



■ Author(s)

Souza MN<sup>1</sup>  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3504-6987>  
Wolf JM<sup>1</sup>  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7577-464X>  
Zanetti NS<sup>1</sup>  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5519-2693>  
Fonseca ASK<sup>1</sup>  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6381-4210>  
Ikuta N<sup>1</sup>  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5598-5340>  
Lunge VR<sup>1</sup>  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4012-8650>

<sup>1</sup> Universidade Luterana do Brasil (ULBRA), Programa de Pós-Graduação em Biologia Celular e Molecular Aplicada à Saúde, Canoas, RS, Brazil.  
<sup>1</sup> Simbios Biotecnologia, Cachoeirinha, RS, Brazil.

■ Mail Address

Corresponding author e-mail address  
Margarida Neves Souza  
Laboratório de Diagnóstico Molecular, Prédio 22, sala 312. Avenida Farroupilha, 8001, CEP 92425-900 - Canoas, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil.  
Phone: (5551) 34782777  
Email: [margaridansouza@gmail.com](mailto:margaridansouza@gmail.com)

■ Keywords

Campylobacter, Clostridium perfringens, food safety, poultry, Salmonella.



## Direct Detection and Quantification of Bacterial Pathogens from Broiler Cecal Samples in the Slaughter Line by Real-Time PCR

### ABSTRACT

Chicken meat is an important source of foodborne pathogens, including *Salmonella*, *Campylobacter*, and *Clostridium perfringens*. These bacteria can occur in the intestinal microbiota of broilers and contaminate chicken carcasses in industrial meat processing. This study aimed to develop and evaluate a procedure based on real-time PCRs for the direct detection and quantification of these three bacteria in broilers' ceca collected in poultry slaughter houses and demonstrate the occurrence of these important foodborne pathogens in Brazilian poultry production flocks. Cecal contents were collected from 45 different broiler flocks in three different slaughterhouses in the state of Paraná, Brazil, totaling 45 samples (in pools of 10 different ceca/chickens per broiler flock). Then, these samples were tested for the detection and quantification of *Salmonella*, *Campylobacter*, and *Clostridium perfringens* by real-time PCRs. The results demonstrated the occurrence of three (6.7%) positive pools for *Salmonella*, 20 (44.4%) for *Campylobacter*, and 32 (71.1%) for *C. perfringens*. Mean bacterial concentrations in the positive samples were 4.3 log<sub>10</sub> cells/g for *Salmonella*, 6.4 log<sub>10</sub> cells/g for *Campylobacter*, and 5.5 log<sub>10</sub> cells/g for *C. perfringens*. In conclusion, *Salmonella*, *Campylobacter*, and *C. perfringens* could be detected and quantified directly from the broilers cecal contents collected in the slaughter line. This procedure will be certainly useful to more quickly detect these foodborne pathogens and prevent their occurrence in chicken meat and other poultry food products.

### INTRODUCTION

Foodborne diseases can result in more than two million deaths per year worldwide. Chicken meat is a possible carrier of foodborne pathogens that cause human infectious diseases (Saif, 2008; FAO-WHO, 2009; WHO, 2020). The most common bacterial pathogens are *Salmonella* and thermotolerant *Campylobacter* (*C. jejuni*, *C. coli*, and *C. lari*), accounting together for 94.1% of total foodborne outbreaks (EFSA, 2019). *Clostridium perfringens* is also a concerning bacterial pathogen due to the production of toxins that can cause food poisoning, mainly in children, elderly, and immunosuppressed people (Van Immerseel *et al.*, 2004; Lindström *et al.*, 2011; CDC, 2017).

Reduction of the risk of foodborne diseases infection can be pursued with measures of biosecurity and pathogen control throughout the food chain (Gölz *et al.*, 2014; Rivera *et al.*, 2018). The total absence or the occurrence of low levels of pathogenic bacteria in foods is the main goal to minimize human risk. This is also imperative in broilers flocks processed to produce chicken meat in slaughterhouses (Brazil, 2011; EFSA, 2011; Hermans *et al.*, 2011). Besides broiler infection



in any step of the poultry production chain, cross-contamination by pathogenic bacteria can also occur in food processing at the slaughterhouse. Evisceration in the slaughter line is considered the point of highest risk for carcass contamination by enteric pathogens. Therefore, animal and environmental samplings in all slaughterhouse steps (mainly in the evisceration) have to be collected to further perform laboratory analyses aimed at the detection of specific pathogens (Allaart *et al.*, 2013; Rajan *et al.*, 2017). Additionally, several different biological samples can be used for pathogen detection: fecal drop, feces, drag swabs, etc. It is noteworthy that a previous study demonstrated that cecal drops reflect chickens' cecal microbiome (including pathogenic bacteria) better than any other animal sample and should be preferentially used to estimate the contamination risk in slaughterhouses and foods (Pauwels *et al.*, 2015).

Foodborne bacteria are usually detected in laboratories by bacterial isolation in different culture media, followed by additional biochemical and serological characterization of bacterial colonies (Lee *et al.*, 2015). Although these traditional microbiological methods are considered the gold standard, they are laborious and require several steps and reagents. These time-consuming analytical processes can take days to obtain a final result, which reduces the effectiveness in controlling the contamination of poultry flocks. Additionally, some fastidious bacteria such as *Campylobacter* are difficult to isolate in culture media, requiring other analytical procedures (Schnider *et al.*, 2010; Maurischat *et al.*, 2015; Nagpal *et al.*, 2015; Ricke *et al.*, 2019). These methods are also usually not quantitative, making the effective estimation of the contamination risk of positive foods for any bacteria impossible (Navidshad *et al.*, 2012; Ricke *et al.*, 2019).

Thus, DNA-based methods like real-time polymerase chain reaction (qPCR) and loop-mediated isothermal amplification (LAMP) have been increasingly developed and used to detect and quantify foodborne pathogens in the poultry production chain (Souza *et al.*, 2019; Waldman *et al.*, 2020). Other important advantage of DNA-based methods is the possibility of performing qualitative and quantitative analysis of food pathogens in biological samples simply with prior enrichment or even directly from biological samples (Albini *et al.*, 2008; Rodgers *et al.*, 2012; Park *et al.*, 2014; Ricke *et al.*, 2019).

The present study aimed to develop and evaluate a procedure based on real-time PCRs for the direct detection and quantification of the foodborne

pathogens *Salmonella*, *Campylobacter*, and *C. perfringens* in broilers' ceca collected in poultry slaughterhouses.

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

### Samples

A total of 450 griller broilers with 30 days of production (weight of birds ~ 1.4 kg) from 45 flocks in 39 different farms located in the state of Paraná, Brazil, were selected by convenience (10 broilers per flock) in three different slaughterhouses between 2017 and 2019. The cecum of each broiler was collected aseptically in the slaughter line after mechanical evisceration, placed in 45 sterile plastic bags (pools of 10 ceca per flock), and maintained at 4°C for a maximum of 24 h until laboratorial processing (Stern *et al.*, 2005; Rasschaert *et al.*, 2007).

### Samples pre-processing

The 45 pools of ceca collected in slaughterhouses were prepared in the laboratory before analytical processing. First, cecal contents were released from the pools manually and homogenized. Then approximately 50 mg of each sample was collected with a sterile spatula and mixed with 1,250 µL of lysis solution (NewGene Prep, Simbios Biotecnologia, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil). It was then incubated at 60°C for 10 min and centrifuged for 1 min at 9,410 x g. Tubes containing pre-processed samples were separated for DNA extraction, which was performed immediately after.

### DNA extraction

DNA extraction of cecal content samples was performed using a commercial kit for total nucleic acid purification (NewGene Prep and Preamp, Simbios Biotecnologia). This procedure was performed according to the manufacturer's instructions with some modifications. Initially, 100 µL of supernatant from the pre-processed sample prepared in the previous step was transferred to another tube (1.5 mL) containing 400 µL of cell lysis solution. After homogenization, 20 µL of silica suspension was added into the tube, which was incubated at room temperature for 10 min and shaken by inversion every 2 min. Then each sample was centrifuged for 1 min at 9,410 x g and the pellet was washed once with 150 µL of wash solution A, once with wash solution B, and once with wash solution C from the extraction kit. All tubes were placed in a thermoblock at 60°C to remove water. Then, 50 µL of elution solution was added and each sample tube



was centrifuged for 3 min at 9,410 x g. The liquid with soluble DNA was removed to another tube and stored at -20°C until DNA amplification.

### Real-time quantitative PCRs (qPCRs)

Real-Time PCRs were carried out using commercial kits SALamp, CPBAmp and CPERamp (NewGene, Simbios Biotecnologia). All these kits are TaqMan® based-PCRs (including only one primers pair and one probe) with the following specific molecular targets: a) *invA* gene for *Salmonella* spp. (Hoorfar *et al.*, 2000); b) 16S rRNA target for thermotolerant *Campylobacter* (*C. jejuni*, *C. coli* and *C. lari*) (Josefsen *et al.*, 2004); and c) *plc* gene for *C. perfringens* (Abildgaard *et al.*, 2010). Three gBlocks™ Gene Fragments (Integrated DNA Technologies, Iowa, USA) were synthesized with DNA sequences specific for all three targets and used as positive controls in the qPCRs. All assays were carried out on the 7300 Real-Time PCR equipment (Applied Biosystems, Massachusetts, USA) with the following cycling conditions: one initial denaturation cycle of 3 min at 95°C, followed by 40 cycles of 15 s at 95°C and 60 s at 60°C. Also, the three gBlocks™ were serially ten times diluted (initial concentrations of standard samples: 4,000,000 copies) and five dilutions with known loads (40 to 400,000 copies) of each gBlocks™ were used as standard samples for preparing standard curves for each bacterium in all runs of qPCR. CTs (cycle threshold) observed in all positive samples were compared with CTs of the standard curve to determine the bacterial load and to estimate the number of bacteria cells. All results were converted to log<sub>10</sub> cells/gram of cecal content.

### Data analysis

Analytical sensitivity of the assays (LOD, limit of detection) was calculated using the PROBIT procedure based on the methodology described by Waldman *et al.*, 2020. In summary, replicates of positive control samples of each pathogen with loads of specific bacteria DNAs (*Salmonella* 5,000,000 copies; *Campylobacter*

4,000,000 copies; and *C. perfringens* 3,000,000 copies) were serially ten times diluted (diluted 10<sup>5</sup> to 10<sup>-1</sup> fold). The procedure was repeated on three different days by the same operator and equipment to evaluate reproducibility, totaling 9 replicates of each dilution. The number of cells of each dilution, the total number of repetitions, and number of positive repetitions were used to calculate the 50% and 95% cut-off values, which represented the LOD of the assays.

Assessments of possible statistical differences between qualitative variables were verified by Pearson's chi-square test or Fisher's exact test as appropriate. Distributions of quantitative variables were verified by the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test with Lilliefors correction and comparisons between groups were performed by Student's t-test and ANOVA. All analyses were bilateral with a pre-established significance level of 5% alpha error ( $p < 0.05$ ). Data were compiled and analyzed using SPSS® software (23.0 version, Chicago, IL Statistical Package for the Social Sciences).

## RESULTS

### Development of the pre-processing procedure and limit of detection of qPCRs assays

First, pre-processing conditions were evaluated by testing different volumes of samples and cell lysis solutions to avoid the occurrence of amplification inhibitors. Three DNA extractions protocols were developed: A, B, and C (Table 1). All the 45 samples collected in this study were submitted to these DNA extraction protocols and amplified with the specific qPCR for *Salmonella*. The final quantities of cecal content per qPCR reaction (mg/qPCR) for each protocol were 0.077, 0.0154, and 0.00308 mg/qPCR, respectively. The results demonstrated the occurrence of 1, 3, and 2 PCR positive samples for *Salmonella* in protocols A, B, and C, respectively. So, we assumed protocol B (0.0154 mg/qPCR) to be the most sensitive (Table 1).

**Table 1** – Adjustment of the DNA extraction protocol to avoid amplification inhibitors.

DNA extraction protocol	Volume of pre-processed sample extracted (µL)	Volume of cell lysis solution added in the DNA extraction step (µL)	Final quantity of cecal content per qPCR reaction (mg/qPCR)	Number of <i>Salmonella</i> positive samples/total samples <sup>2</sup>
A <sup>1</sup>	500	0	0.077	1/45
B	100	400	0.0154	3/45
C	20	480	0.00308	2/45

qPCR= quantitative real-time PCR.

<sup>1</sup> Original protocol, as described by the manufacturer's instructions purification (NewGene Prep and Preamp, Simbios Biotecnologia).

<sup>2</sup>Repeated three times.



PROBIT analysis demonstrated a limit of 2.8 log<sub>10</sub> cells/g of cecal content of *Salmonella*, 2.7 log<sub>10</sub> cells/g of cecal content of thermotolerant *Campylobacter* and 2.6 log<sub>10</sub> cells/g of cecal content of *C. perfringens* to obtain 50% positive results, and 3.8 log<sub>10</sub> cells/g of cecal content of *Salmonella*, 3.7 log<sub>10</sub> cells/g of cecal content of thermotolerant *Campylobacter* and 3.6 log<sub>10</sub> cells/g of cecal content of *C. perfringens* to obtain 95% positive results for the qPCR, with a 95% confidence level (Table 2).

**Table 2** – PROBIT analysis – Analytical sensitivity of the qPCR assays in cecal content samples.

Assay	Confidence level (%)	Sensitivity (log <sub>10</sub> cells/g)
qPCR <i>Salmonella</i>	50%	2.8
	95%	3.8
qPCR <i>Campylobacter</i>	50%	2.7
	95%	3.7
qPCR <i>Clostridium perfringens</i>	50%	2.6
	95%	3.6

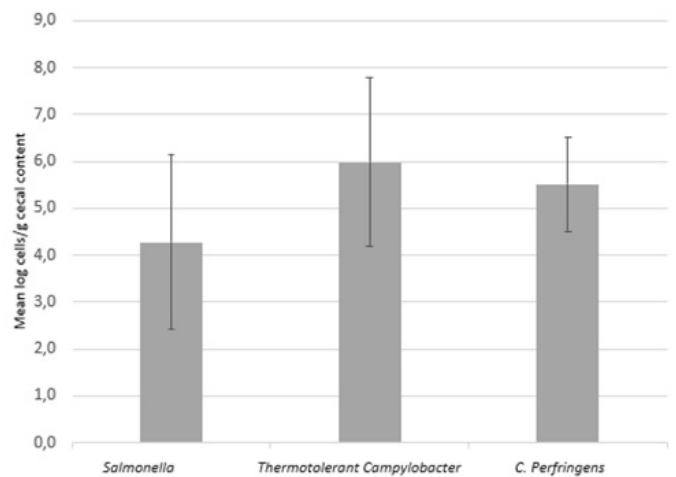
qPCR= quantitative real-time PCR.

### Prevalence of foodborne pathogens in the slaughterhouses

The complete procedure described above, its mean qPCR for the three foodborne pathogens, was used in the analysis of the broiler flocks' cecal content pools collected in the slaughter line. *Salmonella* was detected in 3 (6.7%), thermotolerant *Campylobacter* in 20 (44.4%), and *C. perfringens* in 32 (71.1%) poultry flocks in the three Brazilian slaughterhouses. The detection frequencies were statistically different for the three bacterial pathogens ( $p < 0.01$ ).

All flocks were evaluated for single or multiple infections. Five flocks (11.1%) showed negative results for the three bacteria analyzed, 8 flocks (17.8%) were positive only for thermotolerant *Campylobacter*, 18 flocks (40.0%) were positive only for *C. perfringens*, 2 flocks (4.4%) tested positive for *Salmonella* and *C. perfringens*, 11 flocks (24.4 %) tested positive for thermotolerant *Campylobacter* and *C. perfringens*, and only one flock (2.2 %) tested positive for the three bacteria analyzed.

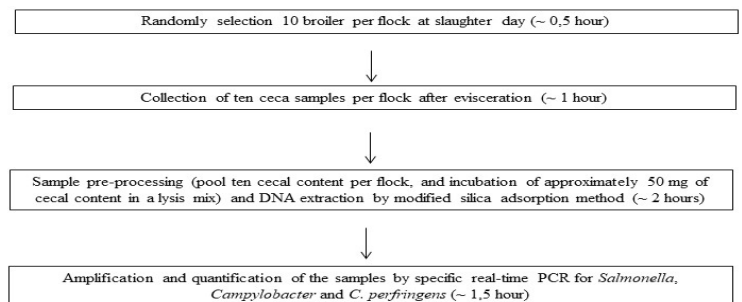
Bacterial loads were determined in all positive samples. Overall results ranged from 2.8 to 6.4 log<sub>10</sub> cells/g of cecal content (mean 4.3 ± 1.9) to *Salmonella*, 3.8 to 10.0 log<sub>10</sub> cells/g (mean 6.4 ± 1.7) to thermotolerant *Campylobacter* and 3.7 to 7.8 log<sub>10</sub> cells/g (mean 5.5 ± 1.0) to *C. perfringens* (Figure 1).



**Figure 1** – Mean and standard deviation of bacterial concentrations found in cecal content samples from 45 broiler flocks from slaughterhouses in the state of Paraná, Brazil.

### Flowchart diagram for detection and quantification of foodborne pathogens in cecal content

Based on these previous findings, an analytical procedure was defined, and a flowchart diagram was designed to summarize the detection and quantification of *Salmonella*, thermotolerant *Campylobacter*, and *C. perfringens* direct in cecal content samples by real-time PCR assays (Figure 2). It has been used in the routine analysis of the broilers samples in the slaughterhouse.



**Figure 2** – Flowchart diagram for the detection and quantification of *Salmonella enterica*, thermotolerant *Campylobacter*, and *Clostridium perfringens* in cecal content samples by Real-time PCR assays.

### DISCUSSION

To increase food security it is necessary to reduce the occurrence of foodborne pathogens. For poultry products, it is also important to control bacterial contamination levels in all production chain processes, from farm to slaughterhouses, distribution, and storage (Brazil, 2011, EFSA, 2011; Back, 2014). Complete elimination of pathogens in chicken meat and other poultry products is an extremely difficult task, as they can become persistent in food processing environments (Rivera *et al.*, 2018), but some measures can be taken



to reduce the risk of food contamination, such as the rapid identification of infected broiler flocks to avoid sending contaminated chicken products to the market (Josefsen *et al.*, 2004; Park *et al.*, 2014).

Risk of chicken carcasses contamination by pathogenic bacteria could be assessed by evaluating the intestinal microbiota content, including the detection and quantitation of *Salmonella*, *Campylobacter*, and *C. perfringens*. Furthermore, pathogen tracking is more efficient when broilers are analyzed immediately after evisceration in the slaughter line, thus monitoring intestinal poultry microbiota and providing safer food products to human consumption (Seliwiorstow *et al.*, 2015; Yeh *et al.*, 2019). Traditionally, feces and fecal material have been the samples collected in poultry farms as well as in slaughterhouses, respectively. However, cecal drop and/or cecal content are better samples to evaluate the broilers' intestinal microbiota because birds' ceca retain the microbial content longer than the small and large intestines, including high concentrations of bacteria, fungi, and other microorganisms (Clench, 1999; Pauwels *et al.*, 2015; Stanley *et al.*, 2015; Ijaz *et al.*, 2018). Moreover, feces and fecal material are not good estimators of the bacterial community of the cecal content (Pauwels *et al.*, 2015; Seliwiorstow *et al.*, 2015; Stanley *et al.*, 2015). For these reasons, cecum was already known as a spot for bacterial isolation in poultry (Pauwels *et al.*, 2015).

The present study evaluated the application of a procedure to detect and quantify three important foodborne pathogens (*Salmonella*, *Campylobacter*, and *C. perfringens*) in broiler's cecal samples by real-time PCR. First, PROBIT assays were carried out to determine the LOD of the qPCRs in cecal samples and the results demonstrated that between 100 and 1000 bacterial cells/g could be detected as previously reported (Waldman *et al.*, 2020). In addition, all these three bacterial pathogens were detected in more than one sample, demonstrating the good performance of the complete procedure. Previous studies have already demonstrated that PCR methods can be used to detect foodborne pathogens in chicken and other poultry samples (Alonso *et al.*, 2011; Park *et al.*, 2014). However, they have been carried out only after bacterial pre-enrichment and/or isolation (Borges *et al.*, 2019; Souza *et al.*, 2019; Borges *et al.*, 2020). The present study demonstrated that *Salmonella*, *Campylobacter*, and *C. perfringens* can be detected directly from broilers' cecal samples obtained in slaughter houses. With the removal of the pre-enrichment step in BPW, the whole

procedure could be reduced in more than 12 hours (Park *et al.*, 2014; Ricke *et al.*, 2019). Additionally, quantitative data could be used to estimate the risk of contamination of chicken meat.

Additionally, it was possible to estimate the prevalence of these bacterial pathogens in the evaluated chicken broilers flocks. *Salmonella* was detected in 6.7% of the ceca from the sampled flocks. Some previous studies in Brazil described a wide range of *Salmonella* frequencies in chicken samples collected at different stages of slaughter: 48.9% in samples obtained during the slaughtering process in the Rio Grande do Sul state (Borges *et al.*, 2019); 9.33% of slaughterhouse samples (whole carcasses, cuts, viscera, and chiller water) in Mato Grosso do Sul state (Boni *et al.*, 2011); 0.2% of cloacal swabs collected from broilers chicken flocks in the metropolitan region of Fortaleza (Bezerra *et al.*, 2016); 3.7% of chicken carcasses from a slaughterhouse in the state of Mato Grosso (Cunha-Neto *et al.*, 2018); and 1.66% of cloacal swabs and 26.66% of chicken carcasses in the state of Rio de Janeiro (Baptista *et al.*, 2018). Moreover, 37.5% of raw chicken legs sold at retail in the state of São Paulo were positive for *Salmonella* (Ristori *et al.*, 2017). Bacterial loads were estimated in all positive samples and the results ranged from 2.8 log<sub>10</sub> to 6.4 log<sub>10</sub>, with a mean of 4.3 log<sub>10</sub> bacteria/g of cecal content. This result could be compared to another Brazilian study that presented *Salmonella* loads ranging from 1.16 to 3.64 log<sub>10</sub> CFU/mL in chicken carcasses (Borges *et al.*, 2019).

*Campylobacter* was observed in 44.4% of the broiler flocks analyzed here. Previous studies have also demonstrated the high frequency of *Campylobacter* in cecal samples from broiler flocks, ranging from 50% to 73% of positive flocks (Rasschaert *et al.*, 2007; Reich *et al.*, 2008; Boer *et al.*, 2015; Seliwiorstow *et al.*, 2015). Unfortunately, there are no studies in Brazil regarding cecal content samples, making more detailed comparisons impossible. However, a previous study with cecal drops demonstrated a high frequency (81.8%) of *Campylobacter* (Kuana *et al.*, 2008). Some Brazilian studies tested other types of samples (water, cloacal swabs, carcasses, organs, among others) and reported a wide range of bacterial frequencies: 69.4% (Borges *et al.*, 2020); 71.3% (Franchin *et al.*, 2007); 4.9% (Cortez *et al.*, 2006); 16.8% (Hungaro *et al.*, 2015); and 8.73% (Castro Chaves *et al.*, 2010). It is noteworthy that all these studies were performed in different farms and also different Brazilian geographic regions. At the retail, two studies conducted at



Southern Brazil found *Campylobacter* in 17% of poultry meat (Silva *et al.*, 2016) and 91.7% of poultry meat products (Würfel *et al.*, 2018), while a study conducted at São Paulo state detected this bacterium in 7.7% of raw chicken (Lopes *et al.*, 2018).

Previous studies have also shown that *Campylobacter* spreading is frequently fast in poultry flocks, with most birds from the same flock hosting this bacterium (Berndtson *et al.*, 1996; Rudi *et al.*, 2004). Also, a direct correlation between *Campylobacter* concentrations in broiler intestinal content and carcass is known and when a previously negative poultry flock is slaughtered after a positive flock, the more recent processed chickens become positive by cross-contamination (Rosenquist *et al.*, 2006; Reich *et al.*, 2008). These findings reinforce the importance of monitoring and decreasing *Campylobacter* intestinal concentrations in broilers at the flock level to reduce the transmission risk of this microorganism to humans through food consumption (Rudi *et al.*, 2004; Rosenquist *et al.*, 2006; Franchin *et al.*, 2007; Reich *et al.*, 2008).

In this study, bacterial loads of *Campylobacter* ranged from 3.8 log<sub>10</sub> to 10 log<sub>10</sub>, with a mean of 6.4 log<sub>10</sub> bacteria/g of cecal content. According to a previous study (Seliwiorstow *et al.*, 2015), highly contaminated broiler flocks (> 7.5 log<sub>10</sub> CFU/g) should be excluded to reduce the potential risk of campylobacteriosis transmission to humans. The present study found five broiler flocks (11.1%) with loads > 7.5 log<sub>10</sub> bacteria/g of cecal content, i.e., presenting a high transmission risk of campylobacteriosis through poultry product consumption. Another study quantified *Campylobacter* in other different types of samples collected during slaughter in Brazil, with bacterial loads ranging from 0 to 2.1 log CFU/mL (Borges *et al.*, 2020). In worldwide studies that analyzed cecal samples, bacterial concentrations ranged from 6.1 log<sub>10</sub> to 11.1 log<sub>10</sub>, with means ranging from 6.9 log<sub>10</sub> to 8.5 log<sub>10</sub> CFU/g (Rudi *et al.*, 2004; Reich *et al.*, 2008; Seliwiorstow *et al.*, 2015; Vinueza-Burgos *et al.*, 2018).

*C. perfringens* was found in 71.1% of broiler flocks analyzed in this study. A study conducted in Swedish slaughterhouses found *C. perfringens* in 18% of broiler carcasses after chiller (Lindblad *et al.*, 2016). To our knowledge, this is the first Brazilian study to evaluate the occurrence of *C. perfringens* in poultry slaughterhouses. At the retail level, when analyzing chicken liver sold in USA markets, Cooper *et al.* (2013) detected *C. perfringens* in 69.6% of samples. *C. perfringens* loads ranged from 3.7 to 7.8 log<sub>10</sub>, with a mean of 5.5 log<sub>10</sub> log<sub>10</sub> bacteria/g of cecal content. *C.*

*perfringens* is a major cause of human food poisoning. Bacteria survive in the animal body when food is contaminated with very high concentrations (> 6 log<sub>10</sub> cells/g of food) because viable bacterial cells can form spores in vivo (Shrestha *et al.*, 2018). The present study found 10 broiler flocks (22.2%) with loads ≥ 6.1 log<sub>10</sub> bacteria/g of cecal content, demonstrating concern in regards to contamination of chicken meat.

Brazil is an important poultry-producing country and exports chicken meat to different countries of the world (ABPA, 2020). The results reported in this study are concerning, as they show that three important bacterial pathogens are present in chickens from broiler flocks in commercial slaughterhouses and could contaminate poultry food products. It is noteworthy that dissemination of these pathogens in Brazilian poultry is widely variable depending on the region, poultry establishment, poultry flock, and type of sample analyzed (Cortez *et al.*, 2006; Bezerra *et al.*, 2016; Würfel *et al.*, 2018; Borges *et al.*, 2019). Specific hygiene and biosecurity measures to control these foodborne pathogens throughout the poultry production chain are extremely necessary to reduce economic losses and minimize the risk of exposure of consumers to these bacteria.

In conclusion, a procedure for detection and quantitation of the main poultry bacterial pathogens in cecal content samples was developed and used in the routine analysis of three slaughterhouses to assess the risk for bacterial contamination in chicken meat. The complete procedure, from collection of samples to the analysis of the results in the laboratory, takes less than one day (approximately 5 h if the industry has a molecular biology facility). So it is possible to predict the risk of food infection, take sanitary measures before the food reaches the end of the production chain, and provide safe food for consumers. This procedure can also be useful to detect the occurrence and to determine the prevalence of these pathogens in both broiler flocks and slaughter houses from different poultry-producing regions in Brazil.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This study was supported by Simbios Biotecnologia. MNS and JMW were supported by the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior - Brasil (CAPES) [Finance Code 001]; and VRL was supported by the CNPq (Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico) [Process number 311010/2017-2].



## REFERENCES

- Abildgaard L, Højberg O, Schramm A, Balle KM, Engberg RM. The effect of feeding a commercial essential oil product on *Clostridium perfringens* numbers in the intestine of broiler chickens measured by real-time PCR targeting the  $\alpha$ -toxin-encoding gene (*plc*). *Animal Feed Science and Technology* 2010;157(3-4):181-9.
- ABPA - Associação Brasileira de Proteína Animal. Relatório Anual 2020 ABPA. São Paulo; 2020 [cited 2020 May 12]. Available from: [https://abpa-br.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/abpa\\_relatorio\\_anual\\_2020\\_portugues\\_web.pdf](https://abpa-br.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/abpa_relatorio_anual_2020_portugues_web.pdf).
- Albini S, Brodard I, Jaussi A, Wollschläger N, Frey J, Miserez R, et al. Real-time multiplex PCR assays for reliable detection of *Clostridium perfringens* toxin genes in animal isolates. *Veterinary Microbiology* 2008;127(1):179-85.
- Allaart JG, van Asten AJ, Gröne A. Predisposing factors and prevention of *Clostridium perfringens*-associated enteritis. *Comparative Immunology, Microbiology and Infectious Diseases* 2013;36(5):449-64.
- Alonso MZ, Padola NL, Parma AE, Lucchesi PMA. Enteropathogenic *Escherichia coli* contamination at different stages of the chicken slaughtering process. *Poultry Science* 2011;90(11):2638-41.
- Back A. Monitoria Sanitária para frangos de corte. In: Macari M, Mendes AA, Menten JF, Alencar NI, editors. *Produção de frangos de corte*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Campinas: FACTA; 2014. p. 371-6.
- Baptista DQ, Santos AF, Aquino MHC, Abreu DL, Rodrigues DP, Nascimento ER, et al. Prevalence and antimicrobial susceptibility of *Salmonella* spp. serotypes in broiler chickens and carcasses in the state of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. *Pesquisa Veterinária Brasileira* 2018;38(7):1278-85.
- Berndtson E, Danielsson-Tham ML, Engvall A. *Campylobacter* incidence on a chicken farm and the spread of *Campylobacter* during the slaughter process. *International Journal of Food Microbiology* 1996;32(1-2):35-47.
- Bezerra WGA, Da Silva ING, Vasconcelos RH, Machado DN, Souza Lopes E de, Lima SVG, et al. Isolation and antimicrobial resistance of *Escherichia coli* and *Salmonella enterica* subsp. *enterica* (O: 6, 8) in broiler chickens. *Acta Scientiae Veterinariae* 2016;44:1364.
- Boer P, Rahaoui H, Leer RJ, Montijn RC, Van der Vossen JMBM. Real-time PCR detection of *Campylobacter* spp.: a comparison to classic culturing and enrichment. *Food Microbiology* 2015;51:96-100.
- Boni HFK, Carrijo AS, Fascina VB. Ocorrência de *Salmonella* spp. em aviários e abatedouro de frangos de corte na região central de Mato Grosso do Sul. *Revista Brasileira de Saúde e Produção Animal* 2011;12(1):84-95.
- Borges KA, Cisco IC, Furian TQ, Tedesco DC, Rodrigues LB, Nascimento VP do, et al. Detection and quantification of *Campylobacter* spp. in Brazilian poultry processing plants. *The Journal of Infection Developing Countries* 2020;14(1):109-13.
- Borges KA, Martelo, EB, Dos Santos LA, Furian TQ, Cisco IC, Manto L, et al. Detection and quantification of *Salmonella* spp. in poultry slaughterhouses of southern Brazil. *The Journal of Infection Developing Countries* 2019;13:455-60.
- Brasil. Ministério da Saúde. Secretaria de Vigilância em Saúde. Manual técnico de diagnóstico laboratorial de *Campylobacter*: gênero *Campylobacter*: diagnóstico laboratorial clássico e molecular. Brasília; 2011.
- Castro Chaves SO, De Souza CO, De Arimatéia Freitas J, Dos Santos DD, De Araújo CV, Da Silva RR. Ocorrência de *Campylobacter* em granjas e abatedouro avícolas na mesorregião metropolitana de Belém, PA, Brasil. *Ciência Animal Brasileira* 2010;11(3):554-60.
- CDC - Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Food safety. *Clostridium perfringens*. 2017 [cited 2018 Jan 01]. Available from: <https://www.cdc.gov/foodsafety/diseases/clostridium-perfringens.html>.
- Clench MH. The avian cecum: update and motility review. *Journal of Experimental Zoology* 1999;283:441-7.
- Cooper KK, Bueschel DM, Songer JG. Presence of *Clostridium perfringens* in retail chicken livers. *Anaerobe* 2013;21:67-8.
- Cortez AL, Carvalho AC, Scarcelli E, Miyashiro S, Vidal-Martins A, Bürger KP. Survey of chicken abattoir for the presence of *Campylobacter jejuni* and *Campylobacter coli*. *Revista do Instituto de Medicina Tropical de São Paulo* 2006;48(6):307-10.
- Cunha-Neto AD, Carvalho LA, Carvalho RCT, Prazeres Rodrigues D dos, Mano SB, Figueiredo EEDS, et al. *Salmonella* isolated from chicken carcasses from a slaughterhouse in the state of Mato Grosso, Brazil: antibiotic resistance profile, serotyping, and characterization by repetitive sequence-based PCR system. *Poultry Science* 2018;97(4):1373-81.
- EFSA - European Food Safety Authority and ECDC - European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control. The European Union one health 2018 zoonoses report. *EFSA Journal* 2019;17(12):5926.
- EFSA - European Food Safety Authority. EFSA panel on biological hazards (BIOHAZ). Scientific opinion on *Campylobacter* in broiler meat production: control options and performance objectives and/or targets at different stages of the food chain. *EFSA Journal* 2011;9(4): 2105-245.
- FAO-WHO - Food and Agriculture Organization, World Health Organization. *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter* in chicken meat. *Microbial Risk Assessment Series* 2009;19:1-69.
- Franchin PR, Ogliari PJ, Batista CRV. Frequency of thermophilic *Campylobacter* in broiler chickens during industrial processing in a Southern Brazil slaughterhouse. *British Poultry Science* 2007;48(2):127-32.
- Gölz G, Rosner B, Hofreuter D, Josenhans C, Kreienbrock L, Löwenstein A, et al. Relevance of *Campylobacter* to public health - The need for a One Health approach. *International Journal of Medical Microbiology* 2014;304(7):817-23.
- Hermans D, Van Deun K, Messens W, Martel A, Van Immerseel F, Haesebrouck F, et al. *Campylobacter* control in poultry by current intervention measures ineffective: urgent need for intensified fundamental research. *Veterinary Microbiology* 2011;152(3-4):219-28.
- Hoorfar J, Ahrens P, Radstrom P. Automated 5' nuclease PCR assay for identification of *Salmonella enterica*. *Journal of Clinical Microbiology* 2000;38:3429-35.
- Hungaro HM, Mendonça RCS, Rosa VO, Badaró ACL, Moreira MAS, Chaves JBP. Low contamination of *Campylobacter* spp. on chicken carcasses in Minas Gerais state, Brazil: molecular characterization and antimicrobial resistance. *Food Control* 2015;51:15-22.
- Ijaz UZ, Sivaloganathan L, Mckenna A, Richmond A, Kelly C, Linton M, et al. Comprehensive longitudinal microbiome analysis of the chicken cecum reveals a shift from competitive to environmental drivers and a window of opportunity for *Campylobacter*. *Frontiers in Microbiology* 2018;15(9):2452.
- Josefsen MH, Jacobsen NR, Hoorfar J. Enrichment followed by quantitative PCR both for rapid detection and as a tool for quantitative risk assessment of food-borne thermotolerant campylobacters. *Applied and Environmental Microbiology* 2004;70(6):3588-92.
- Kuana SL, Santos LR, Rodrigues LB, Borsoi A, Moraes HLS, Salle CTP, Nascimento VP. Occurrence and characterization of *Campylobacter* in the Brazilian production and processing of broilers. *Avian Diseases* 2008;52(4):680-4.



- Lee KM, Runyon M, Herrman TJ, Phillips R, Hsieh J. Review of *Salmonella* detection and identification methods: aspects of rapid emergency response and food safety. *Food Control* 2015;47:264-76.
- Lindblad M, Lindmark H, Lambertz ST, Lindqvist R. Microbiological baseline study of broiler chickens at Swedish slaughterhouses. *Journal of Food Protection* 2006;69(12):2875-82.
- Lindström M, Heikinheimo A, Lahti P, Korkeala H. Novel insights into the epidemiology of *Clostridium perfringens* type A food poisoning. *Food Microbiology* 2011;28(2):192-8.
- Lopes GV, Landgraf M, Destro MT. Occurrence of *Campylobacter* in raw chicken and beef from retail outlets in São Paulo, Brazil. *Journal of Food Safety* 2018;38(3):e12442.
- Maurischat S, Baumann B, Martin A, Malorny B. Rapid detection and specific differentiation of *Salmonella enterica* subsp *enterica* Enteritidis, Typhimurium and its monophasic variant 4,5,12:- by real-time multiplex PCR. *International Journal of Food Microbiology* 2015;193:8-14.
- Nagpal R, Ogata K, Tsuji H, Matsuda K, Takahashi T, Nomoto K, et al. Sensitive quantification of *Clostridium perfringens* in human feces by quantitative real-time PCR targeting alpha-toxin and enterotoxin genes. *BMC Microbiology* 2015;15(1):219-31.
- Navidshad B, Liang JB, Jahromi MF. Correlation coefficients between different methods of expressing bacterial quantification using real time PCR. *International Journal of Molecular Sciences* 2012;13(2):2119-32.
- Park SH, Aydin M, Khatiwara A, Dolan MC, Gilmore DF, Bouldin JL, et al. Current and emerging technologies for rapid detection and characterization of *Salmonella* in poultry and poultry products. *Food Microbiology* 2014;38:250-62.
- Pauwels J, Taminiau B, Janssens GPJ, Beenhouwer M de, Delhalle L, Daube G, et al. Cecal drop reflects the chickens' cecal microbiome, fecal drop does not. *Journal of Microbiological Methods* 2015;117:164-70.
- Rajan K, Shi Z, Ricke SC. Current aspects of *Salmonella* contamination in the US poultry production chain and the potential application of risk strategies in understanding emerging hazards. *Critical Reviews in Microbiology* 2017;43(3):370-92.
- Rasschaert G, Houf K, Van Hende J, Zutter L de. Investigation of the concurrent colonization with *Campylobacter* and *Salmonella* in poultry flocks and assessment of the sampling site for status determination at slaughter. *Veterinary Microbiology* 2007;123(1-3):104-9.
- Reich F, Atanassova V, Haunhorst E, Klein G. The effects of *Campylobacter* numbers in caeca on the contamination of broiler carcasses with *Campylobacter*. *International Journal of Food Microbiology* 2008;127(1-2):116-20.
- Ricke SC, Feye KM, Chaney WE, Shi Z, Pavlidis H, Yang Y. Developments in rapid detection methods for the detection of foodborne *Campylobacter* in the United States. *Frontiers in Microbiology* 2019;9:3280.
- Ristori CA, Rowlands REG, Martins CG, Barbosa ML, Santos LF dos, Jakabi M, et al. Assessment of consumer exposure to *Salmonella* spp., *Campylobacter* spp., and shiga toxin-producing *Escherichia coli* in meat products at retail in the city of Sao Paulo, Brazil. *Foodborne Pathogens and Diseases* 2017;14(8):447-53.
- Rivera D, Toledo V, Reyes-Jara A, Navarrete P, Tamplin M, Kimura B, et al. Approaches to empower the implementation of new tools to detect and prevent foodborne pathogens in food processing. *Food Microbiology* 2018;75:126-32.
- Rodgers JD, Lawes JR, Vidal AB, Ellis-Iversen J, Ridley A, Pleydell EJ, et al. Characteristics and comparative performance of direct culture, direct PCR and enumeration methods for detection and quantification of *Campylobacter* spp. in broiler caeca. *Veterinary Microbiology* 2012;159(3-4):390-6.
- Rosenquist H, Sommer, HM, Nielsen NL, Christensen BB. The effect of slaughter operations on the contamination of chicken carcasses with thermotolerant *Campylobacter*. *International Journal of Food Microbiology* 2006;108(2):226-32.
- Rudi K, Høidal HK, Katla T, Johansen BK, Nordal J, Jakobsen KS. Direct real-time PCR quantification of *Campylobacter jejuni* in chicken fecal and cecal samples by integrated cell concentration and DNA purification. *Applied and Environmental Microbiology* 2004;70(2):790-7.
- Saif YM. *Diseases of poultry*. 12<sup>th</sup> ed. Iowa: Blackwell Publishing; 2008.
- Schnider A, Overesch G, Korczak BM, Kuhnert P. Comparison of real-time PCR assays for detection, quantification, and differentiation of *Campylobacter jejuni* and *Campylobacter coli* in broiler neck skin samples. *Journal of Food Protection* 2010;73(6):1057-63.
- Seliworstow T, Duarte A, Baré J, Botteldoorn N, Dierick K, Uyttendaele M, et al. Comparison of sample types and analytical methods for the detection of highly *Campylobacter*-colonized broiler flocks at different stages in the poultry meat production chain. *Foodborne Pathogens and Diseases* 2015;12(5):399-405.
- Shrestha A, Uzal FA, McClane BA. Enterotoxigenic clostridia: *Clostridium perfringens* enteric diseases. *Microbiology Spectrum* 2018;6(5):1-17.
- Silva DT, Tejada TS, Blum-Menezes D, Dias PA, Timm CD. *Campylobacter* species isolated from poultry and humans, and their analysis using PFGE in southern Brazil. *International Journal of Food Microbiology* 2016;217:189-94.
- Souza MN, Lehmann FKM, Carli S de, Kipper D, Fonseca ASK, Ikuta N, et al. Molecular detection of *Salmonella* serovars Enteritidis, Heidelberg and Typhimurium directly from pre-enriched poultry samples. *British Poultry Science* 2019;60(4):388-94.
- Stanley D, Geier MS, Chen H, Hughes RJ, Moore RJ. Comparison of fecal and cecal microbiotas reveals qualitative similarities but quantitative differences. *BMC Microbiology* 2015;15(1):51.
- Stern NJ, Reiersen J, Lowman R, Bisailon JR, Fridriksdottir V, Gunnarsson E, et al. Campy-on-Ice consortium. Occurrence of *Campylobacter* spp. in cecal contents among commercial broilers in Iceland. *Foodborne Pathogens and Diseases* 2005;2(1):82-9.
- Van Immerseel F, Buck JD, Pasmans F, Huyghebaert G, Haesebrouck F, Ducatelle R. *Clostridium perfringens* in poultry: an emerging threat for animal and public health. *Avian Pathology* 2004;33(6):537-49.
- Vinuesa-Burgos C, Cevallos M, Cisneros M, Damme I van, Zutter L de. Quantification of the *Campylobacter* contamination on broiler carcasses during the slaughter of *Campylobacter* positive flocks in semi-industrialized slaughterhouses. *International Journal of Food Microbiology* 2018;269:75-9.
- Waldman J, Souza MN, Fonseca ASK, Ikuta N, Lunge VR. Direct detection of *Salmonella* from poultry samples by DNA isothermal amplification. *British Poultry Science* 2020;61(6):653-9.
- WHO - World Health Organization. *Food safety*. 2020 [cited 2020 Oct 10].