Investigation of the potential effects of transportation and lairage on the contamination of pig carcasses with *Yersinia enterocolitica*

Minvielle, B.¹, Paboeuf, F.², Labbe, A.³, Lediguerher, G.¹, Le Roux, A.¹, Denis, M.²*

Abstract

Pathogenic *Yersinia enterocolitica* is frequently isolated from pig tonsils, but can also be found in the feces and lymph nodes of infected animals; which represent potential sources for the surface carcass contamination during slaughter. The aim of the study was to investigate the respective effects of the transportation and lairage steps on the overall contamination of the carcass, taking also into account the contamination of their environment. Each Trial was conducted in two abattoirs, whose environmental contamination was assessed. In each abattoir, 6 trucks and 6 lairage pens were sampled in duplicate at the end of the day, for 5 consecutive days, in spring and autumn. Four groups of 8 pigs from the Anses Specific Pathogen-Free herd (SPF) were mixed with conventional pigs for different contact times during transportation (1h) or lairage (2, 4 or 8h) prior to slaughter, and one group had no contact with other pigs. Each group of SPF pigs was sampled at the end of the slaughter line for the presence of pathogenic *Y. enterocolitica* for internal (tonsils, caecal content, mesenteric lymph nodes) and external (carcass surface) contamination. Samples were placed in ITC broth for enrichment at 25°C for 48h. Broth was streaked on CIN plates. After 24H at 30°C, typical colonies were streaked on YeCM plates. Biochemical tests were done to confirm *Y. enterocolitica* and to identify the biotype. The environmental contamination of trucks and lairage was very low. *Y. enterocolitica* was only detected in 11/240 lairage swabs. All internal and external samples from SPF pigs mixed with conventional pigs during transportation or lairage were negative after slaughter. Four tonsils of the SPF pigs slaughtered directly on the slaughter line after 4 hours of activity, with no prior contact with conventional pigs, and one of the corresponding surface carcasses, were found positive in one abattoir. In our experimental conditions with SPF pigs, we were not able to demonstrate contamination by contact with conventional pigs during transportation and lairage steps, whose environmental contamination appeared to be scarce. Limited cross contaminations were observed during the slaughter process, which emphasizes the importance of good hygiene procedures to limit carcass contamination by pathogenic *Y. enterocolitica*.

Introduction

In 2013, yersiniosis was the third most frequently reported human zoonosis in Europe, with a total of 6 471 confirmed cases (EFSA, 2015). Pigs are frequently described as a source of human contamination by *Yersinia enterocolitica* through consumption of raw or undercooked meat (Satterthwaite et al., 1999). Pigs do not develop clinical signs, but they carry *Y. enterocolitica* in their oral cavities, on their tongues and tonsils, and in their lymph nodes, and they excrete this bacterium in their feces (Nesbakken et al., 2003). From a one-survey carried in France on 3120 pigs from 96 batches tested in 16 slaughterhouses (Fondrevez et al., 2014), 13.7% of the pigs were found positive for pathogenic *Y. enterocolitica* on their tonsils and 74.3% of the pig batches contained at least one positive pig. Presence of *Y. enterocolitica* on pig tonsils or feces is a potential source of contamination of the carcasses during slaughter. The contamination of *Y. enterocolitica* free-pigs can also occur during transport (trucks) and during lairage (pens) through the immediate environment of pigs, by contact or ingestion of infected feces from other pigs. The aim of the study was to investigate the respective effects of the transportation and lairage steps on the overall contamination of the carcass, taking also into account the contamination of their environment.
Epidemiology and control of hazards in pork production chain – SAFEPORK
One health approach under a concept of farm to fork

Material and Methods

Y. enterocolitica status of trucks and lairage pens.

The trial was conducted in two abattoirs (AB1 and AB2; more than 600 pigs/h) of West of France, on 2 different weeks (one week in spring and one week in autumn). In each abattoir, a total of 60 trucks were sampled; 6 trucks per day, during 5 consecutive days, on the two weeks. Trucks were taken at random after 6 to 8 hours of activity. After the unloading of the animals and before the truck was washed, each truck was swabbed with two swabs. Each swab was applied on one floor of the truck on 4 different zones of 0.25m². In each abattoir, a total of 60 lairage pens were sampled; 6 lairage pens per day, during 5 consecutive days, on the two weeks. Lairage pens were taken at random after 6 to 8 hours of activity. After departure of a batch of pigs and before arrival of other animals, each lairage pen was swabbed with two swabs. Each swab was applied on the floor on 4 different zones of 0.25m². The floor types of lairage pens were solid concrete for the AB1 abattoir and concrete slatted floor for the AB2 abattoir. In these abattoirs, the pens underwent once a week a full cleaning and disinfection procedure at the end of the week.

Transmission of the Y. enterocolitica during transportation, lairage waiting and slaughter.

To evaluate the risk of transmission of the bacteria to Y. enterocolitica-free pigs during transportation, lairage waiting and slaughter, Specific Pathogen-Free animals (SPF pigs from Anses) were slaughtered in each of the two abattoirs, AB1 and AB2, according 3 modalities. M1 (contact during transportation) : 8 SPF pigs were loaded in last position in a truck containing conventional pigs from another farm et stayed in contact in the truck with these pigs during 2 hours before being directly slaughtered in first position at the beginning of slaughter, without waiting time in lairage. M2 (contact during lairage) : 3 groups of 8 SPF pigs arrived respectively at the abattoir 2, 4 and 8 hours (M2-2H, M2-4H, M2-8H) before the beginning of the slaughter. They were transported in a clean and disinfected truck of Anses. They were mixed in one lairage pen with conventional pigs from another herd. There were slaughtered in first position. The floor types of lairage pens were solid concrete for the AB1 abattoir and concrete slatted floor for the AB2 abattoir. M3 (contact during slaughter): 8 SPF pigs arrived at the abattoir after 4 hours of slaughtering activity. They were transported in a clean and disinfected truck of Anses and had no contact with other pigs. They were slaughtered directly without waiting time in lairage. For all the modalities, 20 swabs of the abattoir environment (equipment, machines, tools...) were realized after cleaning and disinfection, or just before the slaughtering of the SPF pigs. Several samples were collected from the SPF pigs; caecal content and mesenteric lymph nodes were collected after evisceration and, carcass swab on one half of carcass and tonsil swab were realized before the cooling step. All the modalities were realized from Tuesday evening till Wednesday morning. The truck of Anses was always confirmed negative for Y. enterocolitica as well as SPF pigs’ feces and tonsils before departure of the SPF pigs from Anses.

Samples analysis

To detect the bacteria and, to characterize and biotype the isolates, we used the same method as described by Fondrevez et al., (2010); this method was used previously during the one-year survey (Fondrevez et al., 2014). In brief, samples were enriched in ITC broth; 100 ml for environmental and carcass swabs, 9 ml for tonsil swabs, 225ml for 25g of caecal content and for 25g of lymph nodes. After 18h at 25°C, ITC was streaked on CIN plate. Plates were incubated for 24h at 30°C. Typical colonies were isolated on YeCM plate and then on PCA. Biochemical tests were done to confirm Y. enterocolitica and identify the biotype.

Results

The environmental contamination of trucks (0/240 swabs) and lairage (11/240 swabs) was very low. No Y. enterocolitica was detected in the 120 trucks. Y. enterocolitica was detected in only 11 swabs of lairage pens, in the sampling done in autumn. They corresponded to 5 pens for the AB1 abattoir and to 3 pens for the AB2 abattoir. Y. enterocolitica was detected mainly from Wednesday to Friday. Isolates were from biotype 1A and 4 in the AB1 abattoir, and from biotype 1A in the AB2 abattoir. All internal and external samples from SPF pigs mixed with conventional pigs during transportation or lairage (M1 and M2) were negative after slaughter. For the contact during slaughter (M3), three environmental swabs of the abattoirs before activity were positive for Y. enterocolitica biotype 1A (2 swabs for AB1, and one for AB2). After 4 hours of activity, all the environmental swabs of the two abattoirs, sampled before the SPF pigs slaughtering, were negative. Among the 16 SPF pigs tested, slaughtered directly with no prior contact with conventional pigs, four tonsils and one carcass of our SPF pigs were found positive for Y. enterocolitica biotype 4 in the abattoir AB2, due to unidentified cross-contaminations on the slaughter line.

Discussion

Despite a reported high contamination of pig tonsils by Y. enterocolitica (13.7% of pigs and 74.3% of the pig batches), for the French pigs (Fondrevez et al., 2014), we observed in this study a very low presence of the bacteria in the environment of the pigs during transportation and lairage. In a parallel sampling to our study, Leblanc-Maridor et al., (2015) isolated Salmonella in 90 to 100% of the same lairage swabs when pigs were present and in 30 to 60% of the truck swabs. This low environmental contamination by Y. enterocolitica could result from a low qualitative and quantitative presence in the feces of infected pigs and/or a limited ability of the bacteria to survive in these conditions. In Belgium, Van Damme et al., (2015) found a prevalence of 25% in pig feces for a prevalence of 55% in pig tonsils, with a median concentration in Y. enterocolitica of 2.80 log10 CFU/g of pig feces and of 4.14 log10 CFU/g of pig tonsil. The lower prevalence for French pig tonsils (13.7%) suggests that the prevalence for pig feces could be lower as well, and consequently little participate to the dissemination of the bacteria in the environment of the animals. Indeed, a presence of 9.5% only was observed in French pig’s feces, in a previous study (Feurer et al., 2012). An experimental contamination of the SPF pigs by Y. enterocolitica confirmed that the bacteria can colonize and be excreted by the pigs (Personal communication, E. Esnault). Quantitative data (in progress) will specify the level of Y. enterocolitica excretion by the pigs. In our limited experimental conditions with SPF pigs, we were not able to demonstrate contamination by contact with conventional pigs during transportation and lairage steps, while these steps were identified as risk for transmission of Salmonella between animals (Berends et al., 1996). Van Damme et al., (2014) have meanwhile shown a strong correlation between the presence of Y. enterocolitica in the feces of slaughtered pigs and waiting times in lairage; the risk of infection (or fecal excretion) increasing with longer waiting times. The risk of contamination of non-infected pigs during transportation and lairage appears limited, but a contamination during slaughter could be observed despite a small number of animals tested. Indeed, four of our 16 SPF pigs became positive for tonsil during slaughter and one for carcass. This contamination during slaughter, due to cross-contamination from slaughtered infected animals, confirms that the control of the slaughtering process is necessary. In a process study realized in six abattoirs in France, Feurer et al. (2015) showed that a part of the carcass contamination originated from the pig itself and other part from cross-contaminations on the slaughter line. The presence of Y. enterocolitica on pig carcasses was nearly 5 times higher when the tonsils were collected at least one half of the positive carcasses at the end of the slaughter line were due to cross-contaminations. Vilar et al. (2015) and Van Damme et al. (2015) demonstrated that presence of Y. enterocolitica in the tonsils and/or in feces, or in the pluck set, was a risk that the carcass becomes contaminated.
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Conclusion

In our experimental conditions with SPF pigs, we were not able to demonstrate contamination by contact with conventional pigs during transportation and lairage steps, whose environmental contamination appeared to be scarce. Limited cross contaminations were observed during the slaughter process, which emphasizes the importance of good hygiene procedures to limit carcass contamination by pathogenic \textit{Y. enterocolitica}.

Acknowledgements

This work was funded by a funding of the Brittany Region for Agriculture (CPER). The authors thank the management and the staff of the two abattoirs for their collaboration in this project.

References


1. IFIP, Meat Quality and Safety Department, Le Rheu, France.
2. Anses, Hygiene and Quality of Poultry and Pig products unit, 22440 Ploufragan, France.
3. Anses, SPF and Experimental Pig Breeding Department, 22440 Ploufragan, France.
4. Corresponding author: martine.denis@anes.fr