**EXAMINATION ON THE OCCURRENCE OF SELECTED ZOONOTIC PATHOGENS REGARDING THE CURRENT SITUATION OF THE FINNISH REINDEER HUSBANDRY**

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**Introduction**

Reindeer husbandry represents an important economic factor and a valuable cultural heritage. About 185 000 semidomesticated reindeer (*Rangifer tarandus tarandus*) live in the northern regions of Finland. Transmission of infectious agents to man may occur through direct contacts to free-ranging animals including cervids, by contamination of the environment through faecal shedding or by consumption of venison. In contrast, to domestic animals, however, the epidemiological situation in free-ranging animals and in their habitat is difficult to assess. There is a lack of information regarding the human health risk due to faecal shedding of pathogens by reindeer. Bacteria, such as *Campylobacter* spp, *Enterococcus* spp, *Escherichia coli* (E. coli), *Salmonella* spp, *Yersinia* (Y.) spp and the parasites *Cryptosporidium* spp are among the most important agents in causing zoonosis like enteric and other diseases and were isolated before from healthy and diseased domestic ruminants (De Rycke et al., 1986; Munoz et al., 1996; Busato et al., 1998 and 1999). The objectives of this study, that was performed as part of the EU-project RENMAN, were to figure out the occurrence and prevalence of important zoonotic pathogens in reindeer.

**Material and Methods**

In this study, 2 243 faeces samples from healthy reindeer, adults and calves, of both genders were examined for the occurrence of *Campylobacter* spp, *Enterococcus* spp, *E. coli*, *Salmonella* spp, *Yersinia* spp, and in addition, for the occurrence of the parasites *Cryptosporidium* spp. The samples were taken in the course of one year (June 2001 - April 2002) from Finnish and Norwegian free-ranging and corralled reindeer herds, considering parameters such as degree of intensification of husbandry, location and season. Samples were taken off the ground or per rectum from slaughter animals, sent to Kiel, Germany, directly after collection and conserved frozen until further processed.

The examination for *Campylobacter* spp was done by incubating faecal material in Preston broth for 24 h in a microaerophilic atmosphere at 37 °C. A loopful of the enriched suspension was plated on Preston agar and incubated for 48 h under the above described conditions. *Campylobacter*-like colonies were analysed by Gram-staining, catalase and oxidase tests, and further biochemical reactions.

To detect *Enterococcus* spp, faecal material was diluted in glucose-azide broth and incubated for 48 h at 37 °C. A loopful of broth was then spread both on kanamycin-aesculin-azide agar and Slanetz and Bartley agar. After 48 h at 37 °C suspicious colonies were Gram-stained and their biochemical reactions were analysed further by catalase and oxidase tests. *Escherichia coli* was isolated by adding faeces to Gram-negative broth. After 24 h of incubation at 37 °C a loopful of broth was plated onto Endo-c agar and incubated under the above mentioned conditions for 24 h.

Typical metallic shiny colonies were subcultured on blood agar and Gram-stained and tested biochemically. To detect the occurrence of *shigatoxin 1 and 2 genes* (*stx1, stx2*), the intimin gene (*eae*) and EHEC-hemolysin gene (*hlyEHEC*), EHEC EDL 933 (*stx1,2* positive) was used as a positive control and *E. coli ATCC 11 229* (*stx1,2* negative) was included as negative control. The amplified products were analysed by electrophoresis and were visualised following ethidium bromide staining (100 µl/100 ml gel) at UV-light.

For the selective enrichment of *Salmonella* spp faeces was inoculated into tetrathionate broth and incubated for 24 h at 37 °C. Two enrichment steps were repeated the following two days. On the fourth day one loopful of the cultured medium was plated both on *Salmonella-Shigella* agar and Leifson agar. After 24 h of incubation at 37 °C presumptive *Salmonella* spp colonies were Gram-stained and tested biochemically.

Cultural examination of *Yersinia* spp was performed by adding faeces to Gram-negative broth and incubating for 48 h at 21 °C. One loopful of broth was then plated on *Yersinia*-selective agar and incubated for another 48 h at 21 °C. Colonies with the typical bull’s-eye-appearance were subcultured on blood agar and Gram-stained and biochemical tests were subsequently carried out. To detect the *Yersinia*-genes encoding 16SrRNA, yadA and v-antigen PCR was performed.

For the detection of *Cryptosporidium* oocysts, immunomagnetic separation was applied using Dynabeads anti-Cryptosporidium. Twenty µl of the immunoconcentrate were used for a direct immunofluorescence test (Cryptosporidium-Antigen-IFT). *Cryptosporidium parvum* oocysts from a calf served as the positive control. Using a fluorescence microscope at x400–x1000 magnification *Cryptosporidium* oocysts appear as 6-10 µm in size, round or oval in shape with bright green fluorescence.

**Results**

In 2 224 (99.2%) out of the total number of 2 243 faecal samples one or more of the examined bacteria species were isolated. *Campylobacter* sp, identified as *C. hyointestinalis*, was detected in one sample only (0.04%), *Enterococcus* spp were isolated in 2 084 (92.9%) samples. *Escherichia coli* were isolated in 2 123 (94.7%) samples. Only few of the isolated *E. coli*-strains possess genes encoding *stx1* (0.14%), *stx2* (0%), *eae* (0.61%) and *hlyEHEC* (1.08%). There was no evidence of the occurrence of *Salmonella* spp nor *Cryptosporidium* spp. These results are shown in **Table 1**. One hundred and eight (4.8%) strains of *Yersinia* spp were isolated, consisting of *Y. enterocolitica* Biogroup 1A (*n=29*), *Y. intermedia* (*n=2*), *Y. kristensenii* (*n=72*), *Y. mollaretii* (*n=3*) and *Y. rhodei* (*n=2*).
Regarding the degree of intensification of reindeer husbandry, the season or the geographic origin, no significant differences were found for Enterococcus spp and E. coli, whereas the prevalences of Yersinia spp differed significantly: prevalences for Yersinia spp in free-ranging reindeer in summer and autumn were significantly higher than in fenced reindeer during winter.

Discussion

Faecal samples of reindeer were examined for the occurrence of important enteric pathogens in order to get information about the human and animal health risk. All bacteria investigated in this study may be found in Northern Europe in the environment in aquatic, terrestrial and animal reservoirs (Kapperud, 1981) and were isolated from the intestinal tract of healthy or diseased ruminants worldwide (Adesiyun et al., 1998; Busato et al., 1998). In reindeer, Enterococcus spp and E. coli occurred in very high prevalences, showing the affiliation of these two species to the normal intestinal flora of healthy reindeer. Concerning E. coli, there are only few reports on diseases caused by shigatoxin-producing bacteria in ruminants (Sherwood, 1985; Mainil, 1999), however these bacteria are of extreme importance in causing severe diseases in humans (Griffin & Tauxe, 1991). As the genes encoding stx1, eae and hlyE were detected only in very low numbers of the isolated E. coli-strains, the human health risk due to E. coli excreted by reindeer can be considered very low at the moment. These results comply with another study detecting no E. coli O157:H7 in 1 387 faecal and 421 meat samples from reindeer (Lahti et al., 2001). Yersinia spp was isolated in 108 samples. The identified species Y. intermedia, Y. kristensenii, Y. mollaretii and Y. rhiodei have been isolated before from various environmental samples (fresh water, soil, etc.), food, healthy animals and healthy and diseased humans (Baier & Puppel, 1981; Sulakvelidze, 2000). Even though these species are widely distributed in nature, their actual impact on human health is a matter of controversy. Campylobacter hyointestinalis was isolated from one sample only. As the cultivation of Campylobacter spp is exceedingly difficult, the real prevalence might be higher. Hitherto Campylobacter hyointestinalis has been associated only sporadically with human gastrointestinal disorders (Edmonds et al., 1987; Gorkiewicz et al., 2002). Even though the prevalence for Campylobacter spp in this study was very low, it shows that reindeer can be carriers of Campylobacter hyointestinalis. This is approved by another study detecting Campylobacter hyointestinalis in a prevalence of 6% in Finnish reindeer faeces (Hänninen et al., 2002).

Conclusion

Summarizing it can be stated, that the examined enteropathogens were either not detected at all (Salmonella spp and Cryptosporidium spp), in very small numbers (Campylobacter spp) or if detected, their virulence and pathogenicity was very low (E. coli and Yersinia spp). In the present situation in northern Europe the potential human and animal health risk by reindeer, excreting various important enteropathogenic bacteria and Cryptosporidium spp, has to be estimated as very low. These results are very important regarding the status of reindeer meat as a natural product for the consumer, as for the production no antibiotic treatment is required so far.

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References


Figure 1. Prevalences of analysed pathogens in faeces of reindeer (n= 2 243)