



Prevalence of Food-Borne *Toxoplasma gondii* in Free-Ranging Chickens Sold in Tunis, Tunisia

S. Boughattas^{1,2}, A. Bouratbine^{2*}

1. Department of Environmental and Biological Chemistry, College of Agriculture, Life and Environmental Sciences, Chungbuk National University, Cheongju, Chungbuk, South Korea (Republic of)

2. Department of Parasitology, Pasteur Institute, Tunis, Tunisia

Article type

Original article

Abstract

Keywords

Chickens
Toxoplasma
Serology
Biological Assay
Polymerase Chain Reaction

Received: 3 May 2014

Revised: 29 May 2014

Accepted: 24 June 2014

Background: *Toxoplasma gondii*, as an important food-borne protozoan parasite, occurs widely in humans and animals including domestic poultry throughout the world. The goal of this survey was to determine prevalence rate of *T. gondii* in free-ranging chickens sold in Tunis, Tunisia.

Methods: In the present study, the prevalence of *T. gondii* in 40 free-range chickens (*Gallus domesticus*) marketed in Tunis, Tunisia was assessed. Blood and brain samples from each chicken were examined for *T. gondii* infection using the Modified Agglutination Test (MAT) followed by mouse bioassay and Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR).

Results: Antibodies against *T. gondii* were found in all 40 samples (100%) with the titer of 10 in 14 chickens, 20 in 9 chickens, 40 in 3 chickens, 80 in 5 chickens, 160 in 6 chickens, 320 in 2 chickens and ≥ 640 in one chicken. By the end of the bioassay, we detected *Toxoplasma* DNA in 15 mouse tissues (37.5%). *T. gondii* was detected from chicken tissues with different antibody titers.

Conclusion: Results of this study indicated very high environmental contamination with *T. gondii* oocysts around Tunis city. The high seroprevalence refers to the public health importance of chickens as source of zoonotic toxoplasmosis to human which suggests that consumption of poultry meat in Tunis city may pose a potential threat to pregnant women health and should be given attention.

Introduction

Toxoplasma gondii occurs widely in humans and animals, including domestic poultry throughout the world. The distribution of *T. gondii* is believed to be best detected using its levels of distribution in free-range chickens (Dubey, 2009; Dubey et al., 2005; Montoya and Liesenfeld, 2004; Tenter et al., 2000). Moreover, according to some traditional and ethnic believes, the meat of free-ranging chickens is one of the most three meat advised to pregnant women for healthier babies. Congenital toxoplasmosis occurs after acquiring infection of *Toxoplasma gondii* during pregnancy (Cook et al., 2000; Jones et al., 2001; Wallon et al., 2004). If the in-

fection is transmitted to the fetus, variable clinical consequences can be observed from the benign forms to the drastic and fatal issues (Dubey, 2010; Dubey and Jones, 2008; Weiss and Dubey, 2009).

Infection is mainly observed via food-borne way by the consumption of unwashed fruits/vegetables, unclear water and/or undercooked/raw meat (Aspinall et al., 2002; Boughattas and Salehi, 2014; Villena et al., 2012). The severity of the infecting parasitic strain can be identified partially within mouse bioassay, strains can be regrouped mainly to fatal, chronic or sub-acute ones.

In our previous works, we reported that congenital toxoplasmosis can be a serious issue in some geographical

*Corresponding author

E-mail: aidabouratbine@pasteur.rns.tn

areas with the identification of mixed strains of the parasite (Boughattas et al., 2010), known to lead to severe clinical manifestations (Boughattas et al., 2011a). We tried to identify the food-borne source of contamination by analyzing the prevalence among the three most consumed hosts including horse, sheep and free ranging-chicken. The analysis within horses (Boughattas et al., 2011b) showed a prevalence of 2.4%, in the same city from where clinical cases were reported, assuming that horse meat wasn't a major contamination source. When we investigated the analysis of sheep meat (Boughattas et al., 2014), high seroprevalence was reported within animals (about 50%). The molecular characterization of the isolates suggested the involvement of the sheep meat as an important risk factor. However, the final conclusion of the major source contamination by *Toxoplasma* when consuming meat cannot be retained without the analysis of the free-ranging chickens. Moreover, the prevalence of *Toxoplasma gondii* in free-ranging chickens (*Gallus domesticus*) is a good indicator of the prevalence of *T. gondii* oocysts in the soil because chickens feed from the ground.

Therefore, we carried out this study to analyze the prevalence rate of *T. gondii* in free-ranging chickens sold in Tunis, Tunisia.

Materials and methods

Sampling

Forty free-range chickens (*Gallus domesticus*) marketed in Tunis, Tunisia was obtained. In the laboratory, brain and blood were sampled after euthanasia and then slaughtering of chickens.

Serology analysis

Blood samples were centrifuged at 800 xg for 10 min and sera were stored at -20 °C until use. Antibodies against *T. gondii* were determined using Modified Agglutination Test (MAT). Briefly, *Toxoplasma* antigen was made by growing the parasite in mice intra-peritoneal followed by treatment with trypsin and fixation with formaldehyde. The whole antigen was used to coat 96 well U bottomed polystyrene plates.

The sera were screened first at two dilutions 1:10 and 1:100 in 2-mercaptoethanol/Phosphate Buffer Saline (PBS). The plates were shaken for 1 min and then covered and incubated at room temperature for at least 5 h free of any vibrations.

The test was considered positive when a layer of agglutinated antigen/serum was formed covering at least 50% of the bottom of the wells at one dilution at least. In negative wells, antigen precipitation is observed. The positive samples were then titrated by two fold dilution.

Tissues treatment

Tissues were collected in individual plastic bags and kept refrigerated (4 °C). When the corresponding blood sample showed positivity by serological analysis, brains were subjected to enzymatic treatment for the mouse bioassay. Briefly, tissue was ground in 2 volumes (w/v) of 0.9% NaCl and digested 2:3 (v/v) with 2.5% fresh trypsin solution in PBS. Lysis was achieved after incubation during 1 h at 37 °C. The product was then filtrated twice, pelleted by cold centrifugation 10 min at 800 xg, washed and resuspended in saline containing PenicillinG/Streptomycin.

Two milliliters of each pellet were then inoculated intraperitoneally to 3 or 4 *Toxoplasma*-free mice. Mice were followed for 40 days, then sacrificed by cervical dislocation and their tissues were sampled and analyzed for any eventual *Toxoplasma* infection.

Mice tissues were subjected to DNA extraction protocol as described by Boughattas et al. (2014). *T. gondii* diagnostic was carried out using B1-PCR by the B22/B23 primers. Amplification program started with preliminary steps of 2 min at 50 °C then, 6 min at 95 °C and followed by 40 cycles of 30 s at 94 °C, 30 s at 57 °C and 1 min at 72 °C adding 1 s/cycle. The final elongation step was achieved after 7 min at 72 °C. Reaction products were resolved on 3% agarose gel.

Results

Antibodies against *T. gondii* were found in all 40 samples (100%) with the titer of 10 in 14 chickens, 20 in 9 chickens, 40 in 3 chickens, 80 in 5 chickens, 160 in 6 chickens, 320 in 2 chickens and ≥ 640 in one chicken. High titers were then retained in 35% of the samples.

By the end of the mouse bioassay, we detected *Toxoplasma* DNA in 15 mouse tissues (37.5%). *T. gondii* was detected from chicken tissues with different antibodies titer (Table 1).

Almost all chicken samples were asymptomatic to mice. Only one sample was virulent. From the 3 bioassayed mice by the sample, one of 3 experimented mouses died 3 days after inoculation without any ascite formation. The remaining two mice were both positive to *Toxoplasma* infection by serology, microscopy and molecular analysis. The chicken was diagnostic in acute toxoplasmic infection phase as its initial titer was ≥ 640 .

Discussion

Surveys conducted worldwide reported variable prevalence of *T. gondii* infection in free-range chickens ranging from 0% in Japan (Matsuo et al., 2014), 6.9% in Mexico (Alvarado-Esquivel et al., 2012) to 90% in Australia (Chumpolbanhorn et al., 2013). In neighborhood countries

on African continent, prevalence can be 30.5% in Ethiopia (Gebremedhin et al., 2014), 47% in Uganda (Lindström et al., 2008) and 68.8% in Egypt (Barakat et al., 2012). High seroprevalence rate in free-range chickens in the present study also corroborates well with the high seroprevalence previously reported in sheep intended to human consumption (66%) from the same area (Boughattas et al., 2014).

The differences in the seroprevalence observed between the studies may be related to differences in relative climatic conditions, cat densities, study design, the number of chickens examined, sanitation condition, housing of chickens, type of serological tests used and the cut-off value reported. The choice of MAT as a diagnostic tool for the current study was made because of its high sensitivity (96.22%) and specificity (98.8%) in chickens compared to other serological

tests (Dubey et al., 1993). The pathogenicity of the *Toxoplasma* strains was investigated by mouse bioassay. Strains are grouped mainly in three groups including 1) virulent strains which cause acute toxoplasmosis and the death of the mouse within 10 days of inoculation, 2) avirulent strains leading to chronic infection without any apparent symptoms and 3) strains with intermediate virulence causing sub-acute infection in mice. It seems that strains from the first and third group or a combination between groups are more associated with clinical toxoplasmosis.

In our present analysis, we detected one sample that led to one mouse death among the three inoculated and high positivity of the remaining two. This could suggest a mixture of strains and further molecular analysis should be investigated to determine its exact genotype.

Table 1: Overview of *T. gondii* infection in chickens sold in Tunis, Tunisia using Modified Agglutination Test (MAT) and Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR)

Tests	Antibody titer							Total
	10	20	40	80	160	320	≥640	
MAT No. (%)	14 (35)	9 (22.5)	3 (7.5)	5 (12.5)	6 (15)	2 (5)	1 (2.5)	40 (100)
PCR positive No. (%)	5 (33.3)	5 (33.3)	2 (13.4)	0 (0)	2 (13.4)	0 (0)	1 (6.6)	15 (37.5)

Conclusion

Our previous analyses enable to discard the horse meat as a risk factor and to incriminate the sheep meat as an important risk factor in Tunis, Tunisia. Within the present study, we assessed that the free-ranging chickens can also be an important risk factor for pregnant women due to the high observed seroprevalence and especially with the new report of long parasite persistence in poultry meat. However, further genotyping investigations should be achieved to determine if the infecting strains in chickens are similar to those identified in congenital toxoplasmosis cases and hence assess if the free-ranging chicken should be avoided by pregnant women or not.

Conflicts of interest

The authors indicate that there is no conflict of interest in this work.

Acknowledgement

This study was financially supported by the research lab LR05SP03, Pasteur Institute, Tunis, Tunisia. The authors thank the all people who contributed to this study especially those involved in sampling.

References

- Alvarado-Esquivel C., González-Salazar A.M., Alvarado-Esquivel D., Ontiveros-Vázquez F., Vitela-Corralles J., Villena I., Dubey J.P. (2012). Seroprevalence of *Toxoplasma gondii* infection in chickens in Durango State, Mexico. *Journal of Parasitology*. 98: 431-432.
- Aspinal T.V., Marlee D., Hyde J.E., Sims P.F. (2002). Prevalence of *Toxoplasma gondii* in commercial meat products as monitored by polymerase chain reaction-food for thought? *International Journal for Parasitology*. 32: 1193-1199.
- Barakat A.M., Salem L.M., El-Newishy A.M., Shaapan R.M., El-Mahllawy E.K. (2012). Zoonotic chicken toxoplasmosis in some Egyptians governorates. *Pakistan Journal of Biological Sciences*. 15: 821-826.
- Boughattas S., Ayari K., Sa T., Aoun K., Bouratbine A. (2014). Survey of the parasite *Toxoplasma gondii* in human consumed ovine meat in Tunis City. *PLoS One*. 9: e85044.
- Boughattas S., Ben-Abdallah R., Siala E., Souissi O., Aoun K., Bouratbine A. (2010). Direct genotypic characterization of *Toxoplasma gondii* strains associated with congenital toxoplasmosis in Tunisia (North Africa). *The American Journal of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene*. 82: 1041-1046.
- Boughattas S., Ben-Abdallah R., Siala E., Souissi O., Maatoug R., Aoun K., Bouratbine A. (2011a). Case of fatal congenital toxoplasmosis associated with I/III recombinant genotype. *Tropical Biomedicine*. 28: 615-619.
- Boughattas S., Bergaoui R., Essid R., Aoun K., Bouratbine A. (2011b). Seroprevalence of *Toxoplasma gondii* infection among horses in Tunisia. *Parasites and Vectors*. 4: 218.
- Boughattas S., Salehi R. (2014). Molecular approaches for detection and identification of foodborne pathogens. *Journal of Food Quality and Hazards Control*. 1: 1-6.
- Chumpolbanchorn K., Lymbery A.J., Pallant L.J., Pan S., Sukthana Y., Thompson R.C. (2013). A high prevalence of *Toxoplasma* in Australian chickens. *Veterinary Parasitology*. 196: 209-211.

- Cook A.J., Gilbert R.E., Buffolano W., Zufferey J., Petersen E., Jenum P.A., Foulon W., Semprini A.E., Dunn D.T. (2000). Sources of *Toxoplasma* infection in pregnant women: European multicentre case-control study. European Research Network on Congenital Toxoplasmosis. *British Medical Journal*. 321: 142-147.
- Dubey J.P. (2009). Toxoplasmosis in sheep-The last 20 years. *Veterinary Parasitology*. 163: 1-14.
- Dubey J.P. (2010). *Toxoplasma gondii* infections in chickens (*Gallus domesticus*): prevalence, clinical disease, diagnosis and public health significance. *Zoonoses and Public Health*. 57: 60-73.
- Dubey J.P., Jones J.L. (2008). *Toxoplasma gondii* infection in humans and animals in the United States. *International Journal for Parasitology*. 38: 1257-1278.
- Dubey J.P., Karhemere S., Dahl E., Sreekumar C., Diabaté A., Dabiré K.R., Vianna M.C., Kwok O.C., Lehmann T. (2005). First biologic and genetic characterization of *Toxoplasma gondii* isolates from chickens from Africa (Democratic Republic of Congo, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Kenya). *Journal of Parasitology*. 91:69-72.
- Dubey J.P., Ruff M.D., Camargo M.E., Shen S.K., Wilkins G.L., Kwok O.C., Thulliez P. (1993). Serologic and parasitologic responses of domestic chickens after oral inoculation with *Toxoplasma gondii* oocysts. *American Journal of Veterinary Research*. 54: 1668-1672.
- Gebremedhin E.Z., Tesfamaryam G., Yunus H.A., Duguma R., Tilahun G., DI Marco V., Vitale M. (2014). Seroepidemiology of *Toxoplasma gondii* infection in free-range chickens (*Gallus domesticus*) of Central Ethiopia. *Epidemiology and Infection*. 24: 1-10.
- Jones J.L., Kruszon-Moran D., Wilson M., McQuillan G., Navin T., McAuley J.B. (2001). *Toxoplasma gondii* infection in the United States: seroprevalence and risk factors. *American Journal of Epidemiology*. 154: 357-365.
- Lindström I., Sundar N., Lindh J., Kironde F., Kabasa J.D., Kwok O.C., Dubey J.P., Smith J.E. (2008). Isolation and genotyping of *Toxoplasma gondii* from Ugandan chickens reveals frequent multiple infections. *Parasitology*. 135: 39-45.
- Matsuo K., Kamai R., Uetsu H., Goto H., Takashima Y., Nagamune K. (2014). Seroprevalence of *Toxoplasma gondii* infection in cattle, horses, pigs and chickens in Japan. *Parasitology International*. 63: 638-639.
- Montoya J.G., Liesenfeld O. (2004). Toxoplasmosis. *Lancet*. 363: 1965-1976.
- Tenter A.M., Heckeroth A.R., Weiss L.M. (2000). *Toxoplasma gondii*: from animals to humans. *International Journal for Parasitology*. 30: 1217-1258.
- Villena I., Durand B., Aubert D., Blaga R., Geers R., Thomas M., Perret C., Alliot A., Escotte-Binet S., Thebault A., Boireau P., Halos L. (2012). New strategy for the survey of *Toxoplasma gondii* in meat for human consumption. *Veterinary Parasitology*. 183: 203-208.
- Wallon M., Kodjikian L., Binquet C., Garweg J., Fleury J., Quantin C., Peyron F. (2004). Long-term ocular prognosis in 327 children with congenital toxoplasmosis. *Pediatrics*. 113: 1567-1572.
- Weiss L.M., Dubey J.P. (2009). Toxoplasmosis: a history of clinical observations. *International Journal for Parasitology*. 39: 895-901.