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Rapid Detection of *Leishmania infantum* Infection in Dogs: Comparative Study Using an Immunochromatographic Dipstick Test, Enzyme-Linked Immunosorbent Assay, and PCR

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Current zoonotic visceral leishmaniasis (ZVL) control programs in Brazil include the culling of *Leishmania infantum*-infected reservoir dogs, a strategy that has failed to prevent a rise of canine and human ZVL cases over the past decade. One of the main reasons this strategy has failed is because of a long delay between sample collection, sample analysis, and control implementation. A rapid, sensitive, and specific diagnostic tool would be highly desirable, because it would allow control interventions to be implemented in situ. We compared an immunochromatographic dipstick test to enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA) and PCR for detecting *L. infantum* infections in dogs from an area of ZVL endemicity in Brazil. The dipstick test was shown to have 61 to 75% specificity and 72 to 77% sensitivity, compared to 100% specificity for both ELISA and PCR and 71 to 88% and 51 to 64% sensitivity for ELISA and PCR, respectively. Of the field samples tested, 92 of 175 (53%), 65 of 175 (37%), and 47 of 175 (27%) were positive by dipstick, ELISA, and PCR, respectively. The positive and negative predictive values for the tested dipstick were 58 to 77% and 75%, respectively. Efforts should be made to develop a more specific dipstick test for diagnosis of leishmaniasis, because they may ultimately prove more cost-effective than currently used diagnostic tests when used in mass-screening surveys.

Domestic dogs (*Canis familiaris*) are established reservoir hosts of zoonotic visceral leishmaniasis (ZVL) caused by *Leishmania infantum*. Hence, one of the approaches to reduce the incidence of human ZVL (also known as kala-azar) is to cull infected dogs. The impact of such dog-culling programs on incidence of human and canine ZVL has been doubted on both theoretical and practical grounds (10), and the results of controlled intervention trials are equivocal (3, 9). Despite the culling of an average of 19,500 dogs per year since 1989, the incidence of human ZVL in Brazil has increased steadily during the same period (26). One of the reasons why such control campaigns have failed is because of the long delay between sample collection, sample analysis, and control implementation (i.e., culling of infected dogs). This delay typically is 30 days long, but can be as long as 80 days, with infected dogs remaining infectious to sandfly vectors during this period and transmitting ZVL to susceptible dogs and humans. In a study in Brazil, it was shown that whereas a standard culling strategy implemented 80 days postsample collection resulted in only a 9% decrease in dog seroprevalence, culling implemented 7 days postsample collection resulted in a 27% decrease in seroprevalence (6). Current diagnostic methods used for *Leishmania* mass-screening surveys (mainly enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay [ELISA], immunofluorescence antibody test, or direct agglutination test) lack sensitivity or specificity, require technological expertise and specialized laboratory equipment, and can be labor-intensive and time-consuming. Hence, a rapid, sensitive and specific diagnostic test would be extremely valuable in mass-screening surveys and intervention campaigns, because results could be read immediately and control measures could be implemented in situ. Implementation coverage rates would be improved (e.g., dog owners often hide their dogs from culling personnel), and the control intervention would be more effective.

Immunochromatographic dipstick tests for *Leishmania* diagnosis have recently been developed and are all based on recombinant K39 (rK39), a protein predominant in *Leishmania infantum* and *Leishmania donovani* tissue amastigotes (7). rK39 dipstick tests have been shown to be quite sensitive (reported sensitivities, 67 to 100%) and very specific (reported specificities, 97 to 100%) when tested on kala-azar patients (5, 8, 13, 25, 30), with results similar to those of rK39-ELISAs (1, 4, 7, 12, 14, 17, 18, 24, 28, 29). Although rK39-ELISAs have been used to detect ZVL infection in dogs (4, 17, 22, 23, 28), there are no published reports on the use of the rK39 dipstick to detect ZVL in dogs.

We report a study in which the sensitivity and specificity of a commercially available immunochromatographic rK39 dipstick test were compared to serological and molecular diagnostic tests (ELISA and PCR) used in canine leishmaniasis diagnosis. Epidemiological and control intervention implications are discussed.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

**Sampling.** Blood samples (2 to 10 ml) were taken from 148 dogs in the municipality of Capitão Eneas (16°30’S, 44°00’W), an area of *L. infantum* endemicity in Minas Gerais, Brazil. Twenty-seven dogs were sampled again after 5 months. Samples were taken by venipuncture and put into sterile, EDTA-coated
10-ml polystyrene tubes and processed 4 to 10 h after collection. The blood was centrifuged at maximum speed for 20 min, and the buffy coat layer and sera were separated and stored at −20°C. Dog age was estimated by tooth wear or by interviewing dog owners. The mean age of dogs was 34 months (range, 2 to 180 months); 57 of the dogs sampled were female, and 91 were male. No transmission of *Leishmania* (*Vannia*) spp. or *Trypanosoma cruzi* was reported in the area.

PCR. DNA from buffy coat samples was extracted by using the DNeasy DNA extraction kit (Qiagen, Crawley, United Kingdom) according to the manufacturer’s instructions. All samples were amplified with *L. donovani* species-specific primers. Amplification products were detected by ethidium bromide on 2% agarose gels in 1× TAE buffer (40 mM Tris, 40 mM acetic acid, 1 mM EDTA [pH 8.3]). To evaluate sample degradation or PCR inhibition, sample DNA was also amplified for a canine housekeeping gene, an acidic ribosomal phosphoprotein fragment, by using primers PO3 (5′-GGAGAAGGGGGAGATGT-3′) and PO5 (5′-TCTTCCGTCATCAGGAGG-3′) for DNA from uninfected dog and *positive* (water-lysate mixtures of the reference strain cultures) controls. PCR-grade H2O was used throughout. To avoid cross-contamination, separate areas were used for DNA extraction, PCR sample preparation, and amplification.

Hybridization. Membranes were processed by standard procedures—i.e., in denaturation and neutralization buffer for 20 min each and Southern blotted onto a nylon membrane (Boehringer Mannheim, Basel, Switzerland)—and DNA was fixed by UV cross-linking. Membranes were prehybridized at 42°C and hybridized with a 32P-labeled 84-bp nucleotide DNA probe (5′-GACCTGAAACCCTGGTGCTCGGCT-3′) for 24 h at 42°C and then washed at 65°C twice for 15 min in 2× SSC (1× SSC is 0.15 M NaCl plus 0.015 M sodium citrate)–0.1% sodium dodecyl sulfate (SDS) and 0.1× SSC–0.1% SDS, before being exposed for autoradiography for 36 and 72 h at −70°C.

**ELISA.** Log-phase *L. donovani* promastigotes (MHOM/ET/67/L82) were harvested at a concentration of ca. 2.5 × 106 cells/ml, centrifuged at 5,000 rpm, washed in phosphate-buffered saline (PBS), and frozen at −20°C. Cells were freeze-thawed and briefly sonicated. Antibodies (106 promastigotes per well) were added to polystyrene microtiter plates (Immulon 2; Thermo LabSystems, Ashford, United Kingdom) in 100 μl of carbonate coating buffer (pH 9.6) and incubated overnight at 4°C. Plates were washed three times with PBS and blocked with 100 μl of 2% milk powder well in coating buffer for 2 h at 37°C. They were then washed three times with PBS, and serum samples were added at dilutions of 1/100, 1/400, and 1/800 in 100 μl of incubation buffer (PBS–0.05% Tween 20–2% milk powder) and again incubated for 2 h at 37°C. After washing six times with PBS–0.05% Tween 20, peroxidase-conjugated, affinity-purified rabbit anti-dog immunoglobulin G (Sigma, Poole, United Kingdom) was added to 1/500 in 100 μl of incubation buffer and incubation was continued for 2 h at 37°C. Plates were washed six times with PBS–0.05% Tween 20, and then 100 μl of substrate solution (O-phenylenediamine dihydrochloride in phosphate-citrate buffer [pH 5.5]) was added. The reaction was stopped with 50 μl of 2 M H2SO4, and plates were read at 490 nm in an ELISA plate reader.

**ELISA standardization.** The method used for ELISA standardization was performed according to Quininnell et al. (19). Briefly, on each plate, a positive control serum was titrated twofold from 1/20 to 1/327,680. The positive control serum was assigned an arbitrary number of units per milliliter (81,920/ml), which was defined as the reciprocal of the highest dilution at which absorbance was greater than the mean ± 3 standard deviations of background (no antibody) wells. Absorbance was calculated as observed absorbance—mean background absorbance. A standard line was defined as the reciprocal of the highest dilution at which absorbance was less than 0.015. A standard line was fitted over the range 1/80 to 1/81,920 to the positive control absorbance values by log-logit transformation (19). The absorbance at 1/80 was defined as 1 unit per milliliter. For each test serum, the absorbance at 1/80 was used as a standard to calibrate the absorbance at any other dilution.

**RESULTS**

Table 1 summarizes the dipstick, ELISA, and PCR results from field samples and negative and positive controls, as well as the frequency distribution of log units of anti-*Leishmania* antibody units per milliliter depending on dipstick or PCR positivity is represented in Fig. 1. The mean antibody levels for the three groups of negative controls were 2,562 (standard deviation = 558 [Lima]), 1,099 (standard deviation = 689 [Marajó]), and 1,854 (standard deviation = 783 [Cambridge]) U/ml. The mean number of antibody units of all negative controls was 1,831 (standard deviation = 978) U/ml; hence, the cutoff for positivity was 4,765 U/ml (i.e., 3.68 log antibody units/ml). The mean for positive control sera was 170,237 (standard deviation = 97,281) U/ml.

![Picture](https://via.placeholder.com/150.png?text=Table%201%20Comparative%20diagnosis%20of%20L.%20infantum%20in%20dogs)

**TABLE 1. Comparative diagnosis of *L. infantum* in dog blood**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ELISA/PCR result</th>
<th>No. of samples with</th>
<th>Negative controls</th>
<th>Positive controls</th>
<th>Field samples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(n = 40)</td>
<td>(n = 10)</td>
<td>(n = 175)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>RAPYD</strong></td>
<td><strong>RAPYD+</strong></td>
<td><strong>RAPYD</strong></td>
<td><strong>RAPYD+</strong></td>
<td><strong>RAPYD-</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELISA+/PCR+</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELISA+/PCR−</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>19</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELISA−/PCR+</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELISA−/PCR−</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>62</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* PCR controls.

Negative and positive controls. Three groups of uninfected dog sera were used as negative controls for all diagnostic tests. The sera came from (i) dogs of various ages and breeds, which had attended a veterinary clinic in Lima, Peru (n = 17); (ii) mongrel dogs from Belém, Brazil (n = 12); and (iii) dogs of various ages and breeds that had attended a veterinary clinic in Cambridge, United Kingdom (n = 11). The ELISA-positive and PCR-positive sera were used as positive controls for all diagnostic tests. The sera were confirmed *L. infantum* infection (either by culture, microscopy, or xenodiagnosis) from Marajó, Brazil (19, 20).

**Data analysis.** Sensitivity, specificity, and positive and negative predictive values (PPV and NPV, respectively) for each diagnostic test were calculated according to the method of Fleiss (11). The PPV of a diagnostic test is the proportion of total positive test results that are true positives and the NPV of a diagnostic test is the proportion of total negative results that are true negatives.
positives) and assumed that all ELISA-negative, PCR-negative samples were true negatives (i.e., all 39 RAPYD-positive, but ELISA-negative, PCR-negative samples were false positives). Approach 1 gives an estimated 74 positives and 101 negatives. In approach 2, we again used the estimated 100% specificity for ELISA and PCR, but also used the estimated 75% dipstick specificity. Thus, only 21 (62/3) of the 39 RAPYD-positive, ELISA-negative, PCR-negative samples are false positives, and 18 are true positives. Approach 2 gives a total of 92 positives and 83 negatives. Table 2 summarizes the sensitivity, specificity, PPV, and NPV of each test by each approach. With approach 1, the sensitivity and specificity of the dipstick test were 72 and 61%, respectively; approach 2 increases the estimated sensitivity to 77%. The respective sensitivities of ELISA and PCR were 88 and 64% by approach 1 and 71 and 51% by approach 2 (Table 2).

**DISCUSSION**

To our knowledge, this is the first study to use a dipstick test to detect *Leishmania* infection in dogs. Our study indicates that the dipstick test has a comparable sensitivity to ELISA, but that its specificity is very low (61 to 75%). Thus, use of the dipstick tests would lead to a high proportion of dogs being misdiagnosed as false positives (up to 39 out of 92 positive field samples; Table 1). The reason why this was the case is unknown, but it could include test cross-reactivity to some factor present in dog blood, because tested rK39 dipsticks were highly specific when tested on blood from kala-azar patients. Previous studies using the rK39-ELISA assay reported responsiveness to rK39 in (i) 2 of 33 Chinese toxoplasmosis patients (although the authors reported that the two responsive patients may have had subclinical ZVL) (24), (ii) 2 of 61 healthy Sudanese controls from a region of endemicity (29), (iii) 1 of 10 Turkish malaria patients (17), and (iv) 6 of 83 Turkish cutaneous leishmaniasis patients (17). The rK39 antigen is not known to cross-react with *Leishmania braziliensis* or *T. cruzi* (4, 7, 8, 18). Also, rK39 responsiveness appears to be restricted to active kala-azar infections, as opposed to asymptomatic, self-healing, cured, or treatment-resistant patients (4, 14, 24) or dogs (22, 23), although other studies failed to show such an association (29, 30).

Five reported studies used an rK39-ELISA to detect *Leishmania* infection in dogs (4, 17, 22, 23, 28). The rK39-ELISA was 100% sensitive in 90 parasitologically confirmed, high-antibody-titer dogs in Brazil (4) and in 37 parasitologically confirmed dogs in Venezuela (negative controls not included in either study) (28). In a Turkish study, 18 of 494 dogs were positive by rK39-ELISA; sensitivity and specificity were reported to be 93% and 100%, respectively (17). In a large epidemiological survey in Italy, rK39-ELISA sensitivity and specificity were 97 and 99%, respectively (23). Finally, in a Moroccan study, the rK39-ELISA was 100% sensitive in detecting 11 parasitologically confirmed, clinically symptomatic...
dogs, but failed to detect ZVL infection in 9 parasitologically
confirmed, clinically asymptomatic dogs (22). Variability in
dipstick performance will depend on factors such as the type of
diagnostic antigen and conjugate used. Previous experience
with malaria dipstick tests show that these tests can be highly
variable in terms of sensitivity and specificity (27). False-posi-
tive rates for malaria dipsticks can be as high as 28%, which
may, for example, be due to cross-reactivity to rheumatoid
factor (16).

A number of PCR protocols to detect L. infantum have been
developed, and PCR has been shown to be a sensitive and
highly specific technique for the detection of symptomatic or
parasitologically proven infections (2, 20, 28). Evidence sug-
gests that PCR is less sensitive in detecting asymptomatic dogs
(2, 20). The results presented here confirm this observation,
because PCR detected only 79% of ELISA-positive and 39%
of dipstick-positive field samples, with PCR positivity being
associated with ELISA antibody units (linear regression after
arc-sine transformation of data: df = 39, r = 0.84, P < 0.0001).
The sensitivity and specificity of the PCR assay depend on
several factors, including PCR primers, DNA extraction pro-
tocol, and source of biopsy material (15, 21). The advantage of
using blood (buffy coat) is that the sampling is less invasive
than bone marrow, spleen, or lymph node aspirates, and sam-
ple can be processed readily. On the other hand, the parasite
load in blood tends to be lower than those in bone marrow,
spleen, or lymph node aspirates, and blood may contain a
number of PCR inhibitors (e.g., heme) that may affect PCR
assay sensitivity.

With a conservative cutoff (i.e., mean + 3 standard devia-
tions) (19, 20), ELISA was 100% sensitive in detecting culture-
positive dogs and 84% sensitive to detect parasitologically con-
formed (PCR) field dogs. Interestingly, four of nine PCR-
positive but ELISA-negative samples were from dogs that had
recovered serologically by the time the second samples were
taken. This demonstrates that the sensitivity of a diagnostic
technique can change with the course of infection (20) and that
these dogs appear to have developed an immune response that
controls infection. The sensitivity and specificity of ELISA
depend on the type of antigen used (e.g., parasite species,
promastigotes, or amastigotes) and changes to the standard
experimental protocol (e.g., incubation time or type of micro-
titer plates used).

We conclude that research into developing a more specific
Leishmania dipstick test should be pursued, because there are
many potential advantages of such a tool with respect to other
diagnostic methods. With dipsticks, a large number of samples
can be processed quickly and with minimum effort. Compared
to microscopy, ELISA, or PCR, the technological expertise
(i.e., training of personnel) necessary to perform the dipstick
tests is minimal, as is the requirement for specialized labora-
tory equipment. Another advantage of dipstick tests is that
patients (in our case, dog owners) can see the results for
themselves, which will contribute to a better working relation-
ship between local communities and people carrying out the
surveys and would increase compliance rates. From an epide-
miological point of view, a dipstick test allows interventions to
be implemented in situ. The outcome should be to significantly
reduce the mean duration of infectiousness of dogs that have
become infected, thereby significantly enhancing the impact of
the intervention on the basic reproductive number, R0 (10).

Immunochromatographic dipstick tests are comparatively
expensive, but considering the data presented above, a sensi-
tive and specific dipstick test could provide very cost-effective
alternatives to currently available diagnostic tests, especially
when used in mass-screening surveys.

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