our study, astA1 was most detected among the strains from gut of healthy turkeys in respect to the APEC isolates (Table 2).

In this research, the distribution of the virulence-associated genes in *E. coli* O78, the serogroup more frequently detected among the APEC isolates, has been of relevance. *iss* and *irp2* have been found in all O78 and *tsh* and *cva/cvi* were detected in the most of O78 (Table 3). These genes, and

Table 2. Virulence-associated genes in *E. coli* from colibacillosis affected and healthy turkeys.

	astA1	iss	irp2	iucD	рарС	tsh	Vat	Cva/cvi
APEC (no. 50)	11a (22)b	42 (84)	27 (54)	39 (78)	8 (16)	22 (44)	8 (16)	29 (58)
AFEC (no. 15)	4 (26.7)	4 (26.7)	0 (0)	5 (33.3)	1 (6.7)	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (6.7)

^aNumber of isolates, ^b% of detection.





Table 3. Virulence-associated genes in E. coli serogroups from turkeys affected by

	astA1	iss	irp2	iucD	рарС	tsh	Vat	Cva/cvi
078 (no. 18)	2ª (11.1)b	18 (100)	11 (61.1)	18 (100)	2 (11.1)	16 (88.9)	0 (0)	15 (83.3)
Other serogroups (no.22)	6 (27.3)	17 (77.3)	13 (59.1)	14 (63.6)	3 (13.6)	4 (18.2)	6 (27.3)	11 (50)
Not typeable (no. 10)	3 (30)	7 (70)	3 (30)	7 (70)	3 (30)	2 (20)	2 (20)	3 (30)

^aNumber of isolates, ^b% of detection.

colibacillosis.

in particular tsh and cva/cvi, were identified less frequently in *E. coli* of other serogroups or not-typeable strains. These findings confirm the importance of the presence of these genes to increase the pathogenic attitude of the bacterium. In fact, O78 notoriously represent the most associated serogroup to the disease in poultry (Barnes et al., 2003).

vat was never found in O78 (Table 3). In previous observations, this gene was absent or sporadically detected in O78 while frequently associated with O2 (Vandekerchove et al., 2005). Likewise, the O2 strains detected in this study were *vat*-positive. At present, we are not able to explain the reason of this apparent correlation between vat and O2 serogroup. Finally, we point out the finding of a not-typeble strain among the APEC isolates equipped with all the eight tested virulence genes.

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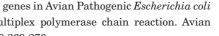
Conclusions

In this study, a relevant correlation between the virulence-associated genes investigated and the *E. coli* strains from affected turkeys was observed. The virulence genes more frequently detected among the APEC strains have been iss, iucD, cva/cvi. Iss and *iucD* were present in all tested O78, while tsh and cva/cvi were of high relevance in O78 in respect to other serogroups. These observation are, in our opinion, of relevance and prove the importance of these virulence-associated genes, considering that O78 has been the most detected serogroup among the APEC isolates and is notoriously related to the disease. The finding of a nottypeable APEC strain equipped with all the eight tested genes confirms the importance of characterisation in depth to define the potential pathogenic attitude of the isolate.

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