

Genetic characterization of turkey astroviruses identified in Croatian poultry flocks

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BIDIN, M., D. MAJNARIĆ, Z. BIDIN, I. LOJKIĆ: Genetic characterization of turkey astroviruses identified in Croatian poultry flocks. Vet. arhiv 83, 57-67, 2013.

ABSTRACT

The identification and genetic characterization is described of turkey astroviruses (TAsTV) detected by polymerase chain reaction (PCR) in Croatian turkey and chicken flocks. Multiple organ samples were collected from 16 turkey and 7 chicken flocks and tested by specific primers for the presence of turkey astrovirus-1 (TAsTV-1) and turkey astrovirus-2 (TAsTV-2). TAsTV-1 was detected in 6 turkey flocks, and TAsTV-2 in 4 turkey and 2 chicken flocks, which represents the first finding of turkey-origin astrovirus in chicken hosts. Amplified polymerase gene fragments were sequenced and analysed. Phylogenetic analysis was based on the alignments of 82 amino acids deduced from 250 nucleotide (nt) ORF 1b sequences from a total of 30 TAsTV isolates. Molecular and phylogenetic analysis of astrovirus sequences revealed the existence of one TAsTV-2 and two TAsTV-1 genotypes detected in commercial poultry flocks in Croatia. Within each cluster of astroviruses, the polymerase gene proved to be highly conserved.

Key word: turkey astrovirus-1, turkey astrovirus-2, genetic characterization, phylogenetic analysis

Introduction

Turkey astroviruses (TAsTV) are members of the genus *Avastrovirus*, from the *Astroviridae* family. They are non-enveloped, single-stranded and positive sense RNA viruses, approximately 27 to 30 nm in size (COOK and MYINT, 1995; KOCI et al., 2000). The astrovirus genome consists of three open reading frames (ORF): ORF 1a, ORF 1b and ORF 2. ORF 1a and ORF 1b code for non-structural proteins, while ORF 2 encodes a structural, capsid precursor protein (CUBITT, 1996). ORF 1b is considered the most

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conserved region among avian and mammalian astroviruses, and codes for RNA-dependant RNA polymerase (RdRp) (MONROE et al., 1993; KOCI and SCHULTZ-CHERRY, 2002). It overlaps with ORF 1a in approximately 70 nucleotides (nt), and is introduced to the open reading frame by a stem loop (MARCZINKE et al., 1994). Unlike ORF 1b, ORF 2 appears to be a hypervariable region of the astrovirus genome, responsible for classification in different serotypes (SMYTH et al., 2009; PANTIN-JACKWOOD et al., 2006; 2011).

Turkey astrovirus was first detected in 1980 by electron microscopy (EM) of faecal samples from turkeys suffering from diarrhoea (McNULTY et al., 1980). Later, based on the genome characterization and serological investigation, the existence of two genetically and immunologically distinct types of TAsV (TAsV-1; TAsV-2) was confirmed (KOCI et al., 2000; TANG et al. 2005a; 2005b). TAsV-1 and TAsV-2 isolates, when compared, shared only 35% nucleotide similarity in the capsid gene (KOCI et al. 2000; BEHLING-KELLY et al., 2002). Both TAsV types, but primarily TAsV-2, are associated with poultry enteritis and mortality syndrome (PEMS), causing constant economic problems in commercial turkey production (PANTIN-JACKWOOD et al., 2006; 2008). PEMS is a multi-causal disease of young turkeys, characterized by diarrhoea, maldigestion, weight loss and poor growth performance. Apart from astroviruses, which are considered the most frequently detected enteric viruses in turkeys, rotaviruses, reoviruses, coronaviruses and parvoviruses are viral agents also associated with the complex aetiology of this syndrome (BARNES and GUY, 1996; PANTIN-JACKWOOD et al., 2007; SPACKMAN et al., 2010) .

Infection with TAsV is a relatively common finding in commercially reared turkeys in countries with developed turkey production. In Croatia, TAsV-1 and TAsV-2 have been recently detected by polymerase chain reaction (PCR) in young turkeys affected by enteric disease (BIĐIN et al., 2009; LOJKIĆ et al., 2010). In order to reveal the genetic specificities of TAsV, we based our research on an molecular and phylogenetic analyses of the obtained TAsV polymerase gene sequence data. Here we report an investigation of TAsV found to circulate in commercial turkey and chicken flocks in Croatia.

Material and methods

Poultry flocks. Sixteen turkey and seven chicken flocks from commercial farms in Croatia were included in this investigation. Both turkeys and chickens were found dead at the age of 2 to 40 days. Ten to 20 carcasses from each flock were collected and dissected. The intestines and lymphoid organs (timus, spleen and bursa of Fabricius) were sampled for the purpose of molecular diagnostic testing.

Sample preparation and viral nucleic acid extraction. All organ samples collected from poultry were pooled, so each sample contained approximately five organs per flock. Finally, there was a total of three pooled samples of each type of organ (intestines, timus,

spleen and bursa of Fabricius) per each turkey and chicken flock. Viral RNA was extracted from samples using a High Pure Viral Nucleic Acid Kit (Roche Diagnostics, Mannheim, Germany) according to the manufacturer's instructions. The final product was purified viral RNA in a volume of 70 μ L.

Reverse transcription (RT) and polymerase chain reaction (PCR). Reverse transcription was conducted using 5 μ L RNA in a 50- μ L reaction volume containing 20 U RNaseH-M MLV reverse transcriptase (SuperScript™ III reverse transcriptase; Invitrogen, Carlsbad, California, USA), 5 pmol random hexamer primer, 0.5 mM dNTPs, 10 mM dithiothreitol, 50 mM Tris-HCl, 75 mM KCl and 3 mM MgCl₂. The reaction was carried out in the GenAmp PCR System 2400 (Applied Biosystems, Foster City, California, USA) and the mixture was incubated at 50 °C for 45 min followed by 72 °C for 10 min. The cDNA obtained was then used for amplification in PCR assays.

The primers used for detection of TAsV-1 (forward primer: 5'-GAT GGT GGG TAG CCT ATT GTG TTC -3' and reverse primer: 5'-AGC TYA TGM GGT TCT TTC TTC TYG-3') and TAsV-2 (forward primer: 5'-TGG ACC GAC CCR RTT ITY ACC A-3' and reverse primer: 5'-GGC CCG ACY TCA GGM AGT TGT-3') were designed to amplify 250 base pairs (bp) fragment of TAsV-1 and 911 bp fragment of TAsV-2 polymerase gene (DAY et al., 2007). The PCR reaction (total volume 50 μ L) contained 5 μ L cDNA, 25 μ L GoTaq® Green Master Mix (Promega, Madison, USA) and 0.20 μ L of forward and reverse primer. Thermal cycling parameters were adjusted for each virus, as described by DAY et al. (2007). The PCR reaction products were analysed by 2% agarose gel electrophoresis and stained with ethidium bromide.

The PCR products that showed the expected amplicon length were considered positive and purified by ExoSAP-IT® (Affymetrix UK Ltd., USB® Products, High Wycombe, UK). Sequencing was performed in both directions by Macrogen Inc. (Seoul, Korea).

Molecular and phylogenetic analysis. The sequence data were initially aligned using the BLAST search program. Molecular analysis and multiple sequence alignment were performed using the Clustal W program implemented in the Mega 5 software package (TAMURA et al., 2011) and BioEdit (HALL, 1999). For the phylogenetic analysis, all TAsV-1 and TAsV-2 partial polymerase gene sequences used in this study were aligned together to 250 nt corresponding to 4132-4381 nt of the TAsV-1 referent isolate Y15936. Eighty-two amino acids were deduced from 18 astrovirus nucleotide sequences, and analysed. Phylogenetic analysis was performed by the Neighbour-joining method, based on the *p-distance*, using Mega 5 software.

Gen Bank accession numbers. Accession numbers of the sequences submitted through this study are listed in Table 1. TAsV-1 sequences used in this study were from turkeys (Y159362, DQ324822, DQ324823, DQ324825, DQ324826, HQ317706, HQ317715) and ducks (JF815370, JF815371). The accession numbers of the TAsV-2 sequences

compared from turkeys were EU143844, EU143845, EU143850 and AF206663, and from ducks JQ692620, JQ692621 and JQ69262.

Results

Virus detection. Out of all the tested flocks, PCR assays showed astrovirus presence in the organ samples from eleven turkey and two chicken flocks (Table 1). TAstV-1 was found positive in six, and TAstV-2 in four turkey flocks. The ORF 1b fragment of TAstV-2 was also amplified in samples belonging to two chicken flocks. Neither of the tested chicken flocks were found to be infected with TAstV-1.

Table 1. Poultry flocks positive to TAstV, organs in which the virus was detected, isolate names and Gen Bank accession numbers.

Flock	Age/ days	Virus	Positive organs	Isolate	Accession number
1-turkeys	15	TAstV-1	Intestine	TAstV-1/CRO-53	JX083354
2-turkeys	18	TAstV-1	Intestine	TAstV-1/CRO-21	JX083355
3-turkeys	10	TAstV-1	Intestine	TAstV-1/CRO-61	JX083356
4-turkeys	20	TAstV-1	Spleen, intestine*	TAstV-1/CRO-510	JX083357
5-turkeys	21	TAstV-1	Intestine	TAstV-1/CRO-286	JX083358
6-turkeys	12	TAstV-1	Intestine	TAstV-1/CRO-528	JX083359
7-turkeys	6	TAstV-2	Timus, spleen, intestine*	TAstV-2/CRO-169	JX083366
8-turkeys	15	TAstV-2	Timus	TAstV-2/CRO-201	JX083367
9-turkeys	2	TAstV-2	Spleen	TAstV-2/CRO-552	JX083368
10-turkeys	40	TAstV-2	Timus, spleen, intestine, bursa Fabricii*	TAstV-2/CRO-05	JX083974
11-chicken	7	TAstV-2	Intestine	TAstV-2/CRO-06	JX083370
12-chicken	21	TAstV-2	Intestine	TAstV-2/CRO-739	JX083371

* Organ from which the virus was sequenced.

Sequence characterization. The samples that showed the expected amplicon length were sequenced, and the nucleotide sequence data obtained (Table 1) were used for further molecular and phylogentic analyses. Croatian TAstV-1 sequences (250 nt in length) derived from turkeys showed a higher similarity to each other on an amino acid (96.3-100%) than on a nucleotide level (93.2-98.8%). Compared with TAstV-1 from ducks and turkeys, they shared high nucleotide (90.8-99.2%) and amino acid (92.7-100%) identities. Generally, Croatian TAstV-1 sequences were more similar in the polymerase gene fragments compared to TAstV-1 from ducks than to turkey-origin TAstV-1 sequences. Croatian TAstV-1 sequences were characterized with seven unique

nucleotide changes that resulted in substitution of three amino acids. Corresponding to the nucleotide positions of the referent TAstV-1 isolate Y15936, the substitutions were as follow: at 4346 nt (serine instead of alanine in TAstV-1/CRO-53), at 4349 nt (histidine instead of leucine also in TAstV-1/CRO-53) and 4373 nt position (glutamine instead of leucine in TAstV-1/CRO-528).

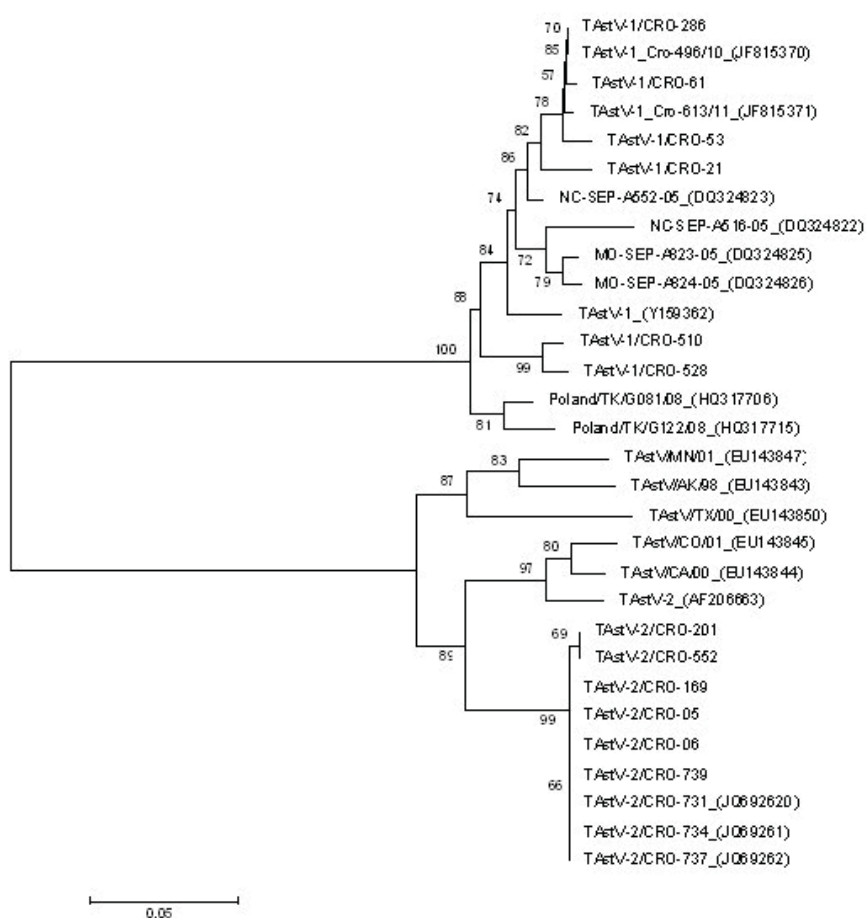


Fig. 1. Neighbour-joining tree based on alignments of 82 amino acids deduced from 250 nt fragment of polymerase gene of 15 TAstV-1 and 15 TAstV-2 sequences. The evolutionary distances were computed using *p-distance*, with 1000 bootstrap replicates.

The polymerase gene fragment of six TAsV-2 positive samples was sequenced in the length of 883 nt. Croatian TAsV-2 sequences from turkeys and chickens showed genetic parity. They were identical in amino acid composition, whilst they differed on a nucleotide level in only 0.4% of cases. They shared the same range of nucleotide and amino acid percentage identities with duck TAsV-2 isolates, also originating from Croatia. The similarities with foreign turkey TAsV-2 sequences were greater on the amino acid (92.7-98.7%) than on the nucleotide level (87.2-92.4%). The sequence TAsV-2/CRO-739 detected in chickens was characterized by three unique nucleotide changes at the 4041, 4045-6 nt position of the TAsV-2 referent strain TAsV/CO/01 (EU143845). This resulted in substitution of three amino acids: alanine-histidine-asparagine instead of glutamic acid-glutamine-aspartic acid. Although it had no effect on amino acid composition, the specificity of all Croatian turkey and chicken TAsV-2 sequences was adenine (at the 4024 nt position of the referent strain), while other compared sequences had guanine located at this position.

Aligned together, all TAsV-1 and TAsV-2 sequences shared 59.2-62% nucleotide and 59.2-65% amino acid similarities in the compared 250 nt ORF 1b fragment.

Phylogenetic analysis. A phylogenetic Neighbour-joining tree was constructed using *p-distance*, based on the alignments of 82 amino acids deduced from 15 TAsV-1 and 15 TAsV-2 nucleotide sequences (Fig. 1). Phylogenetic analysis was consistent with molecular characterization of astrovirus sequences. A Neighbour-joining tree formed two distinct clusters; one consisted of TAsV-1 and the other consisted of TAsV-2 sequences. Within the cluster of TAsV-1 sequences, Croatian TAsV-1 isolates from turkeys (except TAsV-1/CRO-510 and TAsV-1/CRO-528) were branched with TAsV-1 from ducks, but showing a close evolutionary relationship with other TAsV-1 sequences. TAsV-1/CRO-510 and TAsV-1/CRO-528 were more phylogenetically related to TAsV-1 sequences originating from Poland and with the referent sequence (Y15936) from the U.S. Within the TAsV-2 cluster, all Croatian TAsV-2 isolates from turkeys, chickens and ducks were grouped separately from foreign TAsV-2 sequences, forming a "Croatian subgroup".

Discussion

The present research was designed to investigate the occurrence and genetic diversity of turkey astroviruses circulating in commercial turkey and chicken flocks in Croatia. As avian astroviruses are known to be associated with enteric syndromes (PEMS and RSS) affecting commercially reared poultry, their molecular specificities and phylogenetic relationship have recently been of the great interest. The majority of studies regarding avian astroviruses have been done in Northern Ireland and the U.S. (McNULTY et al., 1990; McNEILLY et al., 1994; PANTIN-JACKWOOD et al., 2006; 2007; 2008; 2011; SPACKMAN et al., 2010; TODD et al. 2009; 2011), while in Croatia there have been only two limited

surveys dealing with astroviruses found in chickens and turkeys (BIDIN et al., 2009; LOJKIĆ et al., 2010). To investigate the presence of turkey astroviruses, for the purpose of this study we tested two types of avian hosts: turkeys and chickens. Although there are no published data about turkey-origin astroviruses infecting chickens, we found it to be epizootiologically important to investigate the possibility of astrovirus transmission between avian species. Recently, an astrovirus similar to TAsV-2 was detected in guinea fowl (CATOLLI et al., 2007), chicken-origin astroviruses were identified in pigeons (ZHAO et al., 2011), ducks and geese (BIDIN et al., 2011; 2012), while turkey-origin astroviruses have also been detected in ducks (BIDIN et al., 2012).

From the 16 turkey and 7 chicken flocks included in this survey, TAsV-1 was found positive only in turkeys (6 flocks), while TAsV-2 was detected both in turkeys (4 flocks) and chickens (2 flocks). We suspect that TAsV-2 infection occurred in chickens due to insufficient biosecurity and disinfection of poultry houses. To clarify TAsV-2 transmission to another avian host, further research is required to determine possible changes in virus-host interaction. Of all the types of organ tested (intestines and lymphoid organs), astroviruses were the most frequently detected in intestinal samples (Table 1). There were only three flocks in which the virus was detected in multiple organ samples. The finding of TAsV-1 or TAsV-2 in lymphoid organs (flock 4, 7, 8, 9 and 10) indicates the early stage of astrovirus infection, in which the virus replicates in lymphoid tissues (SCHULTZ-CHERRY et al., 2000). Considering that the age of TAsV-positive poultry varied from 2-40 days, it is obviously that astrovirus infection spreads by vertical and horizontal routes. Moreover, because TAsV-2 was found in multiple lymphoid organs and intestines, it is likely that turkeys aged 40 days (flock 10) were infected with TAsV-2 later in the production cycle, rather than before or shortly after hatching. Conversely, we may suspect that the flocks in which the virus was only detected in intestinal samples were found dead later in the course of astrovirus infection. Although it would not be wise to attribute the death of turkeys and chickens to astroviruses, the TAsV-1 or TAsV-2 infection surely acted as a contributing factor in immunosuppression and poor performance.

To characterize the TAsV-1 and TAsV-2 detected in Croatian poultry flocks, the polymerase gene from each astrovirus positive sample was amplified, sequenced and analysed. The molecular characterization of TAsV-1 sequences identified in turkey flocks showed that they were highly similar in nucleotide and amino acid composition to TAsV-1 isolates from ducks originating from Croatia, indicating that there were no significant differences in genotypes of TAsV-1 found in various avian hosts. These four sequences from turkeys and two from ducks were branched together (Fig. 1), showing the greatest phylogenetic relationship with the sequence NC-SEP-A552-05 (DQ324823), originating from the U.S. turkey flock. Unlike them, the sequences TAsV-1/CRO-510 and TAsV-1/CRO-510 were phylogenetically closer to European TAsV-1 isolates. Although

there is a small evolutionary distance between amino acid sequences calculated by the Neighbour-joining tree, the analysis performed suggests that there were two TAsV-1 genotypes detected to be circulating in Croatian poultry flocks.

Nucleotide and amino acid sequence characterization of the amplified polymerase gene fragment of TAsV-2 detected in Croatia revealed that one genotype was infecting turkeys, chickens and ducks. Based on the molecular analysis and the Neighbour-joining tree constructed, Croatian TAsV-2 sequences derived from various avian species belonged to the same genetic group, so there were no host-specific TAsV-2 genotypes (Fig. 1).

The alignment and comparison of 250 nt and 82 deduced amino acid of TAsV-1 and TAsV-2 revealed that polymerase gene sequence similarities were consistent with the results obtained in other studies (PANTIN-JACKWOOD et al., 2006; 2011). Within each cluster of turkey astroviruses, the polymerase gene was highly conserved, without significant variability in nucleotide or amino acid sequences. Although it shared a high level of identity with other Croatian TAsV-2 isolates, by having three unique amino acid substitutions, the sequence TAsV-2/CRO-739 was the most diverse TAsV-2 sequence.

Conclusion

The molecular and phylogenetic analysis performed allowed us to infer several conclusions regarding turkey astroviruses identified in Croatian poultry flocks. The finding of TAsV-2 in chickens represents the first detection of turkey-origin astrovirus in chicken hosts, indicating that astroviruses are not host-specific. Molecular and phylogenetic analysis of astrovirus sequences revealed the existence of one TAsV-2 and two TAsV-1 genotypes detected in commercial poultry in Croatia. Analysis of the partial ORF 1b sequences confirmed that polymerase gene is highly conserved within astroviruses.

Acknowledgements

This research was supported by grant No. 053-0531863-1856 from the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports, Republic of Croatia.

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Received: 16 June 2012

Accepted: 5 December 2012

BIDIN, M., D. MAJNARIĆ, Z. BIDIN, I. LOJKIĆ: Genska karakterizacija puranskih astrovirusa dokazanih u hrvatskim jatima peradi. Vet. arhiv 83, 57-67, 2013.

SAŽETAK

Opisana je identifikacija i genska karakterizacija puranskih astrovirusa (TAstV) dokazanih lančanom reakcijom polimerazom (PCR) u hrvatskim jatima purića i pilića. Organi uzorkovani od 16 jata purića i 7 jata pilića pretraženi su specifičnim početnicama na prisutnost puranskoga astrovirusa-1 (TAstV-1) i puranskoga astrovirusa-2 (TAstV-2). TAstV-1 dokazan je u 6 jata purića, a TAstV-2 u 4 jata purića i 2 jata pilića, što predstavlja prvi nalaz astrovirusa puranskog podrijetla u novog domaćina-kokoši. Umnoženi odsječci polimeraze bili su sekvencirani i analizirani. Filogenetska analiza temeljena je na sravnjivanju 82 aminokiseline izvedene iz 250 nukleotida (nt) sekvencije ORF 1b od ukupno 18 izolata puranskog astrovirusa. Molekulska i filogenetska analiza otkrile su postojanje jednog genotipa TAstV-2 i dva genotipa TAstV-1 dokazanih u komercijalnim jatima peradi u Hrvatskoj. Polimeraza je unutar obje skupine astrovirusa pokazala visoki stupanj postojanosti.

Cljučne riječi: puranski astrovirus-1, puranski astrovirus-2, genska karakterizacija, filogenetska analiza
