

Detection of PRRS virus in housefly (*Musca domestica*) in a pig farm in southeastern Mexico

Detección del virus de PRRS en la mosca doméstica (*Musca domestica*) en una granja porcina en el sureste de México

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this study was to detect the presence of the porcine respiratory and reproductive syndrome virus in housefly (*Musca domestica*) in a pig farm. To know the porcine respiratory and reproductive syndrome virus circulation in the farm, 1277 blood samples, and 26 samples of oral fluids from pigs housed in pens were taken to detect the nucleic acid of the porcine respiratory and reproductive syndrome virus using real time RT-PCR test. Three-hundred flies were collected, using an entomological net, and 50 samples of 6 flies each were formed. Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics. From the sera tested, 95.74% (1224/1277) were positive in the ELISA test. The nucleic acid of the porcine respiratory and reproductive syndrome virus was detected in 34.6% (9/26) of the oral fluids and in 4% (2/50) of the fly samples analyzed. The real time-PCR test allowed detecting of the porcine respiratory and reproductive syndrome virus in houseflies. Therefore, further virus sequencing studies are needed to better understand the role of flies in the porcine respiratory and reproductive syndrome transmission.

Key words: Houseflies; PRRSV; real-time-PCR; swine

RESUMEN

El objetivo de este estudio fue detectar la presencia del virus del síndrome respiratorio y reproductivo porcino en moscas domésticas (*Musca domestica*) en una granja comercial de cerdos. Para conocer la circulación del virus del síndrome respiratorio y reproductivo porcino en la granja, se tomaron muestras de sangre de 1277 y 26 muestras de fluidos orales de cerdos alojados en corrales para detectar el ácido nucleico del virus del síndrome respiratorio y reproductivo porcino utilizando la prueba de RT-PCR en tiempo real. Se recolectaron 300 moscas, utilizando una red entomológica, y se formaron 50 grupos de 6 moscas cada una. Los datos se analizaron mediante estadísticas descriptivas. De los sueros analizados el 95,74% (1224/1277) fueron positivos en la prueba ELISA. El ácido nucleico del virus del síndrome respiratorio y reproductivo porcino se detectó en el 34,6% (9/26) de los fluidos orales y en el 4% (2/50) de las muestras de moscas analizadas. La prueba de PCR en tiempo real permitió detectar el virus del síndrome respiratorio y reproductivo porcino en moscas domésticas. En conclusión, más estudios de secuenciación del virus son necesarios para comprender mejor la función de las moscas en la transmisión del síndrome respiratorio y reproductivo porcino.

Palabras clave: Mosca domestica; PRRSV; PCR tiempo real, cerdos

INTRODUCTION

Porcine reproductive and respiratory syndrome (PRRS) virus is a pathogen of wide world distribution, with negative effects for the swine industry [1]. The cost caused on pigs by the PRRS virus in the USA is around \$664 million per year [2, 3]. The PRRS virus, a single-stranded, positive-sense, enveloped RNA belongs to the family Arteriviridae, genus *Arterivirus* and order Nidovirales [4].

PRRS virus classified into two major genotypes, European or type 1 (PRRSV-1), Lelystad strain, and the North American or type 2 (PRRSV-2), isolated ATCC-VR-2332. Both genotypes share 63.4% identity at genomic level [5, 6, 7]. There are different control strategies for PRRS virus, such as vaccination, use of inoculates, natural infection and the use of gilts grown in the own farm [8, 9, 10]. Transmission commonly occurs by direct contact between pigs because of high population density or by exposition to contaminated body fluids contaminated blood with PRRS virus, semen, secretions and saliva [4], contaminated needles, fomites (coveralls and boots) and vectors such as Diptera [11].

Houseflies (*Musca domestica*) are insects that belong to the Diptera order, which are considered potential agents in the transmission of PRRS disease [12]. Flies are common insects in pig farms, where they reproduce and feed animal wastes, transmitting bacteria, viruses or parasites when they defecate or regurgitate the food, infecting other animals and humans with acquired pathogens [13]. Previous studies have demonstrated that houseflies could serve as vectors for PRRS virus; however, experimental studies indicate that this virus seems not to replicate in flies, which means that they could not act as a biological vector [11, 14, 15, 16]. However, experimental studies have limitations, such as laboratory conditions and the size of fly populations. The goal of the present study was to detect, through RT-PCR test, the presence of PRRS virus in houseflies in a commercial pig farm.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study design, site and animals

A transversal descriptive study was carried out in a population of houseflies, in a replacement gilts barn, where gilts were distributed in 72 pens with approximately 11 animals per pen.

The study was conducted in a pig (*Sus scrofa domesticus*) farm located in Yucatán, Mexico. The climate of the region is tropical subhumid with average temperature, rainfall, and relative humidity of 26 °C, 1200 mm, and 78 %, respectively [17]. The farm was a continuous flow and complete cycle farm with approximately 5500 sows, PRRS positive stable, according to the classification of Holtkamp *et al.* [18]. To control PRRS effects on animals, the farm produced its own gilt replacement, which are taken to an acclimatization area. The farm did not applied vaccines against PRRS. Serum samples were taken from gilts before they were introduced to the breeding herd, at approximately 30 weeks of age. Only gilts positive to the ELISA test were kept.

Biological samples from pigs and houseflies

To detect PRRS virus antibodies in pigs in a commercial farm, 1227 gilt serum samples were taken. The samples were analyzed with a commercial kit (IDEXX HerdCheck PRRS X3, USA), and they were considered seropositive when the S/P ratio was ≥ 0.4 , according to the manufacturer instructions. The ELISA test was carried out at the clinical laboratory of the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine and Animal Science of the *Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán*.

Oral fluid samples from 26 pens, out of a total of 72 pens, were collected by allowing pigs to interact with 20 cm cotton ropes for 20 min, using the protocol described by Prickett *et al.* [19, 20]. Thereafter, the oral fluids were deposited in collection tubes, stored in coolers, and then sent to the laboratory for analysis.

Housefly samplings were carried out using an entomological net [21, 22] throughout the length of the barn. Three-hundred houseflies were collected, placed in a mesh cage, and stored at -80°C in an ultra-low temperature freezer (VWR model 5703, USA). Then pools of six flies were deposited in sterile Eppendorf tubes for a total of 50 samples [11, 23]. Pools were pressed in the wall of the tube, added 500 μL of phosphate buffered saline (PBS) and centrifuge at 450 G per 5 min, to obtain the supernatant [11].

To detect PRRS virus nucleic acid, all oral fluid samples and housefly homogenates were tested by real-time RT-PCR (VetMAX™ PRRSVNA & EU Controls of Thermo Fisher Scientific, USA) following the manufacturer instructions and using the sequence of the ORF7 gene. A PCR reaction was considered positive if the cycle threshold (Ct) level was obtained at <37 cycles. The quality control of the real-time RT-PCR process included negative (nuclease-free water) and positive (PRRSV RNA) controls, provided by the kit (VetMAX™ PRRSV NA & EU Controls, Thermo Fisher Scientific, USA).

Statistical analysis

Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics through the Excel software, and the kappa test to compare the diagnostic assays (oral fluid vs serology).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A total of 1,277 serum samples from gilts distributed across six groups were analyzed. The ELISA test indicated that 1239 serum (97,02%) were seropositive. In the six groups, percentages of seropositive cases were 98,90% (179/181), 99,45% (181/182), 98,74% (236/239), 99,30% (283/285), 100% (194/194) and 84,69% (166/196), respectively.

This is the first study that detects the PRRS virus in housefly under field conditions in Mexico. In addition, farm PRRS virus seropositive was confirmed by the presence of specific antibodies in replacement gilts. The high prevalence ($>95\%$) of antibodies indicates the titers circulation of the virus and the development of antibodies in an endemically infected farms [24, 25]. The highest percentage of positive animals could be because the gilts were sampled 19 weeks after staying in the same barn with pigs (lots) of different ages, ranging from

6 to 20 weeks of age. However, that does not mean that pigs were shedding the PRRS virus. The short duration of passive immunity in piglets could make them susceptible to infection or natural reinfection. Geldhof *et al.* [26] found antibodies against PRRS virus in piglets, transmitted through colostrum and still detectable in serum up to 5 weeks of age. The gilts, in this study, were sampled at 200 days (d) of age, which agree with Flores-Mendoza and Hernández [27] results, who mention that the antibodies produced by the infection with PRRS virus can remain for long periods but with low titers.

The high percentage of seropositive gilts here found shows the presence of infection or natural reinfection. IgG antibodies could be found between 7- and 15-d post infection, remaining constant for months and declining between 135- and 300-d post infection [9, 28, 29].

PRRS virus nucleic acid was detected by RT-PCR in 9 of the 26 oral fluid samples (34,6%). In fly homogenates, 2 of 50 samples were detected positive (4%). Diagnostic results from fly homogenates and oral fluid are shown in FIG. 1. The positive control amplified in cycle 29.

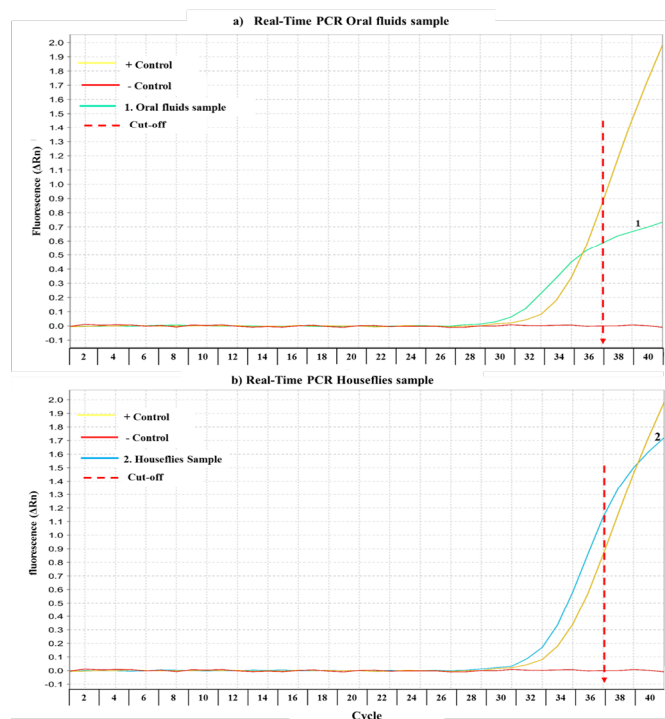


FIGURE 1. Amplification of the ORF 7 gene by real-time PCR of oral fluids (a) from pigs and housefly homogenates (b). The cut point is represented by a dotted red line. The positive and negative controls of the amplified ones are represented in each figure (yellow and red lines respectively). Number 1 corresponds to a sample of oral fluid from pigs, and number 2 corresponds to a homogenate sample of houseflies. The "X" axis corresponds to the amplification cycles, and the "Y" axis is the fluorescence production

The 34,6% (9/26) positive samples detected in oral fluid by real-time PCR test, agree with De Regge and Cay [30] who found that oral fluid samples would be PCR positive when more than 30% of individual pigs are serum positive. On other hand, Olsen *et al.* [31] reported 90% positive animals to PRRS virus using the

PCR test in oral fluid, when 36% of the pigs were vaccinated. Prickett *et al.* [19] tested samples of oral fluid and serum for the detection of PRRS virus with pigs of 3, 5, 8, 12 and 16 weeks of age, that were infected with the PRRS virus and obtained a 77% concordance between oral fluid and serum samples.

An explanation of the low detection of the virus in oral fluid, is that probably few animals were shedding the virus in the saliva, as the transmission of PRRS virus in the animals here studied occurs naturally, causing the moments of contact to be different. This generates a dilution with negative saliva, whereby oral fluid samples could be below the detection limit of the test. Seddon *et al.* [32] reported that 80% of the pigs in a corral chew the rope within 30 min of its placement. The real-time PCR test in oral fluid has a high sensitivity when 30% of the pigs are individually shedding the virus [30].

Several authors mention that when the viral load is very low, the samples deteriorate during the conservation period, which could result in a false negative case, which was not very likely in this study, since the cold chain was taken care of [33, 34].

Houseflies are insects that belong to the order Diptera, considered potential agents in the transmission of diseases [12]. They are common in pig farms, where they develop and feed on animal waste and this is where these insects can acquire bacteria, viruses or parasites, and disseminate by flies hairs, legs, body and proboscis (by ingesting liquids from animal tissues, including blood, serum, saliva, mucus and tear secretions). These insects, by defecating and regurgitating [16, 35] can infect animals and humans with the acquired agents [13]. Previous studies have shown that flies act as vectors for pathogen transmission [36] as well as PRRS virus [11].

Previous studies reported that the houseflies are a mechanical vector of PRRS virus [37], which can transport the pathogen through its morphological structure [38].

PRRS virus do not require many viral particles to cause an infection, according to Yoon [39] who found that transmission only requires ≤ 20 virions.

However, here, the nucleic acid of PRRS virus was detected in only 4% (2/50) of the samples, which could be due to the handling of the samples, because the frozen of the extracted RNA could have suffered some type of degradation [40]. However, based on the sample size, the amount of viruses here found could be important in the dissemination, as few viral particles are required to establish an infection [41]. A possible explanation for the absence of PRRS virus in fly homogenates could be due to a low number of viremic pigs or low loads of the virus shedding by infected pigs [42]; and to the amount of virus in the flies that could be detected [37]. Schurrer *et al.* [16] propose that virus retention in flies appears to be related to the initial viral load after ingestion and ambient temperature.

Otake *et al.* [11] using real-time PCR observed that the PRRS virus could remain viable in the intestinal tract of the houseflies up to 12 h after feeding fluids from an infected pig, but only for a short period on outer surface of the flies. On the other hand, Schurrer *et al.* [16] found that the PRRS virus could remain 48 h in the fly after its exposure to the virus; however, the prevalence of positive flies and the viral load decreased with time. The ability of the PRRS virus to remain within the body

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of a housefly suggests that it could protect the virus against certain environmental factors that affect the survival of this microorganism outside the host, such as ultraviolet light and drying factors [43]. However, Gröbel *et al.* [44] mention that the midgut of the housefly has a pH of 3,1, which could be another explanation for the low number of positive samples, since the PRRS virus remains viable at a pH between 6,0 and 7,65 [45], thus decreasing the possibility of finding the virus in the macerates. There are studies that mention that the flight capacity of housefly could increase the risk of the transmission of disease. Schurrer *et al.* [15] reported that the housefly flight exceeds 5 km, with a distance dispersion of up to 33 km. It is very relevant to mention that the farm here studied was in a high pig density area with a large population of pigs within 10 km. In the present study, the season effect was not evaluated; however, it could be a risk factor, since there are reports of increments in the number of outbreaks, with low incidence during spring and summer, and high during the fall and winter seasons [46].

CONCLUSION

The porcine reproductive and respiratory syndrome virus was detected in domestic flies using the real-time PCR test; however, more epidemiological and molecular studies are needed before being able to reach a conclusion regarding the importance of domestic flies in the transmission of the porcine reproductive and respiratory syndrome virus among and between pig farms.

Conflict of interest statement

The authors proclaim that there is no conflict of interest with regard the publication of this manuscript.

Ethics approval

Animal ethic committee approval was not necessary because oral fluid collection was not invasive, not painful and pigs were not forced to interact. Blood samples included in the study were obtained from routine veterinary work in the farm.

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